
On its cover, a flatboat crew entertain themselves with music while a jolly man holding his hat and brandishing a red handkerchief dances to the tune of a fiddle. He waves and invites the prospective reader to open what proves to be a remarkable little book. In fact, the painting by George Caleb Bingham - the last of a thematic exploration he began in 1846 of riverboat men at leisure entitled *The Jolly Flatboat Men (1877-78)* - is a nostalgic farewell to a rapidly changing way of life set in motion by the end of the Civil War.

This small but splendid catalog accompanies the exhibition *American Encounters: Genre Painting and Everyday Life*. Featuring only five works, it is the second installment of a four-year collaboration between four museums focusing on the history of American art through the lens of genre painting. The volume begins with a well-considered essay by Terra Foundation for American Art curator Peter John Brownlee. He discusses the evolution of American genre painting as an exploration of the distinctly American character (often recorded as a type based on racial, regional and class differences), its relationship to European predecessors as well as the economic context. For the young Republic less than a century old, an expanding Frontier forms an important part of Brownlee's discussion. As American artists searched for subjects distinctive from those of Europe, depictions of the West harbored nostalgic appeal for a West which may never have existed but generated interest and contributed to sales of Western themed subjects.

Illustrated and footnoted catalog entries follow each painting by project curators from participating institutions: Blaise Ducos and Guillaume Faroult, Musée du Louvre; Kevin M. Murphy, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art; and Stephanie Mayer Heydt, High Museum of Art. The Directors’ forward begins and a bibliography concludes the catalog. Geared towards scholars and generalist alike, this eminently accessible volume is composed of twenty-three figures illustrating the introductory essay and five accompanying exhibition entries. Due to format limitations, the illustrations for the most part are quite small, making it difficult to fully appreciate the curatorial analysis so wonderfully discussed.

As a vehicle for the expression of cultural nationalism, the stock or stereotyped characters as evinced by *The Jolly Flatboat Men* and typifying American genre painting, are still with us today. Despite advances to American society over the past 150 years made at the conclusion of the Civil War, these paintings can tell us more about where we have been as a nation, the current state of our union and perhaps who we are and where we should be going.

Andrea Walton, MA, MLS, krw1@nyu.edu

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