Bingham@200

A Bicentennial Celebration

BY MARGARET C. CONRADS

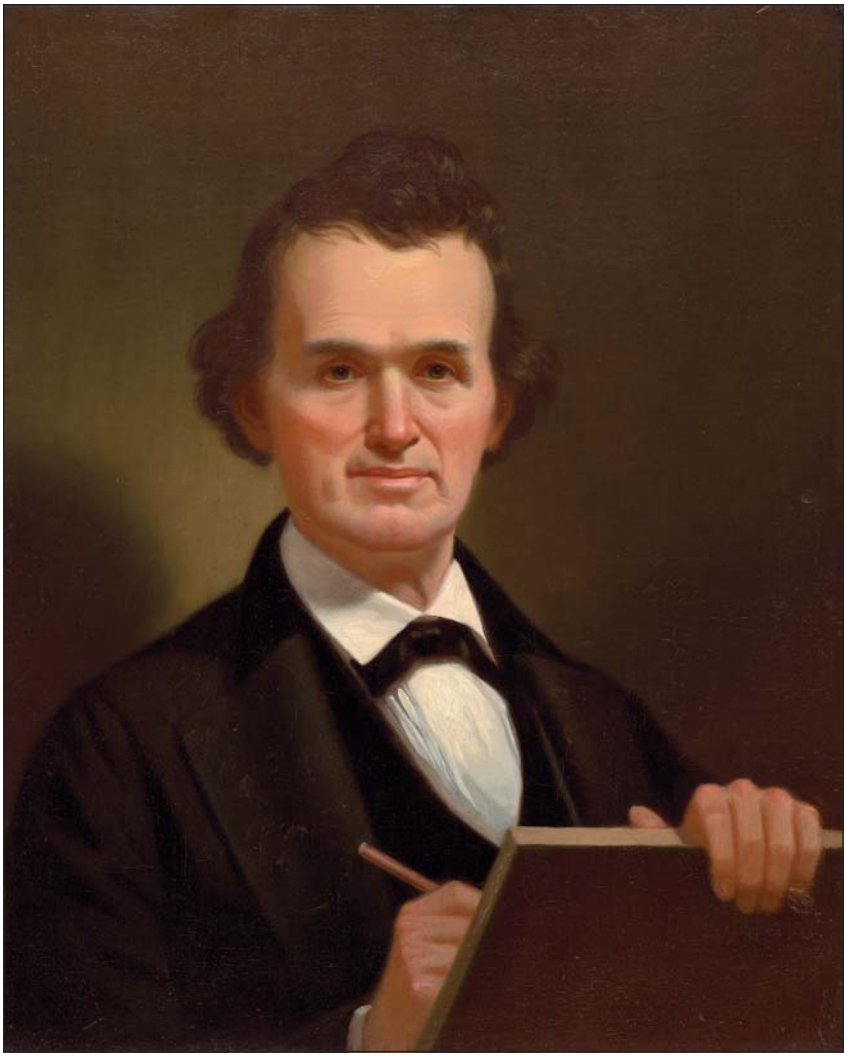

Fig. 1: George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
***Self-Portrait*, circa 1877**
Oil on canvas, 27⅛ x 22⅛ inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art;
lent by the Kansas City Public Library

This year is the bicentennial of George Caleb Bingham's (1811–1879) birth (Fig. 1). Born on March 20, 1811, in Virginia, Bingham came to central Missouri with his family in 1819.[1] Living first in Franklin and then Arrow Rock, Bingham demonstrated an early ability with drawing. He followed a typical path of apprenticeship for young men of his generation, in his case, to cabinetmakers who also served as Methodist ministers. Although he had no formal training, by the early 1830s he was pursuing a career as a portraitist across Missouri. Frequent visits to—and later studios in—St. Louis exposed Bingham to a nascent art culture before his first trip to the East Coast in 1838, when his artistic ambitions inspired a trip that year to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and likely New York. He was a resident in Washington, D.C. between 1840 and 1844, and made occasional return visits to these artistic centers through the mid-1850s. After a stay in Düsseldorf, Germany, from 1856 to 1859, Bingham relocated to the Kansas City area where portraiture occupied most of his time until his death in 1879.

From the early 1840s through the mid-1850s, Bingham painted about fifty canvases that depict the life and politics of Missouri. They were quickly embraced by eastern critics and supporters as quintessentially American subjects, and he was frequently praised for his accurate reading of character. His most constant patron during these most productive years was the American Art-Union in New York, an organization that exhibited and purchased paintings "illustrative of the history, literature, or manners of the country."[2] Bingham's political beliefs, which he put into practice as a prominent Whig Party member and state representative, informed his imagery, while his high regard for European art, especially of the Renaissance, shaped his style and technique.

Drawing, a foundation of the European tradition, played a key role in Bingham's creative process. Most of his surviving drawings relate to specific paintings. Exactly how he used his drawings, however, remains somewhat a mystery. Often to scale and stage-like in their poses, his precisely rendered figures surely aided him as he arranged compositions. Incised outlines and remnants of a chalk-like medium on the reverse of some sheets suggest that at times he employed a transfer process related to Renaissance practice, which may have assisted him as he recycled specific figures for multiple paintings. Carefully delineated shading, a hallmark of his drawing style, also likely provided guides as he created volumetric form and shadows in paint.

A group of one hundred drawings by Bingham was originally owned by John How, an early St. Louis mayor. How gave the drawings

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George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Fur Trader, 1845
Black India ink, wash,
pencil on rag paper, 11⅞ x 9⅝ inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art;
lent by the People of Missouri; acquired
through the generosity of Allen P. and
Josephine B. Green Foundation

Fur Traders Descending the Missouri was the first of Bingham's images of river life to have a figure making direct eye contact with the viewer. In this preliminary drawing, Bingham placed the fur trader at a closer vantage point than that seen in the painting. He captured the intense stare of his model by surrounding the dark outlines of the eyes and eyebrows with broad highlights on the forehead and left cheek and softly shaded wisps of hair. For the painting, Bingham aged the boatman and deepened the furrows around his mouth to give the appearance of a frown and to further accentuate the passing of older methods of commerce.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Bull-Whacker, 1844
Black India ink, wash, pencil
on rag paper, 12¹³⁄₁₆ x 7¹⁄₁₆ inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art;
lent by the People of Missouri

Bingham's canvases are filled with character types, many of which, including *Bull-Whacker*, were first realized in ink and pencil. They include river boatmen, traders, trappers, frontier citizenry, and country politicians who represented contemporary manners and customs, often with a considerable measure of Bingham's own attitudes.

To Missouri viewers, the details of gesture, pose, costume, expressions, and physical attributes made Bingham's characters easily recognizable types. For audiences on the East Coast, they created an image of the frontier they could only imagine. The tattered sleeve, unkempt hair, darkly shadowed features, and bandaged head of Bingham's *Bull-Whacker* underscored this teamsters' difficult, low-paying work driving oxen for wagon trains and suggested his low position in the labor force.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Fur Traders Descending the Missouri, 1845
Oil on canvas, 29 x 36½ inches
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1933 (33.61). Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Art Resource, NY

This work announced Bingham as a major painter of American subjects. Originally titled *French Trader and Half-Breed Son*, this canvas refers to the high number of French fur traders who worked along the Missouri River and fathered children with Indian women. Bingham's pastoral setting and the title change, made by the American Art-Union when they purchased the canvas, idealized the subject. Bingham's fur trader guides his boat on flowing water littered with tree limbs, a metaphor, perhaps, of the hazards a fur traders life on the frontier. In the mid-1840s, white contact with Indian tribes was being hotly debated as was the collapse of the fur trade.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Fiddler, 1846
Black India ink, wash, pencil
on rag paper, 10 x 8⅛ inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art;
lent by the People of Missouri;
acquired through the generosity
of the Louis D. Beaumont Foundation

Bingham drew figures in a variety of positions and from a variety of angles to perfect the pyramidal arrangement in *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, each figure indicating his ability to render compact poses and, in some cases, extreme foreshortening. As Bingham worked out the individual forms, he personalized each one by their hats, an article of clothing that identified ethnic origins or socio-economic status for nineteenth-century viewers. The fiddler, shown here in a preliminary sketch, wears a straw hat that suggests he may have previously worked as a farmhand. Bingham also paid careful attention to the poses of several of the boatmen's hands and feet. For example, the space left between the ground line and the bottom of the fiddler's boot anticipates the next beat of the music, animating the figure who remains anonymous behind his hat.

BELOW:
George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
The Jolly Flatboatmen, 1846
Oil on canvas, 38⅛ x 48½ inches
Private Collection; on loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Image courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

When Bingham exhibited *The Jolly Flatboatmen* in New York in 1847, some found the subject vulgar in its presentation of everyday life on the frontier. Boatmen were largely considered a rowdy class, but Bingham, a supporter of westward expansion, offered another viewpoint. The men, shown with their cargo and tools neatly stowed in the foreground, are portrayed relaxing only after completing the hard work of river commerce, tasks that ensured the economic health of America. Using a compositional format based on Renaissance models, Bingham located the balanced arrangement of figures on a flatboat on a perfectly calm river in a bucolic landscape. Under an even soft light, this work unfolds in a peaceful environment, one that contrasted sharply with many Easterners' views of a wild West.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Fisherman Waiting for a Bite, 1851
Black India ink, wash, pencil on rag paper, 9 x 11¼ inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; lent by the People of Missouri

Bingham based the figures in *Fishing on the Mississippi* on earlier drawings such as this one, which display a high degree of development, where every fold and shadow is carefully rendered. Bingham used *Fisherman Waiting for a Bite* to create a comprehensive underdrawing in graphite and ink on his canvas. Although the figure is transposed with amazing exactitude, some adjustments are visible. Most noticeable, perhaps, is the changed character of the fisherman's face from a rugged visage with unkempt hair in the drawing to a softer, ruddier complexion in paint. In the drawing Bingham played with the shape of the hat, suggesting a desire on Bingham's part to present East Coast audiences with a gentler image of the western boatman.

BELOW:
George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Fishing on the Mississippi, 1851
Oil on canvas, 28¾ x 36 inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art;
Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust

Painted in New York in 1851, *Fishing on the Mississippi* was part of Bingham's project to construct an image of the West for his own day and for posterity. In a pastoral landscape bathed in the rosy light of sunset, three men, waiting to provide steamboats with wood for fuel, are lost in thought on the rocky bank of a river. The perfect equilibrium of the composition and smoothness of the paint strokes convey complete serenity. Dark clouds, moving in from the left, suggest changes on the horizon. By 1850 steamboats were quickly displacing flatboats as the primary mode of river transportation, and river transportation was being challenged in the West by expanding railroads.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Potential Voter, 1851
Graphite and ink on paper, 11¼ x 9¹⁵⁄₁₆ inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; lent by the People of Missouri;
acquired through the generosity of The Loretta M. Cowden Foundation

The drawings for *Canvassing for a Vote* reveal interesting insights into the Bingham's working method. He frequently revisited or revised his narrative subjects. For example, *Canvassing for a Vote* is a reconfiguration of *Country Politician* (1849; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco). Most notably, in the later canvas the scene is outside, and the left-hand figure has been changed from an older man listening intently to a well-dressed prosperous farmer in a relaxed pose. Indeed, several related drawings indicate that, from the start, Bingham tested other figure types. Here in *Potential Voter*, numerous early ideas visible as erasures around the hat, left arm, and walking stick reveal the image's development as Bingham worked. His final choice for the painting, based on this drawing, added the presence of an increasingly important member of the Missouri—and national—electorate.

ABOVE:
George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Canvassing for a Vote, 1852
Oil on canvas, 25¼ x 30½ inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art;
Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust

Canvassing for a Vote reflects Bingham's faith in the democratic system, even as he recognized its shortcomings. Set in the artist's hometown of Arrow Rock, Missouri, the composition shows a politician and trio of potential voters arranged in a solid triangle at the center of the painting. They represent the campaign process at work, including Bingham's own views on problems of 1850s American politics. A sleeping dog and a man whose back is turned may imply political disenfranchisement and disinterested citizens, issues in 1852 that bothered the artist considerably. By placing the horse's rump in line with the canvasser's head, Bingham may also be commenting on the dubious character of certain politicians. *Canvassing for a Vote* was painted as the political climate in Missouri grew increasingly heated, despite, or on account of, the Compromise of 1850, which attempted to balance Northern and Southern interests by allowing popular sovereignty to determine whether states would enter the Union as slave states or free states.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Stump Speaking, 1853–1854
Oil on canvas, 42½ x 58 inches
Courtesy of Saint Louis Art Museum;
Gift of Bank of America (43:2001)

Stump Speaking was the fourth in a series of six large-scale political subjects that Bingham began in 1847. *The Stump Orator* (1847; location unknown), the first canvas of the group, provided the model for this painting, both of which depict politicians campaigning like *Canvassing for a Vote.* Political "stumping"—making speeches from the top of a tree stump—was especially familiar to Bingham. In 1846 he ran for state legislature as a Whig candidate and lost in a bitterly contested election. Two years later he was successful in the same race. This image of an orator's appeal to a crowd reflected Bingham's belief that the will of the people must prevail. In *The Stump Orator* and *Stump Speaking* (the latter painted at least in part to have a print made after it), Bingham conveyed the diversity of the voting population through careful differentiation of physical features, costume, and pose.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879)
Village Character, 1847
Black India ink, wash, pencil on rag paper, 10 3/16 x 6 7/8 inches
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; lent by the People of Missouri

Only a fraction of what was likely a larger cache of drawings related to *The Stump Orator* (location unknown) and *Stump Speaking* survives. Most of the extant sheets relate to figures that can be found in both paintings. *Village Character*, for example, appears on the sidelines behind *The Stump Orator's* campaigner, but in *Stump Speaking*, he is highlighted and moved within the group of listeners to the left of the politician. Contrasting sharply in costume and demeanor with the many better dressed figures, he represents a class of men Bingham acknowledged must be allowed to participate in the American political system even if they lived outside his select Whig circle.

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to the St. Louis Mercantile Library in 1868, where they remained until 1974, when the library decided to sell them. Citizens across the state raised the necessary funds to ensure the drawings remain in Missouri in perpetuity. Today, the drawings are held in trust for the People of Missouri and are housed at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, and the Saint Louis Art Museum. *Bingham@200*, an installation of thirty drawings by George Caleb Bingham, is on view at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art through October 2, 2011. For information call 816.751.1278 or visit www.nelson-atkins.org. AFA

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1. For an overview of Bingham's biography and the most complete listing of his paintings, see E. Maurice Bloch, *The Paintings of George Caleb Bingham: A Catalogue Raisonne* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986). On the artist's drawings, see E. Maurice Bloch, *The Drawings of George Caleb Bingham* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975). For a thorough investigation of the relationship between Bingham's politics and his art, see Nancy Rash, *The Painting and Politics of George Caleb Bingham* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). For essays on *Fishing on the Mississippi* and *Canvassing for a Vote*, see Margaret C. Conrads, *The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: American Paintings to 1945* (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2007), 1:114–127.
2. Charles E. Baker, "The American Art Union," in Mary Bartlett Cowdry, *American Academy of Fine Arts and American Art-Union Exhibition Record, 1816–1852* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1953), 1:152–53.