

Fur Traders Descending the Missouri

1845

Oil on canvas, 74 x 92 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Show the students George Caleb Bingham's *Fur Traders Going Down the Missouri* without any preliminary information about it and ask them to tell you what they see. (Accept any observations)

Tell them that the river in the picture is the Missouri and the date it was painted is 1845.

Show the course of the Missouri River and its confluence with the Mississippi on the map of the United States. Does anyone know why the Missouri and Mississippi rivers were important in the 19th century? (They were major arteries for transportation and travel.)

Ask them to look closely at the painting and see whether there are clues that would tell us what this boat is carrying. (They will notice two figures, a man with a hat and a boy, one live animal tied to the boat, a dead duck or other water bird, and two small satchels or bags for carrying things. It is unlikely they will guess that these people are fur traders, but encourage guesses about what they are transporting.)

Tell them that the name of this painting is *Fur Traders Going Down the Missouri* and that it was painted by an American painter who grew up in Missouri by the name of George Caleb Bingham.

What do you notice about the expressions on the two figures?

Are they similar or different? (different)

How would you describe their ages and expressions? (adolescent boy with dreamy cheery expression, middle-aged man looking sour, bitter, worn, etc.)

Where are the figures looking? (directly at us)

Do they look energetic or lazy? (pretty laid back)

How did the painter make the whole scene look pretty calm and laid back? (fog, colors are not at all brilliant or vibrant, river is very calm, lots of sky with puffy clouds, only one person is needed to move the boat, the boy is in a lounging position.)

Where do you think the furs that have been trapped are in this picture? (probably under the raised part the boy is leaning on)

What kinds of lines do you think predominate in this painting? (horizontal--boat, course of the river, line of tops of trees in background) Remind them that the artist's use of predominantly horizontal lines also reinforces the feeling of a calm, laid back scene.

Ask the students whether they think this is a landscape painting? (no) Why not? (Although there is a lot of landscape in the painting, the main focus is the boat with 2 figures looking directly at us.)

Ask what kind of painting they think this is (it is a genre). A genre painting shows a scene from everyday life, usually with very ordinary people, tells us something of what particular people wore and activities they did at a particular time and place. Genre painting was popular in the United States from 1830 to 1880, a period in which the rapidly expanding country saw a divergence of lifestyles. Genre paintings such as *Boatmen on the Missouri* offered Americans a window into the lives of others and represented a distinctly new American appreciation for the common worker.

Tell them to begin thinking of what kind of scene they would choose to portray in a genre painting of today. Say to them: A good way to decide is to look around you and observe what is happening, what people are doing on the streets, in the playground, in the city of O'Fallon, wherever you find yourself.

Point out the reflections in the water. The reflections add a mysterious quality to the whole painting.

Boatmen were familiar subjects in American culture, well-known through narrative songs and literature. The popular mythology of the period considered flatboatmen to be unsavory, disreputable characters who lived outside the social order, but Bingham's men have none of these stereotypical qualities. The men sit upright, bathed in a brilliant light. They look directly at the viewer as equals. They are, however, not "average Americans." Their clothing, while not undignified, is a bit rough and tattered. Their broad shoulders and enormous arms suggest the hard physical labor of their daily work. Historians interpret *Boatmen on the Missouri* in a variety of ways:

- Bingham, as an artist seeking fame and new sales of his work, may have been trying to tap into the growing American interest in western frontier themes.
- Bingham, as a son of the American frontier, may have been trying to challenge the popular, eastern stereotype of flatboatmen in particular and of life in the West in general.
- Bingham, as a regional booster and aspiring politician, may have been trying to revise the widespread conception of frontier as wilderness and show it as a place hospitable to commercial enterprise.

Whatever the case, these working men in the painting are certainly romanticized. Their clothes are crude but clean, and their poses reveal their confidence and character; the artist has depicted the laborers in a noble and dignified manner.

According to the artist, the figure on the left was of mixed race. The figure on the right also stares at the viewer and is marked by an odd triangular, yellowish-red cap that he wears. The figure on the left rests on a box draped by a blanket with a rifle in the crook of his arm, and to his immediate right lays a dead duck that he had recently shot. His bright blue shirt contrasts with his father's red shirt on the right and with the tied-down black cat on the left, all of which appears in the water's reflection.

The painting glows with the warm, misty, golden colours of dawn as two bored trappers stare out at the viewer as they glide down the tranquil, rain-swollen river in a dugout canoe. Chained in the bow of the craft is what appears to be a large black cat, but in reality is actually a pet bear cub.

Other sites say:

The animal on the prow has never been identified; some prefer bear, wolf, cat, or dog.