Like many professors at many universities, he found his office a bit too cramped and austere for his taste. He politely requested that "the floor of the studio should be carpeted and two or three pieces of cabinet furniture or books, engravings and artists material ought to be procured. The walls also should be colored to a sober tint brown or neutral."

It is not known whether these particular inconveniences were remedied or not, but it is known that the professor was George Caleb Bingham, one of the country's most respected genre artists who spent the last two years of his life (1877-1879) as first head of the art department at the University of Missouri.

Bingham's request, in a letter to James S. Rollins, included his wish that, "a room other than that in the frame building should be provided for a studio as soon as possible, as the danger from fire will render it a very unsafe depository for works of art. I will be continually uneasy about my own pictures while they are there."

Ironically, Bingham's fear of fire was well founded. In 1892, years after his death, the great fire at the University destroyed nine of his valuable paintings. Twenty years later, the capitol at Jefferson City burned down and 12 more Bingham paintings went up in flames. Despite this loss, a great volume of his works remain, some of which recently have been on display at the State Historical Society of Missouri in Columbia. Among those on exhibit is a previously undiscovered painting of Missouri's Civil War cavalry leader, General J. O. Shelby, which was formally presented to the society on October 3 at its 70th anniversary meeting.

A noted genre painter (works that depict scenes or events from everyday life in a realistic manner), Bingham's world-famous works of art are typically Missourian. As explained at the Historical Society exhibit, "Day by day he studied the Missouri River boatmen, the farmer, the village politician and his constituents and the tavern loungers and reproduced these familiar figures in great genre paintings."

According to a recent work on Bingham by Maurice Bloch, "George Caleb Bingham's name was long missing from the annals of American art, and
At the State Historical Society exhibit, student Diane Lieber views portraits of Columbia businessman Albert Newman and Vinnie Ream, who sculpted the statue of Lincoln in the U.S. Capitol Building. The self-portrait, above, shows George Caleb Bingham as he appeared when he taught art at the University.

Missouri's First Professor of Art
it is only in relatively recent years that he has come to be recognized as one of the country’s foremost genre painters.” No serious investigation of his life work was actually attempted until almost 40 years after his death.

Such paintings as his Jolly Flatboatmen, Fur Traders Descending the Missouri, Raftsmen Playing Cards, Watching the Cargo, Fishing on the Missouri, are basically river oriented, reflecting the river cities such as Arrow Rock, Missouri where Bingham lived.

Also a renowned portrait painter, Bingham’s subjects include many notable historical figures connected with the University of Missouri, including John Lathrop, first president of the University (a portrait said to have been rescued by students from the great fire of ’92); James Shannon, second president of the University; James S. Rollins, president of the Board of Curators; and Thomas Miller, founder of Columbia College, the predecessor of the University.

A native Virginian, Bingham and his family moved to Franklin, Missouri at age seven. After his father’s death, they lived in Arrow Rock, where Bingham’s home has been preserved. Apparently he was self-taught until his 20s when he studied in Philadelphia, but he was established professionally by that time. He began as a portrait painter, but blossomed into other areas by first painting political banners for his party, the Whigs.

In 1846, Bingham ran for the Missouri legislature on the Whig ticket, and defeated his opponent by three votes. Bingham took his seat in the fall, but his opponent contested the election and unseated Bingham.

Bitterly depressed, Bingham vowed he intended to “strip off my clothes and bury them, scour my body all over with sand and water, put on a clean suit, and keep out of the mire of politics forever.” Whatever his intentions, he remained in some form of local politics for the rest of his life.

During this period Bingham expressed his feelings on canvas and produced many well known political paintings such as Stump Speaking, Order No. 11, and the County Election, the latter painted in Columbia.

In 1848, he ran again and defeated his former opponent by 26 votes. After his term in the legislature, he attended many Whig conventions, both local and national. He held the post of state treasurer throughout the Civil War.

He switched his allegiance from the Whig party (which became the Republican party) to the Demo-
Bingham's interests in both faces and politics are clearly emphasized in a page from his sketchbook, left, and in Stump Speaking, below left. The portrait of James S. Rollins, below, is a duplicate of the original, which a fire destroyed in 1892.
The influence of life in Missouri river towns shows up clearly in Bingham’s Watching the Cargo, above. The recently discovered painting of the Civil War General J. O. Shelby is just one of many portraits by the artist.
fection. No brothers were ever nearer. Theirs was an example of the finest friendship. The natures of the two men were in complete harmony and they literally shared every thought without reservation.”

The correspondence between the two men makes up a major history of Bingham’s career. About 1000 of Bingham’s letters to his friend are extant and provide a valuable record of the artist’s career.

According to Fern Helen Rusk’s (later Mrs. John Shapley) (AB ’13, AM ’14, PhD ’16, DFA ’59) book, George Caleb Bingham, the Missouri Artist, “In his very early years, when Bingham undertook the procuring of an art education, we found his young lawyer friend lending his money and encouraging him in his attempts. And never did this true friend fail.

“As a state senator he used every effort for the passage of a bill introduced by the House, providing for the payment of Bingham’s expenses which he had been forced to incur through the defense of his seat in the House to which he had been regularly elected in 1846.

“He was always ready to lend money for the engraving of his friend’s pictures. He often defended him against criticisms, and he gave him a place in his home for months at a time.

“Upon the artist’s last visit to Major Rollins’ home, when the latter casually remarked, ‘Bingham, if I had your genius, I would be a millionaire,’ Bingham rejoined with a heart full of gratitude, asking what need he had of money when he had a friend who was always on the lookout for his welfare.”

Each of the men named a son for the other.

Two years after the painter was made adjutant general of Missouri, the Board of Curators established an art department and designated Bingham as the first professor of art. He held that position until his death. He was given a studio in the old English and Art Building on the northwest corner of the campus.

According to C. B. Rollins, Bingham’s appointment permitted him to paint professionally and he painted many portraits, among them one of Samuel Laws, who was then president of the University. About that time, Laws brought a professor of Hebrew and Semitic Literature to campus from New York. This professor, according to Rollins, was “a fine scholarly old gentleman, who, though versed in his profession, was woefully lacking in tact. One day he wandered into Bingham’s studio, and seeing the portrait of his friend, Laws, on the easel, began to criticize it with all the assurance of ignorance.

“The professor, who was very nearsighted and wore enormous, thick convex lenses, went up to within a foot of the painting, and peering at it, said ‘I don’t like this picture; you don’t do Dr. Laws justice. You make him look like a goat.’ Bingham, to whom the remarks had been addressed, replied sharply, ‘Well, sir, you show yourself as much a judge of art as of propriety. This is a fine portrait of Dr. Laws, so acknowledged by the doctor himself and his friends. Had I wanted to paint a picture of a goat, I should certainly have selected you for my model.’”

When Bingham was elected professor of art, no salary was provided and he was granted the privilege of occupying the studio to receive pupils. It is possible, however, that a salary was attached to the position the third year.

He taught not only pupils in the University, but also those of the nearby female colleges who wished his instruction. The nature of his position did not necessitate his regular presence at the University so he spent a good deal of time, even during the sessions, out of town.

Part of the widower Bingham’s out-of-town time was spent at the Lykins Institute in Kansas City, where he courted and eventually wed Mrs. Lykins, his third wife. After his marriage, he brought his new bride to live with him at Stephens College, where he boarded. One evening at dinner, so a famous Bingham anecdote goes, the waitress caught the button on her sleeve in a curl of Mr. Bingham’s wig and it was whisked halfway around the table before it could be recovered, much to the amusement of the girls and the great embarrassment of the new Mrs. Bingham. Apparently Bingham had a quick wit; he nonchalantly put the room at ease by remarking offhandedly that you could hardly expect another’s hair to stay on his head when his own would not do so.

During his last few months on campus, in the spring of 1879, the late Judge North Todd Gentry recalled that “General Bingham gave an exhibit of his pictures in his studio. He made a most interesting and instructive talk on how he happened to paint many of his pictures, and he said he had in mind to paint three historical pictures, one to represent a Camp meeting in Missouri, one a County fair in Missouri and one a Circus day in Missouri.”

The three pictures were never painted, for in July of that year, Bingham and his wife left Columbia after a visit of nearly two months at the home of his dear friend Rollins. Two days later he died in Kansas City.

Appropriately, James S. Rollins delivered the funeral oration, and according to the Kansas City Times, this tribute was touching. “It was the noble tribute of a manly man to a friend who could no longer speak for himself.”

The Times, however, was inaccurate, for Bingham plainly speaks today through his own works of art which mirror the man, his times and his life, his connections with the University, his political involvements, and most of all, his love for Missouri.