

george caleb bingham as ethnographer:

a variant view of his genre works

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George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879) has a secure place in the history of American art based on a small group of Western-theme paintings, almost all of which were completed in the period 1845 to 1855. Indeed, these paintings of river, frontier and election subjects are so well known, it comes as a surprise to some to learn that Bingham was primarily a portraitist, and that his career as an artist covered forty-eight years. It seems reasonable that a painter located in Missouri prior to the Civil War would turn to the frontier for subjects, but this does not explain why he was virtually the only artist to focus on what we have come to think of as typical Bingham subjects, such as flatboatmen. Nor does it explain why this work was concentrated within only a short portion of his career. Why, indeed, would an artist abandon a mode of painting in mid-career when it had established a national reputation for him? This paper is an attempt to reach past conventional explanations of Bingham's work in order to understand why Bingham, and virtually he alone, began to do a series of paintings of Western rivermen, the frontier and political scenes, and why he stopped. Rather than restrict our view of Bingham's Western paintings to the category of genre work, I am going to suggest we can understand them better if we see them within the context of ethnographic documentation. While I will not argue that Bingham was consciously working as an ethnographic artist, I will argue that if we look at him as if he were, we can begin to see why he began and then stopped a mode of painting, and why these relatively few paintings have a character and attraction different from his more numerous portraits or the genre work of his contemporaries.

Bingham's formative years were spent in Missouri. He arrived as a boy in 1819, two years before Statehood. He lived much of his life in river towns, and he was able to observe the complex and varied movement that used the Missouri River as a principal trafficway for the first

portion of the route to the west and southwest. His journeys in the state made him familiar with frontier life, the life of rivermen, and the energetic politics for which Missouri was noted. While these experiences would later prove important to his career as an artist, he began rather conventionally, in 1833, as a largely self-taught portrait painter.¹ In 1838, Bingham spent a few months in Philadelphia, and possibly visited New York City, where he exhibited a painting titled, *Western Boatmen Ashore* at the Apollo Gallery;² little else is known about the painting. However, it was this gallery that evolved into the Apollo Association in 1839, which in turn became the American Art-Union. Bingham's showing at the Apollo will be an important link in the chain of our analysis and we will return to it later.

Despite the clear evidence that Bingham had painted an original Western theme (earlier he had copied two landscapes showing buffalo hunts),³ up until 1845 he concentrated on his development as a portraitist with few ventures into genre subjects and landscapes. He spent the period 1841-1844 in and around Washington, D.C., basically as a portraitist. But on his return to Missouri in 1844 he began a new phase in his career, and in 1845 the Art-Union purchased four of his works, one the justly famous *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*.⁴ He was now involved in Western painting, and by 1852 two-thirds of his output of this type of subject was completed, and most of these had been sold to the Art-Union. While doing these paintings, he had become involved in state politics, and his election series, dating from 1851 to 1854, reflect this experience. There was a short visit to Europe in 1853. He made more frequent trips to the East and returned briefly to Europe. For part of the Civil War he was a state official. He always had been successful as a portraitist in Missouri, and in the post-war years he painted little else. Portraits throughout his career as a painter were his mainstay, and of the 437 recorded paintings identified by E. Maurice Bloch (as of 1967), only forty-one have Western subjects. In addition, a few others were non-portraits. Yet the thirty-three Western paintings done in the period 1845-1855 made his national reputation.

Conventional art classifications categorize these paintings as genre. A genre picture is usually defined as one whose subject is some generalized aspect of everyday life. The people depicted are rarely shown as idealized figures though they are often represented as types rather than individuals. In this respect, the Western paintings by Bingham can be seen to conform to the genre classification, and both John F. McDermott and E. Maurice Bloch, our principal Bingham scholars, make effective cases for treating the Western paintings as genre works.

Bloch makes some comparisons to other artists, such as William Sidney Mount, which are persuasive in suggesting sources of genre-influence on Bingham, and McDermott argues specifically against looking at Bingham's "genre paintings" as simply "documents of western history." He concurs with Edgar P. Richardson's view, which sees in Bingham's work

a style of “great visual poetry” and “a remarkable sense of what was grand, essential, [and] typical.”⁵ But McDermott qualifies this view of the genre works to acknowledge Bingham’s faithfulness of delineation of Western life, wherein “he painted a world he lived in, not a place he visited,”⁶ suggesting thereby a documentary quality in Bingham’s genre works that is not normally expected of genre pieces. This anomaly, along with the subject matter represented, has attracted the attention of scholars to the work, with Bingham’s prodigious output as a portraitist being glossed over in general histories of American art or painting, as in Barbara Novak’s *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1969), or virtually ignored, as in Oliver Larkin’s *Art and Life in America*, rev. ed. (New York, 1960). This preoccupation with only a few of the paintings of the artist clouds that the excursion into Western-theme paintings was of relatively short duration, and that they were aimed at a clientele largely different from that which commissioned portraits. Had the Western paintings been poorly received, abandonment of the subject by the artist would be understandable, but this was not the case in Bingham’s situation. His Western paintings were appreciated in his lifetime, and to at least one later critic (Novak) they are America’s only real equivalent for “history painting in the grand manner.”⁷ Novak, however, also calls the Western paintings genre despite this exaggerated evaluation.

If we look at Bingham as a genre painter, at his *Fishing on the Mississippi* (Fig. 9), or at *The Wood Boat* (Fig. 8), for example, we see the anonymous people and generalized activity expected in this category of art. And if we review the entire list of forty-one Western paintings, we see that except in one or two instances they do not memorialize historic events. What then triggered Barbara Novak’s appraisal? It is the fact that Bingham’s images can be both compelling visual documents and genre paintings. The latter term is a convenient but questionable classification for these works. At best they are atypical genre works, and identifying them as such introduces a frame of reference which creates more problems than it resolves. However, by drawing upon the field of ethnographic documentation, we can gain a new understanding of Bingham’s Western paintings and the remarkable group of drawings that were preparatory to them (ex. Figs. 5 and 6).

If we return to the evaluation of Bloch, who chooses to call the Western paintings genre, we can find support for this alternative context, for he too recognizes the documentary quality in these works. He states that “Bingham as an illustrator of the western scene was always highly conscious of the importance of the observer and of the need to establish for him a feeling of direct contact with his pictorial counterparts.”⁸ Consider the key word “observer” and the significant operational phrase, “feeling of direct contact.” Genre works are interpretations; Bingham’s paintings, however, seem to be solemn records. This explains why a *presence* seems projected by the people in Bingham’s Missouri paintings, why they have an immediacy that goes beyond what we expect in genre work; we

observe the people and the scenes as if we were eyewitnesses along with Bingham. We can't help but sense that Bingham studied his subjects with an analytical eye, and we know he used procedures to ensure descriptive accuracy. These are characteristics of the ethnographic artist.

The procedures associated with pictorial ethnography began to be systematized in the eighteenth century, as ethnographic studies assimilated some of the rigor associated with the Linnaean approach to classification, a system that required objective, pictorial documentation. A significant role in these developments was played by the three great voyages of discovery undertaken by Captain James Cook during the period 1768-1780. Subsequent expeditions by various nations developed these procedures, and by the end of the century a fairly standard method of formal illustration was being used.⁹ The results were often a curious combination of contemporary artistic conventions and factual reportage. The engravers or lithographers whose interpretations created the printed illustrations reflected a prevailing aesthetic, as did the techniques of the scientific draughtsmen; they were inescapably a part of their times and their vision was conditioned by training and by the values of their patrons. Consequently, a late eighteenth-century French ethnographic illustration, such as that shown in Figure 1, is understandably Neoclassic, despite the fact that its subject is atypical for such a style. The placement of the figures, the hardness of the drawing, and the overall composition mark it as a late eighteenth-century French print.



FIGURE 1: Engraving of Northwest Coast Indians, after Duche de Vancy, from *Voyage de la Perouse*, Paris, 1797. (Linda Hall Library of Science and Technology, Kansas City, Missouri.)

The ethnographic artist was concerned primarily with making visual records which focused on details rather than pose or composition; the conventions of the plate-makers in the printing establishments converted these into illustrations suitable to the period. Since ethnographers concentrated primarily on little-known people and their artifacts, and the cultures documented were primarily but not exclusively primitive, we tend not to associate them with studies of western civilization.

Scientific interest in exotic places had combined with European imperialism, and as different nations reached beyond their borders to acquire territorial and commercial advantages, they provided access for eager scientists in their pursuit of the hitherto unrecorded. One can readily imagine the excitement generated by a first look at some previously undocumented or poorly understood people, such as those Northwest Coast Indians which Duché de Vancy drew in 1786 (Figure 1). But we must also remember that at this time, and even later, countries such as Greece and Russia were not well known to western Europeans. And too, the requirements to practice the necessary science used in the description and classification of natural history and native peoples were modest. Many practitioners were without formal training, and some significant work was done by amateurs. We should not forget the example of Charles Willson Peale whose diverse activities ranged across many fields, including the creation of the first truly professional natural history museum in the United States as well as the fabrication of false teeth and the painting of portraits. Indeed, his inclusion of portraits as part of the display in his museum reminds us that the urge to document people was not restricted to subjects in distant lands. The efforts to document as much of the known world as possible might seem unrealistic to us today, but in the early years of the nineteenth century the attempts to do so were hardly confined to Europe, for soon the young United States was involved.¹⁰ We need to remember that Bingham began doing his Western subjects while attempts at this type of objective and systematic documentation, a documentation which depended on visual records that would soon include photographs, were very active. The impact of photography as a tool in ethnographic documentation affected the role of the artist-draughtsman in this field, and I believe it played a role in the decline of Bingham's involvement in Western themes.

The planned scientific expeditions which evolved in the eighteenth century and continued thereafter needed the services of scientific draughtsmen. The artist-ethnographer was a special case of the latter; he furnished skills in delineating people, their environment, and artifacts. Most ethnographic artists were part of organized expeditions; however, on rare occasion an artist bypassed such sponsorship and, in effect, worked speculatively. George Catlin, working in 1830-1836, was one of those rare exceptions. On the other hand, Karl Bodmer, who, like Catlin, depicted Indians in the 1830s, was in the employ of a knowledgeable student of the American West.¹¹

The artist-ethnographer tended to follow an established pattern of work. Acting first as a draughtsman, he began with field sketches from which more finished pictures could be made. A typical intermediate step was the working up of more finished drawings which, while based on the field sketches, effectively supplanted them. Articles of costume, physiognomy, body ornamentation, artifacts and equipment were recorded. Depictions of activity or of the landscape, when included, tended to be selective, stressing typical poses or special topographical features. A small watercolor of 1851 by George Catlin, Figure 2, is typical of that intermediate step, where a more carefully made drawing or painting is really

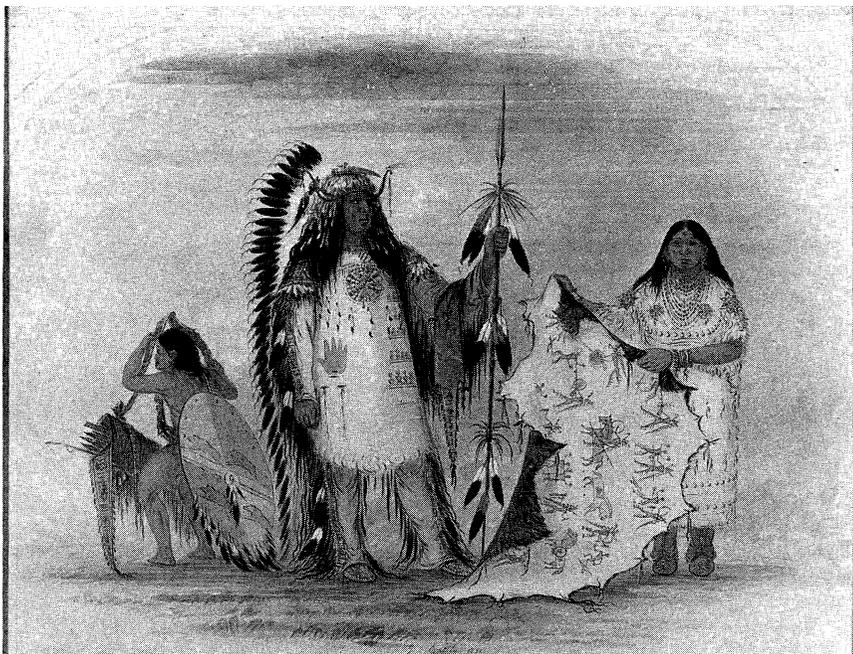


FIGURE 2: George Catlin, **Mandan Chief: Mah-To-Toh-Pah**. Watercolor, 1851. (Collection: Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.)

a studio piece.¹² We should keep this in mind when making our comparison of Bingham to this tradition and its procedures. The final product of the artist's efforts normally would be a printmaker's interpretation used to illustrate a multi-volume account of the expedition's findings, as in the case of Figure 1. In some circumstances, however, individual prints or easel paintings were the end product. Some of Catlin's work was reproduced as illustrations in his lifetime, but he was and is still best known for the large collection of paintings which were extensively exhibited as Catlin's Indian Gallery. And he was not alone in using ethnographic studies as a basis for easel painting. When we do find the

ethnographic artist turning to more formal painting as an end product, we find that picturesque scenes were generally preferred. The unusual or exotic subject was attractive in the Romantic era, and a relatively unknown artist might gain some advantage this way in winning acceptance in the conventional art world, for ethnographic draughtsmen were usually young and without prior reputations as artists. If the paintings could be accepted by the Academy or Salon, an artist's reputation might be confirmed, but comparatively few artist-ethnographers made the transition to salon exhibitor. Sometimes an established artist or one with traditional training joined an expedition as a member of the scientific team, and he could use this experience to enrich his repertoire of subjects and to enhance his status. This occurred with Bodmer and with William Hodges, the latter serving with Cook on his second voyage.

Measured against this framework it is clear that Bingham was not a scientific illustrator as such. He went on no expeditions, nor did his work illustrate publications coming out of them even though American expeditions were taking place during his active career. Nevertheless, his Western paintings and the procedures he used in making them bear interesting parallels to those of the ethnographic artist.

Regrettably, few preliminary drawings by Bingham survive, but we are told that his carefully finished drawings were based on sketches from life.¹³ The finished drawings, of which a large number exist, form the sort of meticulous record one finds used by ethnographic artists in the preparation of prints or paintings. While this practice is not restricted to ethnographic illustrations, its importance in the process cannot be overlooked. In Bingham's case, finished drawings were carefully transferred and sometimes traced on the canvas. These drawings are usually studies in brush and ink built over preliminary pencil lines. That Bingham used these drawings to solve a variety of descriptive problems as well as to work out natural poses is clear. Some of the sheets include more tentative efforts, most frequently on the verso, and a few, such as Figure 3, include both types on one side and thus provide an insight into the contrast between preliminary sketch and finished drawing, emphasizing the care with which the latter were done. Bingham's heavy dependence on these drawings as a major step in the painting process does not argue artistic inadequacy on his part; rather, it illustrates the importance to him of accurate delineation of details of costume, physiognomy and posture which he had worked out as a draughtsman. In this delineation he is very close to the ethnographic process. Bingham's drawings are fascinating in relation to their painted counterparts (e.g., Figures 4 and 8), but in addition they form an extraordinary record of selected male types which we cannot find in daguerreotypes of the same period (see Figures 5 and 6 for example). That they were given by a donor to a library in 1868, during Bingham's lifetime, suggests an early appreciation of them as unique, visual documents.¹⁴

Bloch assumes that the drawings were intended only as a direct means



to an end—the paintings,¹⁵ and that it was the paintings rather than the drawings that Bingham intended to market. Portraits, of course, were almost all commissioned, but the bulk of his Western paintings were done speculatively in that he sought a buyer after their production. But why did he start doing these paintings in the first place?

Apparently, Bingham's first Western paintings (1835) were copies of someone else's originals (see note 3). One might surmise that some traveler in the West had wanted an *aide-mémoire* and unable to have originals, settled for copies, using an available and willing artist in the region. The practice of making such pictures was not uncommon, and a young and inexperienced painter would likely reach for any opportunity to sell a picture, whatever the subject or purpose. In the next few years, Bingham did some landscapes and genre paintings, one of which was the *Western Boatmen Ashore* that was exhibited at the Apollo Gallery in 1838 (see note 2). That opportunity, however, did not ignite any changes in the pattern of Bingham's work which had followed conventional subject matter, but Bingham's potential for this type of theme was demonstrated and at the gallery that was to evolve into the American Art-Union.

The American Art-Union functioned from 1839 through 1851,¹⁶ with its operation revolving around the purchase of works of art, principally oil paintings, which it exhibited and eventually distributed by lot to its paid membership. Every member received at least a print made after one of the paintings. The creating of aesthetic taste was as important as cultivating the talent of artists,¹⁷ and so the Art-Union deliberately encouraged pictures that would be "illustrative of the history, literature, or manners of the country."¹⁸ Bingham's work was



FIGURE 3: George Caleb Bingham, **Spectator** (Bloch, **Drawings**, 38). Ink and wash drawing, 1847. (Photo: Mercantile Library, St. Louis, Missouri.)

FIGURE 4: George Caleb Bingham, **Woodboatman** (Bloch, **Drawings**, 76A). Ink and wash drawing, 1850. (Photo: Mercantile Library, St. Louis, Missouri.)

FIGURE 5: George Caleb Bingham, **Dockhand** (Bloch, **Drawings**, 113). Ink and wash drawing, 1857. (Photo: Mercantile Library, St. Louis, Missouri.)

FIGURE 6: George Caleb Bingham, **Woodboatman** (Bloch, **Drawings**, 64A). Ink and wash drawing, ca. 1849. (Photo: Mercantile Library, St. Louis, Missouri.)



singled out, in the Art-Union's *Bulletin* of August, 1849, as an example of their success in turning American artists to American subject matter. They stated that the

assistance of the Society was of material importance to the artist. Indeed, according to his own statement, if it had not been bestowed, [Bingham] would never [sic] perhaps attempted that peculiar class of subjects which have given him all his reputation. . . . Having returned to Missouri, he was induced to attempt those delineations of Western life, as exhibited by the Art-Union during the past three or four years.¹⁹

Despite this support, as we noted earlier, Bingham seemed to prefer the conventional path of a portraitist in his painting career, and over the years he did few speculative pictures, apparently making no serious effort to find a market for them outside of the Art-Union. The evidence collected by Bloch clearly shows that the Art-Union was the major stimulus for Bingham to do both conventional genre and Western-theme paintings. What thus seems astonishing, in retrospect, is that he retreated from this type of painting when his reputation was clearly enhanced by his Western paintings.

Bingham's first sales to the Art-Union occurred in 1845, and one of the four paintings had a Western theme, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*. Why he chose to do this painting at this time and to send it to the American Art-Union, we cannot state for certain. Given the circumstances of the Art-Union's operation, it seems quite likely that Bingham may have reacted directly to an expressed interest by the Art-Union in Western subjects. The fact that the bulk of Bingham's paintings of this type was sold directly to the Art-Union in less than ten years raises the possibility that he may even have received some advice on the matter of preferred subjects. No documentation shows this positively, but we do have the Art-Union's statement claiming that they "induced him to attempt those delineations" we call Western. Perhaps they were interested in finding an artist who was competent to illustrate a segment of the American scene that was already documented in words but not in pictures. If so, they were limited in their choice of knowledgeable artists. Bloch makes some fascinating comparisons between Bingham paintings and written descriptions of the West which had been published earlier. He notes that *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* could have served as an illustration for a passage in Washington Irving's *Astoria* (1836).²⁰ Timothy Flint's *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley* (1832) includes a description of a flatboat and its crew that relates closely to Bingham's *Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846) and his *Shooting for the Beef* (1850) has a striking parallel in Edmund Flagg's book, *The Far West* (1838).²¹ There is evidence that Bingham saw his Western paintings as descriptions, not as poetic interpretations. In a letter to the Art-Union he comments on the *Squatters* and the *Wood Boat* (Figures 7 and 8) both painted in 1850:

The Squatters as a class, are not fond of the toil of agriculture, but erect their rude Cabins upon those remote portions of the National domain, where the abundant game supplies their physical [sic] wants. When this source of subsistence becomes diminished [sic], in consequence of increasing settlements around, they usually sell out their slight improvements, with their "preemption title" to the land, and again follow the receding footsteps of the Savage.

The "Wood Boat" is a group such as the traveller daily sees upon the navigable waters of the west. The wood for sale is conveniently placed in a flat boat, while the hardy *choppers* await a purchaser in some approaching steamer.²²

Bingham had some difficulties with the Art-Union in its last phase,²³ but this alone should not have caused the rapid diminution of his Western paintings which occurred after 1852 if he was truly committed to this subject. He was aware of their value to his reputation; yet he turned away from them. We need to look beyond the Art-Union for additional explanation of this turn of events. There was, of course, the interruption of the Civil War which affected Missouri profoundly. Also, there might have been a declining interest in mid-century in what were becoming "old" Western themes though we have no substantive evidence of this. On the other hand, it is possible that Bingham simply saw Western genre as a timely subject to advance his reputation as a painter and the Art-Union as a convenient vehicle. And if one looks at the work merely as genre, one can't help but wonder if Bingham was comfortable doing paintings of this type. His attitude toward figurative work is really much too didactic for conventional genre subjects. If we compare Bingham's *Fishing on the Mississippi*, [(1851) Figure 9], with John Chapman's *Lazy Fisherman*, [(1844) Figure 10], both of which were Art-Union purchases, we can see that the Bingham lacks the anecdotal quality typically found in nineteenth-century genre, such as the Chapman demonstrates. When Bingham did try to do pure genre, as he did in a painting called *Checker Players* (1850), his achievement fell short of the level of the work found in his rivermen series. It is the latter that have earned for Bingham his historical status, while his conventional genre efforts alone would have triggered little critical attention. It does appear that Bingham needed outside stimulus to do any kind of genre, and the principal source of this was the Art-Union. But the Art-Union's interest in the subject of the West was also subject to influences, and had the organization continued, it would have had to recognize the rapidly expanding capabilities of photography in pictorial documentation.

In the late 1850's, the collodion process in photography began to displace the daguerreotype in America. The collodion, or wet plate, process introduced a degree of flexibility and control in photography that enhanced the medium's capability for pictorial documentation. Until this development occurred, the draughtsman-painter had no real competition in the critically important role of making pictorial documents; now the photographer could also meet this need.²⁴ While the photographer could

not do everything the draughtsman could, the former had unique advantages, the most important of which was accuracy in details. We remember Bingham because of his uncanny ability to convince us that his vision was accurate; we also recognize that Bingham's Western paintings document a mode of life that was being changed by the development of the railroads (which reached western Missouri in 1859) before photography could do the job. We know a very special aspect of American life only through Bingham's work, just as we know the Mandan Indians only through Catlin's. However, by the time of the Civil War, the photograph became the primary pictorial document, and the draughtsman's role in art and ethnography was irretrievably changed. In a sense, we can say that Bingham was doing the job of the documentary photographer in the years before the Civil War.

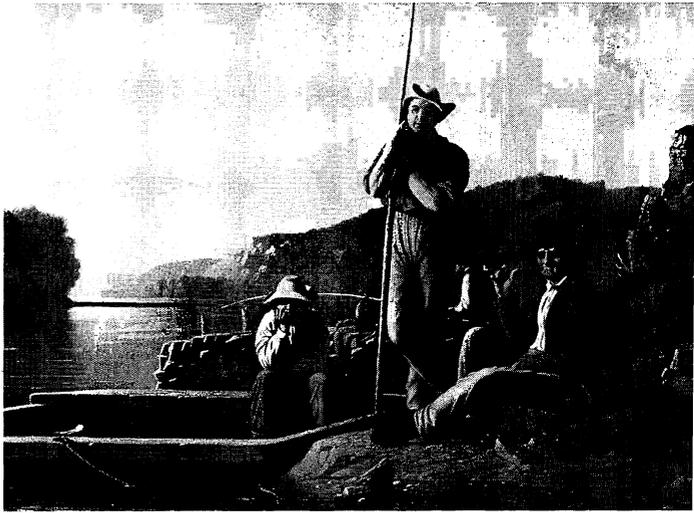


FIGURE 7: George Caleb Bingham, **The Squatters**. Oil on canvas, 1850. (Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of Henry L. Shattuck in memory of the late Ralph W. Gray.)

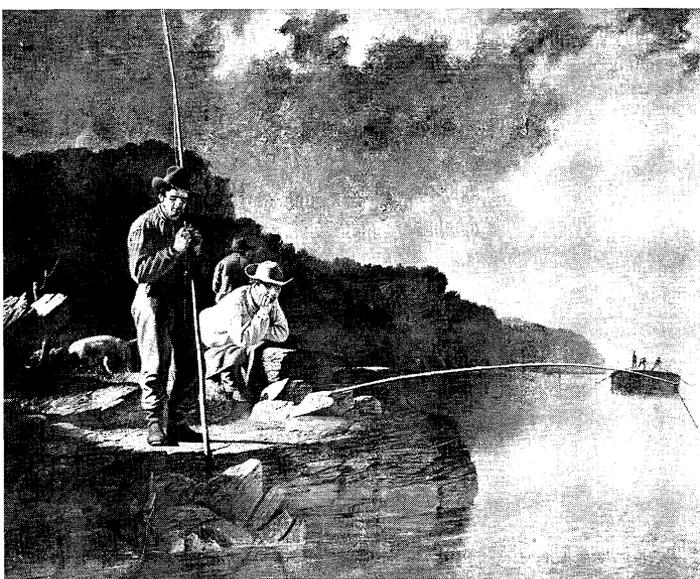
FIGURE 8: George Caleb Bingham, **The Wood Boat**. Oil on canvas, 1850. (Collection: St. Louis Art Museum.)

McDermott, while dealing with the genre issue in Bingham's art, suggests that the artist was simply painting the world about him and that he did not seek "to fulfill the romantic dreams of stay-at-home people."²⁵ I cannot agree. On the contrary, Bingham was clearly producing unique, pictorial documents, *for his time as well as ours*, of a section of the country and of a rapidly disappearing people. Furthermore, there was a romantic aura associated with what was, in fact, a faraway place and unfamiliar life-style to a great many of his contemporaries in more settled or sophisticated regions. Today, Bingham's pictures carry something of the same compelling attraction that the Civil War photographs by Mat-

thew Brady and others, with their subjects carefully posed and frozen in time and space, do. We sense an integrity of content even though we are always aware of the intermediary function of the photographer or the artist. The care with which details are shown in the costumes and props enhances the fidelity of the images even when settings are contrived or overall compositions are formulaic and conventional. This wedding of a special theme with objective and meticulous detail separates Bingham from the conventional genre artist and aligns him with ethnographic artists of his time and with the documentary photographers of the future.

FIGURE 9: George Caleb Bingham, **Fishing on The Mississippi**. Oil on canvas, 1851. (Collection: Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Nelson Fund, Kansas City, Mo.)

FIGURE 10: John Gadsby Chapman, **The Lazy Fisherman**. Oil on canvas, 1844. (Collection: Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Nelson Fund, Kansas City, Mo.)



In sum, George Caleb Bingham was a willing and capable artist when an Eastern art organization sensed that there was an interest in paintings of Western themes of a rather particular sort. In the 1840's, Bingham was a professional painter who was hard-pressed to compete with better trained and more fashionable artists. That he would respond to the opportunity implicit in the Art-Union's interest in a special category of subject which he (perhaps alone) could do well does not, therefore, seem surprising. Despite their static compositions, Bingham's paintings carry that sense of fidelity that makes us accept them as accurate descriptions without other pictorial evidence. We have seen that they could easily be used to illustrate early travel books. The task required that he solve problems of detail and pose, and so he used carefully developed drawings derived from preliminary or field sketches to paint a

small but incomparable record, some of which was reproduced as prints. In his relatively small output of prints we have the one deviation from the practice of the artist-ethnographer, but this was due as much to the decisions of the American Art-Union, the principal patron for these paintings, as anything.²⁶

If instead of the Art-Union's interest in Bingham's Western paintings, some scientifically-oriented group had elected to study what Flagg called "that singular race of men"²⁷ who worked the flatboats, no more qualified artist than George Caleb Bingham was available for them to commission as illustrator. But formal scientific study of the American West in those years tended to focus on the Indian and the largely unknown high prairies and the mountains beyond. This has obscured the parallels which do exist between the selection and depiction of Bingham's subjects and that of the more obvious work of ethnographers in America.

If Bingham had not received special encouragement, it is quite probable that he too would have ignored the rivermen and small town politics as themes, and thus he would have remained a little known portraitist who happened to do most of his work west of the Mississippi. However, one institutional patron, the American Art-Union, was apparently interested in filling the gap in the Western record, possibly because there was an awareness that a way of life in America was disappearing. Even if the Art-Union had not collapsed, improvements in the field capabilities of photography would have reduced and then terminated the need for a draughtsman's documentation of the river people. But even before the full development of photography, river traffic had been supplanted by the railroads. Bingham's subject had given way to civilization's progress; by 1860 an era was over.

Thus Bingham's limited involvement in Western-theme painting, and it was limited, is best understood not as an excursion into genre painting, but rather as service to a patron that had a clearly defined interest in the documentation of an aspect of American life and manners. Bingham worked very much as did artist-ethnographers with more exotic subjects. Certainly his Western paintings helped his career as an artist, but coincident with his patron's departure, his subject was fading from the American scene and Bingham's repertory. He returned to conventional subjects, mostly portraits, and continued this path for the last two decades of his life. That the few Western frontier paintings and the attendant drawings are now the most appreciated of his large output is ironic. But since we have elevated them to the top of his oeuvre and have accorded them an honored place in the history of American art, it helps if we can see them within the total context of his times—in the years before photography was able to provide ethnographic documentation when we still relied upon artists.

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footnotes

This article is based on a paper given at the 1976 annual meeting of MASA, and the 1976 meeting of the Midwest Art History Society.

1. For details concerning George Caleb Bingham's life and work, the most important sources are: John Francis McDermott, *George Caleb Bingham, River Portraitist* (Norman, Okla., 1959), hereafter cited as McDermott, *River Portraitist* and E. Maurice Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, 1967) and *The Drawings of George Caleb Bingham with a Catalogue Raisonne* (Columbia, Mo., 1975). In the 1967 publication, volume one is subtitled, *The Evolution of an Artist*, and volume two, *A Catalogue Raisonne*, hereafter cited as Bloch, *Bingham I* and *Bingham II*. Bloch's exhaustive research has been invaluable in the preparation of this paper.

2. Bloch, *Bingham I*, 22.

3. Bloch, *Bingham I*, 26 quotes a Bingham letter (St. Louis, 1835) that tells us of these two paintings. Possibly the originals were by Peter Rindisbacher (1806-1834) considering the date. The paintings are known only through this reference.

4. Bloch, *Bingham II*, 48, 52, 53, 54.

5. McDermott, *River Portraitist*, 191, and Edgar P. Richardson, *Painting in America* (New York, 1956), 176-177.

6. McDermott, *River Portraitist*, 191, 189.

7. Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1969), 152.

8. Bloch, *Bingham I*, 257.

9. My studies of these procedures, particularly of those used in conjunction with the Cook Voyages, have been supported in part by grants from the American Philosophical Society, the Kansas City Regional Council for Higher Education, and the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

10. The first American expedition that included both scientists and artists was the one led by Stephen H. Long, 1819-1820. There is a remote possibility that Bingham might have seen this group since the Long family arrived in Franklin, Missouri, as mentioned in the expedition's account, in 1819. Titian Ramsey Peale II was a naturalist-artist on that expedition. He went on other expeditions, including the Wilkes Expedition to the South Seas (1838-1842), leaving Philadelphia late in 1838. There is a chance that Bingham could have met Peale at the Museum in Philadelphia in 1838, and perhaps in Washington, D.C., where Peale settled after the Wilkes Expedition's return. The first half of the nineteenth century was one of extensive exploration and publication of expedition findings, and Bingham must have been aware of their character, especially after visiting the leading scientific center in the United States, Philadelphia.

11. Karl Bodmer (1809-1893) was the artist who served Prince Maximilian on his travels to the West in 1833-1834. The first English edition of Maximilian's *Travels in the Interior of North America*, with Bodmer illustrations, was in 1843.

12. Catlin's 1851 watercolor of a Mandan Chief, now in the Joslyn Museum's collection, was done long after his pioneering field work along the upper-Missouri River in 1832-1836.

13. Fern Helen Rusk, *George Caleb Bingham, The Missouri Artist* (Jefferson City, Mo., 1917), 35. As Bingham's earliest, published biographer, she was able to interview some of his sitters and friends. One (Dr. Oscar F. Potter), whose portrait was painted in 1848 by Bingham, and who also posed for one of the finished drawings which was derived from a sketch, is the source for this information.

14. Comparatively few Bingham drawings survive outside of the group of 112 sheets given in 1868 by John How, Mayor of St. Louis, to the St. Louis Mercantile Library. He had acquired them directly from Bingham. Bloch, *Bingham Drawings*, 9. In addition, there are eight sheets that Major Rollins, Bingham's close friend, collected which are now in the State Historical Society of Missouri. Only seven other sheets have been identified.

15. Bloch, *Bingham Drawings*, 11.

16. See Charles E. Baker, "The American Art-Union" in volume one of Mary Bartlett Cowdrey, *American Academy of Fine Arts and American Art-Union*, 2 vols. (New York, 1953) for detailed information. The name change occurred in 1844.

17. Baker, "Art-Union," 147.

18. *Ibid.*, 152-153.

19. *Ibid.*, 157.

20. Bloch, *Bingham I*, 80.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 86 and 118.

22. McDermott, "Bingham and the Art-Union," 66.

23. See relevant correspondence published by John Francis McDermott in "George Caleb Bingham and the American Art-Union," *The New York Historical Society Quarterly*, XLII (Jan. 1958), 60-69.

24. This impact has been discussed in detail in my *Art and Technology: A Study of the*

Interaction of Technological Growth and Nineteenth Century American Pictorial Art (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1961).

25. McDermott, *River Portraitist*, 189.

26. Bloch has identified fifteen prints after paintings. Four were the election series, five were based on three river paintings. In addition to four portraits, *The Emigration of Daniel Boone* and *Martial Law (Order No. 11)* were reproduced. Only the two versions of *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1847) were reproduced by the Art-Union.

27. Flagg, *The Far West I*, 30, quoted in Bloch, *Bingham I*, 86.