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Stephen C. Behrendt

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, sbeherdt1@unl.edu

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ORIGINALITY AND INFLUENCE IN GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM'S ART

STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT

*Perception is an act of modification
of anticipation.*

—E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*

The work of “the Missouri artist,” George Caleb Bingham (1811–79), offers us a good opportunity for considering the broad subject of originality and influence in the arts. The combination of originality and convention in paintings such as *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, and *The County Election* can tell us much about the dynamics of that branch of American art which sought to reconcile the inherited traditions of formal, academic European art with the often strikingly unconventional reality of a New World.

Stephen C. Behrendt has published several works on literature, art, and artistic influence; the most recent is The Moment of Explosion: Blake and the Illustration of Milton (1983). He is associate professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

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Often condescendingly labeled “regional” art because of its frequently eclectic emphasis upon the local and the “folksy,” this sort of genre painting is in fact directly related to the Romantic picturesque, as defined not only by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art and literary critics and practitioners but also by aestheticians from Edmund Burke and William Gilpin to Goethe and Ruskin. It follows from the new emphasis upon the real and the particular that may be traced in the poetry of Wordsworth and Freneau and the paintings of Constable and Church.¹

On the other hand, the position of the neoclassical advocates of the general and the consensus who united behind Sir Joshua Reynolds is anticipated by Dr. Johnson’s Imlac, who declares that the poet must concern himself not with the individual but with the species (“he does not number the streaks of the tulip”).² Artists like Bingham, however, were endeavoring to paint not just streaked tulips but a whole garden of flowers entirely unknown in Europe. Furthermore, that element of the unfamiliar, the different, frequently gains from the emphasis afforded by its juxtaposition with the familiar, the conventional.

TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL

In many ways this study addresses the subject of tradition and the individual talent both on the personal level of the particular artist and on the broader national level of American art as it sought to distinguish itself from the European tradition that lay behind it. An artist like Bingham (or like frontier artists such as Remington and Russell) faced a dilemma in attempting to portray in formal works of art scenes, events, and experiences quite unlike anything familiar to either the producers or the consumers of conventional European art. The "language of art" had not yet developed the requisite "vocabulary" for the American experience, with the result that Bingham and others were forced both to adopt and to adapt the inherited vocabulary of the western European visual tradition for their own purposes. Ironically, this occurred even as in Europe the trend in visual and verbal art toward both romanticizing and sensationalizing the American frontier was gaining momentum.³ In any event, one discovers in the works of these American artists a visual device in many ways analogous to what literary critics call the simile. That is, an unfamiliar scene is frequently rendered in such a way that its significance is made apparent to the viewer through some degree of likeness to a picture (or pictures) with which the viewer is already familiar. This visual simile functions like its literary relative: not only is the similarity revealed, the difference—the uniqueness—is heightened in the process.

Literary critics have made much of the ambiguity inherent in influence studies.⁴ I do not mean to suggest that Bingham or others like him set out to repudiate the European tradition in some sort of artistic patricide. Bingham does not engage in deliberate misinterpretation of his predecessors as a revisionistic means of freeing himself from any crippling fear of possibly repeating their statements in his own art. Bingham did not need, as Harold Bloom suggests many poets did, to liberate himself from his predecessors, but rather to employ their works in a variety of ways that enabled him to

make statements of his own. His statements, however, do in some cases gain significance from the implied act of comparison involved in any such manipulation of source materials.

Still, we need to remind ourselves that judgments about "influence" are risky, that visual analogies do not in themselves constitute reliable indicators of influence, and that even where it can be demonstrated that an artist has appropriated something from a predecessor—whether a concept or a particular detail—we still need to make some tough decisions about the artist's intentions in using that material from his or her predecessor.⁵ We might take up another analogy and say that studies of "influence" are studies in geneology, while studies of "sources" or "artistic borrowing" are largely studies in grafting: the former concern the development of the body, the latter the history of limb and organ transplants.⁶ The art historian Göran Hermerén has remarked that among the principal potential values inherent in studies of artistic influence are (1) the possible insights into the nature of the creative process, (2) the evidence of how cultural contacts are made and new ideas passed from person to person or culture to culture, and (3) the degree to which an artist's originality may be indicated both by what he or she employs and by what he or she does *not* employ from works or traditions known to that artist.⁷ All these matters enter into the considerations about Bingham's art that follow here.

REAL AND SPECIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

A series of pictures will serve to illustrate both the possibilities and the pitfalls implicit in any study of artistic influence. First, consider a pair of pictures. One is the version of Bingham's *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* that was originally entitled *French Trader and Half-Breed Son* when Bingham submitted it to the American Art Union in 1845 (fig. 1).⁸ The other is Caspar David Friedrich's *Ship on the River Elbe in the Early Morning Mist* (fig. 2), exhibited at the Dresden Academy in 1822. Each presents a relatively commonplace scene



FIG. 1. *George Caleb Bingham, Fur Traders Descending the Missouri.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

that combines the particularizing tendency of realism with the generalizing impulse of landscape and genre art. Each artist suffuses his canvas with a misty haze that both conceals and entices, inviting the viewer to try to penetrate the haze in order to discover (or imagine) background details that are therefore as much the creations (or projections) of the viewer as they are the productions of the painter. Indeed, Henry Adams has argued that in a painting like *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* Bingham follows the popular conception of landscape dating back to Claude Lorrain, in whose landscapes the most notable single feature is the "golden atmosphere, which often made background objects indistinct, but contributed to

the unity of the effect and to the illusion of distance."⁹ This Claudian device is cited by J. T. Flexner as a "soft mist" that keeps scenes intimate even as it dimly hints at what may lie beyond.¹⁰

But can we claim there is a substantive connection between these two works? That is, do the works themselves exhibit features that permit us to draw any concrete conclusions about originality and influence in Bingham's painting, completed as it was some twenty-three years after Friedrich's? Or, on the other hand, are we tempted to impose a relationship on the basis of the shared feature of the misty river setting? Did Bingham know Friedrich's picture? There is no evidence to indicate that

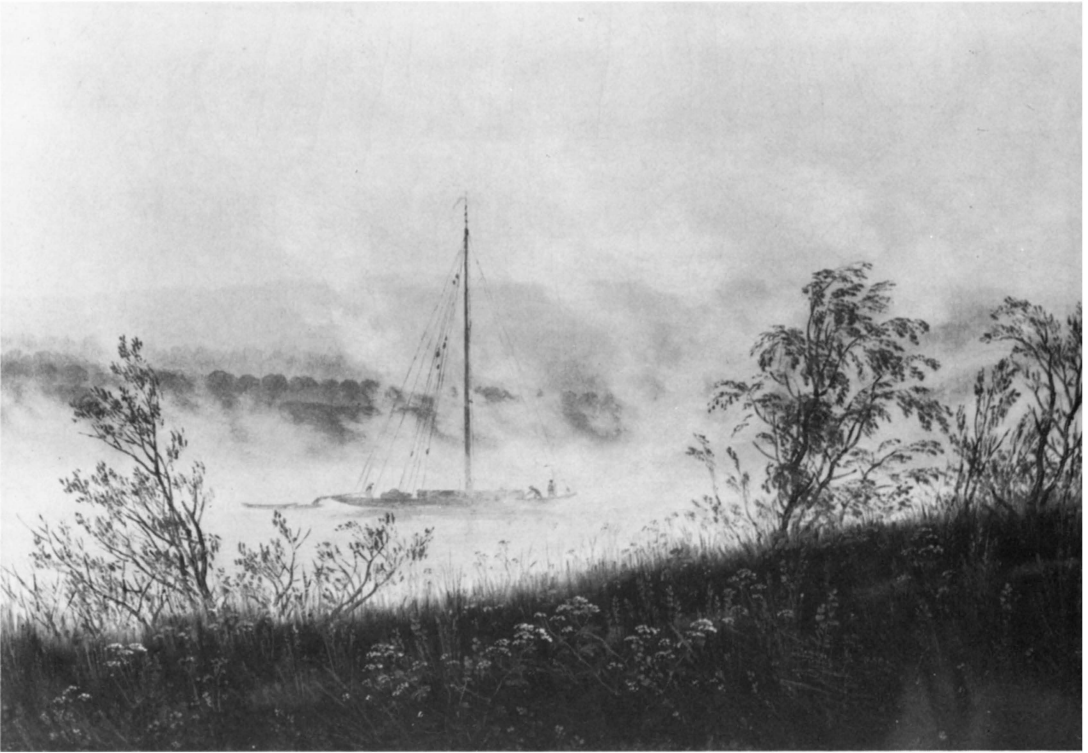


FIG. 2. *Caspar David Friedrich, Ship on the River Elbe in the Early Morning Mist.* Wollraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne.

he did. Moreover, even if he had in fact seen Friedrich's painting, would Bingham have fully understood its symbolism, a very personal symbolic system that becomes fully apparent only after one studies many of the German artist's works and the cryptic things he wrote and said about them? That the ship is for Friedrich the ship of life might be intuited; that the river is the river of death (not the river of life that proceeds from the throne of God [Rev. 22:1], as one might assume from Christian iconography) might be less apparent. Still less would the uninitiated viewer be likely to know that the prominent bank of vegetation in the foreground "is an allusion to the rapid passing of life," or that the mist is Friedrich's recurrent symbol for time. It has been said that for Friedrich "nothing was ever an object *per se*, it was also a symbol."¹¹ One would scarcely be tempted to venture the same claim for Bingham.

Historians of nineteenth-century American art have generally been quick to point out the remarkable coincidence of the virtually simultaneous creation by Bingham and his contemporary William Sidney Mount (1807-68) of thematically and structurally similar pictures: Bingham's *Fur Traders* and Mount's *Eel Spearing at Setauket*. Painted, like the *Fur Traders*, in 1845, *Eel Spearing* also seems related in form and structure—if not in circumstance—to John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1778). Both depict boats propelled slowly over tranquil waters by single oarsmen; both include an older figure, a younger figure, and a small animal; both involve some type of hunting as ostensible subject. Is there, then, an inherent relationship between Bingham's and Mount's works as paintings, or are they related simply by a fortuitous accident of coincidence?

Finally, we may observe yet another variety

of apparent influence in the later version of Bingham's *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (fig. 3),¹² which appears indebted to a classical sculpture of a dancing satyr for the figure at the apex of the compositional triangle: the torso and legs are virtually identical, the arm positions reversed but only slightly modified.¹³ In his study of Bingham's work, E. Maurice Bloch remarks that this particular classical figure "was actually well known in small-scale reproductions that must have ornamented many a parlor in Bingham's time."¹⁴ Bingham himself had become convinced early in his three-month stay in Philadelphia in 1838 of the value of drawing from figure casts (as opposed to the inadequate two-dimensional images in engravings and instruction books) for the painter

intent upon reproducing the living human figure. In a letter to James Sidney Rollins late in his life, Bingham still calls such cast sculptures "indispensible" as "models for pupils in Art."¹⁵ Beyond this cast sculpture, we may reasonably suspect that Bingham also drew upon Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819)—which he undoubtedly knew at least from an engraving—not only for the crowded general compositional triangle but also for the particular detail of the handkerchief waved by the dancing flatboatman, another instance of apparent borrowing that so many critics have noted.

So far we have established only that there appear to be both general and specific correspondences between Bingham's works and those of his predecessors and contemporaries. But



FIG. 3. *George Caleb Bingham, The Jolly Flatboatmen (2)*. Daniel J. Terra Collection, Terra Museum of American Art, Evanston, Illinois.

mere analogies do not establish influence, nor do subjective discussions that treat different works in similar but nonetheless metaphorical language. Bingham was not, of course, doing anything unusual when he turned to the work of others both for inspiration and for technical suggestion. Indeed, copying was still routinely accepted well into the nineteenth century as a means by which a young artist might perfect his craft, if not necessarily his art. Certainly such copying of the masters had played a very large part in the training of artists in the eighteenth century, where imitation was in fact typically accounted a form of interpretation as well as of instruction. That visual emulation and adaptation is apparent, moreover, not just in apprentice works but in mature productions as well. Among Bingham's immediate predecessors and contemporaries in America, for instance, we discover that Asher B. Durand (1796–1886) was much influenced by Rubens, Constable, and Claude Lorrain; along with the English painter John Martin, Constable and Lorrain also inform the work of Thomas Cole (1801–48). The genre painter John Quidor (1801–81) drew frequently from Rowlandson and the English comic engravers, and Mount turned on more than one occasion to the work of the English painter David Wilkie. Indeed, when an artist is largely self-taught, as Bingham was, learning one's craft by imitating the masters (often from poor-quality prints or from engravings, better in quality but technically "translated," in art instruction books) is both natural and necessary. When the superior artist acquires the language of art in this fashion, he or she occasionally turns that idiom against itself as a way of distinguishing the new work from those that inform it. It is to this same tradition of critical imitation that so formidable an artist as Picasso belongs in our own century; indeed, Picasso is reputed to have said that "the best criticism of any work of art is another work of art."¹⁶

But when one copies all or part of another work, what exactly is it that is copied? For example, Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (*Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*; 1863) is indebted for its

three central figures to the lower right corner of Raphael's *Judgment of Paris*. But the concept of a group of clothed men and nude women owes something as well to Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre; Pastorale* (ca. 1510). Many artists borrowed from Raphael, of course, including Bingham, who seems to have taken the seated nude who looks out at us from that same figure group in *The Judgment of Paris* as the basis for similarly posed seated figures in *Boatmen on the Missouri* (1846) and *The Squatters* (1850). When Manet and Bingham borrow from Raphael's picture, though, do they wish to carry over their original context along with the borrowed images? That is, are we intended to discern in the *Luncheon on the Grass* some modern version of, or commentary upon, *The Judgment of Paris*? Do we need the precursor work in order fully to understand the new work, or is that new work self-sufficient, its nature and significance entirely unrelated to any aspect of the precursor's content? If it is thus "free-standing," the apparent influence relationship need not trouble us beyond our routine observation of the visual similarity: what has been borrowed is a matter of surface more than substance. But most borrowing is not so easily dismissed.

BINGHAM AND NATIONALISM IN ART

The whole broad topic of influence relations in the arts is particularly relevant to the case of an artist like Bingham. As a self-taught western painter, Bingham was keenly aware that much of his reputation—and hence his market—would depend upon an eastern Establishment. Bingham scholars generally agree that the artist tailored his genre pictures of river life to what he felt would prove most successful, which is to say, most salable. Part of Bingham's achievement lay in the relative success with which his pictures were able to appeal to "both the local pride of the West and the primitivist nostalgia of the relatively sophisticated eastern seaboard."¹⁷ As Bloch and others have explained, by the mid-1840s there was already a good deal of literature about the West in circulation

in the East, and that material could not but pique the interest of a buying public in paintings that would give some sense of what actually existed "out there" on the frontier. So in exhibiting and popularizing his "Western" genre paintings, Bingham came to be regarded both in his own time and by many subsequent students of his art as something of a documentary realist, an illustrator of river life, even though, as art historians are well aware, his depictions are filled with both the specific and the conceptual vocabulary of conventional European art. J. D. Prown has called Bingham a history painter recording his own time.¹⁸ While this assessment may stretch the bounds of history painting rather dangerously, it does suggest something important about the manner in which Bingham's pictures combine history and fancy—even mythology of a sort—for the viewer. Moreover, if we recall the vogue of illustrated travel-books in the mid-nineteenth century, we can also begin to appreciate how the apparently particularized localism of Bingham's pictures would have satisfied a definable market need.

Here, then, is a case in which "market appeal" appears to be a factor in influence relations. As Bloch has pointed out, Bingham accommodated his subjects to the announced wishes of the American Art Union, which had already informed one painter (Frederick E. Cohen) that it was most interested in pictures "taken from every day scenes of life, those that are not suggestive of, or create painful emotions. . . . Anything, however, that illustrates our country."¹⁹ What was wanted, in other words, was pleasant nationalistic pictorialism that would engage the viewer without threatening her or him. It was the sort of prescription Bingham was particularly well suited to address. Indeed, we have only to note the number of figures who look directly at us from his canvasses to get a sense of how well Bingham understood the use of eye contact as a device for generating viewer involvement. Once the Art Union had shown interest in Bingham's western subjects, even having his 1846 *Jolly Flatboatmen* (fig. 4) engraved for their membership; once those pictures had begun to attract serious attention;

and once he had been dubbed "The Missouri Artist," as he had by 1850—then Bingham was able to turn away from his early staple, portrait painting, and concentrate on more of his western subjects.²⁰

BINGHAM'S ART AND THE ACT OF COMPARING

As a purely practical artist who wanted to sell his paintings, Bingham may have intentionally blended elements of familiar European art with his American subject matter in order to combine for his viewer the comforting security of a familiar visual tradition and the novel, the unconventional, and the distinctively local and particular. This is not to suggest that we should overlook or discount the fact that Bingham invested a great deal of time and effort in studying the works of the masters, whether in the original or in reproductions and engravings, and that he would naturally have embodied many elements of what he studied in his own works. Such appropriation of his predecessors is particularly obvious in terms of design, where Bingham's fondness for pyramidal and triangular construction attests to the tenacity with which he clung to this classicizing element of design.

Rudolf Zeitler has called attention to what he terms the dualistic nature of many early nineteenth-century paintings in which a foreground formed by everyday circumstances serves as a sort of "runway" or point of departure for a dreamlike yearning that is projected into a distance full of mystery.²¹ This interest in combining within a single work elements of the real and the fantastic—the "here" and the "not-here"—was common among Romantic artists in all the media. With Bingham, though, as with many of the painters of the West, Zeitler's formulation might quite properly be reversed. For the eastern or European viewer to whom the western subject matter is essentially foreign, what is familiar in a painting like the *Fur Traders* is not the foreground but rather the background. In addressing his audience on its own familiar visual terms, Bingham employs



FIG. 4. *George Caleb Bingham*, *The Jolly Flatboatmen (1)*. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Lent by the Pell Family Trust, Hon. Claiborne Pell, Trustee.

that idiom either in the landscape setting that brackets his main subject or in the traditional iconography or visual arrangement that underlies or articulates his subject. Such a combination of the traditional and the new is unavoidable in this sort of art.

In a sense, Bingham's situation was typical for American artists in the early years who wished to paint distinctively American subjects. Even as late as 1845—the year Bingham submitted his western subjects to the American Art Union—American artists had not yet developed a full painterly vocabulary endemic to what we might broadly term “the American experience.” Hence they naturally reached back to the European visual tradition in search of a sort of artistic skeleton upon which a distinctively “American” art might be assembled. To

communicate, the artist requires a vocabulary. But that vocabulary is only part of the communicative process, for the artist requires as well an audience capable of understanding what he or she would communicate. There must be some common ground—some shared vocabulary—to make such communication possible. This shared vocabulary, I would suggest, was for Bingham, and for many others, part of the accumulated language of European representational art.

We return to the point raised in relation both to Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* and to Bingham's late *Jolly Flatboatmen*: the relation of the borrowed materials to the new work. Does the novelty of the western subject matter make the conventionality of the work's form (or the particular borrowed details of its form)

an embarrassment to the work, an intrusive advertisement of its indebtedness? Depending upon how one feels about the aesthetic validity of such borrowing, the question might be answered in either the negative or the affirmative. It seems clear that Bingham's borrowings of details like the dancing satyr or the waving handkerchief are probably best regarded as convenient appropriations of visual images—shortcuts, as it were. Yet if the satyr figure was as common in America as Bloch claims, and if Gericault's *Raft* was already widely known, then Bingham must surely have realized that in employing those details so obviously in "attention positions" (both appear at the apex of a compositional triangle) he was inviting his viewers to recognize and recall the models upon which he had drawn.²²

All paintings involve us at some level in an activity of comparing: we "decode" or "translate" messages of any sort by matching their details with material already within our general knowledge. But when we enter the field of "influence studies," we tend to look more carefully for any and all such correspondences. The problem with this sort of visual sleuthing is that we may get so carried away by our enthusiasm for the task at hand that we begin to find connections even where none exist. That is, coming at the visually analogous material with a particularly aggressive comparative mind-set, we may in fact impose relationships ("influences"), almost in defiance of the facts or logic of the works we are considering. Something like this might reasonably be said about my placing the Friedrich painting beside the *Fur Traders* and thus seeming to suggest a relationship that does not really exist.

Yet the fact remains that in looking at any picture that suggests another we tend to recall that precursor work—or to recreate it in our memories, since we normally have neither the original nor a reproduction in hand when we encounter the new work. Such a comparison actually benefits both works, for it leads us to consider each not only by itself but also in relation to the other, sometimes even producing in our minds a third, hybrid version that partakes

of both. If Bingham's eastern viewers perceived the artist's use of European precursors, they might have engaged in just this kind of comparative activity, and it is entirely possible that the distinctively American (or western) aspects of the pictures might have benefited most, owing partly to their novelty for the eastern viewer and partly to their service as visual confirmation or clarification of impressions and assumptions the viewer had generated from his or her reading of sensationalized or romanticized materials about the West. Since the conventions of European art would have in some sense provided the standards by which the viewer assessed the picture, that viewer would have been confronted with some striking exceptions to those conventions—for instance, there are few fur traders or dancing flatboatmen to be seen in conventional European art. In a new republic less than a century old, this discovery of a national subject matter distinct from its European antecedents would not have been without significance to an eastern artistic Establishment that was itself part of an expanding America already beginning to see itself as a major political and artistic power. We define by likening and by differentiating, and Bingham's pictures may be seen to stimulate both activities in service to the latter.

POLITICS AND BINGHAM'S ART

One area of American public activity in which continuities and discontinuities with European precedents are clearly apparent is politics. And it was a series of political paintings executed at mid-century that generated perhaps the greatest interest in Bingham's art. The best known of these, *The County Election* (fig. 5), was painted in 1851–52, with another version following later in 1852. In this picture some of the principal matters we have been considering appear to converge. First, the picture was immediately popular when it was exhibited, as we know not only from newspaper reports but also from the fact that a number of keys were issued that purported to identify the figures that populate the picture.²³ Again, it is scarcely surprising to discover that Bingham turned to a model for his

picture—in this case William Hogarth's *Canvassing for Votes* (fig. 6), a work Bingham probably knew in its common engraved state, in which the right-left orientation corresponds to that of Bingham's picture. We can easily see how much Bingham has taken from Hogarth: the street that recedes toward an open landscape in the left background, the refreshment table at the left, the three figures beside the porch that echo Hogarth's three standing men, and the triangular construction executed in "levels" or bands and rising to its apex on the porch at the right.

Flexner attributes the strongest influence upon Bingham's painting to the work of the German immigrant John Lewis Krimmel (1789–1821), whose two paintings, *Election Day at the State House* and *Fourth of July in Center Square*, were at the Pennsylvania Academy when Bingham was in Philadelphia.²⁴ Behind both Bingham's and Krimmel's pictures, though, lie Hogarth's widely circulated election engravings, and this fact raises yet another important issue in influence studies: the role of intermediate works. That is, suppose Bingham had not seen the Hogarth, but had obtained his visual material from the work of an intermediate artist (in this case Krimmel) who had used the Hogarth? Which artist, then, is the source of the "influence" upon Bingham? In an active artistic community, whether local or worldwide, this kind of "cross-pollination" occurs continually, to the frequent despair of source-hunters. The important point for the present discussion is to distinguish between borrowings of form (visual structures) and borrowings of, or overt references to, content (visual statements). In Bingham's election pictures, it is the latter sort of visual connection that yields the most intriguing suggestions about the artist's intentions. While Bingham's political paintings may in fact owe something to Krimmel's works, it would have been Hogarth's engravings rather than Krimmel's canvasses that were more immediately available to Bingham after he departed Philadelphia in 1838.

Bingham's election pictures are, in fact, full of materials borrowed not just from academic

sources but also from distinctively localized ones. The child seated at the left foreground of *The County Election*, for instance, recalls a small classical sculpture "that was especially popular in Bingham's time, both in engraving as well as in small scale reproduction."²⁵ At the same time, other paintings such as *Stump Speaking* (1853) and *Canvassing for a Vote* (1852) reflect the iconography of local election campaign posters.²⁶ Both the teasing invitation to the viewer to identify the figures and the clear reference to Hogarth—if not specifically to *Canvassing for Votes*, then at least to the election series generally—reflect Bingham's implicit suggestion that the viewer do some comparing, not just of pictures but of larger, perhaps national (or nationalistic) issues.

What emerges from such a comparison, briefly, is a sense that the American situation is to be preferred to the European. Barbara S. Groseclose has called Bingham's manner in the election pictures "sardonic, almost Hogarthian thrusts at the foibles of factional politics."²⁷ The "almost" is important, for as Flexner observes, Bingham's treatment of his subject differs from the often cynical, even misanthropic view we find in Hogarth:

All the elements needed for devastating satire are portrayed—windbags and office-holding humbugs, wily or smug; voters idiotic or disreputable, usually drunken; liquor flowing at the polls—yet all is recorded with such admiration as a doting father lavishes on a spirited urchin come home filthy and with his pocket full of frogs.²⁸

Flexner's hyperbole aside, the point is essentially correct: these paintings, like many other mid-century expressions of American nationalism, are full of the self-satisfied optimism so often regarded as the very spirit of Jacksonian democracy. Measured against the precedents of European art and decorum, the American experience (both *in* art and *as* art) is coming to be seen as inherently more vital, expansive even to the point of explosiveness. At moments of cultural intersection—moments naturally suited



FIG. 5. *George Caleb Bingham, The County Election*. St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis.

to representation in the arts and perhaps most engagingly (if condescendingly) recorded in innumerable pictures of bewildered aboriginals confronting the authors and artifacts of “civilized” society—the invited act of comparison cannot but result in a preference for the new. In an environment of increasingly self-congratulatory nationalism, the artist can and does raise such moments of shared preference-by-choice almost to the status of mythology. Bingham is clearly engaging in this sort of activity in his western pictures.

INFLUENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

Finally, I should like to point to another vision of the flatboatmen, this one *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port* (fig. 7), done in 1857. This is one of those later works that some critics, including J. T. Flexner, dismiss as dull failures.

Flexner claims that Bingham lost his spark of originality at about the same time that he traveled to Paris and Düsseldorf (in 1855–59), and that he subsequently became infected with what Flexner calls “the artificialities of the German genre style,” so much so that later efforts such as this picture recast the originally lively flatboatmen as “theatrical figures posing with conscious grace.” Yet E. M. Bloch regards the same painting as the “culmination of [Bingham’s] progression and developing maturity,” seeing in the figure arrangement not contrivance but “a far more fluid, *less* contrived movement [that is] felt throughout the work [and] which reveals the mature artist.”³⁰ In many ways the responses of these two critics reflect their own standards of taste and decorum—the “spectacles” through which they observe the picture—perhaps more than they reflect Bingham’s painting itself. Flexner’s



FIG. 6. *William Hogarth*, *Canvassing for Votes*. Stephen C. Behrendt.

taste reflects his interest in American primitive art, while Bloch's represents his training in classical art. Flexner's concern with convention, with what in the picture is like what has been done elsewhere, deflects attention away from what is different. Bloch, on the other hand, seems to take the picture more on its own terms: although he too recognizes the picture's debts, he sees as well what is distinctive and innovative about the melding of original and inherited materials.

Flexner's objection is, nonetheless, one that deserves attention. If the inclusion of an academic figure-study group or an amalgamation of several such groups disturbs a picture that is aiming to be realistic, then the artist may indeed have failed in his or her effort, for an

academic figure-group is not "natural," nor can it be made natural simply by inserting it into an otherwise natural visual setting. We might see the conflict here as one between academicism and "naturalness"; but we might regard it also as a difference between alternate varieties of academicism. The wild landscape garden of the American wilderness (however defined) is not, after all, the orderly, "civilized" (and hence manipulated or "tamed") landscape garden of Versailles. Just as the American landscape is ultimately not fully reducible to the visual vocabulary of European landscape art, so is much of the language of nineteenth-century American subject matter likewise irreducible.

We come back, then, to the matter of just



FIG. 7. *George Caleb Bingham, The Jolly Flatboatmen in Port. St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis.*

what we mean by “influence” and how we determine what, if anything, an artist wishes us to make of his or her discernible borrowings from the inherited language of visual art. My primary concern here has been to raise what I see as some of the more important questions concerning influence studies as they apply to the art of George Caleb Bingham. With the artists of the West who have taken both concrete and conceptual materials from other artists, we always need to determine whether the borrowing is a matter of formal reference—what in literary studies is customarily called allusion, or the deliberate invocation of both a precursor work and the context supplied by that precursor. If allusion seems not to be the purpose, then we need to decide what is.

In the case of artists like Bingham and others who were directly involved in the forging of a

distinctively American strain of visual art, it is worth asking ourselves whether the connections we observe between their work and that of their European predecessors are not in fact often the inevitable result of a groping for existing forms, or paradigms, by and through which to regulate and communicate their perceptions and their inventions. Just as the subjects of the Bingham paintings we have considered here are acts of community, so too is the making of art an act of implied community with one’s audience. As I indicated earlier, such community interaction requires a basis in a shared language—in this case the language of art, a visual language that is predominantly European but, like any living language, continually receptive to expansion and modification by the incorporation of new materials. Studying an American painting that invites the viewer to contrast what

is, now (i.e., American) with what was, then (i.e., European) may lead that viewer into a variety of acts of discrimination and judgment, not the least of which is likely to be an increasing preference for what is now, what is new. Such pictures, I believe, provide simultaneous reminders of continuity and discontinuity, of likeness and difference, both within the actual sphere of the viewer's own experience and within the broader, less "place-conscious" realm of formal art. The decision by American painters to give prominent place in their work to indigenous American subject matter is analogous to William Wordsworth's radical choice of "humble" subject matter for his poems in the landmark *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, a decision that advanced the democratization of the arts even as it substantially expanded the range of subject matter henceforth to be regarded as "appropriate" to formal art. To turn to "national" subject matter was, for American artists such as Bingham, an act at once patriotic and radical, a declaration of national as well as artistic independence well suited to the self-confident political, intellectual, and artistic expansionism that characterized the nation on the eve of the Civil War.

NOTES

1. Ironically, as Barbara S. Groseclose has observed, it was that very neoclassical artist Benjamin West's emphasis on the contemporary and the particular that inaugurated the modern replacement of the past by the present in the subject matter of painting. See "Painting, Politics, and George Caleb Bingham," *American Art Journal* 10 (November 1978): 18.

2. *Rasselas* (1759), in *Johnson: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mona Wilson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 410. See also Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* (1769-90; first published together in 1797), Burke's essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757), Wordsworth's expanded preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), and Gilpin's several rambles on the picturesque in his "tours" (1789-1804).

3. These latter, related trends are treated at length in Ray Allen Billington's *Land of Sav-*

agery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

4. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Most directly related is Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972).

5. See also the relationship of "parallels" and "analogies" as discussed by Ulrich Weisstein in "Literature and the Visual Arts," *Interrelations of Literature*, ed. Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1982), especially pp. 265-67.

6. The subject of artistic influence in general is far too broad for survey here. A particularly useful and important discussion of the varieties of influence is Göran Hermerén's *Influence in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). A good documentary survey of the matter of visual influence is K. E. Maison's *Art Themes and Variations: Five Centuries of Interpretations and Re-Creations* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, [1960]). I have discussed one aspect of the phenomenon in "The Best Criticism: Imitation as Criticism in the Eighteenth Century," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 24 (1983): 3-22, and have provided an extended example in *The Moment of Explosion: Blake and the Illustration of Milton* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983). A more particular examination of the incorporation of a European visual model into Great Plains art is Rena A. Coen's "David's Sabine Women in the Wild West," *Great Plains Quarterly* 2 (1982): 67-76.

7. Hermerén, *Influence*, p. 321.

8. I refer to the painting here by its more familiar title. In a recent article Henry Adams argues persuasively that this painting's original title provides strong evidence for considering the painting as a companion pendant to *Indian Figure—Concealed Enemy*. See Henry Adams, "A New Interpretation of Bingham's *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*," *Art Bulletin* 65 (1983): 675-80.

9. Adams, "New Interpretation," p. 678. This Claudian strain is countered in *Indian Figure—Concealed Enemy* with the rugged, irregular landscape typical of Salvator Rosa.

Rosa's work formed the stylistic opposite to Claude's serenity, a point widely discussed by theorists and connoisseurs in the eighteenth century. As Adams notes, both Claude and Rosa seem to have reached the height of their popularity in America in the 1840s.

10. James Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1962), p. 150.

11. Helmut Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, trans. Sarah Twohig (New York: George Braziller, 1974), pp. 122, 12.

12. I am deliberately sidestepping the problem of this painting's date. E. Maurice Bloch, the leading authority on Bingham's art, initially dated the picture ca. 1848, despite Bingham's reference in an 1878 letter to being engaged in "finishing" a version of this subject; *George Caleb Bingham: The Evolution of an Artist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) and *George Caleb Bingham: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 62. Writing later, in *The Drawings of George Caleb Bingham, with a Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975), Bloch offers a compromise solution to the dating problem, saying "the painting could have been in progress over a considerable period, with the artist refurbishing it after a lapse of some years in order to make it ready for exhibition" (p. 247).

13. The sculpture is reproduced in Bloch, *Evolution of an Artist*, plate 57.

14. Bloch, *Evolution of an Artist*, p. 94. Indeed, Bingham may have owned some of these reproductions himself, judging from a remark in a letter he wrote to his wife from Philadelphia in 1838: "I have just been purchasing a lot of drawings and engravings, and also a lot of casts from antique sculpture which will give me nearly the same advantages in my drawing studies at

home, that are at present to be enjoyed here." John Francis McDermott, *George Caleb Bingham: River Portraitist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), p. 29.

15. Bloch, *Evolution of an Artist*, p. 41. The letter is dated 9 September 1877.

16. Cited by Martin C. Battestin, ed., Preface to Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews and Shamela* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. xix.

17. Henry Vyverberg, *The Living Tradition: Art, Music, and Ideas in the Western World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 255.

18. Jules David Prown, *American Painting: From Its Beginnings to the Armory Show* (Lausanne and Geneva: Skira, 1969), p. 84.

19. Bloch, *Evolution of an Artist*, p. 81.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

21. Rudolf Zeitler, *Die Kunst des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*; cited by Mario Praz in *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 159.

22. Bloch, *Evolution of an Artist*, p. 94.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 139-46.

24. Flexner, *That Wilder Image*, pp. 145-46. Bloch, incidentally, refers us both to Hogarth and to David Wilkie's *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo* (1822); *Evolution of an Artist*, p. 148.

25. Bloch, *Evolution of an Artist*, p. 154. The sculpture is reproduced as plate 98.

26. See Groseclose, "Painting, Politics, and Bingham," pp. 5-19.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

28. Flexner, *That Wilder Image*, p. 147.

29. J. T. Flexner, *Nineteenth Century American Painting* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), p. 96.

30. Bloch, *Evolution of an Artist*, pp. 94-95; emphases mine.