

The Time of Peace and Cats

It's morning, mid-summer. A haze lies over everything. The river valley seems veiled, the horizon indiscernible. What shrouds everything isn't fog, but a glowing wet glaze you can feel against your face. Likely as not it's August. George Caleb Bingham's style of painting is called *luminist*, the landscape ever so tranquil, yellow-y in the generous morning light.

Bingham's painting is famous. Two men aboard a cottonwood canoe in no particular hurry, that canoe toting a bundle of furs down the Missouri River. The slightest breeze carries smoke from the man's pipe on a silver ribbon out behind.

His flouncy pink blouse makes him look more of a dandy than a mountain man--and that odd stocking cap would be a joke if history didn't tell us it had a name and a story. It's "a freedom hat"--a *toque*, this Frenchman would call it, that back then proclaimed his assertion of liberty. It's a "liberty hat," circa 1820, its legendary roots in rebellious Patee, and it's worn with pride right here by an American fur trapper.

That thin canoe rides low because the bulky catch is a burden. A kid is hanging over the bundle, smiling, and why wouldn't he? It's a buttery summer morning, their trek into the wilds has been wildly successful, and the two of them are homeward bound to sell their furs, all of it on a perfectly calm Missouri.

Fur Trappers descending the Missouri* is George Caleb Bingham's most famous painting. It catches river trapping lore as fittingly as a coonskin cap. Bingham's famous work rode the back cover of the American Lit anthology I used through twenty years of teaching. Always loved it because it seemed so, well, home--two fur trappers on our Missouri River.

It wasn't always titled that way. Bingham called it *Fur Trader, Half-breed Son*, a title thought by some to be embarrassingly un-p.c., the word *half-breed* not ever to be used. *Fur Trappers Descending the Missouri* feels more heroic than *Fur Trader, Half-breed Son*, and vastly less shameful.

But Bingham the artist wanted you to know that the kid in the middle was the son of Native American woman, the Frenchman's wife. While the word *half-breed* in the original title risks offense, it also defines the moment in 19th century history when Euro- and Native Americans got along in almost every human way--royally, if I can use that word in a painting about liberty.

And then there's the third canoe character, a black cat, ears perked, watching the artist maybe, but not in the least nervous about being aboard that canoe. A cat. I wish you could see it. A black cat on a Missouri river canoe.

Now you might think--I did--that there was no earthly reason for George Caleb Bingham to put a haughty black cat on that canoe, no reason but one: the guy loved cats.

Whether or not he did is immaterial. Back then, Sioux City, Iowa, had thousands of cats because everything that went up and down the river needed a mouser. River vessels of all sizes were attacked by mice and rats by the dozen, even hundreds, an army big enough to chew through cargo as if everything in the hold were popcorn.

Even fur trappers needed cats. Mice in indiscernible cracks could destroy a year's furs without breaking a sweat. Even canoe cats found ready employment—no handouts either, no gourmet salmon. Bingham's jet black feline looks arrogant up there in front, but then he knows his worth, as all cats do.

But river cats especially had a right to be arrogant. If those two guys were all about liberty, someone had to remind them that “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” Wasn’t that Jefferson? The cat knows somebody has to tend the bounty to be sure the goods get home.

It's all there in a famous old painting that feels very much at home right here, despite all the years and so much change. The quiet summer morning on the river is neither unique nor rare.

They're still here, still ours to see and to love.