

Release Date: May 29, 2015

George Caleb Bingham's Great American Masterpiece, *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, is Acquired by the National Gallery of Art, Washington



George Caleb Bingham, American (1811 – 1879), *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, 1846  
oil on canvas, 96.8 x 123.2 cm (38 1/8 x 48 1/2 in.)  
National Gallery of Art, Washington. Patrons' Permanent Fund. 2015.18.1

Washington, DC—George Caleb Bingham's masterpiece, *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846)—considered one of the greatest American genre paintings ever made—has entered the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Known as "the Missouri artist," Bingham was fascinated with American frontier life and is particularly well known for his paintings of trappers and boatmen along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. The purchase of the painting from the collection of the Richard and Jane Manoogian Foundation was made possible by the Gallery's Patrons' Permanent Fund.

*The Jolly Flatboatmen* is currently on tour in the exhibition *Navigating the West: George Caleb Bingham and the River*, which began last October at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas. The exhibition closed at the Saint Louis Art Museum on May 17, and travels to the Metropolitan Museum of Art from June 17 through September 20. *The Jolly Flatboatmen* will go on view in the National Gallery of Art's West Building in October 2015.

"*The Jolly Flatboatmen* is among the first distinctly American paintings that capture the allure of Western expansion during the mid-19th century," said Earl A. Powell, III, director, National Gallery of Art. "The American masterpiece has had a regular presence at the Gallery since 1956, thanks to the generosity of its past owners, the Pell family and Richard Manoogian. It joins two other outstanding paintings—*Mississippi Boatman* (1850) and *Cottage Scenery* (1845)—and two works on paper by Bingham in the Gallery's collection."

The painting was also featured in two exhibitions: *American Paintings from the Manoogian Collection* at the National Gallery of Art in 1989, which traveled to San Francisco, New York, and Detroit, and *George Caleb Bingham* at the Saint Louis Museum of Art and the Gallery in 1990.

Born in Virginia in 1811 and raised in Missouri, Bingham began his career as a portrait painter and was largely self-taught. It was not until about 1845 that he began painting his most notable works—genre scenes featuring a wide range of colorful characters that lived and worked on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. These lively compositions remain among the most important portrayals of life at the gateway to the Western frontier.

In *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, Bingham placed his central dancing figure at the apex of a triangular composition. On either side of the dancer, a fiddler plays a tune while another boatman keeps time on a frying pan and the rest of the men lounge on the deck as the boat floats downriver. In the foreground, Bingham included several remarkable still-life elements: a shirt drying in the sun, a coonskin, and a coiled rope. By 1846, when Bingham completed this painting, flatboats were quickly being replaced by steam-powered vessels that could haul freight at significantly faster speeds.

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The American Art Union, based in New York City, was instrumental in Bingham's artistic career. This organization provided artists not only exhibition space, but also helped to disseminate their art to a broader public. In 1846, the Union purchased *The Jolly Flatboatmen* and included the work in its annual raffle. The painting was awarded to Benjamin van Schaick, a grocer living in New York. Bingham's spirited river scene became wildly popular through the circulation of printed reproductions, including 10,000 engravings published by the American Art Union in 1847, followed by an additional run of 8,000 from the same plate, published about 1860.

Hoping to profit from the original painting's popularity, Bingham completed two additional versions on the theme. The first, *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port* (1857), now at the Saint Louis Art Museum, repeats the triangular composition with additional figures. The second version, *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1877–78), currently in the collection of the Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, is a smaller painting with just seven figures. However, the original composition of *The Jolly Flatboatmen* remains Bingham's best-known work.

After disappearing from view for more than a century, *The Jolly Flatboatmen* was purchased by William Pell sometime prior to 1954 when it was exhibited at the Saint Louis Art Museum. It remained in the collection of the Pell family and the Pell Family Trust until Richard A. Manoogian purchased the painting in 1986.

### **National Gallery of Art's American Paintings Collection**

Today the National Gallery of Art's collection of some 1,400 American paintings from the 18th to the early 20th centuries represents the largest holding of any school in the Gallery and is among the top collections in the country. It includes works by nearly every important figure in American painting and many of these artists' greatest masterpieces, from John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (1778), Rembrandt Peale's *Rubens Peale with a Geranium* (1801), and Thomas Cole's four-part allegory, *The Voyage of Life* (1842), to George Inness's *The Lackawanna Valley* (c. 1856), Winslow Homer's *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)* (1873–1876), and George Bellows's *Both Members of This Club* (1909).

The collection also includes George Catlin's Indian paintings, donated by Paul Mellon, and American folk art from the collection of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch. Both gifts total more than 600 paintings, representing more than one-third of the American paintings collection. The recent acquisition of some 226 works from the collection of the former Corcoran Gallery of Art has further enhanced the Gallery's holdings, with outstanding works such as Albert Bierstadt's *The Last of the Buffalo* (1888), Frederic Edwin Church's *Niagara* (1857), and Edward Hopper's *Ground Swell* (1939), plus important works by African Americans, including Aaron Douglas's *Into Bondage* (1936), genre paintings, and the Gallery's first work by Cecilia Beaux.

### **General Information**

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Gallery's Web site at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Follow the Gallery on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt), Twitter at [www.twitter.com/ngadc](http://www.twitter.com/ngadc), and Instagram at <http://instagram.com/ngadc>.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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February 5, 2015

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