

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
CONSULTATION | SALES | APPRAISAL

THOMAS HART BENTON

(b. 1889 Neosho, Missouri – d. 1975 Kansas City, Missouri)

Media: Oil; tempera

Education: Art Institute of Chicago; Academie Julian and Academie Colarossi in Paris

Public Collections: (partial list) Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA; The Baltimore Museum of Art; The Cleveland Museum of Art; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Hunter Museum of Art; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; Metropolitan Museum of Art; National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC; The National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO; The New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut; The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia; Spencer Museum of Art; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Selected Bibliography:

Baigell, Matthew, Thomas Hart Benton. Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1973.

Benton, Thomas Hart, An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography. The University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 1969.

In August of 1908, an eighteen-year-old Thomas Hart Benton of Neosho, Missouri booked second-class passage to Paris on the French ship Le Lorraine. Paris was the place for a young artist to be in the first decade of this century – writers, painters, musicians and dancers flocked there in search of instruction and inspiration. Benton settled in the Passage Guibert and proceeded to sample the classes of the most famous art schools in the city.

Benton remained in Paris until July, 1911 when he returned to Neosho. After Paris, the small Missouri town could no longer provide the nourishment and challenge that the young artist needed. So, in June 1912, not quite a year after his return, he moved to New York. Although Benton considered New York his home between 1912 and 1935, he traveled widely throughout the United States, gathering material for his murals and other paintings. From 1926 to 1935, he taught at the Art Students League in New York. In 1935, with a commission to execute murals for the Missouri State Capital in Jefferson City, and an appointment as Director of Fine Arts at the Kansas City Art Institute, Benton moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where he remained until his death in 1975.

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His early work reveals his experimentation with Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, and particularly the influence of Cézanne. Later, Benton became a friend of the Synchronist Stanton MacDonald-Wright, and by 1914-15 he was producing abstract and representational paintings in a Synchronist style. Benton struggled with the pull between abstraction and figurative art. Around 1916, however, Benton's interest in abstraction and other avant-garde issues lessened. He began to fill his compositions with recognizable American imagery, and eventually became known, as one of the foremost "American Scene" painters.

The seaside resort of Martha's Vineyard was an important part of Benton's life. His association with this unique place began in 1920, and he returned every year until his death to spend carefree months in the company of friends and neighbors. The activities of this seaside retreat and the people he came to know figured in many of Benton's paintings. He used many of the island's old timers as subjects for his portrait studies. In the manner of Daumier, the artist would make little clay studies of his subjects, which he would then tint with black and white to examine the play of light and dark.

Benton treated color relationships in the manner of a photographic negative, making light forms dark and dark forms light, so that rhythmic interaction of shapes might be heightened and more easily studied. "Rhythm," Benton postulated, "is a projection from our inner selves and does not exist in the structure of the object." The legatee of such thinking was Benton's student, Jackson Pollock. Indeed, many of Pollock's fundamental ideas about form were established when he studied with Benton.

By the late twenties Benton had experimented with most of the avant-garde styles, both European and American, and he found them lacking. Once, early in his career he said, "I wallowed in every cockeyed 'ism' that came along and it took me ten years to get all of that modernist dirt out of my system." He wanted to express a uniquely American subject matter, and the only way he could derive the appropriate vocabulary was through direct experience. The only way to get that experience was to meet the people firsthand. He began a series of trips, mostly in the Southeast and South, that provided him with vibrant images of America and its people. In 1926 Benton visited Borger, Texas, the prosperous oil town whose population had grown from zero to 30,000 in the first three months of that year. Little planning went into the development of Borger. Buildings grew up along a single mile-long street giving the feeling of a movie set from one of Hollywood's back lots. A black cloud of smoke rises from a carbon mill used to quickly dispose of the troublesome by-product of the refining process – natural gas. Thousands of cubic feet of gas were burned off each minute. Boomtown, Benton's vision of this quintessentially American phenomenon – instant growth and unbridled entrepreneurial spirit – was his first regionalist masterpiece.

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Benton's sketching trip in the summer of 1928 was the longest and most productive of his career. He covered more than 8,000 miles on the journey which began in western Pennsylvania, continued through the Smoky Mountains and into the cotton country of the South. The extensive travelling provided him with a wealth of subject matter for his mural projects and for his easel paintings. He had traversed the back-roads of America observing at close range the variety of strong, hard-working people who were the backbone of her struggling economy. He attended revival meetings, country dances, and witnessed the picking of cotton and the threshing of wheat. A million vignettes were catalogued to be drawn upon.

Benton's Self-Portrait (1925) appeared in full color on the cover of Time magazine on December 24, 1934. It brought Benton notoriety and a certain star quality that he never totally lost. The story, titled U.S. Scene, discussed a new style of painting practiced by "earthy Midwesterners." Thomas Hart Benton was the most representative of this group, which included John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood. The term Regionalist would soon come into currency, and Benton would carry that label for the rest of his life.

Throughout his career, murals were the major vehicle for this effort. American history and contemporary American life – labor, business, technology, and leisure – became the subjects for the many murals Benton was commissioned to execute in the 1920s and 1940s for American colleges, governmental buildings, and libraries. He employed a narrative format in these large-scale works, often raising the American experience to the level of myth. In Achelous and Hercules (1947), Hercules wrestles Achelous, a river god who assumes the form of a giant bull, for the favors of Deianeira. Hercules breaks off one horn, which is then miraculously transformed into a cornucopia or horn-or-plenty. Throughout the mural, America is presented as a land of abundance and opportunity.

In the late thirties Benton executed several small still-life paintings. Benton found it difficult to relate to the reality of the 1940s. The American he had known so well had changed. The public's interest in realistic images had been replaced by a fascination with abstract forms.

The last quarter century of Benton's life was relatively mellow. He continued to receive commissions from groups as diverse as the Harry S. Truman Library and the Country Music Hall of Fame. And he continued to travel, now looking westward – Benton's wanderlust never abated. During his later years, Benton concentrated on natural landscapes. Nearly every spring, right up to the year he died, he took a boat trip in southwest Missouri, or northwest Arkansas. He painted from a more personal viewpoint, while he continued to express the American image as he saw it. "My American image is made up of what I have come across, of what was 'there' in the time of my experience —

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no more, no less.”