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## Review of The Painting & Politics of George Caleb Bingham.

Stephen C. Behrendt

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, sbeherdt1@unl.edu

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*The Painting & Politics of George Caleb Bingham.*  
By Nancy Rash. New Haven: Yale University  
Press, 1991. Notes, bibliography, index. x  
+ 286 pp. \$35.00.

Nancy Rash's superb study exemplifies the sort of reevaluation that results from tearing down the artificial walls of the gallery and the salon and relocating an artist within an accurate historical and cultural context. Rash introduces Bingham the total person: artist, certainly, but also writer, politician, legislator, polemicist, and social activist. Indeed, Bingham considered himself a public servant who just happened to be also a painter. This important distinction has been blurred by generations of critics who refused to see the "whole" Bingham and who consequently constructed an image of an artist depicting—in the scenes of Missouri life that form the bulk of Bingham's *oeuvre*—a sentimental, mythologized view of the West. Rash corrects that misperception immediately: "the mythic or archetypal qualities that scholars have found in Bingham's pictures have existed more in their own minds than in the mind and work of the artist" (5). Her book explodes this critical fallacy by reconstructing in painstaking, revealing detail the particular historical, political, and cultural contexts from which Bingham's pictures emerged and to which they responded in ways that contemporary critics are only beginning to appreciate.

Rash's book is a particularly helpful companion to the magisterial studies of E. Maurice Bloch, whose publications offer perhaps the definitive account of the pictures *as pictures*. Rash's particular contribution arises from her careful research into Bingham's own agenda in the light of his times: his ardent Whig sentiments, his commitment to economic expansionism, his strong pro-Unionism, his enthusiastic embrace of the democratic process generally. Her revisionist reading of the *Jolly Flatboatmen* and related pictures, for instance, reveals them to be no mere idylls but rather carefully considered essays on commerce and civilization in an expanding nation. Likewise, Rash discloses the intricate links between Bingham's paintings on political subjects and his personal and party political activities, revealing how each glosses the other in ways that have gone largely unnoticed. Indeed, Bingham fully appreciated the power of the visual image in shaping the nature of citizens' beliefs, and he enlisted visual eloquence along with verbal in advancing a direct and broadly humanitarian, egalitarian moral agenda.

Rash's scholarship is wide-ranging and meticulous, extending to a very substantial body of contemporary historical documents as well as to Bingham's own writings (including some previously unattributed to him). Her reading of the inextricably linked art and politics in Bingham's work is a model of interdisciplinary scholarship. Finally, her clear, lively writing is a brilliant reminder that complex intellectual discourse need not be reduced either to elaborate jargon or to labyrinthine expanses of overblown diction and syntax. This book offers at once both real pleasure and intellectual engagement.

STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT  
 Department of English  
 University of Nebraska-Lincoln