



## The Bingham Lady: An Interview

For several years now, I have been working with art historian Patricia Moss while she investigates the current whereabouts of portraits by Missouri artist George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879). Moss uses the Inventory of American Paintings as part of her research, and has contributed her findings on nearly 30 paintings to update the Inventory. Fascinated by her ongoing research, I asked Moss if she would answer a few questions for the RSC newsletter, and she graciously agreed.

### **Nicole Semenchuk: Tell me about your background and why you began your search for lost George Caleb Bingham portraits.**

**Patricia Moss:** I grew up in the Kansas City, Missouri, region. As a child, I was taken to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art countless times and encountered art from Egyptian times through contemporary art. The museum's large George Caleb Bingham collection was always on display. Even as a child, I recognized the bluffs of the Missouri River in his genre work and a similar quality in the faces of all his portraits.



Pictured: Patricia Moss (2009)

College took me to Colorado but, in the early 1990s, I returned to the Midwest. At that time I became more interested in the often divided history of Kansas City and the surrounding region. Even the common history differs depending on which side of the state line you are from. It was during this research that George Caleb Bingham entered my life again. I came across a copy of Bingham's portrait of John B. Wornall (1866). Bingham captured the compelling charm, laughing eyes, and intelligence of a former Southern aristocrat who had become a banker and Missouri state senator. I could go on and on about how that portrait, and other Bingham portraits, caused one visual epiphany after another. I realized that a unifying regional history could be told through the portraits of George Caleb Bingham. I was asked to write an article on the topic for Dr. Carol Mickett, guest editor of a journal published in conjunction with a public television special on the history of the arts in Kansas City. I did, but when it came time to illustrate the article, I could only find images for a third of the portraits I'd seen in books. Institutions had lost photographs that Bingham expert E. Maurice Bloch used in his catalogue raisonné *The Paintings of George Caleb Bingham* (University of Missouri Press, 1986). Many owners listed in Bloch had died and no one seemed to know where the portraits went. The task of illustrating the article became harder than writing it. Still harder was the thought that with each lost portrait, America lost a piece of its past and an irreplaceable work of art.

It was then that I made it my personal mission to locate all George Caleb Bingham portraits of



significance to the Kansas City region, to permanently record their locations, and to arrange photographs of all the portraits to be stored in one location so that future researchers would have easy access to the images.

When I returned to school to work toward two master's degrees in history and art history, the amount of time I could spend on my portrait search decreased. Even still, people who knew of my work began to refer to me as "the Bingham Lady," a name that stuck.

**NS: Tell me about your research in locating the portraits.**

**PM:** After I graduated, I returned to the search for Bingham portraits and learned about the Inventory of American Paintings (IAP). At first, I just used IAP as another source for locating current owners, but then I decided that reinventing the wheel was not useful. IAP was the place where the Bingham information rightfully should be kept, available in a database to researchers worldwide.

Before long, an acquaintance introduced me to a new collector of Bingham portraits in Independence, Missouri. Ken McClain had a dream of opening a Bingham Museum in Independence. He asked my help to find all the Bingham portraits I could so that he could potentially buy, restore, and put them on public display. Our goals matched up perfectly. My search then became a national one.

Unfortunately, despite the staff's best efforts, few owners, even museums, had updated the location information in IAP over the years. So, to find owners, I continued the provenance in Bloch's catalogue raisonné through reverse genealogy. When Bloch's records of provenance were particularly terse, I created complete family trees of the descendants of the sitter. When I had a solid beginning list, I composed a letter to probable owners which stated my sincere belief that the location of these national treasures needed to be preserved. I asked that even if they did not contact me, to please contact the IAP. This authentic sentiment elicited a sincere response. Almost everyone I contacted was more than willing to have the portrait location updated. I believe IAP's option for public anonymity increased the number of responses.

**NS: Were there any surprises along the way?**

**PM:** The search to locate Bingham portraits was a series of surprises. By the time I had completed my research to find the probable present-day owner of a portrait, I sometimes knew the sitter's family history better than the family members did. What surprised

me most were the relationships I would develop with some of the family members.

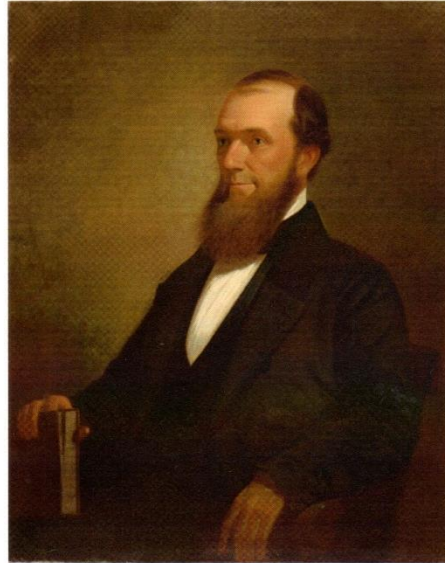
One of my favorite contacts was a remarkable woman named Nancy Berry, who lived on New York's Upper East Side and owned the Bingham portrait of her 3rd-great-grandmother, *Mrs. William (Mary Sedwick) Wilson* (1835). Her brother, William B. Michaels, who owns the companion portrait, *Mrs. James (Margaret Foreman) Strode* (1835), is equally fascinating. He is an old-fashioned stockbroker with captivating insights and contacts.

After nearly a year of sometimes daily communication by phone and e-mail with Nancy about portraits, personal family histories, movies, or books, she decided to keep her Bingham portrait in the family. We remained friendly until her death on January 8, 2009. I still feel a loss when I think of her wit and kindness. It was she who told me the story about Bingham that her grandmother, Nancy Wilson Michaels, told to her by her grandfather, John Wilson.

[John Wilson] had the general store in Independence outfitting settlers on their way west to the gold fields. Bingham had rolled up canvasses in his cart already painted with women in bonnets and men with hair, cravats, and jackets, then he filled in the faces. He asked Mr. Wilson if he could paint his portrait and the answer was "Hell, no, I'm too busy. Go out to the house and paint the two old girls. My mother lives with us, and my mother-in-law is visiting. I'll have a boy run ahead to tell my wife to feed you." [Nancy Berry, July 11, 2007]

I also met Mary Cooper (Mrs. John C. Cooper III) of Baltimore, Maryland. Mary, or Mimi, is a direct descendant of Bingham's best friend and supporter, James Sidney Rollins. We have been corresponding for nearly two years about her remarkable ancestor. She generously shared much information with me, including correspondence between Rollins and Bingham. She even sent me a framed, tinted print of a 1860s photograph of J. S. Rollins' two oldest daughters, Laura and Mary Elizabeth, taken in Washington, D.C., when their father was a United States congressman. It hangs on my living room wall. Mimi, too, decided to keep her Bingham portrait in the family, but she had another portrait of her great-great-grandfather, who, among his many other accomplishments, was the founder of the University of Missouri. She wanted the people of Missouri to have it. When the painting arrived in the

Midwest, art handlers removed the frame and took the canvas to be scanned. When I received the image, only half of it had rolled down my computer screen when I recognized it as the work of George Caleb Bingham. The portrait filled an unexplained gap in Bingham's regular representations of his friend. Through the generosity of Mimi Cooper and with the support of Ken McClain, the George Caleb Bingham portrait of *James Sidney Rollins* (ca. 1855-60) has returned to its native state.



Pictured: George Caleb Bingham, *James Sidney Rollins* (ca. 1855-60), Ken McClain Collection. Photograph used with permission of the owner.