

# **Fur Traders Descending the Missouri**

## **by George Caleb Bingham**

### **Print Facts**

- Medium: Oil on canvas
- Date: 1845
- Size: 29" x 36 ½"
- Location: Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC
- Period:
- Style: Luminism
- Genre: Genre painting
- Bingham returned from a trip to central Missouri in 1845 with several sketches and paintings. This is one of them.
- Taking photographs at this time was very costly and difficult. Americans got to know the west mainly through paintings like this one.
- The man is wearing a liberty cap.
- This work was originally called "French-Trader–Half-Breed Son", but it was later changed to be less offensive.
- The animal at the end of the boat is described as being a black bear cub.
- "Bingham's emblematic image refers to trade, settlement, the nation's north-south axis—the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers—and the issue of race. It can be read from left to right—against the flow—from the native bear cub chained to the boat's prow, to the boy reclining on the pelts, to the man at the stern, a straight line from the beast to civilized humanity. Bingham himself called the picture "French-Trader—Half Breed Son," emphasizing its racial exoticism. However, the managers of the American Art-Union in New York, where he sent it for exhibition, chose to show it under its present title, which transformed the trader and his son into generalized western types. The scene is most remarkable for its pervasive stillness, as native and foreign American inhabitants along the upper reaches of the Missouri drift toward the embrace of the modern, urbanized world." <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/33.61>

### **Artist Facts**

- Born March 20, 1811
- Died July 7, 1879 (68 years)
- Bingham left most (about 95%) of his works unsigned.
- He lived most of his life in obscurity, not gaining attention until the 1930's.
- Bingham was a self-taught artist, gaining interest in art when he worked briefly as an assistant at the age of nine to the artist Chester Harding.
- Bingham worked as a cabinetmaker.
- In the beginning of his career he earned \$20.00 a piece painting people's portraits.
- He could complete a portrait in a single day.
- Bingham contracted measles, which left him permanently bald.
- Bingham was heavily involved in politics, serving as Treasurer for the state of Missouri.

- He was the chief of police in Kansas City.
- The governor appointed him the adjunct-General of Missouri, and he was often referred to as General Bingham.
- He was the first professor of art at the University of Missouri.

### Key Principle of Design to Teach

- **Contrast:** Often artists will juxtapose elements within an artwork to create tension or set a part of the work off from another for emphasis. This can be done by using opposing elements in close proximity (such as light and dark or large and small). The viewer's eye is naturally drawn to the area of contrast.

### Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Contrast

- What colors do you see in this painting? The blue on the boy's jacket meets the orange-ish colored wood on the boat. Also, the red of his blanket has the green in the trees and water behind it. Using these complementary colors creates contrast and draws your eye to the artist's focal point – which is at the bottom/center of the painting.
- Do you see light values or dark values in this painting? The point where the light values in the sky and water meet with the dark values of the boat and trees creates an area of emphasis because of the contrast between the values. By squinting your eyes you can see that all the dark areas are basically in the same area of the painting surrounded by light values. Note that the darkest value in the entire painting (the black cub) is surrounded by the lightest value in the entire painting setting it apart even more.

### Keywords

- Contrast, balance, space, emphasis

### Other Possible Questions

- What is the mood of this painting? Do the people seem hurried? Are they moving slow or fast? How can you tell? What direction would the boat be moving? (The man is rowing in a way that would take the boat to the viewer's left.)
- What time of day is it in this painting? How can you tell? (The shadows tell us it is early morning or late evening.)
- How can you tell these people are on water? What do you see reflected in the water? How do you think an artist paints a reflection? Point out the line where the boat meets the water and the reflection begins.
- What do you think they're carrying in their canoe? There is a dead duck if you look closely.
- How does the bear cub add balance to this painting? The dark black bear cub balances out the people even though they are bigger. The reason the small cub can do this is because it is so black that its value carries a heavier visual weight compared to the people with their lighter values. Try covering up the black cub. Ask students what would happen to the boat – it seems as though it would tip to the right. The cub creates balance in the boat.
- The artist creates the illusion of space with the empty skies and river. Even though that area can almost seem empty, it isn't. Can you see clouds in the sky and ripples in the water? All that space that seems light and vacant balances the boat and its occupants.