Art Spotlight:'Odd' painting on exhibit in Newport aids a good cause
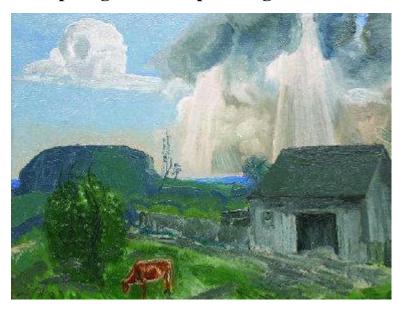

This 1919 oil on canvas by George Bellows, titled "Sun Beams and Rain (Middletown, Rhode Island)," is on display as part of a benefit exhibit in Newport. Courtesy of William Vareika Fine Arts

Artists have been turning out dramatic storm scenes and quiet pastoral landscapes for centuries. Yet rarely do you find the two genres sharing space in the same painting, as they do in this charming, if unusual, composition by the American artist George Bellows (1882-1925).

Titled "Sun Beams and Rain (Middletown, Rhode Island)," the work is essentially two paintings in one: on one side, a massive thunderstorm looks as if it's about to sweep in and pulverize a small barn; on the other, a lone cow grazes in a field, seemingly oblivious to the approaching deluge.

Will the cow find shelter in the barn before the storm hits? Or will it (and presumably the farmer to whom it belongs) get caught in the downpour? And why would Bellows, an artist who's best known for his gritty views of dive bars and prizefights, paint such an odd-looking picture?

The most likely answer (at least to the last question) is that Bellows actually witnessed such a storm, with its billowing black clouds and fire-hose blasts of rain, during one of the summers he spent on Aquidneck Island. If so, he'd be in good company: Long before Bellows' first visit to Rhode Island in 1918, artists such as Martin Johnson Heade and Fitz Hugh Lane were already celebrating the Ocean's State's penchant for dramatic shifts in weather. (Needless to say, it's a trend that continues to this day.)

Look for Bellows' painting, along with works by Heade, John La Farge, Albert Bierstadt and dozens of other name-brand artists, in "Historic New England," a benefit exhibit at William Vareika Fine Arts in Newport. Proceeds from the show, which runs through Nov. 14, will aid Historic New England (formerly the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities).

Bill Van Siclen