

# The Art of the Franchise

“The Artist and the Politician” by Jonathan Weinberg, in *Art in America* (Oct. 2000), 575 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

Editors in search of American art that depicts voting or political campaigning almost invariably turn to George Caleb Bingham’s *The County Election* (1851–52) or one of his other “election” paintings. While some critics have regarded these works as celebrations of democracy, others have viewed them as attacks. That the paintings lend themselves to *both* interpretations is an indication of the artist’s complex achievement, argues Weinberg, a painter and art historian.

Bingham (1811–79) had firsthand experience with the electoral process as a member of the Whig party who held various government positions in Missouri. Largely self-taught as a painter, he had established himself by 1835 as a portrait painter in that state before he was drawn into politics. He lived in Washington, D.C., from 1840 to 1844, where he painted portraits of several prominent politicians but “failed to get the major public commissions he longed for,” Weinberg says. Fame came with his western genre scenes, beginning with *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* (1845). He

also began running for state office. Though he narrowly won a seat in the Missouri House of Representatives in 1846, the outcome was contested, and the Democratic-controlled legislature decided in favor of his opponent. In a letter to a close friend, Bingham vowed thenceforth to “keep out of the mire of politics *forever*.” But he ran again in 1848 and won, then lost two years later.

Each of the six “election” paintings that Bingham executed between 1847 and 1854 was meant to stand on its own, Weinberg says. *Country Politician* (1849) and *Canvassing for a Vote* (1851–52) show a candidate in intimate conversation with a few voters; *Stump Orator* (1847), “now lost and known only through a daguerreotype,” and *Stump Speaking* (1853–54) portray another aspect of electioneering; and *The County Election* and *The Verdict of the People* (1854–55) “shift attention from the politician to the process of voting.” Art historians see signs of Bingham’s disillusion in the latter three paintings.

In *The County Election*, a man in red stands



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The County Election: The process, Bingham knew, involves more than solemn oaths on the Bible.

with his back to a raucous crowd and solemnly swears on the Bible that he has not previously voted in the election. In the foreground, a broadly smiling man “holds his glass up to be filled with hard cider—a favorite tool for attracting voters to a candidate’s side. Liquor seems to have completely overwhelmed another man, who is literally dragged to the polls to cast a ballot.” Another, seemingly battered man sits on a bench, his condition perhaps indicating “physical coercion or a political argument that has taken a violent turn. The power of both money and chance is symbolized by the toss of a coin directly below the swearing-in [of the voter].” Front and center,

two small boys play mumblety-peg—symbolizing, for one critic, the “trivial but rough game” of politics.

Yet *The County Election’s* “comic elements” do not undermine its “coherence and sense of calm,” Weinberg maintains. The painting “incorporates the signs of corruption without allowing the voting, or the composition, to spin into disorder. [Bingham] seems to regard cheating as inherent to the process, no less than is the oath on the Bible. Yet these two contradictory aspects of the voting . . . do not undermine the validity of the process.” For Bingham, Weinberg says, politics *is* a game—but “a game worth playing.”

## OTHER NATIONS

### *Why the Troubles Came*

“Are the Troubles Over?” by Fintan O’Toole, in *The New York Review of Books* (Oct. 5, 2000), 1755 Broadway, 5th floor, New York, N.Y. 10019-3780.

In the eyes of many pessimistic observers, Northern Ireland’s “Troubles,” which have claimed more than 3,600 lives, were a product of atavistic Catholic-Protestant antagonism.

But “sectarian prejudice did not cause the violence,” argues O’Toole, a columnist for the *Irish Times*. “It was, to a great extent, the violence that caused the prejudice.”

When the Troubles began in 1968, he says, prejudice generally “was neither very strong nor very active” in the minds of most. Mixed marriages and neighborhoods were becoming common, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was dying, and Loyalist paramilitarism was found only among “a lunatic fringe.” Decades later, surveys showed that prejudice was far less evident in people who grew up before the Troubles began than among younger folk.

What changed the situation, O’Toole says, was “organized violence”—of the IRA, Loyalist paramilitaries, and the state. Protesting Catholics initially demanded merely “that the emerging social realities be recognized” and Catholics be given equal civil rights. Many Catholics welcomed the British army’s arrival in 1969 to keep the peace, but the army’s “crude and arrogant behavior” destroyed that support. Catholic alienation became complete in 1972 when British paratroopers massacred 14 unarmed civil rights demon-



Who is being threatened? An IRA sign in the Catholic area of Crossmaglen last February did not identify its target.