
David Gilmour Blythe was not only the most important artist working in Western Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century, he was the only painter of national significance active here during that period; anyone interested in American art must know his work. He was a purely local product, for he was born in East Liverpool, Ohio, served an apprenticeship to the Pittsburgh wood-carver Joseph Woodwell during the early 1830s, and spent the most productive period in his life — the last decade — in Pittsburgh. His national importance stems from his uniqueness, for Blythe’s works display a pragmatic realism of style and a profound pessimism of spirit that are exceptional in mid-nineteenth-century American painting.

Blythe, however, was more than an artist: he was a critic of contemporary social institutions, a commentator on popular piety, a crusader for human dignity, a self-righteous moralist, a powerful poet, a satirist of the foibles of the human social order, a reporter of Pittsburgh’s urban problems, and a political cartoonist and propagandist. His work is of crucial importance to historians of the local scene for, as Chambers puts it, Blythe “provides us with a rare glimpse into the compelling moral preoccupations of a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing society” (p. 65).

Bruce Chambers belongs to the relatively new breed of American art historians whose work is as much about history as it is about art. In 1974 he completed a dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania on “David Gilmour Blythe: An Artist at Urbanization’s Edge,” and the title of the volume here under consideration—The World of David Gilmour Blythe — hints at the breadth of Chambers’s interests. The text includes discussion of such diverse topics as: the Scottish immigrants who settled in Western Pennsylvania and Ohio; the role of Blythe’s patrons, including such “leaders of the economic and social establishment” (p. 65) as Hook, Wilkins, Carnegie, Hailman, Batchelor, and Wolff; the popularity of the moving panorama as a form of public entertainment; the depressed economic conditions in Pittsburgh during the 1850s; and the influence of European satirists — Teniers, Hogarth, Cruikshank — on the work of a Blythe. The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, in fact, owns Blythe’s copy of a Dutch genre scene by Teniers.
Three historical topics stand out because of their careful and thorough treatment. One is Chambers's investigation of the complex political and social situation in Pittsburgh at mid-century and its reflection in Blythe's art. A second is the place and treatment of children in Pittsburgh during the 1850s. The children represented in Blythe's paintings are urban urchins: "tough kids, sly, wicked, fearful, inured to circumstance" (p. 42), products of "the corrupting influences of the urban environment" (p. 47). Blythe's commentary is both far from the wholesome youth painted by his contemporaries and profoundly human: "Blythe brings us in touch with the children's anguish" (p. 55). Chambers's third major theme is the Civil War, and Blythe's paintings reveal his interest in such historical problems as secession, the infamous Libby Prison, Tammany Hall, the immigrant vote, and the Confederate raid on Saint Albans, Vermont, in October 1864. Such paintings as Abraham Lincoln Writing the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln Crushing the Dragon of Rebellion, The Blair Family, and Abraham Lincoln, Railsplitter provide insight into Blythe's attitudes toward Lincoln.

Chambers's book will be of special interest to collectors, antiquarians, and dealers because of the complete catalogue raisonné, which lists more than 250 works recorded as by Blythe. Some 85 of these are "Unlocated," and paintings such as Johnsonian Politics, Labor and Capital, The Democratic Procession, The Beer Drinker, and Two Urchins in the Pantry remain to be discovered. At least four new works by Blythe have been discovered in the last year.

Chambers's book replaces Dorothy Miller's outdated 1950 volume as the basic source for all future Blythe scholarship. Its only drawback, and it is a serious disadvantage, is the lack of a complete index; people, places, and ideas discussed in the text are thus difficult to locate.

Of additional interest to local historians may be the proceedings of the public forum, "David Gilmour Blythe's Pittsburgh, 1850-1865," which was sponsored by the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, on May 9, 1981. The speakers included Chambers, myself, and three American historians; the talks were recorded and transcriptions are available from the museum.

Department of Fine Arts
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

David G. Wilkins