

Release Date: May 6, 2004

ART SCHOLAR AND COLLECTOR JOHN WILMERDING TO DONATE IMPORTANT PRIVATE COLLECTION OF 19TH-CENTURY AMERICAN ART TO NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART



George Caleb Bingham
Mississippi Boatman, 1850
oil on canvas, 61 x 44.5 cm (24 x 17 1/2)
John Wilmerding Collection

Washington, DC--John Wilmerding, a respected and widely known authority on American art, is donating one of the most important private collections of 19th-century American art to the National Gallery of Art. The collection will be on view in the exhibition, **American Masters from Bingham to Eakins: The John Wilmerding Collection**, at the National Gallery of Art, East Building, May 9, 2004 through February 6, 2005. On May 5, Wilmerding, who was the Gallery's deputy director from 1983 to

1988, announced to the Gallery's Trustees' Council that all of the works in the exhibition will remain at the Gallery following the close of the exhibition and that *Mississippi Boatman* (1850), one of George Caleb Bingham's acclaimed scenes of frontier river life, will become an immediate gift. Previously, Wilmerding donated *The Chaperone* (c. 1908) by Thomas Eakins on the occasion of the Gallery's 50th anniversary in 1991.

The collection of 51 works represents such masters as Bingham, Frederic Edwin Church, Eakins, Winslow Homer, William Stanley Haseltine, Martin Johnson Heade, Fitz Hugh Lane, John Marin, John F. Peto, and William Trost Richards. Wilmerding made many of his acquisitions based on how they would fill gaps and build on strengths in the Gallery's existing collection of American art.

"Other than friends and family members, relatively few have had the pleasure of seeing these works, because John has been characteristically modest about his activities as a collector," said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery of Art. "That he has now generously agreed to let the collection be seen and enjoyed by a wider public through this exhibition and in our permanent collection is indeed a cause for celebration."

WILMERDING COLLECTION

Among the collection are landscapes, marine paintings, portraits, genre scenes, still lifes, and figure paintings. Highlights from the collection include *Western Shore of Gloucester, Outer Harbor* (c. 1857), a radiant view of sailing vessels on calm water by Lane; *Sparrow Hall* (c. 1881-1882), a rare oil from Homer's English period; *Drifting* (1875), the Gallery's first Eakins watercolor, and his monumental portrait of Dr. William Thomson; *Sunlight and Shadow: The Newbury Marshes* (c. 1871-1875), the Gallery's first marsh painting by Heade; and *Newport Mountain, Mount Desert* (1851), the first North American work by Church to enter the Gallery's collection. There is also an exceptional group of drawings and watercolors of the scenery of Mount Desert Island, Maine, by artists such as Haseltine, Lane, Marin, and Richards, who worked there from the 1840s until the early 20th century.

JOHN WILMERDING

Wilmerding's many books and articles, which began appearing in the early 1960s and continue unabated today, have helped define the scholarly nature of the field as a whole and have also documented the work of key figures such as Lane, Homer, and Eakins. Born in 1938 in Boston, Wilmerding comes from a family with a rich history of collecting art. Wilmerding's great-grandparents, Henry Osborne Havemeyer and his second wife, Louisine Waldron Havemeyer, amassed an extraordinary group of European and oriental works of art that was eventually bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. One of the Havemeyers' daughters, Electra Havemeyer Webb (Wilmerding's grandmother), was an eclectic collector of American fine and folk paintings and sculptures, decorative arts, quilts, tools, vernacular objects, toys, buildings, and transportation vehicles. Her remarkable and vast collection was the genesis of the Shelburne Museum in Vermont.

While an undergraduate at Harvard University, Wilmerding studied alongside Barbara Novak, William H. Gerdts, Jules David Prown, and Theodore E. Stebbins, all of whom later became noted scholars and champions of American art. While Wilmerding took a rarely offered course in American art his junior year, most of his education in American art came from courses in American literature and American intellectual history, taught by world-renowned figures such as Arthur Schlesinger and Archibald MacLeish.

An avid sailor, Wilmerding wrote his Harvard senior honors thesis on the American marine painter Fitz Hugh Lane. He acquired his first work of art, Lane's *Western Shore of Gloucester, Outer Harbor* (c. 1857), in 1960. Five years later he purchased Bingham's *Mississippi Boatman* (1850).

Following completion of his doctorate in art history, Wilmerding began teaching at Dartmouth College. In 1977 he went on to work at the National Gallery of Art, initially as its curator of American art and senior curator. He served as deputy director from 1983 to 1988. In 1980 Wilmerding organized the landmark exhibition, **American Light: The Luminist Movement**, which included artists such as Church, Sanford Gifford, Heade, John F. Kensett, and Lane. He returned to full-time teaching in 1988 at Princeton University, where he is currently the Christopher Binyon Sarofim Professor of American Art.

THE GALLERY'S AMERICAN COLLECTION

When the National Gallery of Art opened in 1941, its collection included fewer than a dozen historical American paintings; at present that number has grown to more than 1,000 works from the 18th through the early 20th century. Today the Gallery's collection of American paintings--supplemented by holdings of prints, drawings, watercolors, photographs, and sculptures--is among the most distinguished anywhere.

During Wilmerding's tenure at the National Gallery of Art, the department of American art was created and important acquisitions were made, including Jasper Francis Cropsey's *The Spirit of War* (1851), Lane's *Lumber Schooners at Evening on Penobscot Bay* (1863), and Heade's *Cattleya Orchid and Three Brazilian Hummingbirds* (1871). After becoming the Gallery's deputy director, Wilmerding continued to support the Gallery's acquisition of significant American works, most notably Rembrandt Peale's *Rubens Peale with a Geranium* (1801).

###

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

Press Office

National Gallery of Art

2000B South Club Drive

Landover, MD 20785

phone: (202) 842-6353 e-mail: pressinfo@nga.gov

Deborah Ziska

Chief of Press and Public Information

(202) 842-6353

ds-ziska@nga.gov