

## Participation in Government: The Role of the Artist in a Democratic Society

*County Election*, 1854

(After the painting by George Caleb Bingham, 1811-1879)

John Sartain, Engraver, 1808-1897

Hand-colored line, stipple and mezzotint engraving

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### What can you learn by looking at the engraving?

- What is happening in this scene?
- When and where is it taking place? How can you tell?
- What is each of the different people doing?
- What do you imagine they are saying and thinking?

*County Election* is part of a series of paintings chronicling the politics of small town Missouri in the late 1840s. A Whig, the artist George Caleb Bingham had himself run for the state legislature in 1846; his victory at the ballot box had been overturned by the Democrat-controlled legislature. Although Bingham did win election in 1848, he lost again in 1850.

This was the era before the secret ballot. Voters swore on the Bible they had not already voted and then voiced their choice to the commissioner. Research identifies the man in coat and top hat as Bingham's old opponent, E.D. Sappington, and the judge holding the Bible is M.M. Marmaduke, Sappington's brother-in-law and ex-governor. It is thought that the seated man on the steps is Bingham himself.

### Discussion/Activities:

#### Context:

- Who could vote in Missouri in 1848? What was the attitude of those excluded?
- When and how did the secret ballot become the law of the land?
- What issues dominated Missouri politics in the late 1840s?
- What differences existed between the Whigs and the Democrats?

Point of view:

- What evidence can you find in this print of corruption, manipulation, frivolity and chance?
- What evidence can you find to support Bingham's perspective that voting was essentially a positive and vigorous part of America's democratic government?
- Compare *County Election* with *Election Night* by John Sloan and Jacob Lawrence's *The 1920s...The Migrants Arrive and Cast Their Ballots*. Both are on view at the Memorial Art Gallery or [http://magart.rochester.edu/PRT899\\*1.htm](http://magart.rochester.edu/PRT899*1.htm).

Art as communication: role of the print

Bingham hoped to turn a profit by selling engraved copies of his painting and hired John Sartain to do the print.

- What changes do you see between the painting and the print to make it more saleable to a national market?
- Why would people buy a print of the County Election for their homes or offices?
- What prints, posters or photographs have a similar appeal to people today?
- Research the political prints by the British satirist William Hogarth. Compare them with Bingham's *County Election*, *Canvassing for a Vote*, *the Verdict of the People*, and *Stump Speaking* to see two different views on the democratic election process.
- Collect and discuss political cartoon and caricatures from the current political election.



Support for the Gallery's school programs is provided by Bank of America, Dominion, the Mary W. Clark Trust, and Rochester Gas and Electric Corporation. Additional support is provided by Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Judson Jr., the estate of Estelle B. Goldman and an anonymous donor for the McPherson Director of Education.