Facingness in George Caleb Bingham's River Paintings

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The river paintings of George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879) have a quality of "facingness." Drawing on recent and period writings about the face and the concept of facingness, I suggest that these paintings, in their content and composition, invite the viewer into a face-to-face encounter. This implies an ethics of looking, an exchange, that is, in which there is some dialogue or reciprocity between the viewer and the work. Furthermore, this characteristic of Bingham's paintings is the artist's way of affirming both their aesthetic status and their relevance to prevailing political narratives of the time, for he proposes the agency of the work of art itself as a legitimate voice in national debate. Bingham's example may suggest ways to revise interpretations of development and progress in nineteenth-century art of the western United States.

Emily Dickinson's poem 421, "A Charm Invests a Face," explores the issues of facingness and dialogue that I see in Bingham's river paintings. Written in the early 1860s, the poem provides an exploration of the complexities of face-to-face dialogue. Its emphasis on both the "veiled" or imperfect nature of interaction and its reciprocal character helps to make clear my claims for Bingham's facingness.

A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld—
The Lady dare not lift her Vail
For fear it be dispelled—

But peers beyond her mesh—
And wishes—and denies—
Lest Interview—annul a want
That Image—satisfies—[1]

Quite a lot could be said about scrutiny and response in this poem, but for the present discussion the themes of vision and reciprocity are most relevant. Its lines of sight work both ways. The "face" that is evoked can be understood to belong to the woman behind the veil or to a second person, imperfectly observed through that veil: Dickinson's words will bear both readings. Either the woman "peers" out at the other through her veil's masking surface, or she is peered at through that surface by such a person. In either case, the important consequence is that Dickinson's verse conjures

George Caleb Bingham, *Mississippi Boatman*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 24⅛ × 17 3⁄16 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., John Wilmerding Collection. Image courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Vol. 32, No. 2

another person out of the prospective dialogue. The implied other figure is latent and potential rather than realized, barely discerned, and replaced instead by the "Image," capable of "satisf[ying]" desire precisely because it is blurred and indeterminate. The person behind the veil flickers in and out of the poem, only once emerging clearly (in the third line) and otherwise concealed or "veiled" by Dickinson's syntax. The circuit of encounter, fantasy, and response compactly described by "A Charm Invests a Face" is channeled through the imperfect, interpretative beholding of the face and its image.

In addition to that idea of imperfect beholding, Dickinson's poem conveys the sense of reciprocity, even sedulity, in the veiled meeting explored. The "Charm" is preserved for the benefit of the other as well as the observing self. A care is extended to the other, and to the other's self-image, in the dialogue of facingness that she describes. Although, like Bingham, Dickinson (1830–1886) offers a mid-nineteenth-century American perspective, she worked under very different cultural and personal circumstances.[2] I offer the poem not as historical evidence but rather as something more: it encourages readers to think about a hermeneutics of the face and of facing. To face and to be faced are complex experiences. The face is both our self-image and the point where that image becomes vulnerable and has to be negotiated. It is how we present ourselves to the world, what "faces" away from us; it is also what we "veil" in order to obscure our anxieties about that encounter.[3] The face implies sincerity, frankness, accessibility—but also the opposites of those qualities, since it is the means of dissembling and deceit. The face uncovers, and is therefore what we mask. It conveys our thoughts and feelings, and it is how we conceal them. It is the vehicle of the fantasized image and, nonetheless, the revelatory channel of the self. To face something or someone and to be faced in turn is, as a consequence of all this, to be intimately forced to confront questions of knowledge and interpretation, resistance and openness.

Social scientists have explored some of the implications of this situation. The sociologist Erving Goffman influentially systematized the idea of "face" as theatrical self-presentation in a series of writings on "face-work" published in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Goffman, individuals engage in face-work when they attempt to bring their own actions and others' understanding of them into line with their self-image. Goffman calls this a central social "ritual" that in normal interaction governs and manages the possibilities of breakdown or disaster. It is essentially a reciprocal or negotiated undertaking between two actors. We connive in the face-work of others as they do in ours, operate a "tactful blindness" when things go wrong, and offer and receive a web of customary interactions designed to maintain social stability.[4] We claim for ourselves the dignity we feel is our due, but, if society is to function, we must also extend that dignity to others so that efficient dialogue depends on our acquiescence in maintaining others' "face," our deference to their image of themselves. Dickinson's poem speaks to an ethics of the face, one that is concerned with interpretation, compliance, respect, and judgment in relation to the other, as well as with questions of trust, uncertainty, and acknowledgment.

In this article, I consider some of the ways in which Bingham's western paintings face their viewers (frontispiece). Note that it is the paintings that face their viewers, and that this does not depend on the presence of any human face, although human faces may be involved. If talk of paintings as if they were actors seems metaphoric, it is only partly so. A number of thinkers have explored art historians' common tendency to treat pictures as if they were alive. This widespread "magical" mode, according to W. J. T. Mitchell, regularly causes viewers to behave toward images in ways that seem to presume that pictures are living beings who make demands on their beholders according to drives and

desires of their own. "What do pictures want?" Mitchell asks in the title of one of his books.[5] To solicit their spectators, paintings face them, make a pitch for their attention, advance forms of interaction. Such notions propose a mode of attention to paintings. They put emphasis on investigating how meaning arises from the ways that paintings face their beholders in this sense and invite them to conceive of the objects as "invested with an animating power of [their] own," as Keith Moxey sums up this recent move in visual studies.[6] My argument considers a set of Bingham's river paintings that can be understood as being—like Dickinson's poem—open to dialogue. Such a situation involves an ethics of facingness in the encounter between painting and the spectator. Like the situation explored in Dickinson's poem, the interaction between painting and viewer is a relationship. It has some mutual element to it, and thus the viewed (whether person or image) may manifest both resistance to the viewer and openness to him or her. To express the intimacy and tension of that encounter, I reframe the third person of "viewers," distanced by time, place, and grammar, into the first person: us. The circuit between the viewer and the "face" that paintings present, like other forms of exchange, does not make things easy. Paintings want our attention, demand it, even, sometimes violently, but that process is also open to what Dickinson calls the "Interview," to reciprocation, interpretation, and response.[7] The relationship formed is one of both openness and resistance to the other partner.

The paintings under consideration here are scenes of life on the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers near Saint Louis, Missouri, where Bingham lived and painted, and where he was also an active Whig politician at the state and local levels. In both spheres Bingham was determined to succeed, and historians have noted in particular how dogged he was in seeking to make and sustain a reputation. During the 1840s and early 1850s Bingham produced several finished oil paintings and a large number of drawings and studies that played an important role in realizing that ambition.[8] They feature the boatmen who worked on the rivers, loading and unloading cargo from the big steamers that transported goods and people up and down what was then the major American network for internal, continental trade and a key element in the republic's infrastructure and economy.

1 George Caleb Bingham, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, 1845. Oil on canvas, 29 × 36½ in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1933. Image © Metropolitan Museum of Art. www.metmuseum.org

Within this period a distinct theme emerges, beginning in 1845 with *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* (fig. 1) and ending in 1854 with *Watching the Cargo by Night* (fig. 2; see also frontispiece, figs. 3, 4, 9, 13–16, 18). These paintings are startlingly frontal, even confrontational, in the way they face the beholder, with shallow foreground spaces and figures—many of whom face us directly and even aggressively—located in a flat, friezelike plane.[9] This orientation is specific to this

2 George Caleb Bingham, *Watching the Cargo by Night*, 1854. Oil on canvas, 24 × 29 in. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebr., Gift of Foxley & Co., 1997.33. Image courtesy Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebr.

3 George Caleb Bingham, *Boatmen on the Missouri*, 1846. Oil on canvas, 25⅛ × 30¼ in. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 1979.7.15. Image © Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

4 George Caleb Bingham, *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, 1846. Oil on canvas, 38⅛ × 48½ in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Patrons' Permanent Fund. Image courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

5 Raphael, *The Transfiguration*, 1516–20. Tempera on wood, 13 ft. 5 in. × 9 ft. 2 in. Vatican City, Pinacoteca. Image © 2018 Photo Scala, Florence

moment in Bingham's career. During a period of European study and travel in the late 1850s, Bingham returned to the river and its boatmen and painted *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port* (see fig. 17) at Düsseldorf. Although the picture has strong thematic connections to the earlier work, it abandons the compositional innovations of the earlier paintings. The self-taught Bingham's belated exposure to a European education seems to have lifted him out of the directness and frontality of the first series and into a more elaborate, but also more conventional, mode of composition.

Art historians have tended to attribute the friezelike, frontal orientation of the earlier paintings to the fact that Bingham educated himself by studying widely circulated prints of Renaissance paintings. A comparison between the dancing figure at the apex of the compositional pyramid in *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (fig. 4) and the figure of Christ in Raphael's *Transfiguration* (fig. 5) appears several times in the literature.[10] However, Bingham seems to have been generally preoccupied by frontality at this stage of his career, and not just in the river paintings. *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap* (see fig. 12), for example, offers us a direct, frontal account of a famous crossing of the Appalachians reminiscent of the biblical Flight into Egypt. I contend Bingham's frontality remains an unresolved question despite his Renaissance sources.[11]

What do Bingham's pictures of the river want? He made them at a moment when he was striving for acknowledgment and success, and what the river paintings wanted, therefore, was, at one important level, to be recognized and valued as successful works of fine art in contemporary terms. Ideas of facingness and dialogue throw light on how paintings speak to issues that have loomed prominently in the scholarly literature on American art of the nineteenth century: the growth and geographic extension of the nation; identity on the frontier and the nature of that moving line; and the temporality of the early republic as it initiated its long transition from agricultural to manufacturing economy.[12] But these paintings also produce meanings that go beyond the sociohistorical. Questions about context can thus be twinned with different questions about ethics, reciprocation, and the demands that paintings make on their observers.

Strikingness and Reciprocity in *The Jolly Flatboatmen*

In Bingham's painting *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, a group of men sit, stand, and lie on the roof of a shallow boat against a scrim-like crystalline sky while, at the center of the compositional pyramid they form, one of their number dances to the accompaniment of a fiddle and makeshift percussion. Behind the dancer and farthest away from us, two men invite our gaze into the scene. The seated man at front right also looks at us, while two others direct our eyes back toward the central figure and the view that lies beyond. On either side of the boat, heavily wooded banks recede into a misty atmospheric distance, and the broad surface of a river fans out in our direction. Sluggish water, a reflective medium at the point of the beholder's entry to the painting, laps and flows around the stern of the boat, and clutter and domesticity lurk in the musty darkness below deck.

Although this is an image of music making and physical energy, the most striking quality of the painting is that it is silent and immobile.[13] There is none of the expressive, theatrical action and gestures of Raphael's *Transfiguration*. In Bingham's pictures action is frozen into motionlessness, and, despite the dance, the boatmen arrayed across the deck have the character of a frieze or tableau. The percussionist's hand never quite makes contact with his instrument; the dappled sunlight and shadow on the raised leg of the prone central figure remain immobile; the dancer's uncompleted step, wafting hair, and athletic motion are stilled by the painter's brush. We are confronted not only by the quartet of men who look directly at us but also by the orientation of the back of the boat in relation to the flat surface of the canvas.

It is highly unusual for the spectator to be confronted by such emphatic frontality in an American work of art from this time. In contrast to the majority of American landscape paintings—at this period overwhelmingly northeastern in production, motif, and consumption—that characteristically exploit illusions of depth within the picture, Bingham's *Jolly Flatboatmen* scrupulously holds us at the surface of the canvas. A painting such as Asher B. Durand's *Progress* (fig. 6), made in New York for an eastern audience, describes its depicted world through devices that lead the eye deep into the scene by way of narrative and movement. The recessive energy of the sinuous unfolding of bodies of water, the lines of marching telegraph poles and paths and roads, the train hurtling over the viaduct, and the orientation of the figures who trudge away from us into the space all contribute to this effect. The picture's insistent visual motion into depth promises that viewers will eventually reach the brilliant domes and exuberantly gushing chimneys of civilization in the distance. The wilderness, which takes up the whole of the foreground at left front, is stranded and immobile, left behind at the painting's surface.

6 Asher B. Durand, *Progress*, 1853. Oil on canvas, 48 × 71 15⁄16 in. Private collection. From Linda S. Ferber, ed., *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape* (Brooklyn Museum, 2007), 166

In contrast, virtually every element in Bingham's composition is oriented toward the picture plane. The rear of the flatboat is directly parallel to this surface, while the bottom edge, where it makes contact with the water, lies rigorously parallel to the edge of the canvas and the frame below. Pushed up against the picture plane and displayed like objects in a still life are (from left to right) a drying shirt, ladder, raccoon skin, rope,

7 Édouard Manet, *The Old Musician*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 73¾ × 97 11⁄16 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Chester Dale Collection. Image courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

and the ends of two bedrolls, all accompanied by the folded triangle of a cloth hanging over the stern, with its flattening, inverted reflection immediately below. Above these items, the outspread oars are locked fast to the plane of the canvas. The effect is reinforced by Bingham's paint surface, with its sharp definition of light and shadow, and by the atmospheric perspective that places the banks of the river in the distance behind the boatmen and defines the sky as a backdrop.

How does this starkly frontal painting address us? What are the meanings of its insistence on vigorous, declarative action frozen in midevent and held in pictorial stasis? What time flows in its fixed but mobile world? Michael Fried, who has been preoccupied by such questions in the history of modern art, draws attention in *Manet's Modernism* (1996) to the "effects of intensity, instantaneousness, facingness, and strikingness" in such works by Édouard Manet as *Olympia* (1863, Musée d'Orsay) and *The Old Musician* (fig. 7), and to their visual "abruptness," qualities that he says induce in the spectator "an experience of the instantaneous stamping- or cutting-out of the image." This "kind of strikingness," says Fried, is "often described as assaulting the beholder."[14] The violent connotations of these terms evoke a blow directed at the spectator, a direct attack, and a "strike," one of Manet's paintings flashing out before it can be resisted and asserting itself on the viewer's consciousness, driving out autonomy in favor of its own presence. For instance, Fried says that *The Old Musician* "aims to instantly seize the beholder's gaze," seeking "by various 'formal' devices, such as every figure touching those next to it and the abrupt partial elision of the bearded man at the right by the framing edge, to compel the beholder to take it in as a whole, a single intense facing object of vision."[15] *The Jolly Flatboatmen* does indeed have something of this quality of "facingness" as a "cutting-out" of the image and "a single intense facing object of vision," a device to force it on the viewer's attention. Perhaps even Fried's talk of visual "assault" may not be pitching things too high. Bingham's picture asserts or, as Fried also says, "stamp[s]" itself on our sight. Viewers may be gripped by the painting's frontality, unable to unfix our gaze. This is at least partly what this picture wants.

This desire to flood our awareness with its presence, however, is not a matter purely of assertion, a violent "demand" on our sight that will not brook our looking away. There are other versions of how a painting might face the beholder and compel his or her attention. Consider the network of gaze and response in "A Charm Invests a Face." That poem's account of blurred and diffident responses to the obligation to "face" another seems to offer a version of facingness that counterbalances the implications of any hyperassertive "strikingness." *The Jolly Flatboatmen* shares with Dickinson's world of imperfect beholding a more reciprocal sense of openness and resistance to the other than these terms might imply. The painting resonates with the poem's delicate apprehension of both reality and the image as fully as with any rough "stamping-out." Some of these faces hail us directly, and yet with skepticism; in doing so they offset the implications of violent confrontation that terms such as "strikingness" carry with them. Bingham's figures engender potential interactions. They offer the opportunity for contact, response, and a reciprocal exchange. Even if the painting's facingness reveals a desire to seize and hold our attention (as Fried claims for Manet's pictures), it also seeks the "Interview" that might "annul" the power of that aggressive image, something mutual, something that suggests communication.

Futurity and Landscape

As the literature on Bingham testifies, historical dimensions inform the character of these paintings. His work as a painter in Saint Louis was interwoven with a long political career, during which he held a number of very senior offices, including, toward the end of his life, adjutant general of the state. Several of his paintings, such as *Stump Speaking* (1853–54, Saint Louis Art Museum) and *The County Election* (fig. 8), respond to that aspect of his experience. Bingham lost the election in Saline County, Missouri, that he depicts in *The County Election*, but from 1848 he was an active member of the Missouri General Assembly.[16]

Bingham's early professional life was, like that of a number of American painters of his and earlier generations, that of an itinerant local portraitist. The river paintings, which span the years from the mid-1840s to the mid-1850s, belong to a period when he was actively engaged in developing his career by seeking to move from a local to a national stage and by taking on types of subject matter other and more prestigious than local portraiture. The works signal the scale of Bingham's ambition to succeed as a painter.

Bingham made frequent if not always very successful forays to the East Coast during this period to promote his work in Washington, D.C. (where he spent several largely fruitless years in the early 1840s), Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, offering to paint portraits but also trying his hand at other subjects.[17] The key development was his success with the American Art-Union (AA-U). Founded in 1840 in New York City, the AA-U was formed to promote the fine arts nationwide and, in the words of the art historian Nenette Luarca-Shoaf, "to bind together the cultural tastes of the increasingly far-flung American citizenry through the purchase and dissemination of original artworks by American artists" by means of their reproduction as prints and in newspapers and magazines.[18] Paying five dollars per year for a subscription, AA-U members could win a work by a contemporary American artist in an annual lottery, and each was also guaranteed an engraving after a painting the AA-U had bought that year. From 1845, when it acquired the first of the river series, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* (see fig. 1), the AA-U purchased twenty of Bingham's pictures, eleven of them river scenes, and his work was the lottery prize or selected as the annual engraving on several occasions. Most notably, in 1847 *The Jolly Flatboatmen* received a superb interpretation by the engraver Thomas Doney (fig. 9), and the print achieved an impressively large circulation: ten thousand copies were produced from the original plate. From 1845 to 1852 the AA-U provided a key source of support and was, Luarca-Shoaf concludes, a major factor in Bingham's successful emergence "as a notable presence on the national art scene."[19]

8 George Caleb Bingham, *The County Election*, 1852. Oil on canvas, 38 × 52 in. Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Bank of America, 44:2001. Image courtesy Saint Louis Art Museum

In line with AA-U aims, Bingham consciously designed the river paintings to promote himself as "the '*Missouri Artist*'"—the "soubriquet" by which he became best known, according to a contemporary commentator—and to "market his . . . paintings to a receptive eastern audience" hungry for images of the West.[20] Presenting the flatboatmen as heroic, even monumental, examples of western character and independence, Bingham became the definitional western painter of the midcentury, so that, according to Luarca-Shoaf, Americans, and even Europeans, came to gauge "the character of western [life] through Bingham's imagery."[21]

The scholarship on Bingham has treated the river paintings as genre scenes. Although a similar perception probably accounts for the sniffier nineteenth-century reviews, which thought *The Jolly Flatboatmen* "a vulgar subject, vulgarly treated," it does not adequately describe the paintings.[22] It seems instead that Bingham's interest in self-promotion led him to broach the most prestigious categories, history painting and, at this precise moment, landscape painting, which, in the hands of such artists of the Hudson River School as Durand, Thomas Cole, and Frederic Edwin Church, was the acknowledged expression of American national expansion and progress.[23]

Bingham's contemporaries recognized this ambition in the river paintings, calling them "gems in the art of scenic painting" and discerning "an entire new field of historic painting."[24] But Hudson River painting was also, notably, an art of the cities and landscapes of the eastern United States. Taking on history and landscape, Bingham's river paintings respond to the prestige and currency of serious national painting in ways that seem conscious reversals of the modes of Hudson River landscapes. And that reversal is intimately connected to the facingness of the paintings.[25]

I have already pointed out in discussing Durand's *Progress* the way in which depth and futurity were linked in American landscape painting at the moment Bingham painted his river scenes. An early and important Hudson River painting such as Cole's *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (fig. 10) fosters that connection through tropes describing future development and what John L. O'Sullivan (the originator of the phrase "Manifest Destiny") called in 1839 "*the great nation* of futurity" and "the expansive," "far-reaching," "boundless future [that] will be the era of American greatness."[26] This famous painting imagines the future state of Northampton and Massachusetts rather than seeking to describe faithfully their condition in the 1830s. As the figure of the painter, seated in the wilderness in the foreground, looks into the depths of the scene, he provides the painting's audience with an image of aspiration toward a developed and transmuted landscape, in which "wilderness" becomes settled and ordered "civilization."[27]

9 Thomas Doney after George Caleb Bingham, *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, 1847. Engraving and mezzotint, 21½ × 26½ in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gertrude and Thomas Jefferson Mumford Collection, Gift of Dorothy Quick Mayer, 1942. Image © Metropolitan Museum of Art. www.metmuseum.org

Bingham's first river painting, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, recently described as "nearly devoid of action, seemingly frozen in time," metamorphoses this trope of the meditative future-oriented observer.[28] Two figures gaze out across the limpid water, while the languid pose of the trader's son suggests the contemplative attitude of Cole's painter, unlike figures in works

10 Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 51½ × 76 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908. Image © Metropolitan Museum of Art. www.metmuseum.org

11 Asher B. Durand, *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York*, 1848. Oil on canvas, 42½ × 60½ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of Thomas M. Evans and museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program

such as Durand's *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York* (fig. 11), who take in the prospect. Thus Bingham eschews the equation of spatial depth and unfolding time, and consequently refuses to provide the viewers with the visual mechanism of a forward-looking figure through whose gaze they may enter the picture. Instead, we have to negotiate gazes that, frankly challenging or forbidding in the case of the trapper, both direct and complicate our access to the landscape that lies beyond them.

Whereas in such Hudson River paintings as *Dover Plains*, the artist directs the viewer's gaze along the projected future of settlement and order, in *Fur Traders*, Bingham's composition blocks the route to knowledge that these pictures prescribe for us. The ordered and managed landscape of futurity is invisible here. Instead, we are presented with a hazy, atmospheric depth, the effect of which is frustrated and virtually abolished by a pervasive mistiness and by the clumps of trees in the middle ground that attract the eye and cause the space to flatten and close up toward the picture plane. The fact that the trees and the line of snags in the midground occupy a single plane makes it almost impossible to read them as anything other than the riverbank's edge. This reading is reinforced by the canoe, entirely parallel to the surface of the canvas, as well as by the ripples of water, all flowing along the same horizontal axis, the stares of the two figures, and the emphatic frontality of the chained bear cub and its reflection.

That Bingham was not unaware of the force of the compositional strategies that define distance as futurity is evident from such hybrid compositions as *Watching the Cargo* (see fig. 14) or *The Squatters* (see fig. 15), in which the frontality and facingness of the men and animals are offset by the unfolding depth of the landscape to the beholder's right.[29] These works underline the frontality of the paintings, such as *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, set on the river, or, like *Watching the Cargo by Night* (fig. 2) and *Mississippi Boatman* (frontispiece), block the access to depth through darkness, interposed structures, and the visual closure of the viewer's gaze into the distances that would otherwise be visible.

In this context, and although it is not a river picture, *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap* (fig. 12) comes into firmer focus. Boone's opening of the so-called Wilderness Trail between Virginia and Kentucky in 1775 was a major event in establishing a route across the Appalachians, although Bingham's painting probably shows a subsequent journey with Boone acting as escort to a group that includes his own family.[30] The result is a stubbornly frontal picture. Like the anti–Hudson River compositions of *Fur Traders* or *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, this painting reverses the trope of depth as a metaphor for futurity. The figures of Boone and his family and followers face us foursquare, "cutting-out" as Fried puts it, or "stamping" the image on our attention, as if these

12 George Caleb Bingham, *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap*, 1851–52. Oil on canvas, 36½ × 50¼ in. Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, Gift of Nathaniel Phillips, 1890

historic events were contemporary and immediate. The crux is that these subjects, like Bingham and the flatboatmen, are on the frontier. For mid-nineteenth-century westerners, unlike for eastern audiences, investment in the frontier was not a future event but, rather, one occurring in the present, and thus in the painting the frontier occurs now, at the moment of our attention. The surface of the picture plane becomes the point of immediacy against which historical forces push.

Daniel Boone also gives us a further clue about the way in which the river operates in Bingham's other paintings. The depth of the picture describes not the future but the past, the eastern world beyond the Appalachian range that the frontiersman and his party are leaving behind. The past is cut off—Bingham closes the emigrants' path with lowering hills and a blasted tree in the style of Cole, whose legacy as the founder of eastern

13 George Caleb Bingham, *Raftsmen Playing Cards*, 1847. Oil on canvas, 28 1/16 × 38 1/16 in. Saint Louis Art Museum, Bequest of Ezra H. Linley by exchange, 50:1934. Image courtesy Saint Louis Art Museum

14 George Caleb Bingham, *Watching the Cargo*, 1849. Oil on canvas, 26 × 36 in. State Historical Society of Missouri. Image courtesy State Historical Society of Missouri

15 George Caleb Bingham, *The Squatters*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 23 1/8 × 28 1/4 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Henry Lee Shattuck in memory of the late Ralph W. Gray. Photograph © 2018 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

landscape painting is therefore metaphorically blasted and left behind, together with the eastern landscape itself. Instead of a body of water flowing away from us and leading us back and into the picture, Boone's line of people flows toward us, ending with a frontal group that faces us directly. *The Jolly Flatboatmen* contains a number of compositional similarities to this arrangement. Both paintings organize their subjects through a pyramidal curve, a formation that associates the arc of the group of boatmen in this river painting with the movement of people in *Daniel Boone*. In such a reading, Bingham's figures travel against the flow of eastern landscape and into our space, which becomes energized by that provocative connection.

In these pictures, Bingham appears to be feeling his way toward a representational regime that will be distinct from Hudson River models. Ambitious and determined to make his name, he seems to have honed compositional decisions in opposition to the eastern domination of both landscape painting and its subject matter. Instead of facing away from us into depth and the future, Bingham's compositions emphasize the static presentness, a fixed moment. They are images that face the beholder in an effort to seize and compel his or her attention. The facingness of these pictures amounts to a visual repudiation of the landscapes of the East and, we might think, by implication of the ideology of progress that they support, the future-oriented sweep of the frontier, development, and the American nation.

Such a reading of these paintings might seem to cut across what we know from the detailed historical accounts of Bingham's political career in Missouri. At exactly the time he made the paintings I have just discussed, Bingham was seeking election to the Missouri General Assembly, an aim in which he succeeded in 1848.[31] Nancy Rash, in the most developed of several art-historical explorations of Bingham as politician, places the river paintings, including *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, in the context of a convoluted set of political maneuverings by Missouri Whigs—of whom Bingham was one—to persuade

the Democratic federal government under President James Polk to provide funding for improving the rivers and clearing impediments and obstructions. When Bingham depicted the flatboatmen, their role in this economic future was dimming and in decline. The wealth of Saint Louis as "the major trading center in the West" was already dependent on the navigability of steamboat traffic, and the flatboats "play[ed] a key role in fueling" the larger craft.[32] A number of the paintings show steamboats approaching boatmen ready with piles of cut wood. Rash argues that Bingham's river paintings—in which wrecked or imperiled steamboats sometimes feature, for instance, *Lighter Relieving a Steamboat Aground* (see fig. 18)—provide a moralized setting for reflection on the snags and hazards of the river as impediments to its role as a vital commercial waterway.[33] Bingham's "vision . . . grew quite decidedly out of the artist's Whig ideas about development, economic growth, and civilization," says Rash, and she argues for Bingham as a vigorous Whig developer, with his eyes set on the contemporary and future development of Missouri.[34]

Yet the facingness of Bingham's paintings, and specifically the temporal stasis that facingness invokes, puts this interpretation into a more complex perspective. Bingham's river paintings work to freeze the time of the boatmen just at the moment when they are in the process of disappearing from the western scene and being superseded by steamboats. This is why there is so little labor in these images. Figures punt the boat along, as in *Raftsmen Playing Cards* (fig. 13), or lean forward to blow on a fire started amid a pile of logs in *Watching the Cargo* (fig. 14), but for the most part they are waiting, or sitting, or static, as in *The Squatters* (fig. 15). The figures in *The Wood-Boat* (fig. 16) provide the summation of this trope. There is no activity at all in the picture, although the signs of past labor are clearly marked in the pile of neatly stacked wood. Bingham himself wrote of the painting

16 George Caleb Bingham, *The Wood-Boat*, 1850. Oil on canvas mounted on board, 25⅛ × 30 in. Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum purchase, 14:1951. Image courtesy Saint Louis Art Museum

that it presented "a group such as the traveller daily sees upon the navigable waters of the west. The wood for sale is conveniently placed in a flat boat, while the [boatmen] await a purchaser in some approaching steamer."[35] Until the steamboat comes past, they are motionless.

In these river pictures Bingham's relationship to the ideology of progress that he otherwise espoused is a complicated one. Bingham does not deny that ideology in his art, but he does present an opportunity to evaluate it or to offer or imagine alternatives to it. Bingham, in his role as Whig politician, promoted the development and exploitation of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Nevertheless, he made paintings in which characteristically western figures stand out against the demands of progress. The stasis of these paintings, their air of mystery or enigma, represents both the time of development and a valorization of a different relationship to the world at variance with industrial time.

It is not that Bingham is mounting some critique of the fundamental idea of progress in all this; rather, he is uninterested in replicating the Hudson River School's images of futurity. The time of the river paintings is balanced in a tension between the developmental and future-oriented time of progress and an older time, of which the flatboatmen are representative, and it is being promoted in Bingham's visual rhetoric as specifically western time. The stasis that hangs over Bingham's paintings of the river men responds to this tension, fixing the image of an alternative relationship to development that was becoming—in the way of the effects of capital—an object of nostalgia even before it had completed the process of dwindling as a live economic force. This transitional status makes the paintings peculiarly sensitive to some of the implications of expansion and the transformations of time under way by the late 1840s. As such, it might be argued that they are specific to their American place and moment.

17 George Caleb Bingham, *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port*, 1857. Oil on canvas, 47¼ × 69⅝ in. Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum purchase, 123:1944. Image courtesy Saint Louis Art Museum

Painting and Time

This historical account seems true. Yet as I have also been arguing, these paintings thematize the question of the contest between action and understanding more broadly. Time is given an explicit thematic treatment in a number of ways in the series. This is the point of the several paintings in which music making is central, including *The Jolly Flatboatmen* and *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port* (fig. 17). Music is an avatar of time, unspooling along a direct temporal line and serving as a metaphor for the unfolding, sequence, and coherence of narrative episodes through devices of recapitulation, echoing, and variation on its themes. The force of freezing the sequential passage of music in the world of the painting—the vigorous action of the arm sawing with the bow against the strings of the fiddle, the rhythm of fingers not quite connecting with a makeshift cymbal—provides a prime aesthetic contrast between the stasis of painting

18 George Caleb Bingham, *Lighter Relieving a Steamboat Aground*, 1847. Oil on canvas, 30 5/16 × 36 3/16 in. White House Historical Association, Washington, D.C., Partial gift of an anonymous donor, 1978, and Mr. and Mrs. Walter Shorenstein, 1981. Image © 2018 White House Historical Association

and the structured disclosure of passing time in music. Like the fluttering handkerchief and delicate high stepping of the dancer in *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port*, music stands for the pattern of human time. But, in painting, that human time is frozen into stillness.[36]

I want to read this immobility as a nod to the nature of painting itself, not because Bingham is some sort of modernist *avant la lettre*, but because by asserting that the status of his pictures as works of art made them comparable to those of the Hudson River School, he proclaims his own achievement in depicting the world and doing so differently from his eastern rivals. Painting is a static mode; it has little to do with any direct manifestation of the flow of time, and when time is represented, it necessarily appears in heavily mediated forms. Indeed, the nature of painting means that it can only represent the mobile and unfolding world through the conversion of action into a static form. The intensity of the acts portrayed in Bingham's pictures—dancing, music making, always the seized and immediate moment—gives action a certain emphasis, but then the stasis of the painting, its concentration on "presentness," holds this world up

for our contemplation. In the case of Bingham's river paintings, the disjunction between action and the static representation of those moments posits the paintings as meditations on time. *The Jolly Flatboatmen* imagines action as contemplation, movement as stasis, the temporal world as a moment of absorption, and in doing so exploits the nature of painting and asserts its potency.

For any study of Bingham, the usefulness of the notion of facingness in the sense of a self-conscious device that provokes reflection on the capacities of painting is limited. The frontality of Bingham's works suggests something of that role. They face the viewer in an attitude of demand. They seize the viewer's attention by an act of force, and if "assaulting" the beholder's eyes through an "instantaneous stamping- or cutting-out" of the image, as in Fried's account of modernism, seems too strong, they are surely determined to require "us to feel and act in specific ways," in Mitchell's phrase.[37] At the same time, however, I have argued that Bingham's paintings seem to have much in common with the veiled indirection of Dickinson's verse. The flicker of recognition and misrecognition in "A Charm Invests a Face" offers an image of what it is to contemplate a sight, to stand back or away from it and its demands on its beholders, and to think about it, with it, and against it. There is a prospect of reciprocity in the relationship here. However vaguely the outline of the other appears, it is discernible, and something is shared, even if only the experience of uncertainty. The circuits of watching figures in *The Jolly Flatboatmen* or *Lighter Relieving a Steamboat Aground* (fig. 18) provide us with a set of possibilities that cue us for similar options. The beholder is not simply "struck" by these paintings but also asked to engage, to consider, to contemplate, and to meditate on what it means to look at this image, to view these figures who are simultaneously monumental, heroic, and melancholy, valued and already vanishing into the mists of history.

Lighter Relieving a Steamboat Aground offers an example of how Bingham's paintings confront but also invite the beholder in. The musing figures with their backs to the audience in such paintings as Cole's *Oxbow* or Durand's *Dover Plains* are notable for their solitariness, even when other figures feature in the composition. These pictures lack attention to other people; their dream of the future is spun out of a single head. Bingham's picture wittily transforms the surrogate figure of Hudson River painting by bringing him hulkingly nearer to the picture plane and by showing him to us in the midst of what is evidently a sociable community. But that preposterous and looming torso in the *Lighter* painting—for all its origins in classical sculpture nevertheless so startling as a compositional device—also blocks our view and makes it impossible for us to discern the face to which his companions respond. There's a droll humor to this, as there is also in the deliberately obscured countenances in *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, precisely rhyming with the same number of faces that look out and hail us. In *The Jolly Flatboatmen* that means that it is the single, upright, dancing figure whose demeanor might swing the balance one way or the other, although in fact he offers only ambivalence, or perhaps irresolution. As a sign of this, it is his face alone that is neither obscured nor frankly open. Instead, he looks down, his countenance visible but shadowed and gazing away.

Bingham's play on the openness or obscurity of faces leads back to the question of dialogue. Like the flickering subjects of Dickinson's poem or the ambivalent central dancer in *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, we face others in a blurred and hesitant net of response. The "image" of the poem's final line "satisfies" only as a sign of the obscurity of the "Imperfectly beheld" real. As the viewer confronts one of these paintings, its quality of facingness also invites her into a conversation. What the painting wants is our attention, but it also wants our response. In *The Jolly Flatboatmen* that desire for reciprocity is held up for our contemplation.

19 Charles Deas, *The Death Struggle*, 1840–45. Oil on canvas, 30 × 25 in. Shelburne Museum, Museum purchase, acquired from Maxim Karolik, 1959-265.16. Photo: Bruce Schwarz. www.shelburnemuseum.org

Western Painting

How representative of the visual culture of the West are the themes of frontality and self-consciousness as I have identified them in Bingham? It is possible to find qualities of facingness and stasis in this sense in the work of other western artists, such as Bingham's Saint Louis contemporary Charles Deas (1818–1867). Deas's *Long Jakes, "The Rocky Mountain Man"* (1844, Denver Art Museum) and *The Death Struggle* (fig. 19) both deal with present, fixed, and frozen moments and do so through versions of frontality.[38] *Long Jakes* focuses our attention on its western subject by fixing the horse and rider parallel to the picture plane and by expressing the moment in which they are depicted as an everlasting present, where intense action is paused. In contrast, *The Death Struggle* foregrounds Deas's melodramatic imagination and proclivities, making the picture a much more "thrilling" work than *Long Jakes*.[39] The instantaneity of *The Death Struggle* is expressed in the form of the plunging antagonists as they lurch toward the viewer and simultaneously into the void. Futurity in *The Death Struggle* is a terrifying prospect that must be held off and can be faced only with horror. Although Deas's paintings explore a set of effects comparable to Bingham's, they lack the rigid facingness of the latter's riverboat series.

Deas and other western artists might be examined with such questions about facingness and self-consciousness in mind, as well as others about their relationship to the eastern landscapes of artists such as Church, or the painting of the West in the works of Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, which forms part of that eastern tradition. As I have argued, it is Bingham's capacity for dialogue, for the reciprocity offered by the face-to-face encounter between painting and its beholder, that constitutes his innovation in western painting.

This dialogic aspect of Bingham's work suggests that his paintings are significant for reasons additional to their status as historical documents. The Bingham scholarship seems open to this. Writing in 1991, Rash introduced her book on Bingham and politics with the claim that "Bingham is an utterly American painter." She attributed this to the fact that "he embued his scenes with the essence and concerns of the particular American political culture in which he lived."[40] At the time of this writing, such an assertion would be harder to make. Certainly, the exhibition *Navigating the West: George Caleb Bingham and the River*, seen in Fort Worth, Texas, and Saint Louis, used different language in 2014. In the catalogue, Andrew J. Walker and Janeen Turk

set out interpretations of Bingham's painting within the broader institutional history of American art, and the catalogue as a whole stresses the "flexibility of meaning" and openness to interpretation the authors discern in his work.[41] In this vein, I introduce Dickinson's poem not to provide historical evidence but because of its interest in reciprocity and the meeting of otherness through veiled encounters with the face, which has some historical bearing on the themes and tactics of Bingham's work.

An ethics of the face is always there, concerned with interpretation, compliance, respect, and judgment, as well as with trust and acknowledgment. The face serves to highlight the reciprocal or negotiated undertaking between two participants. Facingness and frontality, too—metaphoric extensions into the realm of observer-picture relations—are about an ethical negotiation of meaning and its interpretation. If, as spectators, we are expected to deal in images as much as realities, images pulled, pushed, and formulated as part of politics and interpretation, we are nonetheless allowed to see the possibility of connection between the subjects of these paintings and the observer. Bingham's paintings insert themselves into existing narratives—of progress, of the unfolding of national time, of the politics of development. That insertion is a hailing, a form of address to the spectator who is brought into the world of the painting—in part by strategies of facingness.

In the end, there is a threshold to Bingham's self-consciousness about painting. He is no Manet and no modernist. It is his willingness to claim the status of fine art for his work and to challenge his professional rivals with it that has the authentic ring. His river paintings emphasize their frontality because that is the sign of their aesthetic belonging to the long history of painting, from Raphael and *The Transfiguration* onward. But for Bingham, compositional tactics are meant to be interventions in the debates of national life. The claim they make is not that his painting is aesthetically worthy, or not just that; it is that the aesthetic, particularly in the fine arts, may find a role in American life. *The Jolly Flatboatmen* faces out toward us, offers the possibility of dialogue, face-to-face negotiation, respect, and interchange, so that painting itself can hope to take part in that national exchange.

Notes

I am grateful for discussions, suggestions, and comments on earlier versions of this article by Jennifer Greenhill, Alistair Wright, Matthew Walker, Doug Haynes, Jo Pawlik, Celeste-Marie Bernier, John Howard, Robin Veder, and the anonymous readers for *American Art*.

1 Emily Dickinson, "Poem 421," in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1951), 326–27.

2 Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Random House, 2001); Aliki Barnstone, *Changing Rapture: Emily Dickinson's Poetic Development* (Hanover, N.H.: Univ. Press of New England, 2006); Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979); and Jane Donahue Eberwein, *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1985).

3 This bears comparison with ideas of the veil and double consciousness as they appear in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007).

4 Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face to Face Behavior* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), 18.

5 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 8.

6 Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2013), 66.

7 For recent and influential attempts to reconceive objecthood as potentially in dialogue with its observers, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2010); and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2010).

8 Nenette Luarca-Shoaf, "Fluid Presence: George Caleb Bingham and the River," in *Navigating the West: George Caleb Bingham and the River*, by Luarca-Shoaf et al. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2014), 33–36; E. Maurice Bloch, *The Paintings of George Caleb Bingham: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986), and revisions in "George Caleb Bingham: Catalogue Raisonné Supplement," at http://

georgecalebbingham.org/; and, for the drawings, Claire Barry and Nancy Heugh, "Navigating the Path of the Brush: Exploring the Role of Drawing and Preparatory Layers in the Creation of the River Paintings," in Luarca-Shoaf et al., *Navigating the West*, 93–133.

9 See the observations on this static quality in Luarca-Shoaf, "Fluid Presence," 47; and Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Dorothy Mahon, "Technical Brilliance Revealed: Bingham's *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*," in Luarca-Shoaf et al., *Navigating the West*, 142.

10 Most recently in Barry and Heugh, "Navigating the Path of the Brush," 120–21. Also Françoise Forster-Hahn, "Inventing the Myth of the American Frontier: Bingham's Images of Fur Traders and Flatboatmen as Symbols of the Expanding Nation," in *American Icons: Transatlantic Perspectives on Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century American Art*, ed. Thomas W. Gaehtgens and Heinz Ickstadt (Santa Monica, Calif.: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992), 133; Nancy Rash, *The Painting and Politics of George Caleb Bingham* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1991), 82–85; and E. Maurice Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham: The Evolution of an Artist* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), 85–97.

11 For a helpful discussion of the strategy Bingham employed to lead the spectator into *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, see Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, 89.

12 For important moments in this historiography, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950); John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973); and Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

13 Barry Maine notes the similarity of the "figures arrested in motion" of *The Jolly Flatboatmen* to "stop-action photography" in Maine, "The Authenticity of American Realism: Samuel Clemens and George Caleb Bingham 'On the River,'" *Prospects* 21 (October 1996): 13–37, at 22.

14 Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), 405, 295, 405. *The Old Musician* is discussed in relation to facingness on 288–90. See also Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976); and Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008). Fried's "facingness" appeared originally in "Art and Objecthood," where he intertwines a concept of "presentness" with the dyad of "theatricality" and "absorption": "it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theater." Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72, at 167. In this article, I have not sought to move beyond Fried's characterization of "facingness" as "strikingness" into his ideas of absorption and theatricality, although to do so is clearly possible and would offer further opportunities for analysis. On the longer history of ideas of facingness in art history, see Margaret Olin, "Alois Riegl's Concept of Attentiveness," *Art Bulletin* 71, no. 2 (June 1989): 285–99.

15 Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 289.

16 Scott Casper, "Politics, Art, and the Contradictions of a Market Culture: George Caleb Bingham's *Stump Speaking*," *American Art* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 26–47; and Rash, *Painting and Politics*. For an excellent positioning of Saint Louis and Missouri in the context of the period, see Frederick E. Hoxie, "A World of Fragments: America in the 1840s," in *Charles Deas and 1840s America*, by Carol Clark et al. (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 54–69.

17 On Bingham's exploration of "the relationship between the wilderness of the Far West and the commercial economy of the East," see Angela Miller, "The Mechanisms of the Market and the Invention of Western Regionalism: The Example of George Caleb Bingham," *Oxford Art Journal* 15, no. 1 (1992): 3–20, at 7.

18 Luarca-Shoaf, "Fluid Presence," 41.

19 Ibid., 43, 58, at 41.

20 "Paintings," *Daily Missouri Republican*, April 21, 1847, reproduced in Sarah Burns and John Davis, *American Art to 1900: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2009), 457; Luarca-Shoaf, "Fluid Presence," 30, 74n8; and Barry and Heugh, "Navigating the Path of the Brush," 131.

21 Luarca-Shoaf, "Fluid Presence," 62; and Forster-Hahn, "Inventing the Myth of the American Frontier," 119–46.

22 "The Fine Arts: The Art-Union Pictures," *Literary World*, October 23, 1847, 277, quoted in Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1991), 85.

23 Although it continues to have shorthand value, the term "Hudson River School" has come under pressure recently, for example, in "Hudson River School Reconsidered," a double session organized by Alan Wallach and presented at the College Art Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., February 6, 2016. See also Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 3–4; and Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire," in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. William H. Truettner and Wallach (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), 23–112.

24 "Paintings," 457.

25 This is not to say that Bingham directly attacked Church. Bingham was largely silent about his contemporaries, but in a letter dated twenty years later he praises Church as "the *greatest* of Landscape painter[s] whether of the old or modern masters," and claims of his works that "they are scarcely pictures, but rather Nature herself." In the same letter, Bingham confesses, "I have never been able to write anything about Art in a manner satisfactory to myself." Bingham to James S. Rollins, June 19, 1871, in *"But I Forget that I am a Painter not a Politician": The Letters of George Caleb Bingham*, ed. Lynn Wolf Gentzler, comp. Roger E. Robinson (Columbia: State Historical Society of Missouri, 2011), 307, 306.

26 John L. O'Sullivan, "The Great Nation of Futurity," *United States Magazine,*

and Democratic Review 6, no. 23 (November 1839): 426, 427.

27 Alan Wallach, "Making a Picture of the View from Mount Holyoke," in *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, ed. David C. Miller (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 80–91; and Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c. 1830–1865* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

28 Kornhauser and Mahon, "Technical Brilliance Revealed," 142.

29 It is also evident that Bingham was notably less interested in frontality when making studies and sketches for his river compositions. See the examples reproduced in Barry and Heugh, "Navigating the Path of the Brush," 88–89; and in Kornhauser and Mahon, "Technical Brilliance Revealed," 164–67. This supports my contention that Bingham's facingness is a deliberate tactic.

30 David M. Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), 55–105.

31 Miller, "Mechanisms of the Market"; and Barbara Groseclose, "Painting, Politics, and George Caleb Bingham," *American Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (November 1978): 4–19.

32 Rash, *Painting and Politics*, 75–82, at 75, 82. On the redundant status of flatboats superseded by steam in this period, see ibid., 67; Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, 86; and Michael E. Shapiro, "The River Paintings, 1845–57," in *George Caleb Bingham*, by Shapiro et al. (New York: Abrams, 1993), 39–76. Shapiro also states (65), "Rivers and boats are metaphors for commerce and progress, and Bingham's pictures depicting them are animated by similar notions." See also Michael Allen, *Western Rivermen, 1763–1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1990).

33 Nancy Rash, "George Caleb Bingham's *Lighter Relieving a Steamboat Aground*," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 16–31.

34 Rash, *Painting and Politics*, 45.

35 George Caleb Bingham to American Art-Union, New York, November 19, 1850, quoted in John Francis McDermott, "George Caleb Bingham and the American Art-Union," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (January 1958): 66.

36 For recent work on time in American culture of the period, see Thomas M. Allen, *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008); and Lloyd Pratt, *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

37 Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 25.

38 On Deas, see Clark et al., *Charles Deas and 1840s America*, and especially Joan Carpenter Troccoli, "Long Jakes: Some Currents in the Mountain Air," 149–69. See also Johns's observation (*American Genre Painting*, 85): "One could hardly imagine a greater contrast to the types in the works of Deas and Ranney" than Bingham's flatboatmen.

39 Lubin, *Picturing a Nation*, 89.

40 Rash, *Painting and Politics*, 8.

41 Andrew J. Walker and Janeen Turk, "George Caleb Bingham: A Twentieth-Century Revival," in Luarca-Shoaf et al., *Navigating the West*, 181.