24. GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM, *Country Politician*

TALKING POLITICS

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879) was not only a successful painter, he was also an active politician.[1] He first entered political life in 1840, when he was named a delegate to the Missouri state Whig convention. At the same time, he was commissioned to paint processional banners for Whig candidates.[2] The Whig Party had formed a few years earlier from a coalition of smaller parties united in their opposition to the policies of Andrew Jackson and his followers, whom many saw as disregarding and undermining the principles of the Constitution.[3] Whigs believed themselves the true inheritors of the democratic principles established by the American Revolution and accordingly took as their name the word applied in the eighteenth century to the colonists who resisted the tyranny of the English monarchy.

Bingham probably came to identify himself as a Whig in 1837, when he was adversely affected by banking policies enacted by President Martin Van Buren, a Democrat.[4] In 1844 Bingham once again served as a delegate to the Whig state convention and painted political banners for Whig candidates. Then in 1846, at the urging of his friends, he ran for state representative from Saline County. Although he won the election, the results were contested by the Democratic candidate, and Bingham held the office for only three months, at which time the legislature controlled by Democrats ruled against him. He swore he would never again enter politics, but in 1848 he ran for state representative again, this time defeating the Democratic incumbent.[5]

Despite his busy political schedule, Bingham continued to paint portraits and genre scenes, and in the spring of 1849, only months after he had begun his term as state representative, he completed his painting *Country Politician*. Bingham carefully planned and executed this painting, making detailed drawings of each figure, some of which reveal he considered different poses and physiognomies (fig. 24.1).[6] His attention to the subtleties of facial structure was part of the more general interest in the pseudo-science of phrenology, which claimed that the shape of a person's face and head revealed his or her true character.[7] By rendering the figures with distinct physiognomies, Bingham no doubt expected his contemporaries to "read" the figures' faces.

Once he completed his preparatory drawings, the artist positioned each figure within a highly structured composition.[8] The gentleman who sits on an overturned crate draws us into the composition by looking at us and, because no one is seated across from him, we are able to imagine ourselves joining the discussion. The orthogonals created by the floorboards and rafters of the room focus our attention on the talking politician to the right. His posture, gesture, and gaze in turn direct us to the old man hunched on the chair opposite him. He leans toward the politician and looks at him intently, thus encouraging us to look back at the politician and at the gentleman beside him. Taking a slow pull on his pipe, he appears to ruminate on the politician's point. Looking us in the eye, he seem to be asking, "Well, what do *you* think?" To the left stands a young man with his back turned to the stove. Although he may be listening to the politician, he appears more intent on reading the notices posted on the wall, including the large poster for the Mabie Circus, which locates the scene somewhere in rural Missouri.[9]

No symbols appear anywhere in the painting to suggest the subject of the politician's discourse, and therefore the painting appears to depict a slice of everyday life: three men listening to a politician. However, for the artist and his

24. George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879), *Country Politician*, 1849
Oil on canvas, 20 × 24 in. (50.8 × 61 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 1979.7.16

Fig. 24.1. George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879), *Citizen*, 1849. Black india ink, wash, and pencil on rag paper, 9⅝ × 8¾ in. (24.5 × 22.2 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Lent by the People of Missouri, 8-1977/52

fellow Missourians, the painting was a response to a highly charged political debate currently raging throughout the state. Bingham exhibited *Country Politician* in St. Louis shortly after he completed it. In a brief article published in the local *Daily Missouri Republican*, a reporter described it as "a scene in a bar-room, in which the group is most perfect life-like. The jolly old landlord, smoking his pipe; a politician, most earnestly discussing to a very indifferent looking farmer the Wilmot Proviso; whilst a boy, with his coat-tail turned up to the stove, is reading a show-bill."[10] The reporter, perhaps reading each figure's physiognomy, identified the men as specific types—a politician, a landlord, and a farmer. More significantly, he saw them discussing a specific piece of legislation, the Wilmot Proviso.

The Wilmot Proviso had been authored by a Pennsylvania representative to Congress as an amendment to an 1846 bill authorizing federal funds to purchase territories from Mexico.[11] The amendment sought to prohibit the introduction of slavery into any new territories. Although the Wilmot Proviso never came up for a vote in the Senate, and therefore never became law, the House of Representatives did vote on it twice, in 1846 and again in 1847. Each time, the vote was divided along sectional lines, with Northern representatives voting for it and Southern representatives voting against it, thereby vividly underscoring the deep differences between North and South on the question of slavery. The Wilmot Proviso injected the issue of slavery into political discussions throughout the country, but especially in Southern states like Missouri, where slavery was legal.

In January 1849 the Missouri State Senate passed what came to be called the Jackson Resolutions—named after the Democratic Missouri senator Claiborne Jackson.[12] These resolutions responded to the Wilmot Proviso by asserting that it was unconstitutional for Congress to enact any legislation on the subject of slavery. If Congress did attempt to pass such laws, the Jackson Resolutions stated Missouri would cooperate with other slaveholding states "in such measures [as] may be deemed necessary for our mutual protection against the encroachments of Northern fanaticism."[13] Jackson and other Southern slaveholders saw the Wilmot Proviso as an attack on the South by the North, so in response he and like-minded Southerners responded by threatening to dissolve the Union altogether. The Senate resolutions then went to the Missouri House of Representatives, where it was referred to a committee on which Bingham sat, the Committee on Federal Relations. This

committee proposed a more moderate set of resolutions, known as the Bingham Resolutions, which acknowledged that Congress did have the authority to limit slavery in new territories, but recommended that Congress defer to the citizens and politicians of each state to decide the issue on their own. These more moderate resolutions did not call for the abolition of slavery, nor did they threaten secession. The Jackson Resolutions eventually carried the day and were adopted by the Missouri State Senate and the House.

Writing some forty years later, one Missouri historian noted that the debate on the Wilmot Proviso "occasioned very great excitement, threatening not only the accustomed repose and fellowship of the people, but the disruption of political parties."[14] Given the fact that Bingham painted *Country Politician* about the time he was engaged in formulating a more moderate response to the Jackson Resolutions, it seems likely the painting represents his solution to the debate engendered by the Wilmot Proviso: namely, that it was the responsibility, not of Congress, but of the down-home sort of people Bingham depicted in his painting to debate and resolve for themselves the issue of slavery within their respective states.[15] Thus, the gentleman who looks out from the painting might be more pointedly asking us, "Well, what do you think about *slavery*?"

Curiously, once Bingham's painting traveled back East it lost these connotations. In the summer of 1849 Bingham took *Country Politician* to New York, where it was purchased by the American Art-Union (AA-U) for $200.[16] The AA-U sought to promote American art to ordinary citizens, and therefore its selection committee preferred works that would have broad appeal throughout the country. *Country Politician* may have invoked the emotional debate over slavery and states' rights for the artist and his peers in Missouri, but the AA-U saw it in decidedly neutral terms and thus described the subject of the painting as "Three men are seated around a stove, one of whom is arguing some knotty point with an old traveler. Behind the stove a man is standing warming his back with his coat-skirts lifted."[17] Of course, Bingham's painting could seen in such terms because it avoids overt, and even covert, political symbolism. It may have appealed to the AA-U because it depicted a community activity understood at the time to be characteristically American. "To take part in the government of the society and to talk about it is the greatest business and as it were the only pleasure that an American knows," wrote the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* (1835).[18] Bingham thus negotiated the regional and national by subsuming a specific regional debate over the future of slavery within an artistic rendering of the national activity of discussing politics.[19] [KM]

24. GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM, *Country Politician*

1. The most thorough account of Bingham's political career and its relationship to his paintings is Nancy Rash, *The Paintings and Politics of George Caleb Bingham* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

2. On the artist's political banners, see E. Maurice Bloch, "Art in Politics," *Art in America* 33, no. 2 (April 1945): 93–100; Bloch, *The Paintings of George Caleb Bingham: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 159, 166–167.

3. For a comprehensive history of the Whig Party, see Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

4. According to one historian: "While residing temporarily in Natchez, Mississippi, he [Bingham] found his money tied up in a local bank by the Specie Circular. Bingham had been painting portraits in Natchez for $40 to $60 each and the checks received in payment became worthless when the local banks closed because of the demand for specie by the Federal Treasury." See Keith L. Bryant, "The Artist as Whig Politician," *Missouri Historical Review* 59 (October 1964–July 1965): 450. Bingham described Whigs as "freemen, and not like [Democrats] bound to model their thoughts to correspond with the wishes of a Master. We differ . . . but are a unit in opposition to the men who would dare deprive us of the *right* to do so and I trust we shall never fail to exercise this privilege for which we have been so long contending against the dictation of an unscrupulous party." Bingham to James S. Rollins, quoted in Barbara Groseclose, "Painting, Politics, and George Caleb Bingham," *American Art Journal*, November 1978, 7 n. 12.

5. Bingham continued to be active in politics in the 1850s and 1860s, serving as Missouri state treasurer during the Civil War; see Rash, *Paintings and Politics*, 185–215.

6. Preparatory drawings for *Country Politician* are illustrated and discussed in E. Maurice Bloch, *The Drawings of George Caleb Bingham, with a Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975), 99–113. The artist reused some of these figures in his 1852 *Canvassing for the Vote* (The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Mo.), suggesting that he may have employed his drawings as a kind of pattern book; see ibid., 14.

7. For a historiographic account of phrenology, see Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15–35. For a discussion of the relationship between phrenology and the legibility of the social order in the nineteenth century, see ibid., 107–133.

8. Bingham may have derived the composition of *Country Politician* from William Sidney Mount's 1837 *The Long Story* (The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), which he could have known through an engraving; see E. Maurice Bloch, "A Bingham Discovery," *American Art Review* 1, no. 1 (September–October 1973): 24.

9. The Mabie Circus performed throughout rural Missouri in the 1840s; ibid., 24–26.

10. *Daily St. Louis Missouri Republican*, 17 April 1849, 2-1, quoted in Bloch, *Paintings*. Bingham exhibited two other paintings in St. Louis, presently unlocated, but described by the reporter from the *Daily Missouri Republican*; see Bloch, *Paintings*, 180–181. Given the specificity with which the reporter described the painting, Rash has plausibly suggested that Bingham explained the subject to the reporter; see Rash, *Paintings and Politics*, 109.

11. A thorough discussion of the Wilmot Proviso is Chaplain W. Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso Controversy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967). On the Wilmot Proviso and Bingham, see Rash, *Paintings and Politics*, 94–119.

12. For a concise account of the "Jackson Resolutions" and its aftermath, including a tally of votes for and against, see A. J. Conant et al., *Switzler's Illustrated History of Missouri, from 1541 to 1881* (St. Louis: C. R. Barns, 1881), 264–270. See also Rash, *Paintings and Politics*, 103–106.

13. Jackson Resolutions, quoted in Conant, *Switzler's Illustrated History*, 266.

14. Ibid., 269.

15. Rash, *Paintings and Politics*, 109.

16. Bloch, *Paintings*, 180. On the American Art-Union, see ibid., 11–15.

17. Mary Barlett Cowdrey, *American Academy of Fine Arts and American Art-Union Exhibition Record, 1816–1852* (New York: The New-York Historical Society, 1953), 22.

18. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, abridged Sanford Kessler, trans. Stephen D. Grant (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 99. Bingham undoubtedly intended *Country Politician* to have a broad national appeal because by this time in his career he was painting his genre subjects primarily with the American Art-Union in mind; any controversial political content would be reason for the Art-Union to decline his work.

19. In 1867 Henry Tuckerman acknowledged the popularity of Bingham's depiction of regional subjects when he wrote: "Such representations also of border life and history as Bingham made popular, though boasting no special grasp or refinement in execution, fostered a taste for primitive scenes and subjects which accounts for the interest once excited in cities and still prevalent at [*sic*] the West in such pictures as 'The Jolly Flat-Boatman.'" See Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artist: American Artist Life, Comprising Biographical and Critical Sketches of American Artists: Preceded by an Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of Art* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1867), 494. An insightful discussion of Bingham's regionalism is 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.

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