



Newsstand Rate \$1.75

Published by The Bee Publishing Company, Newtown, Connecticut

INDEXES ON
PAGES 36 & 37

Navigating The West

George Caleb Bingham & The River

By STEPHEN MAY

ST LOUIS, MO. — If ever an artist knew rivers — and boatmen — it was George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879), who devoted much of his career to depicting hardy watermen who plied the mighty Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. A self-made, self-taught painter with an active interest in politics, he recognized in the 1840s that the great rivers had become engines of cultural and commercial importance. The unheralded boatmen, in his view, were frontiersmen crucial to the progress of an expanding nation. His depictions were genre paintings, to be sure, but beyond that Bingham appreciated the socioeconomic significance of his subjects and their appeal to Easterners seeking romanticized evocations of the not-so-wild West. As such, his river series became a seminal landmark — aesthetic, social, economic and political — in the turbulent years before the Civil War.

Documenting the magnitude of the artist's accomplishments, "Navigating the West: George Caleb Bingham & 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. 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. On view are 16 iconic paintings that utilized 50 sketches.

"Bingham's working method, from graphite study to underdrawing to finished oil, is explored...in the exhibition and catalog as never before," observe Amon Carter director Andrew J. Walker



After an awkward start, Bingham quickly became an accomplished portraitist, as demonstrated by this robust "Self-Portrait of the Artist," 1834–1835. In his early twenties, the painter looks every bit the ambitious, determined and intelligent artist he had become. In these and later self-likenesses he showed the imperfect fit of the wig he wore after losing his hair to a severe bout of measles. Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis.

and Saint Louis director Brent R. Benjamin. The show and publication, they add, offer the "opportunity to appreciate anew not only the important commentary of Bingham's work but how he worked." Bingham, they conclude, was "an artist who, dedicated to his local scene, transcended the regional mantle to assume his place among America's great artists."

Bingham was the first American artist to achieve national acclaim and prominence while living most of his life west of the Mississippi River. He emigrated with his family from western Virginia to Missouri when he was 8. Settling in a village near the Missouri River, young George had ample opportunities to observe life on the waterway and in adjacent towns — providing subjects for years of river paintings. From 1837 to 1845, the Bingham family lived in Arrow Rock, where the small brick house, now within Arrow Rock State Historic Site, has been designated a National Historic Landmark.

By his early twenties, Bingham had considered becoming a lawyer, a minister, a sign painter and a cabinetmaker, but eventually concluded he wanted to be an artist — and a good one. Although he was self-taught, Bingham was determined to become a first-rate professional painter. He honed his skills through study of drawing manuals rather than formal academic training and through visits East and to Europe to explore museums and galleries.

By the mid-1830s, the young man was making the rounds as an itinerant painter, traveling to communities along the Missouri River and painting portraits in a simple, hard and stiff but clear and forceful style. Understanding the motivations

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SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM



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.



Bollicking yet peaceful, Bingham's exuberant rendering of "The Jolly Boatmen," 1846, was an immediate hit when engravings were distributed to thousands of members by the American Art-Union. Colorful and straightforward, it countered the negative perception of rivermen as wild, uncouth and prone to fighting. Thanks to the AA-U, this picture became the artist's most famous work. The organization's affinity for Bingham's art led to the acquisition of 20 of his genre scenes and one landscape. Manoogian Collection.

BADA Antiques & Fine Art Fair Will Be Presented March 18–24



Julian Simon Fine Art will show "Gondola II" by Jonathan Pike (b 1949), a signed watercolor on paper, United Kingdom, 7½ by 5½ inches (paper size).

Frank Partridge will offer a pair of Chippendale George III girandoles, circa 1765, 27 by 50 inches.

LONDON — Long-regarded as a premier national fair, the BADA Antiques & Fine Art Fair, which takes place March 18–24, is the only event on the international art calendar exclusive to members of the British Antique Dealers' Association.

The vetted show presents a diverse range of important furniture, objets d'art and paintings. Encompassing both antique and contemporary items, the fair allows buyers of all tastes and experience to add to their collections. In recent years the fair has seen a steady growth in visitors and an increase in sales above 100,000 pounds.

Ninety-eight art and antiques dealers from around the country, representing a variety of specialties, have confirmed their attendance at the fair.

Returning exhibitors include leading dealers Godson & Coles, Harris Lindsay, Thomas Coulborn & Sons, Lennox Cato, Frank Partridge, Anthony Woodburn Ltd, Trinity House, The Taylor Gallery, Sandra Cronan Ltd, and Holly Johnson Antiques. The demand for stands has increased and among the new exhibitors at the upcoming edition are Beaux Arts London, Philip Mould & Company, Michael Hughes, Peter Lipitch Ltd and Ted Few.

The range of jewelry brought by various dealers has always been a highlight at the fair, and this year is no exception. Among the offerings from Sandra Cronan Ltd is an important pair of diamond "waterfall" earrings dating from circa 1940, each featuring eight pear cut diamonds, and smaller baguette cut diamonds. New



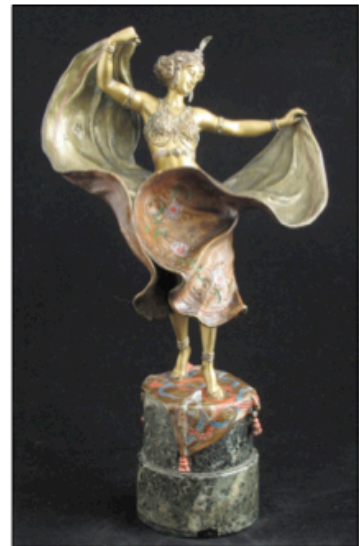
exhibitor John Joseph will bring an Art Deco coral and diamond brooch and Anthea A G Antiques will display a bold coral ring in 18K gold, made by Kutchinsky and dating from the 1970s.

Several trends have emerged among the items being submitted by the dealers for the upcoming fair, including a rise of European furniture and objects designed in an Oriental style. Godson & Coles, specializing in Eighteenth–Nineteenth Century furniture as well as Modern British art, will bring a rare George I period, scarlet japanned bureau cabinet, signed by maker Daniel Massey. Frank Partridge will

devote his entire stand to chinoiserie items. Another prevalent style in furniture will be fine pieces in English oak as seen in the stands of Wakelin & Linfield, Witney Antiques and Shaw Edwards Antiques.

Another notable category is clocks, which is always well represented at the fair. Anthony Woodburn will bring a William and Mary turtle shell and gilt table clock dating from circa 1695 as well as a well-preserved Charles II walnut and marquetry long case clock.

Fine art at the fair again encompasses fine British examples, ranging from Eighteenth Century watercolors from John Spink and Guy Peppiatt Fine



On offer from Solo Antiques will be Franz Xavier Bergman's (1861–1936) cold-painted metamorphic bronze figure of a dancer, circa 1900. The work is signed Namgreb. The skirt opens to reveal a naked maiden.

Art, to modern British sculpture, including Elisabeth Frink's Assassins II from Beaux Arts London, and contemporary works by artist Jonathan Pike, to whom Julian Simon Fine Art will devote its stand.

A new development that will benefit collectors is the association's introduction of certificates of provenance, which members may now choose to include with the sale of an object. This is the first time they have been available for objects sold at the fair.

The fair will take place in the Duke of York Square in Chelsea. For information, www.bada-antiques-fair.co.uk or +44 020 7589 6108.

'In A New Light' Will Shed Insights Into Giovanni Bellini

LONDON — *In A New Light: Giovanni Bellini's St Francis in the Desert* will be published in March in association with the Frick Collection, New York City, by London-based D Giles Ltd (£55, 232 pages), offering insights into an enigmatic Russian work housed in the United States.

Giovanni Bellini's "St Francis in the Desert" is described as a masterpiece of Venetian Renaissance art that has inspired generations of visitors

to the Frick Collection. This monumental panel painting portrays Francis of Assisi, the medieval Christian saint who renounced earthly riches to embrace a humble existence of poverty, prayer and obedience to the Gospels.

Departing from canonical representations of the holy man's life and miracles, Bellini has imagined Francis alone in a mountainous wilderness, stepping forward from his simple shelter into a golden light that

seems to transfigure him spiritually. For centuries, viewers have puzzled over the work's meaning — seeking explanations in a variety of pictorial and textual sources. Until recently, however, the artist's practical conception and realization of this vision have remained largely unexplored.

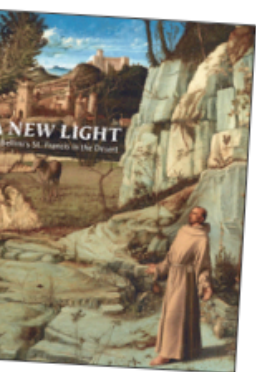
Boasting 180 color illustrations, *In a New Light* presents the collective findings of a technical examination of the artwork. Following a series of

in-depth analyses — including infrared reflectography, X-radiography, microscopy and paint sampling — an international group of specialists considered the artist's working process and its implications for the picture's meaning. Their findings provide a "glimpse over Bellini's shoulder" and open new avenues of research into Venetian Renaissance painting and its cultural and religious context.

Also published in this illustrated book for the first time are recently discovered documents pertaining to the provenance of "St Francis in the Desert" during the Nineteenth Century, as well as synthetic studies of the work's Franciscan milieu and early history.

A monograph of a single picture, *In a New Light* comprises essays and technical studies by leading experts in the fields of paintings conservation, Venetian art, the history of collecting and Franciscan thought, accompanied by many color illustrations that reveal Bellini's masterwork as never seen before.

Contributors include Denise Allen, curator in the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Met-



ropolitan Museum of Art and former curator at the Frick Collection; Michael F. Cusato, OFM, distinguished professor of history, St Bonaventure University, and former director of its Franciscan Institute, St Bonaventure, New York; Anne-Marie Eze, consulting curator at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston; Joseph Godlam chief conservator at the Frick Collection; Charlotte Hale, paintings conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Susannah Rutherglen, who served as Andrew W. Mellon Pre-Doctoral Curatorial Fellow at the Frick Collection from 2009 to 2011.

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