

“That Abused Word: Genre”: The 1930s Genre Painting Revival

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By the spring of 1935 the New York art scene was in the midst of a full-scale genre painting revival. In February, art critic Helen Appleton Read explained that the genre tradition had dropped out of the national consciousness because “homely anecdotes of American life ... were considered even more provincial and inelegant by those who inherited them than the native school of landscape painting and were therefore lost sight of in their migration from parlor to attic and subsequently to junk shop or antiquarian society” (“George C.” C5). By May, Helen Buchalter could observe that in the works on show at the Corcoran Gallery’s Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary Art, “The ‘discovery’ of the American scene, the new realistic ideal, the revival of genre painting have had their effect” (368). Painters whose names had barely been mentioned since the Civil War appeared on the walls of prestigious museums and fashionable galleries; artists, critics, and curators explored the implications of and possibilities for contemporary genre painting; and attention turned to the definition and scope of this slippery addition to the critical vocabulary.

Lewis Mumford referred to his 1930s contemporaries as “a people ... addicted to crazes over periods and antiquities” (*Mumford* 96), and the buzz around genre painting was sustained by journalists recycling each other’s copy and bandwagon-jumping galleries spotting a way to repackage storeroom relics. That the revival was, amongst other things, a fad does not diminish its significance. Genre’s journey from junk shop embarrassment to artworld phenomenon was conditioned by the Depression era spirit of revivalism and nationalism, and imbued with multiple meanings by the ingenious ways the tradition was used and abused in heated debates between the decade’s various aesthetic and political factions.¹ Attention to the discourse surrounding genre painting in the mid-1930s illuminates the ways in which category definitions and canons are shaped by contingencies, the blindspots and revelations that emerge in the pursuit of a “usable past,” and the problems inherent in painting everyday life in early-twentieth-century America.

Quoting Keith Moxey’s definition of history as a “constructed

narrative” in which “It is the context of the present ... that determines the attitudes that permeate our interpretations of the past,” Donna Cassidy argues that “History clearly functioned in the cultural products of 1930s and 1940s America in this way: what was esteemed in the nation’s past told much about the concerns and values of this time period” (99). The definitional uncertainties that surround genre painting—conventionally glossed as “the painting of everyday life”—make it particularly susceptible to such manipulations. As Thomas Crow has recently observed, “The notion of genre painting contains an obvious ambiguity: how can one genre among several – history, portraits, animal and still-life subjects – assume the name of the category given to them all? What is it about scenes of contemporary human types in ordinary, everyday settings that defies their having a positive and exclusive descriptive term of their own?” (91). These ambiguities meant that conservative critics could use narrow definitions of genre predicated on the “homey” repertoire of antebellum painters to browbeat contemporary artists who insistently depicted the damage wrought on everyday life by the Depression, while artists and commentators could nuance and expand definitions of genre painting to argue that Regionalist, Social Realist, and even abstract painting represented the true art of everyday life in contemporary America. Genre painting’s association with the everyday, and thus its claim to represent normative experience, gave weight and depth to these debates.

I

The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 1933 purchase of George Caleb Bingham’s *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* (1845; Color Plate 6) was a symptom of and catalyst for the genre revival. Prior to this acquisition, posthumous interest in Bingham was largely confined to Missouri. Fern Helen Rusk’s 1917 biography *George Caleb Bingham: The Missouri Artist*, was published to coincide with the State’s centennial celebrations and used newspaper archives and first-hand accounts to detail the artist’s involvement in Whig politics and to explain the “wonder” that Bingham “turned to art at all in his pioneer country” (1). Bruce Robertson cites the Museum’s high-profile acquisition as a “tipping point for canonization” as, with *Fur Traders* on view in a New York gallery, Bingham “suddenly became a player in the narrative of American art history” (2). However, visibility alone did not explain this change of fortunes: Bingham’s arrival in New York conformed to the intellectual imperatives that encouraged museums and private collectors in the late-1920s and 1930s to “rediscover” America; his life and work then became contested terrain in the increasingly heated critical debates about the political and aesthetic implications of that process of “rediscovery.”

The Metropolitan Museum’s curators quickly set out to make their acquisition something more than an artefact of local history. In the

Museum's *Bulletin* Harry B. Wehle detailed the importance of the fur trade to the "early history of the vast territories west of the Mississippi and north of the Arkansas" and romanticised fur traders as "restless spirits" for whom "the wilderness with its dangers and its freedom became an incurable habit," before finally introducing the painting itself as "a curiously intimate picture recording this Missouri River life" (120). Following an approach that he would later expand to encompass the vast range of genre, landscape, and history paintings shown at the 1939 *Life in America* exhibition, Wehle locates *Fur Traders* within the kind of progressive "people's history" that, following the work of Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles and Mary Beard, celebrated westward expansion and emphasised the egalitarian spirit of Jacksonian Democracy. In this vein Arthur Schlesinger interpreted the ordinary day-to-day hardships of frontier life as the formative national experience: "All the conditions of life in the West made for the promotion of equalitarian ideas" (202). Wehle and his contemporaries imbued the details of antebellum life recorded by Bingham and others with this foundational significance.

Fur Traders is, as curator Michael Edward Shapiro observes, "an extraordinarily seductive image" (147) and must have been especially so for those who came upon it in the midst of the Depression. The well-stocked traders in their fine, bright shirts glide through a serene landscape. When Wehle describes "the river veiled in morning haze" he alludes to the painting's enchanted, otherworldly charm, which like the curious intimacy of the picture—the two men, their pet and their possessions carefully balanced and perfectly self-contained in their dugout—stands in marked contrast to a disenchanted world where individuals found themselves at the mercy of vast bureaucratic and economic systems. Angela Miller offers a nuanced corrective to such readings: "Fine trails of pigment reveal the workmanship of the artist, calling attention not only to the materiality of the painted surface, but also to the current of the river pulling subject and viewer inexorably beyond the arcadia of the West and back into time and history" (5). But 1930s commentators tended not to follow these "fine trails" or, indeed, the more overt signs of encroaching modernity in other antebellum genre paintings.

Wehle appears to damn with faint praise when he notes that Bingham's "means proved adequate to make refreshing and worth while his simple endeavour to show his spectator what he saw before him" (121). However, such claims correspond to an emerging critical tendency that set such simple means and aspirations against the perceived over-sophistication of contemporary art. The combined elevation of frontier life and plain-dealing art would culminate at decade's end in curator Hermann Warner Williams's boast that *Life in America* "offers the substantial pork and beans of American art, not its soufflés or meringues" ("Life" 78). This strain of

art discourse had been called out some months earlier by Anita Brenner who, as a Jewish intellectual, “dissident communist,” and expert on the art and politics of Mexico where she was born, was attuned to the dangers of nationalist rhetoric and “100% Americanism.”² Writing in *The Nation* in early 1933, Brenner mounted a scathing attack on the movement “away, finally, from European modes, toward a violent nationalism that is more anti-foreign than exuberantly patriotic, is intensely self-assertive and veers into picturesque local color, emphasizing what is native in subject and style.” Anticipating what would become known as Regionalism by the mid-1930s, Brenner identified Thomas Hart Benton as “the first considerable painter in whom these tendencies are clearly marked” (72-73). Regionalist and nationalist ideas framed the Metropolitan Museum’s purchase and many subsequent discoveries from the nineteenth-century genre tradition. *Fur Traders*’s next hosts had a somewhat different agenda.

“Today,” as Alan Wallach notes, “MOMA seems an unlikely place to stage the revival of a nineteenth-century American genre painter” (“Regionalism” 260). That *George Caleb Bingham: The Missouri Artist, 1811-1879* opened in February 1935 alongside a retrospective devoted to the modernist sculptor Gaston Lachaise compounds the apparent incongruity. However, as Wallach goes on to explain, “During the 1930s ... the modernist canon was as yet barely formed and MOMA, like the fledgling Whitney Museum, was on the lookout for art-historical precedents” (“Regionalism” 260-61). Drawing on a Bingham retrospective curated by Meyric R. Rogers at the City Art Museum of St. Louis the previous year, the exhibition featured eighteen oil paintings ranging from early scenes of frontier life such as *Fur Traders*, *Raftsmen Playing Cards* (1847), and *Shooting for the Beef* (1850) to the later political works, *Stump Speaking* (1853-54) and *The Verdict of the People* (1854-55), as well as “photostatic copies” of Bingham’s preparatory sketches and etchings and lithographs made after the paintings. It thus expanded the range of Bingham’s work known to the New York artworld, placing quiet, contemplative works such as *Fur Traders* alongside rowdy, crowded paintings of dancing boatmen and boisterous political campaigns.

MoMA director Alfred Barr’s catalogue foreword introduced the exhibition as one of a series of retrospectives presented not as a “venture in 19th century archaeology but because in different ways the work shown and the personalities behind the work are pertinent to our times” (5). It was thus framed in comparable terms to the Museum’s influential *Homer, Ryder, Eakins* exhibition of May 1930. On that occasion, Barr identified “Eakins’ passion for truth” and “Homer’s naïve enthusiasm for American scenery (despised word!)” as having particular relevance to a contemporary moment in which “the doctrine of art for form’s sake is now the property of the academies” (*Homer* 6). In the brief essays they contributed to Barr’s *Homer, Ryder, Eakins* catalogue, Frank Jewett Mather referred to Homer’s

“superiority” (8), Bryson Burroughs located Ryder among those “extreme individualists – isolated in the arts, who happen unaccountably and have no generation” (12), and Lloyd Goodrich ascribed to Eakins traits “rare among American artists of his generation” (17). Published the following year, Lewis Mumford’s *The Brown Decades* corroborated this account of exceptional individuals who transcended their circumstances to contribute to the “usable past”: “The generation that produced Ryder and Eakins also produced monuments of inanity and pretence: but we must suspect our own characters if it is the latter alone that we preserve and remember. The living past is always alive; and as for the dead past, it was never, even at the moment of its birth, anything but dead” (245-46). MoMA’s George Caleb Bingham catalogue contained few claims for the artist’s genius—and avoided the Metropolitan Museum’s “100% Americanism”—as it sought to explain Bingham’s relevance.

The catalogue included a short essay by Arthur Pope, a Harvard professor who had instructed Barr and his peers in the “Fogg method” of art-connoisseurship.³ Pope stressed the complex arrangement of planes and foreground details in Bingham’s later political paintings, locating *The Verdict of the People* “in the manner inaugurated by Giorgione, Titian and Palma and continued by Poussin and Claude” (Barr, *George* 15).⁴ That challenging the perception of Bingham as a naïve, local, or instinctive painter was a pressing concern for MoMA is apparent from a letter from Barr to Pope written shortly after the opening: “You have perhaps noticed that your article was extensively quoted in last Sunday’s TIMES and was in several of the evening papers of Saturday. I am especially pleased that your article should have been included since I was rather afraid that the documentary and antiquarian aspects of Bingham’s art would be overemphasized. Of course, we would never have had a Bingham exhibition had he not been a master of his problem from an aesthetic point of view.”⁵ The *New York Times*’ Edward Alden Jewell had added “an echo of the Davidian classicism” to Pope’s list of European comparisons (“Retrospective” X9), while the *Evening Post*’s Margaret Breuning quoted enthusiastically from Pope’s “excellent monograph on Bingham’s technique and composition” (“Modern Museum” 26).

Barr’s reading of the press reception was, however, somewhat rose-tinted. *Time* magazine reported that, while in their overwhelmingly positive response to the show “Critics fell over themselves with such phrases as ‘a modern Delacroix’ ... cautious bang-haired Royal Cortissoz sounded a note of doubt in the general acclaim for George Caleb Bingham: ‘There is no distinction of style about his work. He was a mildly competent, mildly interesting practitioner, whose local legend may well be revived as a matter of pious courtesy’” (“In Missouri” 44). Cortissoz was not, in fact, a lone voice of dissent. Another conservative critic, Mary Morsell, felt that comparison

to “Giorgione, Titian and Poussin seems far fetched” (“Modern Museum” 6) while, from a very different critical perspective, Lewis Mumford raised objections in his *New Yorker* “The Art Galleries” column. Praising the La-chaise retrospective as a rare instance of MoMA fulfilling its “chief mission” by giving space to a “distinguished modern artist,” Mumford expressed regret that “The museum has, it is true, countered this act by presenting at the same time the Americana of George Caleb Bingham, a mid-nineteenth-century worthy from Missouri, but that matter I prefer to turn over to the Raised Eyebrows Department, although it may easily belong to the Obituary Column” (Mumford 147). This extension of *The Brown Decades*’ metaphor of a living and dead art of the past places Bingham’s painting firmly in the latter category.

While conservative and modernist voices continued to emphasise the “antiquarian aspects” of Bingham, MoMA was more successful in persuading critics—and other museums—to see his work as “pertinent to our own times.” Of the many commentators who took this line, Helen Appleton Read paid most attention to its implications: “The rediscovery of Bingham’s painting has been occasioned by the effort to find our cultural lares penates. American landscape, graphic humor, and folk art have yielded unexpected riches which can serve in the creation of a usable past. American genre on the other hand has not been rediscovered to any considerable extent” (“George C.” C5). Alluding to works by Waldo Frank and Van Wyck Brooks, that advocated “the creative use of native traditions” and that had gained new currency in the 1930s, Read joined other writers in “taking stock of neglected American traditions at a time when morale was low and faith in the system ... had taken a terrible beating” (Dickstein 448). While Read’s enthusiasm for Bingham’s “native” culture thus corresponds to mainstream cultural ideas of the New Deal era, it also calls attention to the “violent nationalism” to which Anita Brenner referred: Read admired Hitler, attended Nazi rallies, and organised a 1936 exhibition of German painting at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art.

Describing him as “the only painter of the time whose aesthetic beliefs coincided with Emerson’s,” Read locates Bingham within an earlier tradition that elevated the commonplace. She argues that his paintings of Missouri river boatmen, gamblers, and wily politicians answered the charge, which she slightly misquotes from Emerson’s essay “The Poet,” that, “We do not, with sufficient profoundness address ourselves to life, nor do we chant our own lives and circumstances” (“George C.” C5). In what would become a familiar critical turn, Bingham’s dedication to “the homely reality of everyday happenings” and painterly immersion in “the life he loved and knew best” is set against contemporary painters’ “self-conscious effort to seek out American themes in the hope that the subject matter would evoke an American quality” (“George C.” C5). To illustrate this contrast, the article

was accompanied by John Steuart Curry's *The Line Storm* (1934)—which was then on view at the Ferargil Galleries—and Bingham's *Raftsmen Playing Cards* reproduced under the heading “Americana – Now and Then.”

Elizabeth McCausland, a journalist with close ties to the left and a regular contributor to *New Masses*, also made creative use of the past to advance a critique of contemporary art. McCausland used MoMA's odd-couple pairing of Bingham and Gaston Lachaise to elucidate distinctions between the conditions of antebellum and contemporary artistic production, “between the self-conscious artist and the somewhat less self-conscious artist,” between “a highly self-conscious society where art has to a large degree been divorced from any organic relation with life ... [and] a simpler social organization, where what the artist does meets a direct and tangible need of all of the people or many of the people” (“Modern Museum” 6E). While inflected differently, this vision of Bingham as a socially-engaged artist “fulfilling an organic function” stemmed from the same widespread and idealised vision of the “Age of Andrew Jackson” as Wehle’s dewy-eyed depiction of fur traders as “restless spirits.” Where Mumford and the contributors to the 1930 MoMA catalogue cast Homer, Ryder, and Eakins as individualists who stood *apart* from their gaudy era to leave a direct legacy for twentieth-century artists, for Read, McCausland, and others, Bingham’s relevance lay precisely in his status as a man *of* his time whose art was wholly grounded in the society in which he lived and worked, and in the perceived break between such an art and that of the contemporary scene.

Whether cast as an Emersonian “chanting” of “Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries,” as a transparent record of social history, or as the product of an organic relationship between artist and society, nineteenth-century genre’s quotidian subject-matter became something more than local-interest or Americana. As critical attention shifted from Bingham as a unique frontier-artist to embrace the genre tradition as a whole, questions arose about the nature, definition, and relevance of the category term. At the heart of these debates was the relationship between form and content, which Alfred Barr addressed in his assertion that Bingham was “master of his problem from an aesthetic point of view.” Did “genre painting” refer only to scenes of everyday life executed in the naturalistic idiom of Bingham and his contemporaries? What “problems” should 1930s genre painters engage and what aesthetic approach should they adopt? Just as Bingham’s pertinence was explained differently by Wehle, Barr, Read, and McCausland, so these broader questions would be met with divergent responses from across the political and aesthetic spectrum.

II

The critics’ tendency to draw comparisons between antebellum genre painting and contemporary art found physical manifestation on the walls of the

Whitney Museum less than a month after MoMA's Bingham exhibition closed. In the galleries on West Eighth Street, Lloyd Goodrich mounted *American Genre: The Social Scene in Paintings & Prints*. In typical fashion *Time* spun the exhibitions as evidence of the "polite rivalry" between the institutions: "Two months ago the Museum of Modern Art called the attention of Manhattan esthetes to an almost forgotten genre painter named George Caleb Bingham, who was Missouri's favorite 70 years ago. Last week the Whitney Museum went its rival one better by filling three floors with other genre paintings by Bingham, his predecessors, contemporaries and followers in one of the most interesting exhibitions of the year" ("Social Scene" 50).⁶ Rather than being central to the Whitney exhibition as *Time* implied, Bingham was represented by just two works, *Shooting for the Beef*, which had been shown at MoMA, and an engraving made after *The Jolly Flatboatmen*.

Shooting for the Beef hung on the first floor of the Whitney as part of an extensive survey of nineteenth-century oils in which William Sidney Mount, David Gilmour Blythe, Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, and Thomas Waterman Wood all featured more prominently than Bingham. Here the Whitney expanded the parameters of the emerging genre canon to take in rural and urban painters and rustic and bourgeois scenes, to encompass New England, the Midwest, and the frontier, and to stretch back to the Early Republic of Francis Guy and John Krimmel and on into the Gilded Age. On the second floor, Goodrich presented a selection of twentieth-century works including Ashcan School paintings by George Luks, John Sloan, and George Bellows, and contemporaries associated with the Fourteenth-Street School (Isobel Bishop, Kenneth Hayes Miller, Raphael Soyer), Regionalism (Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, Grant Wood) and Social Realism (Philip Evergood, Ben Shahn). *The Jolly Flatboatmen* took its place in a third floor exhibition that combined nineteenth- and twentieth-century prints. The uniting principle running across these floors, media, and eras was the work's status as genre—as depictions of "The ordinary life of the American people."⁷

Time was not alone in judging *American Genre* to be "one of the most interesting exhibitions of the year," and newspaper critics lined up to praise it as a social history "in which varying phases of American life are vividly portrayed" (Breuning, "American Genre" 24) and, following the tendency to find contemporary significance in genre painting, as "a highly provocative and timely display" (Morsell, "Whitney" 3). Following this success several other institutions—including the College Art Association (1935), the Carnegie Institute (1936), the American Folk Art Gallery (1938), the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Harvard's Fogg Museum and the Downtown Gallery (all 1939)—presented surveys of genre painting that owed at least some debt to the Whitney. Elsewhere *Time* noted that other painters were

enjoying the same fate as Bingham: having been “exhumed” from the Pennsylvania “countryside’s parlors,” the “Pittsburgh Legend” David Gilmore Blythe was shown first at the Carnegie Institute in 1932 and then, alongside the lantern-slide artist Joseph Boggs “The Professor” Beale, at the Whitney in April 1936 (“Pittsburgh” 58).

Goodrich’s catalogue “Introduction” followed Wehle and others in attributing the popular success of Mount and Bingham to “the rise of Jacksonian democracy in the 1830’s, which brought a new sense of the importance of the common man, and a strong nativist sentiment” (*American* 5). But, rather than taking genre painting to be an accurate “record” of this society, Goodrich noted the painters’ selective choice of subjects, including their emphasis on “the picturesque and pleasant side of the old American farm life” and their tendency to avoid depicting “everyday work”: “Bingham’s flatboatmen were rollicking, Mount’s farmers were taking their ‘nooning’ or fiddling and dancing, Eastman Johnson’s rustics were engaged in corn-husking bees or maple sugar festivals, when work took on a communal and festal character” (6). Unlike many 1930s commentators, Goodrich recognised that these bucolic antebellum scenes were themselves works of nostalgia rather than an accurate record about which one might become nostalgic, likening the paintings not to social histories but to Mark Twain’s evocation of his Missouri boyhood in *Huckleberry Finn*.⁸

Goodrich’s essay carefully traces the tradition from the antebellum painters Bingham, Mount, and Blythe, through Eastman Johnson and John George Brown, to its “culmination in Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins.” It contrasts the popular 1930s perception of a “healthy” Jacksonian democracy receptive to its humorous, earthy genre painters with the “ostentation and cosmopolitanism” of the post-Civil War era (*American* 8). This account conforms to the familiar story told by the Whitney, and specifically that given at greater length in Goodrich’s monograph on Eakins, in which the artist is described returning after his European studies to find that “The comparatively simple and provincial art world of earlier America was breaking down before the new forces. The new millionaires were ransacking the galleries of Europe to enrich their new houses. . . . The appearance of the dealer, with his red plush galleries and his assortment of the latest salon prize-winners, marked the end of the old simple relations between artist and patron, and the coming of a more sophisticated day” (*Thomas Eakins* 35-36). As in the *Homer, Ryder, Eakins* catalogue essays, *American Genre* characterizes Homer and Eakins as individualists, able to pursue their vision without a supporting school or tradition and to rise above a culture hostile to their endeavors.

Seduced by European travel and training that rendered their own country “crude and utilitarian,” Goodrich argued that a generation of American painters “lost their predecessors’ simple acceptance of America,” and

that for American Impressionists, such as William Merritt Chase who was represented in the exhibition by *A Friendly Call* (1895), “Light and air had become the real subjects of painting.” “Such a conception was,” Goodrich observed, “fatal to genre art” (*American* 8). Those painters, including Johnson, Brown, Wood, and E. L. Henry, who continued to paint in the genre tradition “represented a survival rather than a new departure” (*American* 9). Recent scholarship, and most prominently the Metropolitan Museum’s 2010 *American Stories* exhibition and catalogue, has done much to revise this narrative of a late-nineteenth-century lapse or break in the genre tradition by, for example, emphasising the popularity of Thomas Hovenden’s *Breaking Home Ties* (1890) when it was shown at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair (Weinberg 145-46). It was, however, a commonplace in the critical discourse of the 1930s genre revival, where it served to add drama to the rediscovery of a “lost” antebellum tradition and as a rhetorical device for those wishing to make sharp contrasts with an idealised past in order to critique the failings of the contemporary scene.

While most commentators concurred in praising the range and novelty of nineteenth-century genre unearthed by the Whitney, the relationship between these works and those of the contemporary artists on the second floor divided the critics. Several gamely took up the notion of a coherent tradition in which recent trends and developments might be observed, with Margaret Breuning noting that in “contemporary genre paintings, industrialism is taken for granted” (“American Genre” 24) and Edward Alden Jewell concluding that contemporary painters “carry forward, in the pictures here brought together, the theme of the older men, but in painting idioms that, of course, differ saliently from those of the nineteenth century” (“Art of a Century” 19). Others pointed to disparities that they deemed fundamental differences in kind. The Whitney’s press-release emphasised the “story-telling” element in *American Genre* but for influential *New York Sun* critic Henry McBride the contemporary paintings lacked this defining quality because the artists “now know so much about painting that the story takes second place and so the story is no longer the real thing in the picture” (15). Raising, once again, the notion of an “organic” relationship between antebellum artists and their public, Mary Morsell observed that “healthy genre painting is largely dependent both upon a wide audience and a robust, extrovert mind.” While evident in much of the nineteenth-century work, these conditions were largely absent in a contemporary scene where “attaining plastic and social significance at all costs” prevented the majority of artists from producing “healthy genre” (“Whitney Museum” 5).

Raphael Soyer’s *In the City Park* (1935; Color Plate 7) was among the group of decidedly unhealthy genre paintings on show at the Whitney. Morsell’s assertion that too many contemporaries “never seem to have gotten beyond Fourteenth Street and the more obvious facts of the depression”

was clearly aimed at Soyer and the other artists, including Isabel Bishop and Reginald Marsh, commonly associated with that neighbourhood. *In the City Park* depicts three destitute foreground figures hunkered down on a bench as the life of Union Square goes on around them. When set against the bucolic idyll that 1930s viewers saw in *Fur Traders* and other works of nineteenth-century genre, Soyer's painting must have looked especially bleak. The vast natural world that imbued Bingham's scene with its aura of calm and enchantment is represented in Soyer's painting only by a tree hemmed in by railings and a cloudy sky crowded out by drab commercial buildings. The brown paper package that the sleeping man leans on is a far cry from the rich pile of furs in the traders' dugout and, in contrast to the buoyancy and smooth progress of that boat on the Missouri, Soyer's men are weighed down with worry and have nowhere to go. Especially when contrasted with the bustling public spaces on show on the floor below, such as John Krimmel's *Fourth of July in Centre Square* (c. 1812), Soyer's contemporary Union Square scene appears moribund.

Reviewing Soyer's 1938 one-man show at the Valentine Gallery, Margaret Breuning would again look beyond differences in subject and idiom to discern connections to the earlier tradition: "As usual his pictures might be called genre paintings or conversation pieces as most of them, groups or single figures, contain an implicit story. . . . Much of the vividness of his effects is secured by the economy of his statements; only salients are touched on, uncluttered by a morass of details" ("Art" 22). That Breuning could identify in sparse canvases such as Soyer's *Transients* (1936) the narrative qualities McBride found lacking in contemporary art implies a recognition that twentieth-century painters told different kinds of stories. That, without the prompting of a catalogue essay, she classified Soyer's work as genre indicates that at least some critics were happy for the term to refer to painting of any phase or form of everyday life.

For Morsell, Cortissoz, and others, the association of genre painting with an egalitarian and prosperous antebellum society was so strong that this period and mood came to define the generic repertoire. In response to *American Genre*, Cortissoz began to formulate his ongoing objection to the revival of "genre" in contemporary art:

Fascinating as some of the pictures of an earlier America are, the most interesting thing about the show is the contrast between them and the paintings of the moderns. Downstairs, where the older work is on view, all is romance, prosperity, sentiment and peace. The rich are elegant, and the poor are genteel; the countryside smiles, and if there is a city scene it smiles in one way or another, too. A short walk up the stairs and the visitor is landed

in the midst of bitterness and anything but genteel poverty, of such dreary rusticity as that in John Steuart Curry's Kansas baptism, and the horrors of life in the megalopolis. ("American Life" 15)

Cortissoz saw the change in tone, idiom, and subject-matter encountered upon ascending the Whitney's stairs as an absolute break from the genre tradition. Four years later, commenting on what he perceived to be the continued abuse of the term, Cortissoz asserted that "for most of us, at any rate, 'genre' suggests through ancient usage, homey, intimate life, life steeped in sentiment – and contemporary art ought to be able to get along with designations of its own, without confusing the issues of old and new" ("American Genre" VI8).

The temptation to cast Morsell and Cortissoz as conservative defenders of an ossified tradition is checked by the recognition that "homey, intimate life" does name affective qualities closely bound to the genre tradition: the inclusion of works such Soyer's *In the City Park* and *Transients* at the very least stretches the boundaries of this tradition. Noting that those boundaries were "rather nebulous" and that both loose and rigid definitions of the term could be damaging, Edward Alden Jewell—known as "the diplomat of critics"—concluded a short account of the College Art Association's 1935 travelling genre painting exhibition with the assurance, "Obviously, a middle course will have to be steered" ("Genre" X12). Over the next five years, artists and curators would continue to explore and exploit those nebulous boundaries, and the "middle course" would become impossible even for Jewell as genre painting became embroiled in the polemic factionalism of the era.

III

Few artists in the 1930s explicitly identified themselves as genre painters, but many made works that responded and contributed to the genre painting revival. Of *In the City Park*, Andrew Hemingway observes, "It is unlikely that Soyer set out to paint a genre painting in the mode of David Blythe or Richard Caton Woodville, but in taking up models of naturalistic modern life painting developed in nineteenth-century France he inadvertently (or consciously – it does not matter which) adopted a mode that came out of the genre tradition. . . ." (72). This judgment accords with a long career in which Soyer cited Degas and other Europeans as influences, maintained consistent thematic and stylistic concerns that were largely impervious to the surrounding art scene, and vehemently rejected the nationalistic strain in American culture. Where Soyer was an unlikely, unwitting participant in the genre revival, other artists produced works and statements that self-consciously acknowledged their relationship to the tradition.

Doris Lee was one of a number of female artists who made paint-

ings and prints that did not shy away from the effects of the Depression but displayed a wit and subtlety that tended to elude their male counterparts.⁹ Roberta Smith recently observed that Lee "had no qualms about trying anything that struck her fancy" (E1), while Todd Smith describes a "popular artist" who moved between the lines of mid-century America's "system of high, low, mass, midcult and masscult" (37). Such versatility may have damaged Lee's artistic reputation but it also meant that she was well placed to catch onto the vogue for genre. A 1937 *Life* magazine feature detailed the "kudos and notoriety" Lee attracted when the Art Institute of Chicago awarded its 1935 Logan Prize for *Thanksgiving* (c. 1935; Figure 1), only for the patron Josephine Hancock Logan, who had obviously not been informed about the genre revival, to quip, "Fancy giving a \$500 prize for an awful thing like that" ("Doris Lee" 44). Observers attuned to the spirit of the revival saw things differently: for Alan Burroughs works such as Lee's "bustling view of a *Thanksgiving* . . . seem to renew the almost grotesque realism of David G. Blythe" (213); at the 1939 New York World's Fair, Elizabeth McCausland observed that "the real re-birth of genre seems to be in painting, as in Doris Lee's *Holiday*" ("Living" 22).



Figure 1. Doris Lee, *Thanksgiving*, c. 1935.
Oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 40 1/8 in. (71.3 x 101.8 cm). Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize Fund, 1935.313, The Art Institute of Chicago.
Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

Burroughs's and McCausland's use of "renew" and "re-birth" in their brief appraisals hint at the way Lee's paintings from the mid-1930s overtly register processes of revival and revision. *Hudson River Excursion* (c. 1932)—with its high-toned palette and lumpy clouds and waves that imitate the limitations of hand-tinted chromolithography, and its riverboat subject that recalls popular prints such as '*Rounding The Bend on the Mississippi*' (1866)—is, as *Life* noted, "deliberately suggestive of Currier & Ives" ("Doris Lee" 44).¹⁰ Looking back to an earlier art of the everyday, *Catastrophe* knowingly alludes to Brueghel and specifically to *The Fall of Icarus* (c. 1558) in its depiction of an airship disaster over the Hudson Bay. Tiny, parachuted figures fall around the Statue of Liberty, rescue boats ply the water and onlookers raise their hands in consternation. Meanwhile, a group of construction workers, like Brueghel's ploughman, go about their tasks.

Where Raphael Soyer's *In the City Park* and *Transients* could be seen to modernise genre by excising the "morass of details" that marked Krimmel's, Bingham's, and Blythe's depictions of the crowded public sphere, Lee's *Thanksgiving* revels in the neatly ordered clutter typical of nineteenth-century domestic scenes. Specifically, it appears to reference in theme and idiom *Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses* (1856) and other paintings made in the 1850s by Lilly Martin Spencer, an artist significantly absent from all other manifestations of the 1930s genre revival.¹¹ In *Thanksgiving*, bodies overlap and move in opposite directions, pans bubble at the brim, dresser shelves are lined with carefully arranged crockery, and calendars, clocks, and paintings fill the empty spaces of the walls. Along with clutter, Lee consciously revives the risqué humour common to Spencer's punning paintings and Currier & Ives prints like *Kiss Me Quick* (n.d.): the small girl who bends down to feed or tease the cat inadvertently presents her frilly white drawers to the viewer.

Elsewhere, a mild form of caricature creeps into the coke-bottle glasses and beak-like nose of the woman in the blue dress and apron. Karal Ann Marling explains that "Lee's whimsical, countrified approach to genre painting" led Treasury Section bureaucrats to intervene in the execution of her mural for the Post Office Department Building in Washington DC (60). In *Thanksgiving* Lee gives free rein to this "personal manner" pushing exaggeration beyond the naturalist idiom in which antebellum genre painters had tended to type and satirise. Perhaps she was trying to force viewers accustomed to the bold style of contemporary cartoonists like William Gropper to acknowledge the presence of satire in her own work—and in earlier genre paintings. One critic suggested *Thanksgiving* "weds the daily cartoon strip to the now exalted tradition of the museum primitive" (Schofield 24).

Where Lee crafted nuanced pastiche from the subjects and surfaces of earlier traditions, Thomas Hart Benton sought a return to the deep en-

gagement with everyday life that the 1930s genre revivalists associated with antebellum artists, and specifically George Caleb Bingham. In the "Preface" to Albert Christ-Janer's 1940 monograph, Benton stated, "Bingham lived in a day when it was the picture rather than the way it was made which occupied the amateur's attention. No elaborate pseudo-technical verbiage was erected between his painting and his audience" (viii). This claim echoes the assertion, made in an interview explaining his return to Missouri in 1935, that the contemporary "Middle West has no inhibiting cultural patterns wrapped up in a lot of verbal logic" (Baigell, *Miscellany* 78). Christ-Janer concluded his study by marking the "unique parallelism" between Bingham and Benton, describing the artists' "roots in the soil of Missouri" and "kinship in spirit that is timeless" (136). Benton and his collaborators worked hard to effect this conflation. Thomas Craven explained that the artist's birthplace, "Neosho, in the character of its inhabitants, was not unlike the environment of Huckleberry Finn" (8), while Benton drew on his early experiences in this "real world of bewhiskered toddy- and julep-drinking men" to evidence his lived connection to history: "The Civil War was not a far-off thing to these old men but a living reality, and it was such to me who listened – for what did I know of time?" (Baigell, *Miscellany* 19, 20). Benton's residence in and fascination with the subject-matter of Missouri were figured as a return not only to his home state but to the conditions of production and reception of an idealized past.

Donna Cassidy describes Benton's tendency "to interweave his family history with American history" as part of a process of "rebirth" or "regionalist regeneration" and locates it within a wider 1930s movement in which the "turn to past traditions was not limited to stylistically conservative artists: modernism and nostalgia were paired at this time as well" (116, 110). Like Doris Lee's most interesting work, Benton's oil and tempera easel paintings and large-scale murals from this period stage a complex play between past and present. In *Cradling Wheat* (1938; Color Plate 8) and other paintings made after the return to Missouri, Matthew Baigell observes that "Benton increasingly allowed the look of the land itself to dictate his compositions and the life sustained by the land to provide his subject matter" (*Thomas Hart Benton* 148). The subtly rhymed bodies of the three men and the boy bend to swing the cradle scythe, to inspect the harvest and to bear the weight of the bundled wheat as the trees and distant hills curve in sympathy. Close attention to painstaking agrarian labour untouched by the incursions of mechanised agriculture exists in dialogue with compositional techniques derived from Benton's earlier experiments in abstraction and with the impress of a personal style marked by the angular bodies, contoured landscape, and insistent sense of design. If the subject and, following Benton's claims for his own work, the painter's relationship to it, are in a sense outside of modernity, the execution of the painting is

decidedly modern.

Contemporary critics caught the simplicity and intimacy Baigell associates with Benton's Missouri paintings in earlier work. In a review concerned to distinguish between the artist's "three main tendencies," Lewis Mumford identifies a painter who is

less ambitious, but more human; less assertive, but more profound. This is the Benton who carries over into his smaller oil paintings a sense of the peace and beauty and lonely wistfulness of man facing the earth. He shows us the tired farmer at his plough, or a solitary figure and a freight car under the moonlight "Waiting" [1934]. (*Mumford* 160)

By contrast, the Marxist art historian Meyer Schapiro argued that Benton's murals were "enlargements of intimate, trivial and amusing scenes, well adapted to the casual eye of the tourist or hearty philistine spectator. The small occasions of life are not deepened as in older genre painting, but simply magnified" (57). To Schapiro, Benton's art represented an "unpolitical everyday world" framed by "the formal strategies of ... advertising." Schapiro's important essay, "The Social Bases of Art," argues that modern "culture has been detached from practical and collective interests and is supported by individuals alone" (Hills, "1936" 33). Far from regaining an earlier connection, Schapiro saw Benton as exemplifying this form of detachment.

The Ferargil Galleries exhibition that prompted Mumford's observations ran concurrently with *American Genre*. *Waiting* or *Homestead* (1934) would have provided suitable examples of Benton's recent genre work but he was instead represented at the Whitney by a painting from the previous decade, *The Lord is My Shepherd* (1926). While it may have been due to the prior claims of the Ferargil exhibition, the expedience of selecting a painting held in the Museum's permanent collection, or the fact that Lloyd Goodrich, like Mumford, was an early champion who had become disillusioned by what the latter referred to as the painter's "Riptail Roarer from Pike County, Missouri" persona, the absence of work from Benton's doctrinaire Regionalist phase also served political ends. Tensions between the various artistic constituencies represented by the Whitney had been apparent at least since the spring of 1934 when Raphael Soyer's brother, Moses, echoing Anita Brenner's warning about "100% Americanism," criticised the Regionalist paintings shown at the Museum's Biennial: "Yes, paint America, but with your eyes open. Do not glorify Main Street. Paint it as it is – mean, dirty, avaricious. Self glorification is artistic suicide. Witness Nazi Germany" (7). In this volatile situation *American Genre* served as a form of much-needed artworld diplomacy. The term "genre" clearly carried benign, apolitical associations in the 1930s and under its aegis the absence of radical politics in *In the City Park* and the presence of "more human ...

less assertive" qualities in Benton and his colleagues could be appreciated. Having surveyed works from the nineteenth-century genre tradition, visitors were invited to see contemporary paintings not in terms of Social Realism or Regionalism, but as part of a continuous genre tradition.

The genre revival was not, however, exempt from the aesthetic and political divisions that shaped the 1930s artworld, and the latent tensions in the notion of contemporary genre painting were drawn out by two exhibitions held in 1939. The Harvard "Museum Class" organised *New England Genre* and selected Milton Brown to write the catalogue essay. Unsurprisingly, given the considerable attention paid to the term in the preceding years, this began with the observation that, "Of all the artistic categories, genre happens to be the most difficult to define." Brown characterised genre as "not only an iconographic type but also an attitude":

Genre art depicts the ordinary activity of ordinary people. It is the art which finds its source of inspiration and its subject matter in the everyday life of the people. It is a contemporary picture of contemporary life. . . . Because genre is fundamentally a comment upon daily life, there may be as many approaches to genre as there are ways of looking at life. (5-6)

Brown's essay presents a cosmopolitan conception of genre, paying attention to the Dutch and Flemish traditions and emphasising European influence without making nationalistic claims. The exhibition also broadened the range of media, including several works by John Rogers, whose plaster cast sculptures incorporated familiar genre motifs, as well as needlework, chinaware, and circus playbills.

By drawing attention to, and perhaps amplifying, definitional uncertainties, *New England Genre* prepared the ground for a rather unexpected twist in the 1930s genre revival. While committed to creative freedom and genuinely engaged with avant-garde culture, Edith Gregor Halpert was also known as a "very wide-awake operator" (Pollock 112). The *Contemporary American Genre* exhibition staged at her Downtown Gallery in November 1939 can be understood both as a commercially motivated attempt to capitalise on the publicity surrounding genre painting and as a provocative intellectual challenge. Both motives are apparent in the brief catalogue statement, which begins by citing "The enthusiastic response" to other genre exhibitions as "evidence [of] the wide appeal of genre material." Halpert then quotes rather selectively from Brown's essay, emphasising that genre "is a contemporary picture of contemporary life" before concluding, "in the examples here on view, one will find twenty-seven approaches, recording in so many different ways, varied aspects of contemporary life in America" (n.p.). The exhibition included Georgia O'Keeffe's *Front of Ranchos Church*,

N.M. (1930), John Marin's *Bryant Square* (1932), Charles Sheeler's *Yankee Clipper* (1939), and Stuart Davis's *Artist in Search of a Model* (1931; Color Plate 9).

The categorisation of *Artist in Search of a Model* as "contemporary American genre" might appear to be a prank or provocation. Across multiple, seemingly disconnected planes, Davis collects a painting-within-a-painting, a pencil completing a pencil sketch, elements of landscape and seascape, anthropomorphic versions of the gasoline pump motif that began appearing in his paintings in the mid-1920s, and a reference to comic-strip depictions of slapstick humour. Some elements of the composition toy with the illusionistic representation of depth and volume while others are avowedly two-dimensional; areas of shading and texture punctuate flat expanses of red, yellow, and blue paint. Discussing Davis's famous mural *Swing Landscape* (1938), Jody Patterson identifies both "anti-naturalistic techniques that undermine the traditional mimetic relationship between art and reality" and "vestigial naturalistic clues" (107). Patterson argues that through this technique of defamiliarising and then "reassembling elements abstracted from reality via montage" (109), Davis achieved a form of critical realism. Patricia Hills notes that *Artist in Search of a Model* and the related painting *Television* (1931) stand out amongst Davis's work from this period as they include "cartoon-like human forms" that are "set within an almost convincing compositional space" (Stuart Davis 96). This uncharacteristic foregrounding of "naturalistic clues" perhaps explains why Halpert selected *Artist in Search of a Model* for *Contemporary American Genre*, but following Davis's own arguments, all of his paintings from this period were exemplary "contemporary picture[s] of contemporary life."

In his 1939 essay, "Abstract Painting Today," Davis referred to Regionalism and Social Realism—"the hometown booster [and] proletarian variet[ies]"—as "domestic naturalism" and glossed their subject-matter as "the chicken yard, the pussy cat, the farmer's wife," identifying the agrarian and domestic themes, and the "homey, intimate life," associated with genre painting. He argued that both were equally backward looking and "static," equating them with the genre sculptures shown at the Fogg Museum as "back with the [John] Rogers groups" (122). Davis believed that abstract painting more fully expressed and contributed to "the changing contemporary reality" of life in 1930s America. While Davis certainly never described his own work as contemporary genre, leaving his sometime friend and dealer Halpert to make the connection, he did offer the provocative suggestion that the painting of everyday life in the 1930s would necessarily differ as radically in *form* as it did in content from the painting of everyday life in the 1830s.

As with previous attempts to define genre, some commentators willingly ceded authority to the galleries. For example, *Art News* critic Jean-

nette Lowe explained that the Downtown had, "by way of a Fogg Museum discussion of New England genre... achieved a new definition of the term and sorted out several classifications" (23). For others though this was a step too far. Edward Alden Jewell concluded that *Contemporary American Genre* ended all possibility of maintaining a "middle course" with regard to genre painting: "If an at best nebulous term is to retain for us even a semblance of the particular meaning it has long held, then I'm afraid we shall have to question the use to which it is now put at the Downtown Gallery" ("Pinning" X9). Jewell argued that if the criteria of naturalistic representation was suspended, Anne Goldthwaite's *Alabama Interior* (c.1939) and Louis O. Guglielmi's *Morning on the East Side* (1939) could be said to contain recognizable traces of genre, but that the abstractions by Davis and Marin "not through any artistic fault of their own) bring the little genre experiment to a finis suffused with laughter" (X9). Royal Cortissoz took a similar line. While praising the quality of much of the work on show, he observed that the exhibition's title carried a "popular ring" but was ultimately a "mismuter" and made his assertion that "contemporary art ought to be able to get along with designations of its own, without confusing the issues of old and new" ("American Genre" VI8). A brief, unsigned report, which quoted Jewell's and Cortissoz's claims, carried the headline "That Abused Word: Genre" and suggested that "Perhaps the word ought to be junked altogether."

IV

The contrast between the lack of attention to the genre tradition in Suzanne LaFollette's 1929 overview, *Art in America*, and the extended discussion of historical and contemporary genre painting in Alan Burroughs's 1936 *Limners and Likenesses* demonstrates the rapid revival of the form between the late-1920s and mid-1930s. Brief reference to a third survey of American art, which was published in 1949, offers some perspective on this phenomenon. Oliver Larkin's *Art and Life in America* displays both an awareness of and a degree of critical distance from the debates that accompanied the 1930s genre revival. As Alan Wallach explains, the wide-ranging synthesis that Larkin wrote between 1944 and 1949 had "its roots in the American art revival of the 1930s, with its emphasis on art's social-historical dimension, as well as the politics and culture of the popular front" ("Oliver Larkin's" 85). Larkin's measured definition of "genre" certainly bears the scars of the previous decade's skirmishes: "Although that branch of art which is called 'genre' eludes final definition, its underlying motives and its spirit are unmistakable. . . . Genre, despite the many occasions when it mingles with other modes, has for its essential purpose nothing more heroic than to interpret man to himself by showing how he behaves on simple and present occasions" (214). Initially echoing Cortissoz's and Jewell's attempts to limit the uses to which the term "genre" might be put, Larkin ultimately comes to

a more abstract, inclusive definition of the kind proposed by Milton Brown and exploited by the Downtown Gallery. It is therefore striking that Larkin makes sparing and selective use of “genre” in his analysis of the art of the 1930s and early 1940s. Rather than applying the term to all “realist” depictions of daily life, he reserves it for a particular kind of intense, informed engagement with the everyday: “In smaller scenes where men built stone walls, farmers prune trees, and their wives churned butter, [Anton] Refregier was close enough to the event in time, place, and sympathy to make genre in the best American tradition” (434). Here, again, Larkin seems to agree with Cortissoz that genre has its locus in specifically “homey, intimate life.”

One explanation for Larkin’s cautious and limited use of “genre” in his discussion of contemporary painting lies in the precedents he finds for an art that seeks “nothing more heroic than to interpret man to himself by showing how he behaves on simple and present occasions”:

This was the motive of those calendar pictures of the Middle Ages where the farmer ploughs his field under the high walls of his lord’s castle and in winter guides his cattle through snow while his womenfolk warm their shins at the hearth. This was the origin of the swarming fat couples whose reds, greens, and whites weave such a lively pattern in Pieter Brueghel’s *Wedding Dance* and of the oblivious ploughman who occupies the foreground of Brueghel’s *Fall of Icarus*. (Larkin 214)

Larkin’s association of genre’s myopic interest in everyday life with the figure of Brueghel’s ploughman, in a book grounded in the politics of the 1930s and written in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, carries far-reaching implications. With the help of W. H. Auden’s 1939 poem “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Alexander Nemerov has shown us that Brueghel’s painting operates as a “surrealist diagram concerning the place of the intellectual in violent times” (780). The ploughman figures the citizen turning back to their daily round, or, more specifically, the artist turning back to their canvas, in the face of impending tragedy. From the vantage-point of the late 1940s, America’s enthusiasm for genre painting at a moment of world crisis might thus be understood as a symptom of a wider isolationism and a retreat from the political sphere.

Larkin’s decision not to apply the term “genre” to the left-wing art he most admired implies the judgment, which corresponds to his political worldview, that these painters were attempting something “more heroic” than genre in their depiction of everyday life. For those, like Larkin, who wanted to elevate the politically engaged art of the 1930s as much as for those who wanted to dismiss it as narrow propaganda, Regionalism and Social Realism—which both emphasise painters’ allegiance to political

factions rather than their relationship to everyday life—were more useful terms than the relatively neutral “genre.” Commentators seeking nineteenth-century precedents for the “triumph” of Abstract Expressionism in the postwar years turned to the landscapes of Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt. Genre painting, a term that had once seemed worth fighting for, thus lost its pertinence.

Notes

1. For a wide-ranging account of the revival of nineteenth-century art in mid-twentieth-century America, see Truettner.
2. On Brenner’s intellectual formation, see Wald (47-74).
3. On Barr’s education at Harvard, see Kantor (45-49).
4. This emphasis on the formalist, classicist elements of Bingham’s work is taken up and expanded on by Barbara Novak, who quotes Arthur Pope and E. Maurice Bloch in her account of Bingham’s “Missouri classicism” (152-64).
5. Alfred Barr to Arthur Pope, February 5, 1935. Registrar Exhibition Files, Exh. #38a. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
6. For discussions of *American Genre* that focus on the political implications of the exhibition, see Hemingway (70-73) and Sanders. For an account of the complex relationship between MoMA and the Whitney during this period, see Scott and Rutkoff’s chapter “Modernism versus New York Modern: MoMA and the Whitney” (163-93).
7. *American Genre* did much to establish a wide-ranging canon of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century genre paintings, but was also marked by notable omissions. Most strikingly, genre paintings by nineteenth-century women—despite the success enjoyed by Lilly Martin Spencer during the 1850s—and by African Americans—such as Henry Ossawa Tanner’s *The Banjo Lesson* (1893) or, from the later period, Archibald Motley’s *Mending Socks* (1924)—were wholly absent. While the Whitney was willing to cross the boundary between “high” and “low” art to include colour lithographs made by Currier & Ives, commercial illustrators led by Norman Rockwell who surely represented a contemporary equivalent to the “printmakers to the American people” were not welcome on West Eighth Street.
8. Elizabeth Johns and the scholars who have built on her groundbreaking survey, *American Genre Painting*, have gone much further, identifying these paintings not as benign nostalgia but as carefully constructed fictions that work to conceal and critique the racial, social, and ideological tensions of a deeply divided nation.
9. Forbes Watson noted that Lee, together with another exhibitor, Ann Brockman, were “wittier, more personal, more imaginative than either of the prize winning artists, Nicolai Cikovsky and Simkha Simkhovitch” at the 1933 Worcester Museum of Art Biennial (5).
10. *Hudson River Excursion* was shown at the Art Institute of Chicago’s

1932-33 annual exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture and so represents an early contribution to the genre revival. The Currier & Ives lithographs to which Lee's canvas refers became valuable collectors' items in the late 1920s.

11. In her November 18, 2009 lecture "Consider the Difference: American Women Artists from Cassatt to Contemporary" at the Smithsonian American Art Museum Linda Nochlin made the connection between Lee and Spencer. The Doris Lee Papers at the National Museum of Women in the Arts show that Lee kept extensive clippings files of nineteenth-century and folk art source materials, though it is not clear when or if she encountered Spencer's work.

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