DAVID GILMOUR BLYTHE, ARTIST

JOHN O’CONNOR, JR.

I feel very much in the position of a prosecuting attorney when I come to the story of David G. Blythe. I am always looking for the wellspring of his artistic career. I want to know more of his formal training in the arts. I want to discover the early formative influences that made for his career. What paintings did he see in his travels, what artists did he come to know, and what was his reaction to them? What art books were available to him, and what reproductions of paintings did he see? How did he come to paint as he did? I have asked myself, “How could such a painter come out of East Liverpool or Pittsburgh of the forties or fifties?” All I have unearthed, even in the capacity of a prosecuting attorney, I must confess, is to the honor and glory of David Blythe. His art career was in response to an inner urge. He was self-taught. He learned the hard way. He was original, and his style was his very own. It is true that he was an uneven artist, but in his best work there is more than a spark of genius—there is genius. Blythe was a contemporary of Richard Caton Woodville, William S. Mount, and George Caleb Bingham, who painted genre scenes and were recorders of American life, but there is no reason to suppose that he knew any of them or their work. His painting developed out of his desire to express himself, his times, and his environment. He was as honest as the day is long in his presentation of the life about him. His art was never pretentious. It was a racy art, an art of the people.

David Gilmour Blythe was born in East Liverpool, Ohio, on May 9, 1815. He was the son of John and Susan Blythe, who had settled in 1812 on a farm known as the Kountz Place two miles below the city. Shortly after, they purchased a farm one mile from East Liverpool on what is now Pleasant Heights. They had come to the United States from Perth, Scotland, and reached East Liverpool after a long trip on a raft down the Allegheny and Ohio Rivers.

David Blythe’s early years were spent at his parents’ homestead farm on the Lisbon Road. He began to draw as a child. It is said that the door

1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on April 25, 1944. Mr. O’Connor is acting director of the Department of Fine Arts, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.—Ed.

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of the tool house on the farm was his first drawing board. He was a quiet, bookish, rather eccentric youth who, without any formal training, was able to dash off a striking likeness of an individual either in the presence of his model or from memory. At the age of fifteen he came to Pittsburgh to learn the trade of wood carving with Joseph Woodwell. It was undoubtedly his ability to draw that led him to take up wood carving. It is certain that he was encouraged in his artistic career by Joseph Woodwell, who later founded Joseph Woodwell Company in 1847. He was the father of Joseph R. Woodwell, artist and merchant, and the grandfather of Johanna Knowles Woodwell Hailman, Pittsburgh artist. There was a demand for wood carvers in Pittsburgh in the early days for the interior decoration of homes—moldings, mantels, staircases, paneling, and the making of furniture—and for trade or shop signs, such as the “Eagle and Beehive” which David Blythe is said, on rather good evidence, to have carved for the firm of Lippincott and Schallenger in Uniontown, or the badge for the Firemen’s Insurance Company of Pittsburgh which he designed and carved when he had been but six months with Joseph Woodwell. Casts of this carving were placed by the Firemen’s Company on the houses of those insuring with it. How well his three years’ apprenticeship served him is attested by the heroic statue of Lafayette he carved, which will be discussed later. It was while he was with Joseph Woodwell that J. J. Gillespie opened his art gallery in 1832. Mr. Gillespie, it is said, went abroad for works of art, and he is reputed to have been the first art dealer to bring European paintings west of the Allegheny Mountains. The gallery was a rendezvous for all the artists of the community. There the young Blythe became acquainted in a limited way with what was going on in the art world of his day.

After spending a fourth year in Pittsburgh as a house carpenter, David Blythe, with his brother John, made a trip down the Mississippi to New Orleans and back. On his return, he went to New York where he enlisted in the United States Navy. He served from 1837 to 1840 and was a ship’s carpenter on the “Ontario” in Pensacola Harbor. It is said that while cruising in the Gulf of Mexico he witnessed the bombardment of Vera Cruz by the French Navy. From 1840 until 1845 he was leading the life of an itinerant portrait painter with his base at his home town. Blythe, as usual with the artists of his day, first became a portrait painter. As Suzanne La Follette states in *Art in America*: “It was the demand for portraits that saved the early American painters
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from complete disaster.” In those pre-camera days there was a steady demand for portraits, and if an artist could work quickly and move over a large territory to meet the demands of his sitters, he might earn a fairly good living. It is recorded that Blythe received sixteen dollars for a given portrait. It is interesting to note that the paintings he did while at East Liverpool were portraits, while the paintings done in Pittsburgh were all genre subjects, paintings dealing realistically with scenes from everyday life. In fact, no portrait by Blythe has been discovered in Pittsburgh, though there are many by him in East Liverpool, Ohio, and Uniontown, Monongahela, and other towns of Western Pennsylvania. The indications are that after he had no family responsibilities and had enough funds for a meager living, he turned to his love of painting for its own sake. It was then he began to trace the “foibles of our Iron City streets.”

The earliest portraits are those of his father, John Blythe, and mother, Susan Blythe, “Mrs. Jeremiah G. Webber and Her Son,” and “Mrs. Cynthia Logan.” They were painted in 1841 and 1842. These paintings are primitive in treatment, flat, rigid, undistinguished in composition, and deficient in color and modelling. They might have been painted by one of the itinerant New England artists of an earlier period; nevertheless they are done with considerable directness and simplicity, and without pretense. One portrait, “Isaac Watts Knowles,” which was painted in 1841, is entirely different from the others of the same period. It is done almost entirely in black and white, is exceptionally well drawn, and shows a decided effort at delineation of character.

The great strides that Blythe made as a portrait painter are demonstrated in a group of paintings dated 1854. The portraits of Thomas Coburn, Mrs. Thomas Coburn, and George S. Harker belong to this period. They have notable color; the features are modelled; the drawing is good; and they have about them that air of distinction and breadth which is characteristic of a long line of early American portrait painters. Evidently Blythe had seen paintings by Thomas Sully and Chester Harding or even watched them paint portraits. There are two later paintings of children that are noteworthy. The one, entitled “Fanny,” is undoubtedly the earlier of the two. It is interesting in pose and color. The other one, “Portrait of John C. Thompson,” shows some proficiency in painting and an instinct for composition which marks an advance even over the portraits of 1854. It must be admitted that as a portrait painter, Blythe was in no sense superior to many other American
artists of his time. His fame rests on the genre painting he did during his sojourn in Pittsburgh. These paintings set him apart from all the other artists of his day and give him a place in the history of pre-Civil War art in the United States. In this field he had no preceptor and no predecessor near at hand, and it is understandable that his fellow townspeople in their enthusiasm spoke of him as "Blythe, the Inimitable," "that Hogarth of America," and "that Burns of art."

In his wanderings, Blythe reached Uniontown in 1846 and made it his headquarters until 1851. Shortly after his arrival, the new Fayette County courthouse was completed, and the artist was commissioned to carve a statue of Lafayette for the dome. The citizens subscribed one hundred and twenty-five dollars for the statue. Two-inch poplar planks joined together with long wooden pins constituted the block. A large woodcut portrait of General Lafayette published by S. G. Goodrich and E. Hopkins of New York at the time of the general's visit to the United States in 1825 served as the model. The statue remained on the dome of the courthouse until the building was torn down in 1890. For a time it was placed in the corridor of the new courthouse and, later, on a concrete base outside. It is now fortunately preserved in the Fort Necessity Memorial Museum, which is located near Uniontown.

It was at Uniontown that he met Miss Julia Kefter. In her diary is an entry, "Made an engagement of marriage with David G. Blythe, April 5, 1847." They were married in the rectory of St. Paul's Cathedral, Pittsburgh, on September 30, 1848. They made their home at the National House, Uniontown. Within a year she died of typhoid fever, and the artist, who was also a poet, expressed his grief in verse:

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\begin{align*}
\text{T}'s past! and I'm alone! alone! \\
\text{There was but one unbroken link} \\
\text{That held me, trembling on the brink;} \\
\text{But that is gone} \\
\text{and now I sink!} \\
\text{Alone! alone!}
\end{align*}
\]

"After her death, wrote a friend, "the beauty and the worth seemed to have departed out of his life, and he became careless of the opinion of his fellow men." In a letter in 1857 to a friend, after bewailing other days, when "hope was lined with velvet," he went on in verse:

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\begin{align*}
\text{I have grown} \\
\text{Almost grey and half demented} \\
\text{In trying to find some place where I could}
\end{align*}
\]
Get acquainted
Some place where man and man might dwell
Together in unity.

While in Uniontown, his prose and poetry under the name of "Boots" appeared in the Uniontown Democrat and the American Standard. During the remainder of his stay in Uniontown after the death of his wife, he painted a panorama of the National Pike. This was an ambitious undertaking and marks his departure from portraiture to landscape and genre painting. The panorama was on a canvas seven or eight feet in height and several hundred feet long. The scenes of historic and natural interest began in Albemarle County, Virginia, and extended to the Ligonier Valley in Pennsylvania. Blythe spent several summers in sketching through Virginia and Pennsylvania in preparation for the painting of this panorama. Each scene, such as Monticello, the home of Jefferson, or Fort Necessity being occupied by Colonel Washington, covered an area of canvas seven or eight feet in height by fifteen feet long. The different scenes, sewn together in a continuous strip, were mounted on rollers and thus could be slowly revealed before an audience while a lecturer explained the scenes. The panorama was shown first at Cumberland, then at Winchester, and then at Baltimore. Next it was on display at the Philo Hall, Pittsburgh. Later there were difficulties about the management, and eventually the canvas of this famous panorama was cut into pieces and used as backdrops in Trimble's Variety Theater in Pittsburgh.

Blythe left Uniontown in 1851. For a time he wandered through Westmoreland, Somerset, and Greene counties in search of portrait commissions, and then, until his death in 1865, he lived either in East Liverpool or Pittsburgh. He was in Pittsburgh continuously from 1856 to 1865, though in the First Annual Art Exhibition of the Pittsburgh Art Association in 1859, his address was given in the index of the catalogue as East Liverpool. It is known that he maintained his studio from 1861 to 1865 at 66 Third Street. His first studio in Pittsburgh, which he occupied previous to 1860, was in the Denny Building, evidently not the one which now stands on Third Avenue near Market. This studio was the scene of the painting, "Art versus Law," owned by the Brooklyn Museum. The artist depicts his return to his studio to find an eviction notice on the door because of the non-payment of rent. This painting was purchased from the artist in 1860 by C. H. Wolf, a Pittsburgh
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collector, who recorded in his ledger that the cost of the picture framed was thirty-five dollars. The collector then added this note in his ledger:

This work portrays a true incident in the life of the artist when occupying a studio in Denny's building, corner of Market and Fourth Street, Pittsburgh.

His own form and suggestive features are admirably given.

Poor Blythe; all knew his faults—few his virtues.

At the outbreak of the Civil War he accompanied the Thirteenth Pennsylvania Regiment to the front and remained with it during its three months' service, not as an enlisted man, but as a camp follower engaged in making sketches of army life. One of the results of his sketching is the painting, "General Doubleday Crossing the Potomac," which is now owned by Stephen Clark and hangs in the National Baseball Museum at Cooperstown, New York. Apart from its significance as a scene of Civil War military activity, it is an important American landscape painting. It is well designed, shows a vast expanse of countryside, and is deserving of a place in the history of American art. Out of his experience in the field with troops or the Civil War days in Pittsburgh came such paintings as "Libby Prison," "Fremont in Missouri," "Union Troops, Entraining," "Recruits Wanted," "Story of the Battle," "The First Shot," "The Bounty Jumper," "The Smash-up of the Confederacy," and "The Emancipation Proclamation." This latter painting is among the lost, but a lithograph of it came into the possession of the Old Print Shop in New York in 1943. The title of the lithograph is "President Lincoln Writing the Proclamation of Freedom, January 1, 1863." It was lithographed and printed in color by Ehrgott, Forbriger & Company, Cincinnati, and published by M. Depuy, Pittsburgh, 1864. The artist presents Lincoln as having retired to a disordered attic room of the White House to write the historic document. The room is littered with petitions and records which may have played their part in shaping the decision of the President. Lincoln is in his shirt sleeves and has thrown off one of his slippers. There is a key on the wall above his seated figure which indicates he has locked himself in to escape Mary Todd Lincoln or the many visitors who constantly harassed him. The scene is imaginary, as were most of Blythe's paintings, but in no work is the artist's humanism, insight, understanding, and interpretation of events better shown.
As has been indicated, Blythe's importance in art rests on the paintings which he did during his Pittsburgh period. Two of these pictures have to do with the administration of justice, a theme which has interested artists through the ages. One is "Trial Scene," now owned by the Memorial Art Gallery of Rochester, New York, and the other, "A Court Room Scene," which is in the collection of Mrs. J. Insley Blair of Tuxedo Park, New York. Pittsburgh incidents and Pittsburgh scenes were the subject of most of his paintings. There is "The Pittsburgh Horse Market," which depicts an incident of the auction at what was known as "The Battleground" on Duquesne Way. This painting might very well have come out of the Netherland. Then there is the "Post Office," which is probably the best known of his paintings. This picture has a very definite and balanced composition. It is harmonious and beautiful in color, and amusingly human in its outlook. The background of the scene is the crowded general delivery window which opens onto the street through an arched alcove. The building is the Pittsburgh Post Office that stood at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Smithfield Street on the present site of the Park Building. The characters in the little drama are, on the one hand, two townsmen who have received their mail and are intently reading it—in the one case with the assistance of an interested spectator; and, on the other hand, the group of men and women who are pushing and jostling one another for a place in front of the window. The tension of the latter group is suggested by the basket upset in the crush, and by the urchin burrowing his way into the group, and, in his energy, tearing the trousers of the man beside him. The ragged stogie-chewing newsboy, sitting on the steps at the right center, and the young pickpocket, pursuing his business affairs to the left, show by their actions that they are calm habitués of the place.

On the whole, the colors of the painting, as in all Blythe's pictures, are subdued, mostly in variations of gray and brown, though it must be conceded that there are more color notes in "Post Office" than in any of his other paintings, with the probable exception of "Lawyer's Dream." The stones of the building and steps are gray, and the clothing in general is taupe, fawn, tan, brown, gray, or black. The main contrast appears in the billowing rose gown of the woman in the center, in her deeper rose hat with its blue and cream-colored decorations. The other woman wears a dark green bonnet. The men's costumes, too, have touches of
color—a red jacket-back, a red tie, a rust-red bag, a white shirt. Other bits of white show in the newspapers and letters, and in the woman’s petticoat and hose.

In appearance, as the pencil sketch he made of himself shows, Blythe was tall and spare, with large, square shoulders. He had heavy eyebrows, and his hair and beard were red and usually unkempt. Although he was a stern-looking man, his countenance lighted up when he was engaged in conversation. He wore a long frock coat, very wide pants, large thick-soled boots, and the high hat of the gentleman of his period. Outspoken, fearless, and of great independence of character, he was also a man of fine feeling, sympathy, and understanding, as is conveyed by a letter he wrote to one of his brothers at the front in the Civil War and by his regard for his young wife. Though eccentric in many ways, he was one of the most companionable and sociable of men. This is indicated by his position among fellow artists in Pittsburgh and by the welcome he received at “mess” in Civil War camps. Each painting, as it was finished, was shown in the Gillespie window and, according to contemporary account, they were “the talk of the town and attracted such crowds that one could hardly get along the street.”

There are signs that Pittsburgh in its pre-Civil War times entertained a genius, though not unaware, as shown by the regard in which he was held in the city of his adoption, and by the care with which even the slightest sketches he made have been preserved and handed down as precious heritages. His native talent, his originality, his ability to see the foibles and shortcomings of his day, his satire, his love of the ridiculous, his humanity, and his sense of humor of everyday living made his art an art of the people. He seems to be an everlasting Puck, saying in as many languages as he had at his command, “What fools these mortals be!”

Blythe died at the Passavant Hospital, Pittsburgh, on May 15, 1865. The circumstances of his passing are strangely reminiscent of the death of Stephen C. Foster, his fellow townsman who died a year before in Bellevue Hospital in the City of New York. They may have known each other and may have understood that what one was trying to say in paint, the other was trying to say in the words and music of simple yet immortal songs. David Blythe was buried first in the old Fifth Street Cemetery, East Liverpool, and when this cemetery was abandoned, his remains were removed to the Spring Grove Cemetery, on the spot which was originally the “God’s Acre” of the Blythe farm.