The Mechanisms of the Market and the Invention of Western Regionalism: the Example of George Caleb Bingham

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Water is a pioneer which the settler follows, taking advantage of its improvements.[1]

Thus [. . .] do these highways of God's own making run, as it were, past every man's door, and connect each man with the world he lives in.[2]

By the second quarter of the nineteenth century the myth of the frontier westerner offered a vigorous alternative to the Yankee New Englander as the quintessential American.[3] Herman Melville voiced a belief widespread among his contemporaries: 'the Western spirit is, or will yet be (for no other is, or can be), the true American one.'[4] In the eyes of easterners, the westerner was more than simply a later avatar of the Yankee, he was a fundamentally new man. This western 'original' called forth new forms of vernacular expression. The impulse toward original expression, however, was countered by a cultural need for containment. The frontier West focused communal anxieties about the dangers of social regression in partially settled areas. Nonetheless, easterners wagered upon the probability that western communities would pattern themselves after the East, an investment of faith that helped them to accept the anomalous and potentially disturbing aspects of western society.

Accordingly, the polyglot culture of the early West assumed its place as one phase in the progressive civilizing of the region, worthy of being documented before disappearing in the coming waves of settlement. From an eastern perspective, the West's assimilation into the body of the nation involved the imposition of a normative and unitary frame of reference within which defiantly local elements could be situated. Easterners authored an image of the West that suited their needs. This eastern strategy carried all the more authority when it was realized by a westerner, as was the case with George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879).

Bingham's art and his political involvements were related expressions of a single ambition around which he focused his career — the cultural and economic integration of the West within the nation. Bingham constructed his artistic and political identity out of western materials, but he did so only by first organizing these materials according to a broad social taxonomy. Thus typed, regional peculiarities were subject to a universal natural law that regulated social fluidities.[5] Bingham's western gallery included the Indian, the fur trader, the raftsman, the bargeman, the squatter, the pioneer, the country politician, the patriarch of civilization in the wilderness, the white woman as bearer of domesticity and as captive of savagery.[6] By means of his social typology, Bingham gave to the West an illusory stability, reconciling social variety with permanence. Within the natural world, types were stable, the individual retaining his or her allotted position within the greater scheme. The imperative to type countered a vernacular vitality in which characters thrived according to their ability to assume, chameleon-like, the colours of their environment. As Johnson J. Hooper's character Simon Suggs put it: 'It is good to be shifty in a new country.'[7] In place of polymorphous social and sexual identities — confidence-men kaleidoscopically changing roles and appearances, women behaving like men, and hunters and hunted exchanging identities — Bingham offered a social landscape at once exuberantly diverse and reassuringly fixed.

What helped anchor this exuberance was the chosen style in which Bingham worked. In the following analysis, I will argue that Bingham's classicizing style served as a semantic code through which to negotiate the competing claims of local and universal truth. Furthermore, what was at stake in this negotiation was the relationship of the West as a developing region to the economy and culture of the nation as a whole. The assimilation of the West was carried out on two fronts simultaneously: through trade and an emergent national market, and through cultural mechanisms — in this case the forms of high art — that normalized and situated the exotic, the marginal, and the unfamiliar as the adolescent or primitive phase of national identity. Bingham, actively encouraging his region's assimilation through the political promotion of trade and commerce, had also internalized a nationalist perspective as it was shaped and produced in such eastern centres as New York. This perspective, though rooted in regional types (Yankees and pioneers, for instance), was meant to appeal across regional lines. Yet the national as it was being defined in the 1840s and '50s was ultimately more than the sum of its regional parts. In the instance of genre painting it was defined as a process associated with the market. In Bingham's art, economic and artistic forces mirrored one another. Like the civilizing power of commerce, the strategies of style that Bingham adopted also promoted the domestication

of western character types. Through a form of artistic marketing, the raw materials of western culture were transformed into finished products for national consumption.

The West in the Emerging National Market: *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*

Bingham's *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* of 1845 (Fig. 1) is a peculiarly poignant image of the antebellum West, suffused with longing for a maternal and encompassing wilderness purged of the human violence that so often accompanied settlement. The vision of stasis within motion, where nature and men are not adversaries but harmonious partners, is perpetually appealing. Bingham's dreamlike self-contained world taps a twentieth-century fantasy of a West exempt from the pressures visibly transforming the East throughout the nineteenth century.[8]

Aspects of the painting encourage this view. *Fur Traders* appears to suppress any references to a world beyond the muffled stillness of the river landscape. Bingham's voyagers seem anchored only by their own glassy image on the surface of the river. The horizontal shape of their boat is echoed by the outline of trees along the banks of the river, and by the thread-like breaks in its smooth surface. The clothing of the two figures — the turquoise blue and garnet-red of the boy's shirt and trousers, the salmon shirt of the man — furnishes the only local colour in an otherwise tonally unified landscape. The boy's leaning figure and its reflection form a diamond-shape in the centre of the composition, accenting the stable grid of horizontals and verticals. The stability of the composition, the accented but gradual tonal modulations, the unruffled calm interrupted only by the smoke from the pipe of the man and the delicate white wake of the river as it is sliced by canoe and log, all contribute to an image of the West as pure space, drained of activating motion or energy. Having escaped the tyranny of clock and calendar, this West is shaped by entirely natural agencies. The toil of the passage up the Missouri is forgotten, the trace of labour erased.

Fig. 1. George Caleb Bingham: 'Fur Traders Descending the Missouri', 1845, oil on canvas, 74.3 × 91.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1933. (33.61).

Closer study, however, exposes the mythical elements within our own selective reading of Bingham's image. A number of observations about the painting allow us to reassess how Bingham's own contemporaries might have read the work in the context of their attitudes and knowledge about the region. The presence of the world beyond his image is exposed in the small fissures that interrupt the airtight luminous space of the canvas. Fine trails of pigment reveal the workmanship of the artist, calling attention not only to the materiality of the painted surface, but also to the current of the river pulling subject and viewer inexorably beyond the arcadia of the West and back into time and history. The two central figures are themselves agents of economic forces that had by the 1840s actively transformed the West from a wilderness into a source of raw materials for eastern manufacturers and international markets. The river's current draws the boat toward its destination in St Louis and into a larger world of trade that is defined by distant markets, patterns of taste, and abstract conditions of credit, currency, supply and demand that frame the realities of the western experience.[9]

From the evidence of their cargo, the traders have completed their extractive efforts in the western wilderness and are returning with their goods to civilization, where these raw materials will be transformed into commodities for sale in a national market. *Fur Traders* thus implies its own geographical map, tracing a movement regulated not by nature but by the mechanisms of an emergent market economy. From the Missouri the traders will enter the Mississippi, the nation's spinal column connecting 'the regions of almost perpetual snow' with 'the region of sugar cane and olive' near the Gulf of Mexico.[10] The still, pristine image of the fur traders is actually part of a much larger continental panorama, in which the geography and the economic ambitions of an expanding nation conspire in the movement of goods between East and West, North and South. The wilderness imagery of *Fur Traders* suggests neither aesthetic nor cultural opposition to civilization, but rather a transitory passage through a charmed landscape that is one link in a larger chain of production.

Fur Traders uses its spatial extensions to quite different ends from the radically planar landscapes of contemporary eastern painters such as Sanford Gifford and J. F. Kensett. Rather than suggesting a finely textured self-enclosed microcosm of nature in which action and change are stilled, the world of the *Fur Traders* is as keenly exposed by what lies beyond the borders of the frame as by what the image itself contains. Beneath its surface vision of undefiled wilderness, Bingham's painting reveals its western origins in the central place accorded to humans and to a primitive form of economic activity. His wilderness remains a backdrop.

The artistic autonomy of the image is as much a modern fiction as the autonomy of its subjects. Its horizontality and the absence of framing elements on either side contribute to the impression that the view can be extended laterally beyond the frame. In this respect, Bingham's image mirrors the horizontal strip-like format of the contemporaneous moving panoramas of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, a popular art form which, like Bingham's art, originated in the West. In 1846, a year after Bingham finished *Fur Traders*, John Banvard completed his 'Three mile long moving panorama' which took audiences on a painted voyage down the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico (Fig. 2). Bingham may have observed Banvard's panorama in the making and incorporated its innovations into his own pictorial conception.[11] The panoramas, however, far from eschewing overt narrative, structured their voyage around the various phases in the passage from wilderness to civilization. But while their pictorial strategies differed, both Bingham and the panoramists appropriated local materials for nationalist purposes.[12]

Henry Adams has recently proposed that *Fur Traders* had a pendant, entitled *The Concealed Enemy* (Fig. 3), also painted in 1845, and the same size as the now better-known painting with which it was exhibited at the American Art-Union that year.[12a] Indeed, when *The Concealed Enemy* is hung to the left of *Fur Traders*, the two paintings suggest a series of thematic and aesthetic polarities contained within a panoramic continuum of space. The pendant depicts a figure hidden in the bluffs above the river preparing to ambush the unsuspecting traders with their cargo of animal skins. Their dreamy solitude is about to be violently interrupted. Seen from the perspective of its pendant, the wilderness of Bingham's *Fur Traders* becomes contested ground; the site, in nineteenth-century terms, of a conflict between savagery and civilization, one scene in an unfolding panorama of western settlement. Bingham's nineteenth-century audiences understood wilderness as a relative term, a fluid condition within a historical process, rather than an absolute entity. In this redefined context, *Fur Traders* reminds us that it is a mistake to see Bingham's image as a celebration of wilderness. The fact that Bingham chose to represent traders and not trappers further underlines their position within a market nexus.

On another level, *Fur Traders* is a self-representation, portraying a region just growing conscious of its own peculiarities at a time when they were most threatened. Bingham's own artistic identity turned upon this paradox of a regionalism that was itself the product of processes ultimately antagonistic to it. The classic serenity and order of *Fur Traders* would have been an unlikely achievement a decade earlier, for its visual control implies as well a cultural mastery over new lands which Americans had not yet won in the 1830s. Bingham realized a sense of regional character only imperfectly attained previously, at the very moment that regional autonomy

BANVARD'S PANORAMA.---Figure 1.

Fig. 2. Woodcut illustrating the machinery for Banvard's moving panorama, *Scientific American* (December 16, 1848).

was undermined by the emergence of a national market that placed the West in an economically and culturally subordinate position.[13] The sense, in *The Fur Traders*, of being delicately poised between the direct response to frontier experience and the retrospective myth-making of a more self-conscious age, accounts in part for its special quality. If in *Fur Traders* we witness Bingham actively inventing an image of the West, this image is instantaneously located within an eastern perspective whose creation it is.

Producing Culture in the West

By moderating the polyglot garishness of subjects, Bingham served the promotional purposes of a regional art attempting to demonstrate its normative qualities and to extend its sympathetic reach beyond a local audience. If his western characters were still a refreshingly far cry from Daniel Huntington's *Sybil* (Fig. 4), defended by one reviewer as a more appropriate topic for the annual American Art-Union subscription print, they achieved their local flavour and 'variety' of expression within limits drawn by an older aesthetic of decorum and appropriateness.[14] Bingham was an artistic middleman, producing cultural value by transforming western 'characters' into components of national *character*. This transformation occurred in the eastern capitals that were the centres of cultural production, providing artistic recognition, critical legitimation, and national patronage.

The degree to which Bingham had by 1845 already exchanged his regional dialect for an authoritative national language is evident in comparing *Fur Traders* with a treatment of the same subject by Chares Deas. Like Bingham a westerner, Deas also enjoyed the patronage of the AA-U, although he never achieved Bingham's fame. The same year as *Fur Traders*, Deas painted *The Voyageurs* (Fig. 5), which presented a rich spectrum of western types, from the half-breed boy at the prow of the canoe to his full-blood Indian mother and his grizzled French father.[15] In completing the social portrait that Bingham preferred to leave to the imagination — one based on miscegenation — Deas approached his western materials in a different spirit from Bingham. The river down which Deas' family of voyagers work their way is cluttered by snags and practically unnavigable. The canoe is wedged between a treacherous foreground of tangled branches and a background wilderness too rough to

Fig. 3. George Caleb Bingham: 'The Concealed Enemy', 1845, oil on canvas, 74.3 × 92.7 cm. Stark Museum of Art, Orange, Texas.

inhabit comfortably. In contrast to Bingham's wilderness, reduced to its most essential attributes, the space of Deas' painting suggests not freedom but confinement within a hostile and resistant nature. Deas' *The Voyageurs*, in brief, offered a different version of the West — discontinous with the East, hostile, and inaccessible. By contrast, Bingham located the western fragment as part of a national whole, translating exotic tongues into a familiar formal and expressive language.

The National Significance of Rivers and the Geopolitics of Trade

The panoramic format of *Fur Traders* allowed Bingham to explore the relationship between the wilderness of the Far West and the commercial economy of the East. The Mississippi and its urban nerve centres — St Louis and New Orleans — were crucial links in a chain of rivers and harbours by which the bounty of the West was distributed throughout the republic. Bingham's image is located at the beginning of the process through which a newly forming national economy came to dominate local realities, bringing the peculiarities of western forms of life and work into sharp relief.[16] During these years both the popular arts and easel painting expressed the new relationships that were transforming how Americans experienced space. Contemporaneous bird's-eye river and harbour views, fold-out pocket size and full-scale panoramas of New York graphically illustrated the relationship between 'the great metropolis of this great Republic' and the productive but undeveloped hinterlands of the West.[17] The same impulse that gave rise to these developments also produced the horizontal reach of Bingham's *Fur Traders*. The landscape of *Fur Traders* is completed by piecing together other segments of the trade cycle. This tendency to think and perceive geopolitically was an ingrained part of how Americans — eastern and western both — thought about space.

The painting itself embodies the same process by which western experience was transformed into cultural products suitable for eastern consumption.

Fig. 4. After Daniel Huntington: 'A Sybil', 1847, engraving by John William Casilear, 43.6 × 30.2 cm. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Bequest of the John S. Phillips Collection.

Bingham had originally titled it *French Trader and Half-Breed Son* in place of the more generalized one given the work when it was exhibited at the American Art-Union.[18] Dropping the overt allusion to miscegenation, a fact of western life, the newer title assisted in the mythologizing process by which the social specifics of the western experience appeared as picturesque elements of variety — as heteroglossia — modifying a language organized according to universal rules of exposition.[19] *Fur Traders* subtly draws attention to the regional characteristics of the trappers — the Indian features of the son, the colourfully exotic costumes, the bear cub they carry — while muting any elements of aesthetic dissonance. This aesthetic containment becomes a strategy for subjecting the alien features of the West to a formal order that ultimately serves a social vision.

The geopolitical analogue to Bingham's formal order was the continental system of rivers which served Whig apologists for the West as the natural framework for channelling the productive energies of the region into the perpetuation of a national economy and social order. Bingham's effort to assimilate vernacular materials into high art forms, and his insistence upon the *representative* quality of his subject matter, paralleled the efforts of western Whigs to draw their region into the national fold through the mechanisms of the market. This confluence of economic and cultural assimilation was virtually assumed among western Whigs. Central to their nationalist discourse was a geopolitics that found in the rivers and basins of the West a necessary guarantee of national unity. This geopolitics also informed Bingham's own most characteristic riverine subject matter.

In a country lacking the technological infrastructure that was so important a component of modern nationalism, the physical and economic integration of an expanding nation depended on natural features, and western rivers furnished the most compelling blueprint for expansion.[20] Market goods would flow along natural channels, creating economic interdependencies that would draw the West out of its regional isolation and tie it to eastern institutions. From the opening of the Mississippi Valley in the 1820s, regional apologetics had therefore emphasized those features of western geography most promising for economic development — its rivers and other natural links, as well as its productive potential. John Filson noted in 1784 that the Ohio and Mississippi rivers were 'the great passage made by the Hand of Nature [. . .] principally to promote the happiness and benefit of mankind; amongst which, the conveyance of the produce of that immense and fertile country lying westward of the United States is not the least.'[21] The geopolitical faith was premised upon a productive and mutual alliance between nature and culture. The planners of the republic themselves could not have provided a better guarantee of lasting union.

Given this geopolitical framework, the West, from its first large-scale colonization, evolved within a context defined by eastern economic and social requirements. The East, culturally prior to the West, enframed it from the start. There, American nationalism was actively invented and produced. Western regionalism was itself the ironic product of a successful nationalism that appropriated frontier materials for eastern highbrow culture. Not everything, of course, fell into its embrace, and it was the threatening possibility of a genuine cultural otherness that gave to nationalizing efforts an added intensity.[22]

The success of any nationalist programme of expansion critically depended on Americans' ability to understand the relationship between part and whole, region and nation, and to visualize abstract economic forces in concrete, experiential terms. It meant firmly grasping how one's peculiar local landscape and daily rhythms fitted within a national economy and culture that was more than the mere sum of its parts. But inevitably such a perspective implied a colonial relationship to the East, both in an economic and in a cultural sense.[23] Herein lay the paradox of western regionalism: the assertion of the West's regional distinctiveness occurred in the context of its culturally secondary status *vis-à-vis* the East. Bingham remained an outsider with an imperfect mastery of high art codes. He won his fame, after all, as the 'Missouri artist'.[24]

Fig. 5. Charles Deas: 'The Voyageurs', 1845, oil on canvas, 61 × 73.7 cm. Private collection: on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Expansion complicated the already vexed relationship between local and national culture, the problem of how to sustain a sense of shared identity across the enormous barriers of space that resulted from the westward extension of the frontier. One way around such obstacles to nationalism was to imbue the region with national significance. Regional features such as rivers had a continental reach which could be exploited for nationalist purposes. They linked the East — the economic and cultural hub of the nation — to the West, widely proclaimed as the future seat of empire. Western apologists anxious to demonstrate their region's economic contribution, as well as eastern nationalists concerned about a persistent localism, each welcomed trade between the regions, symbolized by rivers. The appearance of a national market made the assimilation of the West both more urgent and easier to accomplish. In theory the market would father a new sense of nationalism, and it was in turn the favoured child of this nationalism.

As arteries of trade, rivers were not only the physical instrument of the market, but also the associative link between the known and the unknown, materializing abstract market operations and relating the near to the distant. Such relational identity rested on the notion that the West was incomplete, merely one feature of a national entity that required all its parts in order to work. Relational identity was best expressed through a panoramic treatment that permitted eastern audiences to image the West as a clearly readable element in a larger national puzzle. Commerce was the key to this new form of inclusive nationalism, which replaced the language of civic virtue that had held such a key place in eighteenth-century republicanism with a quasi-utopian rhetoric of universal market laws:

> [R]ivers are the progressive and public element in [. . .] geographical expression. They throw the continent open; they are doors and windows, through which the nations look forth upon the world, and leave and enter their own

household. They are the hospitality of the continent — every river-mouth chanting out over the sea a perpetual 'Walk in', to all the world. Or again, they are geographical senses — eyes, ears, and speech; for of these supreme mediators in the body, voice, vision, and hearing, it is the office, as of rivers, to open communication between the interior and exterior world; they are rivers of access to the outlying universe of men and things, which enters them, and approaches the soul through the freighted suggestions of sight and sound. Rivers, lastly, are the geographical symbol of public spirit, the flowing and connecting element, suggesting common interests and large systems of action.[25]

The organic analogy with the human body here fulfills the dream of a fully corporate communal identity, but it also embodies its deepest nightmare — an identity so porous that it loses its discreteness and merges into the oceanic, like the waters of the Mississippi flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. Interiority and exteriority merge. The language of economic exploitation is sublimated within the language of spiritual exchange. Yet this spiritualized access to the interior literally turns the inside out, revealing a mercantile fantasy by which the unknown becomes known, the hidden visible, and the alien domesticated. If coastal and marine views denoted the immensity of the unknown, river views denoted a process by which that unknown could be imaginatively grasped and assimilated, ultimately for economic ends. Regional self-consciousness emerged through this process of making the unknown known and turning the inside out. It developed with reference to the mediating power of the eastern market.

Between the particularities of local experience and the vague generalities of a mystical nationalism lay a gap that the growth of a national market might bridge. In addition, the new rhetoric of commerce between regions exploited nationalist sentiments by promising economic self-sufficiency and independence from Europe.[26] Rivers were a kind of rhetorical signpost alerting listeners to the nationalistic intentions of the speaker, his efforts to link East and West, a contracted past and an expansive future.[27] The market was the chief historical agent transforming the Missouri and the Mississippi rivers from picturesque regional landmarks into powerful agents of nationalism.

The central place of rivers in Bingham's work can only be understood within the context of this geopolitical discourse. Bingham's colonial status, like that of his region, is evident from the fact that the very regional features he celebrates have value only in relation to economic and cultural centres of production in the East. Dependent upon the New York-based American Art-Union for the distribution of his prints, his regionalism was never a purely local product. Equally important, the stylistic codes through which he processed his original regional materials derived from European painting, the medium of exchange with which all frontier materials were assigned a larger cultural value.

Aesthetics and Politics: Bingham's Classicism and Missouri Whigs

During his years of greatest artistic productivity, Bingham was also an active and vocal member of the Whig party of Missouri. Whig political rhetoric disavowed special interests in the name of higher national principles. Bingham assumed this higher ground in his art as well as his politics. Though he represented regional anomalies, he did so on behalf of the region's future within the larger nation. Herein lay his implicit political programme.[28]

In the years from 1845 to 1857 when he painted his finest views of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, Bingham's involvement with Missouri Whigs revealed his commitment to the larger whole that would develop around a national system of trade and economic integration.[29] He supported the influential Whig statesman Henry Clay in the presidential campaign of 1844. Of his many activities on behalf of the West, Clay was most celebrated as the author of the so-called 'American System', which committed the federal government to internal improvements and other measures that would forge stronger trade and manufacturing links between East and West.[30]

Drawn to classical composition, Bingham was temperamentally averse to rhetorical or painterly flourish. Such stylistic preferences reveal a great deal about Bingham's political vision, demonstrating that for the artist painting and politics were distinct expressions of a common endeavour.[31] This is borne out by the homology between Bingham's balanced compositions and his social and political attitudes. The self-conscious classicism of Bingham's art has been attributed to an autodidact's dependence upon drawing instruction manuals.[32] The planar arrangement of his compositions, the predominance of the pyramid as a means of organizing figures, and the clear perspective grid within which objects are carefully placed reveal his debt to schematic Renaissance prototypes.[33] Such properties of restraint, stability, balance, order, and hierarchy, however, parallel the ideals and social motives espoused by his beloved Whig party. His pyramids contained the variety of western types within an overall order in a manner that is structurally analogous to how the federal perspective of the East contained and organized the heterogeneity of western life.[34]

Kenneth Lynn has noted a similar relationship between style and political preferences as a feature of the so-called Southwestern humorists — Augustus B. Longstreet, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Richard Malcolm Johnston, Johnson Hooper, Joseph Baldwin, and others who came to national attention through the services of New York editor William T. Porter's *Spirit of the Times*. Like Bingham, they were Whigs, yet their connection with Bingham has been overlooked by the existing scholarship. Their related uses of vernacular materials and their national perspective, however, offer insights into the broader

relationship between stylistic strategies and political intent among those involved with western materials.

Lynn's collective profile of the Whig humorists fits Bingham as well: 'The ideal Southwestern humorist was a professional man . . . He was actively interested in politics [. . .] well educated, relatively speaking, and well traveled.' As a type he combined a sense of humour with 'a notoriously bad temper'. Lynn's group tended to be what he termed southern patriots. They were sceptical of the democratic mob, and associated with the Whig party nationally.[35] The description recalls Bingham's personality — politically ambitious, proud, and irascible — as well as his politics. His idea of temperateness, balance, and harmony was evident in his admiration for Clay, 'the great compromiser'.[36] Like the Southwestern humorists, Bingham rose to national prominence as a western artist with a regional accent. The American Art-Union promoted him in a manner analogous to the *Spirit of the Times*' editor Porter's promotion of the humorists. Both organizations were based in New York, enjoyed a national circulation, and recognized the gains to be had from marketing fresh new materials with a regional inflection.[37]

For both Bingham and the Southwestern humorists, it was the *framing* of western vernacular subject matter that proved the essence of its effective appropriation by eastern cultural institutions. Such framing, according to Lynn, was 'the structural trademark of Southwestern humor'.[38] What functioned as the frame in the work of the Southwestern humorists was the literate, cultured voice of the Whig narrator, based upon the Addisonian style of such eighteenth-century publications as *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*. This frame acted, in Lynn's words, as a '*cordon sanitaire*' roping off the narrator (and by extension the audience) from the rough-and-tumble world of the vernacular, separating cultured speech from dialect.[39] This formula helped maintain aesthetic, stylistic, and social distance from the anarchic elements of the frontier, and preserved the fiction that the framing narrative controlled the dispersive energies of its vernacular subjects.

For Bingham, stylistic conventions and the formal order through which he organized his frontier materials served an analogous framing function. Like the narrative voice of the literate 'Self-controlled Gentleman', these devices signalled Bingham's participation in the élite culture of European high art, and safely removed him from identification with his frontier material.[40] Thus removed, Bingham, like his literary counterparts the humorists, drew his inspiration from the West — the most authentically 'American' region — without sacrificing a nationalist breadth of vision and disinterested pursuit of the larger good. The riverboatmen, squatters, and backwoods politicians that humorists and artist shared as common subjects testified by their very existence to the need for a larger governing authority, furnished by Whig leadership.[41]

Bingham, however, was by no means a disinterested or neutral observer of western life, as at least one scholar has maintained.[42] While he was quick to exploit the identifying features of western life and landscape, and its peculiar inhabitants, they measured for him the region's difference from the East and in turn its progress toward bridging that distance.[43] In one instance at least, these signs of difference became symbols of identity, as when Bingham used a buffalo as a humorous allusion to the power and energy of the Whig party.[44]

Bingham obliged the critical effort to elevate his art to national status by filtering out strongly flavoured western mannerisms, echoing Renaissance and classical figural types, and constructing a visually clear and readable formal armature for his figures.[45] Apparently, however, not everyone agreed on the nationalist virtues of his art. A notorious attack upon Bingham from the *Bulletin* of his erstwhile patron, the AA-U, provoked him to threaten a lawsuit: '[William Sidney] Mount is the only one of our figure painters who has thoroughly succeeded in delineating American life . . . Bingham has made some good studies of western character, but so entirely undisciplined yet mannered, and often mean in subject, and showing such want of earnestness in repetitions of the same faces, that they are hardly entitled to rank.'[46] Attacks on Bingham typically focused upon his 'vulgar' subject matter, his lack of skill, and the artificial quality of his compositions. Patrons of American art in both East and West preferred their images of common life 'divested of everything like vulgarity', as one St Louis writer put it.[47] Yet if certain critics found Bingham's art stilted and mannered, others responded to his skill in rendering the essential qualities of western character. A St Louis notice wrote of 'BINGHAM, — well-known in the East as the Missouri Artist, and being "par excellence" the American Artist . . .', as the originator of a 'now rapidly forming School of pure American Art. He has no occasion to copy the old masters, for their genius is original in himself. He himself is a Master — one of the New Masters.'[48] Bingham's critical reputation in the 1850s evidently suffered from a certain confusion of codes resulting from his efforts to translate a dialect into the lexical and semantic conventions of the King's English. For some his approach was unsuited to the subject, while for others his classicizing was what made his subject matter palatable.

The praise Bingham received contains a paradox: only insofar as local characteristics could be subsumed into a larger composite national character type could they be exploited as distinct regional features. The fascination with regional peculiarities before the war was doubled-edged, for while they were markers of place, signifying a proud localism, they could easily be turned against the region by condescending easterners as damning signs of provincialism. Mount and Bingham — two artists as noteworthy for their differences as for their

similarities — were lauded by critics for their 'American ' qualities precisely because they succeeded in transforming local elements into pictorial types that fitted within the established taxonomy of national character.[49]

The defense of Bingham's art that best served the patronage interests of the AA-U turned upon the transformation of 'characters' into 'character'. Discussing *Raftsmen Playing Cards* (Fig. 6), *Jolly Flatboatmen* (Fig. 7), and *Stump Orator*, a reviewer for the *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* praised them as 'thoroughly American in their subjects', showing a 'striking nationality of character, combined with considerable power in form and expression', qualities that 'interested the Art-Union [. . .] notwithstanding the existence of obvious faults'. The patronage of the AA-U had nurtured in Bingham's art 'the higher qualities of *character* and *expression* and *general form* which first attracted the attention of the Committee'.[50] Both western and eastern reviewers were drawn to the manner in which Bingham preserved with 'ease and naturalness [. . .] [western] characteristics of dress and countenance', and of posture and attitude, yet did so in a manner that avoided the twin shoals of eastern condescension and western exaggeration, or 'carricature [sic]'.[51]

The original 1828 edition of Noah Webster's *Dictionary* gave nine different definitions to the word 'character' that reveal a basic ambiguity about whether it was something inscribed by culture or transmitted by nature. The word's primary reference was to printing: the marks 'made by cutting or engraving [. . .] with a pen or style, on paper, or other material used to contain writing', or to the letters or figures used 'to form words, and communicate ideas'. A second meaning, however, turns upon 'the peculiar qualities, impressed by *nature* or habit on a person, which distinguish him from others', referring either to human nature or to the nature that cultural apologists began pointing to in the early nineteenth-century as the source of the most distinctive features of national character. *Both* meanings informed the nineteenth-century concept of national character. The notion of inscription is implied in the originating act of creating a republic through a written constitution. Yet the Constitution could not alone give rise to national character, which would only evolve as the product of an organic relationship to place. As the concept of national character developed, it carried with it the lexical reference to both an inscriptive and a natural origin contained in Webster's definition.

This dual definition, which included both the artificial and the natural, projected two different

Fig. 6. George Caleb Bingham: 'Raftsmen Playing Cards', 1847, oil on canvas, 71.2 × 96.5 cm. St Louis Art Museum, St Louis, Missouri. Purchase: The Ezra H. Linley Fund.

Fig. 7. George Caleb Bingham: 'The Jolly Flatboatmen', 1846, oil on canvas, 96.5 × 123.2 cm. The Manoogian Collection. (Photo: Dirk Bakker)

attitudes toward the role of the American artist in the emergence of national identity. The first definition implies a more active role for art and literature in creating national character through artistic inscriptions, by means of a distillation and synthesis that would draw upon an older classical language of types.[52] The second invested the artist with the role of transcribing nature. This ideology of a natural or transparent language was the basis of Bingham's claim to 'originality'. Yet it blurred the extent to which he relied on older formulas to articulate new materials, thus containing their fluid meanings.

Bingham, like so many of his eastern contemporaries, appealed to nature to legitimate his art. At the same time, however, his art referred, through its stylistic codes, to the legitimizing force of European tradition. His style combined the *appearance* of originality with a readability derived from familiar formulas.[53] Herein lay one source of the contradictory assessments that contemporaries made of his art. The concept of character was served by certain stylistic codes derived from eighteenth-century academic theory.[54] Character implied decorum, a harmony of parts in which no discrete element was overly assertive. At the same time, character as the product of the American environment, a natural outgrowth of the soil, carried the added burden of originality or *difference* from European traditions. The use of authoritative codes of meaning, and the resort to claims of originality, confront one another in Bingham's art and help explain the contradictory criticism he received. In addition, they mirror the dual status of Bingham's subject matter. His characters evolved within a national repertoire of types that derived their authority from their local origins, their status as originals. Yet what defined them as types within academic theory also compromised their claims to originality. Bingham's selfconscious employment of European stylistic formulas, in tandem with the rhetoric of originality and of a 'natural' art, for a while served the needs of eastern producers of culture by distancing them from charges of frontier barbarism at the same time that it permitted them to capitalize on the distinctive 'national' (that is, non-European) features of their own emergent western culture.[55]

As Lillian B. Miller has pointed out, concern for national character was strongest in areas where

national unity was central to economic development — the case in the Northeast and the West.[56] The reasons for this emphasis upon the national status of regional features, however, had also to do with the perceived external and internal antagonists of American nationality. The AA-U's rhetorical insistence upon national qualities palliated persistent anxieties about the country's culturally colonial status *vis-à-vis* Europe.

The American Art-Union appreciated Bingham for another reason: his art preserved passages of a western social landscape that he and his patrons both knew were ephemeral.[57] He offered visions of a West whose strangeness, no longer threatening, was now an animating and colourful addition to the cast of national character types. But in the process, he cleansed his subjects, heightened their impact, and dispelled through visually graphic qualities any indistinctness of feature that might prevent easterners from a fully developed mental image of westerners. Bingham's characteristic visual simplification, in short, assisted easterners' efforts to understand and locate the West.

Emphasis upon national over local also deflected regional, racial, and class differences by insisting upon an invented, composite identity that absorbed internal divisions. Beginning in the late 1840s and continuing into the 1850s, the de-regionalization of the West, and a corresponding emphasis upon the 'national, historical' status of western subjects, was a characteristic strategy for counteracting a sense of regional difference.[58] Bingham divested his western characters of those qualities that easterners, along with western Whigs, wished to downplay — social marginality, lack of nobility, and the harsh poverty of frontier life. The riverboatmen that Bingham had encountered as a child in Franklin, Missouri, furnish an example. In his representations, their vaunted high spirits were unaccompanied by the brawling, eye-gouging, drunkenness, loose morality, and other behaviour which terrorized respectable townspeople and which constituted their most memorable qualities in contemporary accounts of these men. Describing the river towns of the West prior to the introduction of the steamboat, James Hall painted a picture of 'proverbially lawless and dissolute' boatmen who indulged 'in every species of debauchery, outrage, and mischief'. These 'despots of the river' hostilely aligned against the peaceloving townspeople, were eventually doomed by the introduction of steam, which 'at once effected a revolution'. The captains of steamboats were 'men of character' representing the new reign of commerce and property along the Mississippi that swept away barbarism and disorder.[59] By the later 1840s, the riverboatmen were picturesque relics, furnishing suitable subjects for a national audience, and ready to receive the imprimatur of the AA-U.

In offering such resolutely western subjects to a national audience, Bingham presented them within a stable matrix of forms. Through his balanced *mise-en-scène* and his carefully controlled disposition of figures, Bingham combined variety of type, savouring of authenticity, with a highly controlled formal order.[60] The words he used to describe the principles of the popular Düsseldorf school apply equally well to himself: 'a freshness, vigor and truth, which captivates those of common understanding and is nonetheless agreeable to minds of the highest cultivation.'[61] He was rewarded with critical acceptance and praise for his 'truthfulness':

> He has not sought out those incidents on occasions which might be supposed to give the best opportunity for display, and a flashy, highly colored picture; but he has taken the simplest, most frequent and common occurrences on our rivers — such as every boatman will encounter in a season — such as would seem, even to the casual and careless observer, of very ordinary moment, but which are precisely those in which the full and undisguised character of the boatman is displayed.[62]

Over the course of the nineteenth century, apologists for American art transformed the academic opposition between the particular and the universal into an opposition between the local and the national. Bingham himself fully recognized this distinction and put it to work on his own behalf. In ordering changes he wished his engraver Sartain to make in his *County Election*, he specified that: 'The title of the newspaper in the extreme right hand corner of the picture, I wish you to change, so as to have in print "The National Intelligencer" instead of "Missouri Republican". There will then be nothing left to mar the *general character* of the work, which I design to be as *national* as possible — applicable alike to every Section of the Union, and illustrative of the manners of a free people and free institutions.'[63] Here, what qualified a subject as national rather than local was the delineation of democratic institutions common to the entire country rather than idiosyncratic local customs and habits.[64]

The solution to the problem of relating the local to the national, for Bingham and for nationalist critics, was not the elimination of regional differences, but their clear placement within a landscape that balanced variety and detail with formal and narrative unities. For Bingham, the challenge to artistic propriety was not in too little but in too much variety, threatening a tyranny of the local. The loss of cohesion resulting from what Reynolds called 'a partial view of nature' paralleled the threatened loss of social cohesion resulting from the levelling force of the frontier.[65] The centrifugal pressure of expansion, bringing with it the development of local cultures remote from the East, and eroding social and racial distinctions, threatened easterners' sense of order, an order implicitly asserted in the concept of a national art. Squatters, border ruffians, bushwhackers and jayhawkers such as the notorious Colonel Jennison refused to stay put, transgressing not only the all-too-permeable borders between states in the

aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, but moral, social, and racial borders as well.[66]

The mixed, hybrid character of the West proved consistently troubling for easterners who saw in its social fluidity a projection of their own anxieties over the mysteries of social identity in the city. In *The Confidence Man* of 1857, Herman Melville vividly captured the peculiar quality of the West as a place of promiscuous social and racial mixing. The social landscape on the decks of the steamboat ironically named the *Fidèle* becomes for Melville a microcosm of the West:

> [N]atives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure; parlor men and backwoodsmen; farm-hunters and fame-hunters; heiress-hunters, gold-hunters, buffalo-hunters, bee-hunters, happiness-hunters, truth-hunters, and still keener hunters after all these hunters. Fine ladies in slippers, and moccasined squaws; Northern speculators and Eastern philosophers; English, Irish, German, Scotch, Danes; Santa Fe traders in striped blankets, and Broadway bucks in cravats of cloth of gold; fine-looking Kentucky boat-men, [. . .] Quakers in full drab, [. . .] slaves, black, mulatto, quadroon; modish young Spanish Creoles, Mormons and Papists; [. . .] hard-shell Baptists and clay-eaters; grinning negroes, and Sioux chiefs solemn as high-priests.

Melville assaulted eastern genteel desires for social containment with a vision of the West dizzying in its profligate variety. From an eastern perspective, Melville's West was a nightmare of the border condition.[67]

Bingham's revulsion at such frontier types as the squatter reveal his own deep discomfort with such social liminality — the western tendency, that is, toward shiftiness. Squatters were distinct from frontiersmen. Far from being heralded as the entering wedge of American expansion, squatters were widely perceived as the undisciplined, socially volatile residue of the so-called barbaric stage of settlement, little better than the Indians they replaced.[68] The figure of the squatter also raised the broader issue of local versus national determination over the future of the West, an issue that flared into warfare with the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which placed the decision about slavery in the hands of the local 'sovereigns'.[69]

The contrasting eastern response to two frontier figures — Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone — reveals what was at stake in the eastern assimilation of western materials. A growing volume of such materials began filtering into eastern literary markets in the late 1830s. Davy Crockett, the epitome of frontier humour, was a character that celebrated the unassimilated West, marked by grotesque exaggeration, hyperbole, bawdy irreverence, and a brash mockery of genteel sentimentalism. In 1833, *The Knickerbocker*, in a tone of good-humoured tolerance, acknowledged him as an aspect of 'the only indigenous literature we possess'. The reviewer condescendingly located the Crockett myth for readers: 'The Wits of every country have their butt; the English have their Irishman, with his "bulls, blunders, botheration and blarney"; the French have the Gascon, with his contrasted points of magniloquence, and good-for-nothingness; and without multiplying examples, why should not we have the Backwoodsman, who can grin the bark off a tree, whip his weight in wild-cats, and whisper a little louder than the thunder.'[70]

By contrast, Daniel Boone, another quintessentially frontier figure, represented national interests.[71] His struggle with wilderness and barbarism was made in the name of civilized institutions.[72] In words attributed to Boone, his 'autobiographer' referred to him as 'an instrument ordained to settle the wilderness'.[73] In the years following his death in 1820, 'Boone of Kentucke' became well-established in the mythology of the West; through his deeds the region earned the designation of 'classic ground', precisely what it could never have become had it remained in the hands of such antiheroes as Crockett.[74] The representative status of such figures as Boone rested on their key place in the larger drama of nation-building. Bingham became Boone's self-appointed hagiographer. Although he painted only one oil directly inspired by the Boone legend, it remains a key statement of Boone's meaning for a national audience. In Bingham's *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap* (1851–52) (Fig. 8), the patriarch of the West appears as an Old Testament figure leading his people into the wilderness.[75] An episode in the settlement of the American wilderness is associated with the Biblical exile of Moses and his people, in which hardship and sacrifice are the prelude to the Promised Land.[76] Bingham's Boone acts out a drama whose real significance is only revealed from the vantage point of the present generation. Boone is an agent of the future, neither simply a colourful character in the local history of the region nor a quaint ancestral presence. The pyramidal group of figures he leads, supernaturally lit by a glow that sets them apart from the dark 'howling' wilderness that surrounds them, represents the progressive sequence of frontier types, from pioneers to pastoralists to farmers.[77] As a western hero, Boone answered Bingham's preference for subjects which both typified the West at a particular stage in its history and foreshadowed its key role in national development. The national status of the Boone myth in Bingham's mind is evident in his proposing the subject again for the nation's Capitol.[78]

In casting Boone as the harbinger of a new order, Bingham characteristically aligned himself with an eastern perspective, articulated by the arch-custodian of culture Henry Tuckerman in an essay entitled 'Over the Mountains, or the Western Pioneer'. Tuckerman constantly reminded his audience of the framework of meaning that situated the 'picturesque locality' of the West within a larger historical panorama. Boone, prototype of the pioneer who came 'to clear a pathway, build a lodge, and found a State in

Fig. 8. George Caleb Bingham: 'Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers Through the Cumberland Gap', 1851–52, oil on canvas, 92.7 × 127.2 cm. Washington University Gallery of Art, St Louis, Gift of Nathaniel Phillips, Boston, 1890.

the wilderness', linked past and future.[79] Tuckerman claimed Boone as the property of a national audience: '[A]s related to the diverse forms of national character in the various sections of the country, as well as on account of its intrinsic attractiveness, the western pioneer is an object of peculiar interest.'[80] This claim is later followed by a plea for artists and writers to preserve the passing frontier, a plea that his contemporaries were sounding as well for the equally transitory wilderness and for the doomed native American: 'The lover of the picturesque and characteristic must often regret that artistic and literary genius has not adequately preserved the original local and social features of our own primitive communities.' Tuckerman observed that: 'in the natives of each section in whom strong idiosyncrasies have kept intact the original bias of character, we find the most striking and suggestive diversity.'[81] Lest his readers mistake this statement for an affirmation of localism, Tuckerman explained the deeper significance of Kentucky as the state better suited 'to represent the national type, than any other state'. Boone, her most exemplary citizen, embodied many of the qualities that Tuckerman found represented in the state as a whole, combining 'the essential features of a genuine historical and thoroughly individual character'.[82] Boone's western qualities, in short, were balanced by those characteristics that demonstrated his role in the national drama of implanting civilization in the wilderness.

Tuckerman's use of the term 'historical' in this context reveals certain assumptions that shaped the significance of regional features in the West. Boone was a historical figure in at least two senses: he not only played a key role in opening the territory to settlement, but his place in history was assured. The term 'historical' here implies both retrospect and prospect: that which shapes history and determines its subsequent course. Those who wrote about the West, such as Timothy Flint, saw their task as recording not only the local histories of the region but, more importantly, as discovering the hidden order in the thicket of events that gave meaning to

history. The design within Kentucky's history was the familiar pattern of the pioneer-emigrant laying the foundation for western community, often against great odds. Boone epitomized this figure. The myth that grew up around him gave him a central role in reshaping the virgin territory of the West according to a preordained march of progress.[83] Those whose performances did not fit neatly into this structure were not properly historical actors, but minor characters affording entertainment and local colour. What made Boone a historical figure also disqualified Davy Crockett (in his pre-Alamo days) from the honour. Crockett was himself too much a product of the frontier to be an emissary of the civilized order.

Tuckerman's use of the term historical, in short, was prescriptive, conforming to a narrative whose general outlines and final resolution were already established, in theory at least. The latent meaning in the discrete stages of western history was the prescribed place of the West in the larger destiny of the nation. The wayward, the circumstantial, the eccentric dropped away or was absorbed into local lore and custom — small eddies that failed to obstruct the broader flow of events.

Others turned to the West, ironically, for an antidote to the very localism it encouraged, and that still prevailed in the older states. Despite pronounced local differences resulting from 'climate, soil, and situation' in the West, bedrock traits of character, according to James Hall, would prevail over local eccentricities, given the right environment: '[T]ake the Virginian from his plantation, or the Yankee from his boat and harpoon, or from his snug cottage, his stone fences, his "neatly white-washed walls", his blooming garden and his tasteful grounds, and place him in a wilderness, with an axe in his hand or a rifle on his shoulder, and he soon becomes a different man; his *national character* will burst the chains of local habit.'[84] The implications of Hall's analysis are significant for understanding the role of the West in the developing sectional allegiances of the 1840s and '50s. It served in theory as a *tabula rasa* where the most deep-seated character traits of the American, uprooted from ancestral soil, would emerge uncompromised.[85] In the West no region had priority. The superficial differences distinguishing 'the Boston merchant' from 'the Virginia planter' would fall away under the influence of the new environment.[86]

In practice the case was quite otherwise. Almost from the start the blank slate of the West was inscribed with the calculus of gain. The quasi-mystical emergence of the real American spirit, the slaking off of the inherited skin of habit and custom, took place primarily through mythical re-enactments of western reality. What the eastern emigrant found at the end of his journey was that the communities on the frontier tended to confirm local prejudices. All the more reason then, that they would prefer to view the varieties of western culture through the legible types and forms of high art, a reminder of the world they had left behind.

In the increasingly dis-United States of the mid-century, the political, social, and economic rift between North and South was symbolically bridged by the West.[87] Increasingly the West served as a metaphor for the nation — a part standing for a larger whole — containing the promise of its future. The geopolitics of trade and the cultural custodianship of the East, encouraged by westerners anxious to assist in the assimilation process, seemed to be succeeding. Even frontier violence and liminality — the very measures of the West's cultural otherness — played a role in domesticating the West to bourgeois tastes and standards.[88] Bingham addressed eastern anxieties about the new region by framing his subject matter in the codes of high art, and using formal homologies to signify the domesticating power of commerce and culture. His art embodies the ironies inherent in the formation of regional consciousness: awareness of place emerged in relation to market forces that both furnished the structures and language through which the region presented itself to the East, and assured a process of economic and cultural assimilation ultimately antagonistic to localism.

Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1961), p. 260.

2. 'The New World and the New Man', *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 2, no. 12 (October 1858), p. 518.

3. M. J. Heale, 'The Role of the Frontier in Jacksonian Politics — Davy Crockett and the Myth of the Self-Made Man', *Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 4, 1973, pp. 405–23.

4. Quoted in George E. Probst, ed., *The Happy Republic: A Reader in Tocqueville's America* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), p. 138.

5. Peter C. Marzio, 'The Not-So-Simple Observation of Daily Life in America', in *Of Time and Place: American Figurative Art from the Corcoran Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1981), notes that the combining of fine arts conventions with everyday subject matter has proved a steady feature of genre in America, bringing together 'the specific and the general, real and ideal' (p. 179). See also Edward J. Nygren, 'American Art: Its Changing Form and Content', in *Of Time and Place*, pp. 10–11.

6. Bingham's trip to the East in 1838 brought with it an essential self-consciousness about his own contribution to the gallery of national types just emerging in eastern genre painting. In the work of William Sidney Mount in particular, Bingham would have found the key to a formula he himself would soon adopt: the presentation of regionally specific characters involved in definably American activities such as settling the land and participating in the democratic process. His friend James Rollins wrote of *County Election*: 'It is pre-eminently a *National* painting, for it presents just such a scene, as you would meet with on the Aroostoock in Maine, or in the City of New York, or on the Rio Grande in Texas, on an election day.' Rollins went on to delineate the various types Bingham included: 'the Courtier, the politician, the labourer, the sturdy farmer, the *bully* at the poles, the beer-seller, the *bruised* pugilist, and even the boys playing "mumble the peg . . .".' Quoted in Nancy Rash, *The Painting and Politics of George Caleb Bingham*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 136.

7. Kenneth S. Lynn, ed., *The Comic Tradition in America* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), p. 106.

8. This mythical reading of the *Fur Traders* is summarized by Rash, *George Caleb Bingham*, pp. 4–5.

9. For a related interpretation see Dawn Glanz, *How the West was Drawn: American Art and the Settling of the Frontier* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 43. The awareness of Bingham's art in

relation to emergent market forces is still recent in the scholarship on Bingham, to wit, in Nancy Rash's recently published *The Painting and Politics of George Caleb Bingham* — see especially pp. 45–54.

10. Robert Baird, quoted in *The North American Review*, vol. 16, 1832, p. 60.

11. E. Maurice Bloch, *The Paintings of George Caleb Bingham: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia, Mo.: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 18, states the influence even more definitively. On the connection see also Rash, *George Caleb Bingham*, p. 44. A further argument for the influence is that nowhere else did Bingham repeat this rigorously panoramic composition. The majority of his river paintings locate the figural subject in the centre of the river or along its banks, so that the observer looks back into deep space rather than being drawn along by the horizontal movement of the boat.

12. Curtis Dahl, 'Mark Twain and the Moving Panoramas', *American Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 1, Spring 1961, p. 31, makes this observation about the panoramists' use of their regional materials.

12a. 'A New Interpretation of Bingham's Fur Traders Descending the Missouri', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 65, 1983, pp. 675–80.

13. This paradox is further borne out by the fact that the figure of the western boatman, central to the mythology of the region, according to Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine, eds., *Half Horse Half Alligator: The Growth of the Mike Fink Legend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 'was created by the introduction of trade on the Western waters; and ceased with the successful establishment of the steam boat' (p. 50).

14. See the *Literary World*, vol. 1, April 3, 1847, p. 209; *Literary World*, vol. 2, Oct. 23, 1847, p. 277.

15. Charles D. Collins, 'A Source for Bingham's "Fur Traders Descending the Missouri"', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 66, no. 4, December 1984, pp. 678–81, draws the connection with Deas' painting of the same year. On Deas' work, see Carol Clark, 'Charles Deas', in *American Frontier Life: Early Western Paintings and Prints* (Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum, 1987), pp. 68–71. Deas never exhibited *The Voyageurs* at the AA-U. On American audiences' preference for 'ideal' or elevated subject matter, see Elizabeth Johns, 'The Missouri Artist as Artist', in Michael Edward Shapiro *et al.*, *George Cabeb Bingham* (St Louis Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), p. 95.

16. See Theodore Stebbins, ed., *A New World: Masterpieces of American Painting, 1760–1910* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1983), p. 261.

17. This colonial relationship between the empire state and the frontier West was baldly stated in 'The Spirit of the Age', *The Knickerbocker* (August 1836), pp. 194–5: 'It is to be hoped [. . .] that the State of New York will respond to the wants and demands of her sister States, and, while she unlocks the treasures of the great West, and develops its unbounded resources, by opening an easy access to market, she will, at the same time, secure to herself the privilege of making it all pay her tribute, and the advantage of controlling its rapidly growing trade for ever.'

Hans Bergmann, 'Panoramas of New York, 1845–1860', *Prospects*, vol. 10, 1985, pp. 119–37, discusses the ideological function of panoramic prints and written narratives in rendering the city into 'a single, comprehensible whole' that furnished evidence of the rationalizing power of the mercantile economy (pp. 119–20). John Kouwenhoven, *Columbia Historical Portrait of New York: An Essay in Graphic History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), contains a number of examples of bird's eye views. While the bird's eye view was itself not new, its frequency as a viewpoint in the nineteenth century suggests an association with other visually enhanced wide angle or extended perspective views. An example of a pocket panorama showing both sides of the river is the 'Panorama of the Hudson River, from New York to Albany, Drawn from Nature', produced by Wade and Goome in 1845. (Library of Congress, Map Room).

18. E. Maurice Bloch, *The Paintings of George Caleb Bingham: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press 1986), p. 172. Glanz, *How the West was Drawn*, p. 42, reads the imagery of racial miscegenation in *Fur Traders* in light of the Enlightenment ideal of a benign fusion of native and European stock. The fact that Bingham changed the painting's title when he exhibited it in New York indicates to me an acknowledgement of eastern anxieties about racial mixing.

19. The term 'heteroglossia' derives from Mikhail Bakhtin. Michael Holquist, Bakhtin's English editor, defines the term, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 428, as 'that which insures the primacy of context over text'. The concept is highly useful for understanding the relationship in Bingham's work of a high art aesthetic to the varied meanings that surround his subject matter, meanings that decentre his efforts at formal and stylistic control.

20. A good statement of the geopolitical faith was made in Daniel Drake's conclusion to an 1834 peroration: '[R]est the political and social upon the physical — and they will be preserved from all serious revolutions, but those which change the surface of the earth itself.' Drake, 'Discourse on the History, Character, and Prospects of the West . . .' (1834: Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1955), p. 51. Such claims pervaded the writing of western apologists throughout the antebellum period.

21. John Filson, *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke* . . . (1784; Ann Arbor, University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), pp. 37–9.

22. Although there is not space in the present article to go into this, an excellent example of a surviving western vernacular are the marvellously bizarre woodcuts that appeared in the so-called 'Davy Crockett' almanacs, defying all the conventions of high art, including consistent scale, perspective, or narrative credibility.

23. See for instance 'Improvement of Western Rivers', *Western Journal and Civilian*, vol. 6, no. 1, April 1851, p. 3, in which the writer alludes to the western states' 'colonial dependence on the East'.

24. Rash, *George Caleb Bingham*, pp. 8, 42, takes this designation as a sign of the virtual identity between Bingham's regional status and his nationalism. I find this identity to be far more problematic, both from the standpoint of western autonomy *vis-à-vis* the East and from an eastern perspective that was never entirely comfortable with regional subject matter unless it was heroicized, sanitized, or made condescendingly humorous.

25. Johns, 'The Missouri Artist', p. 93, discusses the significance of this designation; 'The New World and the New Man', *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 2, no. 12, Oct. 1858, pp. 518–19.

26. *Western Monthly Review*, 'Present Population and Future Prospects of the Western Country', vol. 1, Oct. 1827, p. 331, is a concise statement of this position.

27. For James Hall, *The West: Its Commerce and Navigation* (Cincinnati, 1848), p. 36, the promise of the West lay in 'the great inland trade which has grown up within the memory of living men, and has become the pride of our country, its paramount interest, the muscle and sinew of its power.'

28. This Whig pose of disinterestedness may have influenced Bingham's own reserved and uncaricatured treatment of the squatter class of settlers in his painting of 1850 entitled *The Squatters*. His private correspondence, however, indicates the deep revulsion he felt toward this most liminal of social groups in the West.

29. These years are generally conceded to be the period of his finest production. See Paul C. Nagel, 'The Man and his Times', in *George Caleb Bingham* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. for the St Louis Art Museum, 1989), p. 28.

30. Bingham's Whig belief in the importance of encouraging manufacturing and trade in the West was programmatically stated in a series of political banners he painted for the successive Whig presidential campaigns of William Henry Harrison and Clay in 1840 and 1844. In 1844, Bingham produced three political banners, seven by eight feet, for Missouri Whig conventions in support of Clay's presidential bid. The emblems of Clay's American System figured prominently in the iconography of these banners. For descriptions of these banners, see John McDermott, *George Caleb Bingham, River Portraitist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), pp. 35–6, and 46–7. The most recent treatment of this imagery in the context of Whig ideology is Nancy Rash, *The Painting and Politics of George Caleb Bingham* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 14–32.

31. The case has been thoroughly argued by Rash, *George Caleb Bingham*, especially pp. 1–6.

32. Bingham briefly studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts from March to June 1838 during a trip east for that purpose. On the influence of drawing manuals, see Peter B. Marzio, *The Art Crusade* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1976).

33. Bingham's debt to Renaissance sources was first pointed out in 1935 by Arthur Pope, *George Caleb Bingham, The Missouri Artist, 1811–1879*, quoted in McDermott, *River Portraitist*, pp. 185–7. More recently, Robert Rosenblum and H. W. Janson have made the connection in *Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1984), p. 184.

34. Critics were quick to recognize Bingham's reliance on geometric forms to contain the often boisterous actions he portrayed, but not all

agreed about the success of this strategy: 'In composition, Mr. B. should be aware that the regularity of the pyramid is only suitable to scenes of the utmost beauty and repose; that when motion and action are to be represented, where expression and picturesqueness are objects sought for, proportionate departures must be made from this formal symmetry.' 'The Fine Arts. The Art-Union Pictures', *The Literary World*, vol. 2, October 23, 1847, p. 277.

35. Kenneth S. Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1959), p. 52.

36. Like the Southwestern humorists, he allied himself politically and personally with powerful individuals in Missouri, most notably his lifelong friend and supporter James Rollins. Furthermore, Bingham rose to national prominence as a western artist with a regional accent through the promotional efforts of the American Art-Union, which functioned in a manner analogous to the *Spirit of the Times*. Both art union and magazine were based in New York, both enjoyed a national circulation, and both recognized the gains to be had from seizing upon fresh new materials with a distinctively regional voice. In addition both enlisted their newly discovered artist and writers in the double cause of nationalism and Whig leadership.

37. Even Bingham's sanitized version of frontier life proved too salty for certain New York critics, who felt his subjects lacked dignity, singling out *The Jolly Flatboatman*: 'the very name of which gives a death blow to all one's preconceived notions of "HIGH ART".' 'The Fine Arts', *The Literary World*, April 3, 1847, p. 209. The viewpoint was reiterated in a review of October 23, 1847.

38. Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*, p. 64.

39. *Ibid.*

40. The phrase is Lynn's.

41. An important aspect of this was Bingham's Unionism. He denounced southern secessionists as 'traitors' conspiring to bring down the government, and enlisted in the Army of the Union where he served until 1865. His ardent support for the Union during the Civil War was but one manifestation of his commitment to federal authority. See McDermott, *Bingham: River Portraitist*, pp. 131, 135.

42. McDermott, *River Portraitist*, p. 188. His view was repeated by John Demos, 'George Caleb Bingham as Social Historian', *American Quarterly*, vol. 17, 1965, pp. 218–28. Rash, *George Caleb Bingham*, makes the most extended argument countering this view.

43. Bingham's proposed political banner for Boone County Whigs in the 1844 presidential campaign of Henry Clay revealed the logic of development implied in his use of western materials. In Bingham's words, the banner depicted 'old Daniel Boone himself engaged in one of his death struggles with an Indian, painted as large as life, it would make a picture that would take with the multitude, and also be in accordance with historical truth. It might be emblimatical [sic] also of the early state of the west, while on the other side I might paint a landscape with "peaceful fields and lowing herds" indicative of his present advancement in civilization.' Quoted in C. B. Rollins, ed., 'Letters of George Caleb Bingham to James S. Rollins', *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 32, Oct. 1937–July 1938, pp. 13–14.

44. See McDermott, *River Portraitist*, p. 46.

45. See Marzio, 'The Not-So-Simple Observation of Daily Life', p. 183, on the influence of classical principles of design in the composition of American genre. Bingham's ideas about art were formalized in an address — 'Art, the Ideal of Art, and the Utility of Art' — written toward the end of the artist's life for the University of Missouri and delivered by James Rollins. It is reproduced in full by McDermott, *River Portraitist*, pp. 394–401.

46. Development of Nationality in American Art', by 'W', *Bulletin of the American Art-Union*, vol. 4, December 1851, p. 139. E. Maurice Bloch, *The Paintings of George Caleb Bingham: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia, MO.: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 14, identifies the author of the article as Thomas W. Whitley, currently waging a campaign against the AA-U. See E. Maurice Bloch, 'The American Art-Union's Downfall', *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 37, October 1953, pp. 331–59.

47. *St Louis Weekly Reveille*, August 24, 1846, p. 977, as quoted in Ron Tyler, 'George Caleb Bingham: The Native Talent', in *American Frontier Life*, p. 30.

48. 'Fine Arts', *Western Journal and Civilian*, vol. 7, no. 2, Nov. 1851, p. 145. The subject of this encomium was Bingham's *Election Scene*, exhibited in his St Louis studio.

49. See for instance 'Twenty-Sixth Exhibition of the National Academy of Design', *Bulletin of the American Art-Union*, vol. 4, May 1851, p. 23, which praised a painting by Mount exhibited at the National Academy of Design as 'a thoroughly American production'. The *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, March 18, 1853, supplement, p. 1, proclaimed Bingham's *County Election* 'AN AMERICAN WORK OF ART', and in the same article wrote that Bingham was 'to the Western what Mount is to the Eastern States, as a delineator of national customs and manners. Both are original and both occupy very honorable places in the ranks of American artists.' Quoted in McDermott, *River Portraitist*, p. 97.

50. Emphasis added. 'The Gallery.—No. 4', *Bulletin of the American Art-Union*, vol. 2, no. 5, Aug. 1849, p. 10. A related review appeared in the *Bulletin*, December, 1850.

51. *Missouri Republican*, November 30, 1847. Quoted in McDermott, *River Portraitist*, p. 65.

52. See Marzio, 'The Not-So-Simple Observation of Daily Life', p. 183, on the concept of types as defined in Reynolds's *Discourses* and 'basic to nineteenth-century aesthetics'.

53. He admired the Düsseldorf style for its naturalism, writing from Germany to James Rollins that: 'The striking peculiarity of the school which flourishes here by its own inherent vitality, is a total disregard of the "old masters" and a direct resort to nature for the truths which it employs' ('Letters', Dec. 14, 1856, *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 32, p. 347).

54. One possible medium for the transmission of such theory in the United States were Samuel F. B. Morse's 'Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts' (1826), edited by Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1983). Cikovsky, p. 23, notes the profound influence of Blair, Kames, and Reynolds on Morse.

55. Rash, *George Caleb Bingham*, p. 3.

56. L. B. Miller, 'Paintings, Sculpture, and the National Character, 1815–1860', *Journal of American History*, vol. 53, no. 4, March 1967, p. 700. In the South, according to Miller, nationalism was 'rejected for sectionalism' until eventually the region began to think of itself as a 'culturally distinct area' and then as a distinct nation.

57. The theme of the passing frontier was sounded as early as 1833 by Isaac Appleton Jewett, 'Prize Essay: Themes for Western Fiction', *Western Monthly Magazine*, vol. 1, December 1833, p. 582.

58. A striking instance of this was an edition of *Davy Crockett's Almanack of Wild Sports of the West, and Life in the Backwoods* published in Nashville c.1834–35, and 'Calculated for all the states of the Union'. A copy of this almanac is at the University of Texas.

59. James Hall, *Letters from the West* (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), pp. 229–31. Bingham's own attitude toward the role of these boatmen in the coming order of western society is revealed in their absence from his Election series, as noted by Gail Husch, 'George Caleb Bingham's "The County Election": Whig Tribute to the Will of the People', *American Art Journal*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1987, p. 36. Rash, *George Caleb Bingham*, pp. 67–8, contends that flatboats and keelboats remained an active presence on the river through the 1840s, distinguishing them from the fur traders who plied the river during the earlier phases of western river life. Whatever the case, their days were numbered and their numbers diminishing. 'Progress of the Great West', *De Bow's Commercial Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, September 1847, p. 50, concluded that 'the first steamboat that ascended the Ohio sounded their death-knell. . . .'

60. Bingham himself shared in this feeling for variety as a key element of his painting, writing to Rollins about 'The Verdict of the People': 'The subject will doubtless strike you as one well calculated to furnish that contrast and variety of expression which confers the chief value upon pictures of this class' ('Letters', April 16, 1854, *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 32, p. 180).

61. 'Letters', *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 32, p. 347.

62. From the *Missouri Republican*, quoted in McDermott, *River Portraitist*, p. 62.

63. Letter from Bingham to John Sartain, October 4, 1852, cited in George R. Brooks, 'George Caleb Bingham and "The County Election"', *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin*, vol. 21, 1964, p. 39.

64. Bingham's distinction between a disinterested national community of taste and self-interested and prejudiced local behaviour parallels Reynolds' distinction between universal public values and personal preference. John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), analyzes

the relationship of Reynolds' theories of painting in his *Discourses* to the tradition of civic humanism. Reynolds' later discourses shift toward the notion of a *national* (rather than a universal) community of taste premised on custom. For Bingham, the national stood in stead of the universal dimension; such was the substance of his Romantic updating of classical theory.

65. Reynolds, Discourse IV, p. 73. See Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting*, pp. 90, on the relationship between aesthetic form and political stability and 99–112 on the dangers of artistic ambiguity.

Bingham's only formally presented ideas on art, given in his 'Art, the Ideal of Art and the Utility of Art', show a Reynoldsian bias, filtered through a characteristically nineteenth-century emphasis upon truth to nature. Like Reynolds, Bingham invoked Michelangelo as the guiding measure of greatness; like Reynolds, his artistic theories turned upon the beautiful and the ideal as types associated with the higher life of mind and spirit, though he significantly reinterpreted their content.

66. On Bingham's reaction to the activities of Colonel Jennison, hired as a Union officer during the Civil War, see his letter to the 'Representatives of Missouri', dated February 12, 1862, in 'Letters', *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 32, pp. 50–8.

67. Bingham explored the implications of this disturbing frontier liminality in his *Captured by Indians*, or *The Captive* (1848) dealing with the well-worn theme of white captivity, and the attendant dangers of miscegenation or racial mongrelization. (No. 182, Bloch 1986).

68. For an expression of this attitude see 'The Kansas Usurpation', *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 1, February 1858, p. 494. Johns, 'The Missouri Artist', pp. 112–15, argues that squatters carried more than one set of meanings for Bingham. Glanz, *How the West was Drawn*, pp. 21–2, contrasts squatters with the heroic Boone in Bingham's *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers*. Opinion on the role of the squatters in the settlement of the West varied along a wide political spectrum, however. Senator Hamlin of Maine spoke on their behalf when he proclaimed in 1850: 'There have been various reproaches cast on the people of the territories [. . .] almost every opprobrious epithet has been cast upon them.' But, he insisted, the people thus vilified 'are intelligent, worthy men, who have gone there to build a Republic, and to make it one of the marks of commerce, which shall connect us with the far-distant East. They have gone there to adorn that land, and make it bud and blossom as the rose.' One man's squatter was another man's empire builder. Cited in Dawn Glanz, *How the West was Drawn*, p. 60.

69. Bingham made clear his feelings toward the squatter as a mobile and disreputable political agent misusing democratic privileges on the frontier in a proposed but never executed series. From Philadelphia he wrote to James Rollins that: 'After I complete the portraits for our State Capitol, I have it in contemplation to paint a new series of pictures illustrative of "Squatter Soverignty" [sic] as practically exhibited under the workings of the Kansas Nebraska bill. I shall commence with the *March of the "Border Ruffians"* and will take pains to give those infamous expeditions of organized rowdyism all those odious features which truth and justice shall warrant' ('Letters', August 10, 1856, *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 32, p. 20).

70. *The Knickerbocker*, vol. 2, Dec. 1833, 'Literary Notices', p. 483: Review of *Sketches and Eccentricities of Col. David Crockett.*

71. See Marshall W. Fishwick, 'Daniel Boone and the Pattern of the Western Hero', *Filson Club History Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 2, April 1953, pp. 119–38.

72. Glanz, *How the West was Drawn* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), pp. 1–25. Also relevant are Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn.: 1974); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 51–8. Johns, 'The Missouri Artist', pp. 133–9.

73. Filson, *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke*, p. 81.

74. James Hall, *Letters from the West* (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), p. 12.

75. On the painting, its sources and meanings, see Glanz, *How the West was Drawn*, pp. 164–5; Bloch, *Paintings of G. C. Bingham*, pp. 19–20, note 68; Rash, *George Caleb Bingham*, pp. 61–4.

76. Such typological references lead one to wonder if Bingham knew the young Frederic Church's 1848 *Hooker Party*, which employed Old Testament imagery for related ends.

77. Glanz, *How the West was Drawn*, p. 21. Bingham actually repainted the landscape of *Boone* in 1852 to enhance the sense of a hostile wilderness, narrowing the gap through which they make their way and darkening the landscape with storm clouds. The first version featured an open sunlit landscape.

78. Bingham eventually lost the Capitol commission to Emanuel Leutze. The artist also proposed the Boone subject to Rollins as a possible decoration for the State Capitol of Missouri and later called upon Congress to commission a work 'properly illustrative of the history of the West. . . .' ('Letters', Jan. 12, 1855, July 18, 1858, in *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 32, pp. 187, 365).

79. In *The Home Book of the Picturesque*, originally published in 1852 (Gainseville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), p. 117. The figure of Boone assumes a different cast in a 'Prize Essay' entitled 'Themes for Western Fiction', published in the *Western Monthly Magazine*, vol. 1, December 1833, pp. 574–88. Here Boone, though identified as the 'Patriarch of Kentucky', p. 579, is imaged as the romantic hunter fleeing civilization. The transformation in Boone's meaning is apparent in the difference between this earlier account and Tuckerman's later nationalist interpretation. On the dual identity of the Boone figure, see Smith, *Virgin Land*, pp. 51–8.

80. *The Home Book of the Picturesque* (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), p. 118.

81. Tuckerman, p. 127.

82. Tuckerman, p. 135.

83. Glanz, *How the West was Drawn*, pp. 5, 20, makes a similar point.

84. Hall, *Letters from the West*, pp. 234, 245.

85. This idea bears striking parallels with the so-called 'frontier thesis' presented in 1893 by Frederic Jackson Turner.

86. Hall, *Letters from the West*, p. 237.

87. Robert Russel, *Critical Studies in Antebellum Sectionalism: Essays in American Political and Economic History* (Greenwood Press, 1972), analyzes the economic and cultural factors drawing West and East together in the 1850s.

88. Carol Smith-Rosenberg, in 'Davy Crockett as Trickster: Pornography, Liminality, and Symbolic Inversion in Victorian America', *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 101, argues that Crockett was the 'uncultured civilizer'. He, too, as she argues, played a role in the bourgeois appropriation of the West, though he did so through means antithetical to bourgeois values, through a liminality that 'does not really threaten social order — it only appears, momentarily, to do so'. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Connecticut: Weslyan University Press, 1973), demonstrates the central place of violence in the domestication of the West through myth.