



Colorful Characters

Chapter 8 - by Kay Hively

From the moment Chester Harding sailed out of his life, George Caleb Bingham took his art seriously. Every free moment he worked on drawing and painting. Soon people began to notice his work, and he got small portrait jobs. Many people wanted images of their family members, and George was able to provide these images in paint.

As he neared adulthood, George ended his apprenticeship as a cabinet maker and moved back to Arrow Rock. With money he made from his art, he built his own home, using the skills he had learned in the cabinet shop.

Although he was happy to get portrait work from his friends and neighbors, George still loved the river and the activities that occurred along the riverbank. When he could, he walked down to the river

from his house, which sat high on a bluff. While visiting the boatmen, he made pencil sketches.

Because he had worked with Chester Harding on portraits, he was good at drawing faces. But he had to work hard to draw good human figures and the landscape around them.



Each time George visited the river, he could see changes coming. New ways were coming, and one day the river he had always known would be gone. Already steamboats

were finding their way up the Missouri River. He could see an end to the colorful boatmen who moved their flatboats up and down the river.

George still enjoyed the local politics he had learned about as a young boy. Arrow Rock and Boonville

were hotbeds of politics when politicians came to town and delivered red hot speeches to rowdy crowds. George not only attended the political meetings, he enjoyed sketching some of the political events.

His admiration for newspapers continued, and he often stopped at the newspaper office to talk politics. Although his artwork provided him with enough money for supplies, he still brought newsprint home from the newspaper office for his preliminary drawings.

As the years went by, George Caleb Bingham became a great artist. He traveled to many of the great cities in America and Europe. But his home and his heart were always in Missouri.

Much like his mentor, Chester Harding, George became an exceptional portrait artist. He painted

many images of his friends in Missouri, and he painted many famous Americans. But his most popular and most important works were scenes of life on the Missouri River in the early days of settlement.

His paintings often showed the colorful boatmen and the politicians that he had admired in childhood. Not only did George Caleb Bingham paint the things he knew and loved, he painted a way of life that would have been lost without his paintbrush.

Even though his fame spread throughout the nation, he was always known as “The Missouri Painter.” And, in keeping with the vow he made as a boy, he was also the artist whose work was filled with the colorful characters he knew and loved.

Things to Think About and Do

1. In your library or on the Internet, find examples of George Caleb Bingham’s paintings. Find at least one Bingham portrait and learn something about the person in the portrait. Find at least one painting of the boatmen and one of the political meetings. Which do you like better?
2. In Arrow Rock, there is an old newspaper shop much like that George Caleb Bingham would have seen. Visitors in the town may tour the shop and see the old printing presses. Have you ever toured a newspaper office and printing plant? Ask your teacher to schedule a field trip to a newspaper office.

GLEs: R1H, R1I, R2C, IL1B

Learn more about Arrow Rock by visiting the following Web sites:
www.arrowrock.org/history.php
www.mostateparks.com/arrowrock.htm
www.friendsar.org

Author Kay Hively and Illustrator Billie Gofourth-Stewart are both from Neosho, MO. Produced by the Missouri Press Foundation, ©2010