

*Navigating The West:  
George Caleb Bingham  
& The River*



By Stephen May

ST LOUIS, MO. — Dubbed “the Missouri artist,” George Caleb Bingham moved to the state as a child and, by the 1840s, began

Previous page: Bingham’s masterpiece, his most aesthetically pleasing painting, “Fur Traders Descending the Missouri,” 1845, brought him national attention when it was acquired by the American Art-Union and disseminated as engravings all over the country. The light-filled, dreamy atmosphere is often seen as Luminist in quality. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Right: Following the success of “Fur Traders Descending the Missouri,” 1845, Bingham painted an uninspired second version, “Trappers’ Return,” 1851. Michael Edward Shapiro, former chief curator at the Saint Louis museum has observed that “In each instance that Bingham repeated himself, the second version is invariably inferior.” Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Mich.

painting the scenes of western life for which he is now famous. “Navigating the West: George Caleb Bingham and the River,” an



interesting and informative exhibition organized by Amon Carter Museum of American Art and Saint Louis Art Museum, already seen in Fort Worth, is on view in St Louis through May 17.

The exhibition celebrates his iconic depictions of frontier life by bringing together his river paintings and drawings for the first time in decades.



Returning to Missouri from one of his visits East, Bingham began to specialize in subjects indigenous to the Mississippi valley: fur traders and trappers, flatboatmen, squatters, farmers and Indians. Many looked back nostalgically, such as the figures in "Boatmen on the Missouri," 1846, an atmospheric rendering of three "woodhawks" who sold wood to passing steamboats for fuel. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of Mr and Mrs John D. Rockefeller 3rd.



The relaxed pose of this "Boatman," 1846, belies the rough and rowdy reputation of his compatriots working on the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. In Bingham's oil, "Boatmen on the Missouri," the figure in the drawing is joined by two other watermen, one equally at ease. Collection of Mr and Mrs Stuart P. Feld.

A bevy of curators from the two museums assembled the show and contributed to the fine catalog. Importantly, they offer fresh insights into how Bingham used many preparatory drawings in



composing finished paintings. The 22 paintings on view in

“Navigating the West” include masterworks from the museum's American collection and others on loan from prominent museums and private collections.

By the time Bingham painted “The Concealed Enemy,” 1845, Indians had disappeared from the Missouri landscape. Nevertheless, images like this were still popular in the East. Curators Kornhauser and Mahon observe that “this painting presents an image of savagery and danger to be found on the river.” Stark Museum of Art, Orange, Texas.





Left: Bingham's deft sketch of a "Skillet-beater," 1846, is replicated in two versions of the artist's best-known boatmen image, "The Jolly Flatboatmen." Created with black ink and wash over pencil, it demonstrates Bingham's early mastery of figural drawings. Bingham Trust, Lent by the People of the State of Missouri to the Saint Louis Art Museum.



Right: Bingham built his large compositions in a classical pyramid. This carefully delineated ink and pencil drawing "Cardplayer," 1847, was transposed as a central figure in the painting "Raftsmen Playing Cards." Bingham Trust, Lent by the People of Missouri, General Purchase Funds, on loan to Saint Louis Art Museum, St Louis.

They are joined by more than 50 related drawings and prints, as well as the recently restored "Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley." Painted around 1850, at the same time as Bingham's masterworks, the 348-foot-long "Panorama" provides another depiction of life along the western rivers.





Bingham completed the flamboyant "Jolly Boatmen in Port" in 1857 while he was residing in Dusseldorf. The composition reflects that city's emphasis on baroque principles of pictorial construction. As the sun rises on the St Louis docks on the Mississippi, the boat is crowded with many people, including a black man on the left in tattered clothes, perhaps a recognition of the increasingly violent controversy over slavery. Saint Louis Art Museum, St Louis.

The exhibition travels to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, June 17–September 20. The Saint Louis Art Museum is at 1 Fine Arts Drive, Forest Park. For information, 314-721-0072 or [www.slam.org](http://www.slam.org).