

STYLISTIC INFLUENCES IN THE WORK OF
THOMAS HART BENTON

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Frontispiece. Study for "Self-Portrait." 1970.
Thomas Hart Benton.
Pencil, 15½ x 10½".
Estate of the artist.



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PREFACE

During the first half of the twentieth century, Thomas Hart Benton was a prominent figure in American art. Although his popularity in the modern art world sagged under the pressures of changing contemporary trends, he never abandoned his belief in his ideas about what American art should be. His individualism as a painter and as a person gained the respect, if not always the admiration, of the entire art world and certainly the affections of rural America.

As a native Missourian who grew up some fifty miles from Benton's boyhood home in Joplin, Missouri, the writer knew of the artist and first became specifically interested in his work in 1972. Benton often visited The School of the Ozarks where the author was teaching. He had several friends there--particularly Steve Miller, director of the Ralph Foster Museum, who was also a friend of the writer.

On March 24, 1973, the author attended the official opening ceremonies of the Joplin, Missouri, centennial celebration which included the presentation of Benton's mural "Joplin at the Turn of the Century, 1896-1906." Joplin is the town where Benton began his artistic career as a newspaper cartoonist. He was a featured speaker in

the ceremonies that morning. The opening of the Thomas Hart Benton Retrospective Exhibition in the Spiva Art Center at Missouri Southern State College took place later during the same day. Mr. Benton was again a featured speaker. This occasion was a unique opportunity to view first hand many of Benton's works as well as to see Mr. and Mrs. Benton in person.

Several works in the Spiva Art Center were being exhibited for the first time. These included the clay models in diorama which he had used to help him with dimension in the Joplin mural (Figure 6). Always before, Benton destroyed his clay models after they had served their purpose. The ones in this exhibition were saved for historical and educational reasons. Some bronze sculptures, many of the paintings, and a number of the drawings had not been exhibited before. Working drawings tracing the development of the Joplin mural were on display in the Municipal Building (Figure 7). The exhibit represented the various stages of Benton's development and career.¹

On October 5, 1974, Benton wrote to Steve Miller indicating his plans for visiting The School of the Ozarks, as it happened, for the last time (Letter 1). During this

¹Mary Curtis Warten, ed., Thomas Hart Benton: A Personal Commemorative (Joplin, Missouri: The Joplin Council for the Arts, 1973), p. 12.

Letter 1. Letter from Thomas Hart Benton
to Steve Miller. October 5, 1974.

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Dear Steve —

Glad to get the news of you and The School.
I am indeed planning to come down your way before the end of the month, probably about the 20th, and spend a few days.

I want to make a few drawings of Ozark people, starting with Chuck Allen. You can probably help me find a couple of girls at the school who could look the part of mountain (hillbilly) ballad singers. And maybe you know some old fiddles who could look the part of a ^{real} mountain fiddler.

I need such people for the new Country Music Foundation mural at Nashville. I have all the actions and instruments, ^{digression up} but need a few characteristic faces. (Anglo-Scott-American, you know)

Surprised to hear about Carl. Had no idea he had moved down your way. Will, of course, see him when I come down.

Leaving here Monday (8th) for Kansas City. The Abrams book on my work is to be nationally released there on the 12th and I have ^{to} be ~~there~~ at the ceremonies. Glad to have the airplane if it can be conveniently sent.

Best regards

Cordially Tom

visit to the Ozarks region, Benton made some of his last sketches for use in the "Birth of Country Music" mural for the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee (Figure 8). The dulcimer player wearing a pink dress in the mural is a portrait of Doody Brodhacker, a student at The School of the Ozarks.

In addition to studying the original works of Thomas Hart Benton in the Joplin retrospective show, the writer had the opportunity to become familiar with those in the collection of The School of the Ozarks. These include the painting "Departure of the Joads"; "The Music Lesson," "Photographing the Bull," and "Folk Singer" or "Burl Ives," which are lithographs; and several sketches including some used for the painting "The Young Fishermen" or "Down the River."

Much of Benton's art is in places of public access where the common people, who enjoy it most, see it. It is Benton's interest in America, his characteristic artistic style, and his remarkable intellectual outlook that has attracted the author to study his life and art in greater detail.

Acknowledgments are due to the members of the thesis committee, Dr. Warren Casey, Dr. John Rios, and Mrs. Winifred Williams, for their help and consideration

throughout this study. The cooperation of the librarians at the Texas Woman's University is appreciated. Thanks are also due to Mr. Ronald Miller of the Ralph Foster Museum for providing unpublished letters and manuscripts, and to the art department of The School of the Ozarks for providing access to slides. Appreciation is expressed to Kenneth Burchett for his understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hart Benton's career in art spanned a period of sixty-nine years, during which he assured himself of a place in the history of twentieth-century art. The peak of his popularity came in the 1930s when there was general surge of patriotism and intensified interest in America by Americans. Thomas Benton, along with some other artists of the time, was striving to give the average citizen a meaningful and understandable art. These artists were public spirited and interested in the entire country rather than just in an artistic community. Benton, Grant Wood, and John Stuart Curry, the "Regionalists" of the 1930s, were interested in the everyday life of the common working people in America.

Benton's painting raises the question of an artist's responsibility for communication of ideas in art to the common person, his obligation to national and local heritage, and the function of an artist in society. Using his great wealth of knowledge and experience both in art and life, Benton painted for the people who, even if they did not understand composition and technique, identified with it.

His aim was not to develop an imitation of reality but to create a parallel artistic construction.¹

Although popular, Thomas Benton became the center of much controversy concerning the aesthetic value of his painting which differed in both content and style from the mainstream of twentieth-century French-American art. Even today his work is often the subject of sharp criticism. Nevertheless, he and his painting have not been forgotten but are secure of a place in art history.

Years of experimentation with techniques and subject matter brought a unique and extremely personal style to Thomas Hart Benton's work. From the baroque tradition going back through Rubens, the Venetian painters of the Renaissance, and Michelangelo, Benton found a philosophy of art that ultimately stems from the bas-relief sculpture of Hellenistic Greece where the subject matter was, as Benton's, of everyday life and rural scenes.² He studied the work of many artists and experimented with numerous techniques of painting before integrating these influences into a mature style. The artists and teachers who influenced his artistic growth are significant in the evaluation of his development.

¹Matthew Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d.), p. 55.

²Malcolm Vaughan, "Up From Missouri," North American Review, March 1938, p. 92.

As a painter, Thomas Hart Benton drew upon his background for his philosophy and subject matter. His childhood and family were important parts of his artistic success. Through the political and historical traditions of his ancestry he developed a deep respect for the common American people. Although during the early phases of his studies in art he rejected his background in rural America and thought it necessary to live in Chicago, Paris, and New York, he ultimately returned to his cultural roots.

Thomas Hart Benton was born in Neosho, Newton County, Missouri, on April 15, 1889. His parents were "Colonel" Maecenus Eason Benton and Elizabeth Wise Benton. His mother was from Texas. "Colonel" Benton was from Tennessee, had served in the Confederate Army, and was educated in law. In 1869 he moved to Neosho and later became active in politics, going on to serve six terms in the United States House of Representatives and as United States Attorney for Western Missouri. His great-uncle, Thomas Hart Benton, for whom he was named, was a prominent United States Senator and advocate of western expansionism. Politics was a very important part of young Benton's life.

As a boy, Benton often accompanied his father to political rallies and meetings both in the towns and in the backwoods areas. He came to know and understand the people of Missouri, the Ozarks, and the growing Southwest. He

could recall actual frontier conditions from trips into the Indian country of Oklahoma Territory.

The foundation was laid for Benton's philosophy in his youth. His reactions to and acceptance or rejection of teachings, theories, and techniques always took into account those early values and what he saw as meaningful human experiences.

Thomas Hart Benton died in 1975 leaving a legacy of paintings that clearly define his philosophy of art in a style that grew out of long and patient study in an attempt to reconcile twentieth-century art with classical tradition. Benton's mature style reflects a deep integrity to himself, to his art, and to his time.

CHAPTER I

THE ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF
THOMAS HART BENTON

Search for Method

An understanding of an artist's professional growth and development is significant in a study of his work.

Benton himself thought it to be so and made this statement:

The methods an artist employs as he develops do have a great deal to do with what he delivers for public consumption. The history of how, when, and why he adopted certain methods rather than others is therefore necessary for a complete understanding of his career, though I do not believe for a complete response to what comes to be his art.¹

Benton enjoyed drawing as a small child, and his first formal instruction in art was in classes at the Concoran Gallery in Washington, D. C., while his father was serving in the House of Representatives. His first lessons were in learning to draw arrangements of cubic blocks. (This device seems to have been retained in his later method of blocking-in spatial units and figures with cubic forms before making a final sketch.) During his childhood, his favorite subject matter included trains, Indians, and battleships. He did not paint but was interested in pen-and-

¹An American in Art (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1969), pp. 9-10.

ink drawing. He enjoyed looking at the engraved illustrations in his family's history books and the historical paintings in the Capitol Rotunda.¹

As he grew older, he became fascinated with newspaper cartoons and copied the crosshatched style of Berryman who worked for the Washington Post. Developing skill in this technique enabled him to get a job as a cartoonist with the American, a Joplin, Missouri, newspaper when he was seventeen years old. Benton worked in Joplin for a few months before attending a military academy for a year. From there he went to the Chicago Art Institute to prepare for a career in journalistic art.²

One of his teachers, Frederick Oswald, introduced him to watercolor. Benton began working in color directly from life. He soon forgot his journalistic intentions as he became fascinated with painting. At the same time, he did traditional academic charcoal drawing from plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculptures. He did not care for the technique and found the casts boring. However, he was soon promoted to the life drawing classes. He studied composition from Japanese prints and Whistler's paintings. Oswald encouraged observation of how these were arranged, and

¹Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, p. 21.

²Ibid., p. 22.

Benton acquired a lasting taste for flowing lines. He also studied the drawings of the Spanish illustrator, Daniel Vierge. Still in Chicago, Benton began to work with oil paint. His teachers, Freer and Betts, encouraged a limited palette. He often used similar colors in his later paintings. This palette consisted of black, white, Venetian red, yellow, ochre, burnt sienna, and a green oxide mixed with black.¹

With Frederick Oswald's encouragement, Benton went to Paris and enrolled in the Académie Julian in 1908. He was impressed with the weekly lectures on anatomy, but, again, was bored by the cast-drawing class. During the mornings he studied at the Académie, and in the afternoons he sketched in the cafés and streets or painted in his studio.

In 1909 at the Luxembourg Museum Benton saw an exhibit of Impressionist works. The painting that most influenced him was by Pissaro. It had a strong sense of structure that appealed to him. The painting was a sunlit scene of red tile roofs and backyard gardens. Benton studied Pissaro's style and endeavored to paint in the same manner. The Impressionist technique required an altered palette which was based on the spectrum.²

¹Benton, An American in Art, p. 12.

²Ibid., p. 15.

Benton left the Académie Julian in the spring of 1909 and began attending the Académie Collarossi. This was a sketching studio where well-known artists often worked. There was always a model although there were no instructors. At this time he met John Carlock, another American painter in Paris. Carlock was seriously studying Cézanne and Cézanne's ideas about Poussin and Classical and Renaissance art. He encouraged Benton to study in the Louvre. Benton found his visits to the Louvre quite rewarding and later referred to them as his introduction to art history. He learned types of color harmonies and various compositional devices used by the old masters. Carlock, however, failed to interest Benton in Cézanne. The breaking up of form into flat planes of color was foreign to Benton's way of working.¹ Although he was very interested in the work of Cézanne, he did not understand it at the time, and he continued painting in both the Impressionistic and Academic styles.

During the following year, he continued daily drawing at the Académie Collarossi and figure and portrait painting as well as reading a large amount of French literature. He became intrigued by the work of Paul Signac and the Pointillist method. In studying this

¹Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, p. 24.

Neo-Impressionist technique, Benton again used a spectral palette and became involved with the intensities of colors rather than tonal values. He enjoyed painting in this particular contemporary style, because the forms remained whole even though the colors were broken up. In 1910 this style was considered quite radical. Rather than trying to paint colors that corresponded with nature, for the first time he became involved with schematic color equivalents. Variations of hue were used in place of the traditional variations of value. This was an abstract problem--not just painting what he saw.¹

In the winter of 1910 Benton first saw Fauve and Cubist works--a different type of art than any he had studied. The many artistic styles developing at once were somewhat confusing for a young artist. He had continued to base his composition on the construction of Japanese prints which he collected and hung about his studio. By studying the Classical and Renaissance painting in the Louvre, he had become aware of solid forms composed in three-dimensional perspective, but he was still arranging silhouette patterns which were sometimes shaded to give a three-dimensional effect.² Benton found that this type of composition would not work with cubistic experiments or other art styles

¹Benton, An American in Art, p. 19.

²Ibid., pp. 21-22.

influenced by the work of Cézanne. His own work at this time was more profoundly influenced by Matisse and Gauguin as they dealt with flat shapes instead of volumes and were closer to Benton's own style.

Benton did not stay with any one painting technique while he was in Paris. Although he experimented a great deal and, as a result, had little to show for his time and effort, all of these learning experiences would prove to be extremely valuable in the culmination of his unique personal style.

Toward the end of his stay in Paris, he read Philosophie de l' Art by Hippolyte Taine. The book explained the close relationships between the art of the past and the cultures that had produced them. It caused Benton to challenge ideas about art that he had not questioned before, and it had a profound influence on Benton's personal philosophy concerning art.

Art is not only form but, especially in the case of a representational form, also an expression of the artist's humanistic thinking and feeling; and as he is conditioned to think and feel as a human being by the culture in which he lives, some knowledge of that culture is needed for complete comprehension of what he has to say. Pulling artifacts out of their contexts is like pulling any other kinds of facts out of their's.¹

He began to realize the implications of the relationships between the paintings in the Louvre and the societies in

¹Ibid., p. 26.

which they were produced. This, in turn, created questions in his mind about the direction the contemporary painting of Paris was taking. Paintings seemed to be evolving from other paintings--not from society. Benton did not resolve this dilemma easily or quickly.

In the spring of 1911 his father sent word that he was unwilling to finance more time in Paris. Benton knew that he could not support himself in France, and in July he returned home to Neosho, Missouri. The cultural difference between Paris, France, and Neosho, Missouri, caused Benton to feel rather disoriented although he continued to paint.

Benton did portraits of anyone who would pose during the early part of 1912. He used a limited palette and strict realism for five consecutive months. The following spring he began painting landscapes with a full spectral palette, but felt that the Neo-Impressionist method was incongruous with Ozarkian subject matter. Instead, he drew with blue lines and modelled these shapes with variations of bright color.¹

He did not think that Missouri offered much opportunity for an artist, and in the summer of 1912 he went to New York City. While attempting to support himself with art, Benton tried many things--book illustration, portraits,

¹Ibid., pp. 25-28.

ceramics, teaching, movie-set design, and managing a gallery. A portrait of his sister was published in Colliers magazine and brought him his first widespread publicity.¹

One significant experiment in 1914 was a number of paintings that Benton did in the Synchronist style. This technique was based on the theories of Cézanne. The arrangement of color planes produced the forms. The Synchronists used brilliant spectral colors and Baroque rhythms which, although abstract, were derived from Michelangelo's sculptures.² The Baroque rhythms appealed to Benton and seemed to be the bridge between the traditional forms of the past and the present coloristic trend (Figure 1).

In 1914 he obtained a job with Fox Studios doing historical research and drawing plans for movie backdrops and sets. He became interested in distemper or glue painting which was used for painting scenery. It was a media that he would use in many of his future paintings. This media was quick drying and could be painted over rapidly as well as allowing precise brush lines. During his employment by the movie studio, he continued to paint portraits, using actors and actresses as volunteer models.

¹Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, p. 26.

²Benton, An American in Art, p. 33.



Fig. 1. "The Bather." c. 1917.
Thomas Hart Benton
Oil on canvas, 29½ x 28½".
Private collection.

After abandoning the Synchromist color-form style, he once again became fascinated with the work of Michelangelo and returned to further studies of form itself. He was particularly interested in painting groups of figures in a three-dimensional style. This problem involved illusions of space and depth created on a flat painting surface. For six months during 1916, he concentrated on composition based on Classical and Renaissance art.¹

Then came World War I. Benton served in the Navy. He was sent to Norfolk, Virginia, and assigned the duty of making accurate and descriptive sketches of buildings, machinery and equipment, and other activities at the base:

This was the most important event in my development as an artist. I was forced to observe the objective character of things--buildings, airplanes, dredges and ships--things so interesting in themselves that I forgot my esthetic drivelings and morbid self-concerns. I left once and for all my little world of art for art's sake and entered into a world, which, though always around me, I had not seen. That was the world of America. Furthermore, I was thrown among boys with whom I discovered bonds of sympathy, boys from the hinterlands of the South, and I got along with them. They were interested in what was going on, not in their own egos. I felt perfectly natural and at ease for the first time since the old days in Missouri.²

In the drawings done for the Navy, objects had to be accurately defined causing the subject matter in Benton's art to become an important factor.

¹Ibid., p. 37.

²Thomas Craven, "Thomas Hart Benton," Scribners Magazine, October 1937, pp. 33-40.

During his off-duty time, he read a history of the United States illustrated with engravings that were typical of the mid-nineteenth century. He began to question why paintings of American history could not have a higher aesthetic value that could be communicated to the people along with the subject matter. After all, history painting was traditionally considered an important part of art history.

Benton returned to New York City after the war and held an exhibition of a group of paintings from his experiences at Norfolk. The general public was interested in this work, and Benton was encouraged.¹

He continued to read widely in art history, American history, and psychology. Some reading especially of consequence at this time in the development of his style was about Tintoretto. It included a description of his working methods and procedures in painting the "Last Supper" in the church Santa Maria della Salute in Venice. The article described a small sculpture Tintoretto had made to compose the arrangements of figures in three-dimensional space and give them realistic shadows and highlights. Benton became interested in this method and proceeded to examine reproductions of other Tintoretto paintings. He realized that they

¹Benton, An American in Art, pp. 44-45.

all had a sculptural quality and thought a similar procedure would help him with multiple-figure compositions. In all of his previous efforts, he had not been able to achieve the parallel to reality for which he had been striving. He thought perhaps these concrete references would give a tangible base from which to compose historical paintings. Through experimentation he became adept at this technique. All of his painting began to change in form as he worked with the three-dimensional models. Although he continued to experiment, from this point in his development all of his work had a continuity of style.¹

In Benton's opinion this completed the first stage in his development as an artist: the search for method.² His eclectic combination of modern and Renaissance styles and his tendency to use American subject matter separated him more and more from the mainstream of twentieth-century French-American art.

Development of Method

According to Benton, the second phase of an artist's development is when his own method of working is "developed and its formal and representational potentialities are

¹Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, pp. 54-55.

²Benton, An American in Art, pp. 49-50.

explored."¹ This phase, as well as the first of searching for a method, is primarily technical.

In 1920 he spent the first of many summers on the island of Martha's Vineyard. Here he began his first attempts in American genre painting using the local people as models, a tradition that he was to continue in his painting year after year. His method was systematic. First making sketches from life, he constructed three-dimensional models in clay which were tinted to show highlights and shadows. The actual painting was done while referring to both the clay models and the drawings. Some of these early works have survived to find their way into private and public art collections. The painting "The Lord is My Shepherd" of 1926 (Figure 2) is now in the Whitney Museum and clearly shows the artist's new-found interests in the American people as subjects for art and the beginning of what was to become the distinct Benton style.²

During the next few years, he developed a plan for a series of murals to be called "History of America." This series was to be made up of chapters, each of which would contain five related pictures collectively measuring over twenty-five feet in length. The paintings were to be

¹Ibid., pp. 50-51.

²Ibid., p. 53.



Fig. 2. "The Lord Is My Shepherd." 1926.
Thomas Hart Benton.
Tempera on canvas, 33 1/4 x 27 3/8".
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York.

symbolic illustrations of the development of the United States (Figure 3). Before Benton began the paintings, he was assured by the Architectural League, which had taken an interest in the project, that it would exhibit each chapter of his history as he completed it.¹

In 1924 the first chapter was finished, exhibited, and immediately was the cause of disputes. The second chapter, which was completed during the winter of 1926, also created controversy. The prevailing theory concerning murals was that a flat wall should only have a flat, inconspicuous, and pale looking painting. Benton's murals were the antithesis of this concept. They had illusory dimensions which seemed to project and recede, the color and form were exceedingly vibrant, and there were distinct contrasts in value. The subject matter also aroused criticism, because it suggested underlying meanings rather than being merely decorative. Storytelling subjects were considered fit for book illustrators but not for painters. Benton felt differently about the content of paintings:

Although I had, at times gone along with such views, continued studies of the history of art, particularly of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century painting, had, by now, radically changed my mind. I had come to believe that meanings had a generative function. I concluded that the forms of a Giotto, for instance, resulted quite as much from the meanings that inspired him as from his technical discoveries or his observations of

¹Ibid.



Fig. 3. "Palisades (American Historical Epic)." 1919-24.
Thomas Hart Benton.
Oil on canvas, 72 x 84".
Estate of the artist.

nature. As I now saw it, his religious stories had a constructive as well as a communicative place in his art. Form was, therefore, to a much greater degree than our modern artists realized, a "function" of the subject.¹

Benton's long art career was to include teaching. In 1926 while he was still working on the "History of America" murals, he took a position at the Art Students' League in New York where he was to teach for the next nine years. During the middle twenties, Benton's work and life began to take on distinct patterns. While in New York during the winters, he painted and taught. He spent his summers on Martha's Vineyard and, in the spring or fall, would make extensive sketching trips into the South or Midwest.

A walking trip in 1926 lasted for three weeks in northern Arkansas and southern Missouri. It was the first of many similar trips he was to make to that area during his career. He made pen-and-wash sketches of rural America and began the work that was later to be called "Regionalist" art. Sketch trips might take an entire summer. Sometimes they would include a hike through the Ozarks, a journey on west to the Texas oil country to make drawings of boom towns and the people he found there, and a further circuit through Taos and Sante Fe, New Mexico, before finally going

¹Ibid., pp. 56-57.

east in the early fall to again take up painting and teaching.¹

Most of these journeys were accomplished by walking. He travelled lightly with only a knapsack containing sketching materials and a few clothes. Each trip resulted in many drawings for possible future use in paintings. These sketches defined the general form of the subject without details or highlights and shading. Later, he would use them as guides for making three-dimensional forms in clay which, in turn, would be used as references while painting. These drawings were done as studies and were not intended for exhibition. Benton refers to these sketches in a letter of 1970 written to his river guide, Jim Owens (Letter 2). Because pencil drawings tended to smear as he walked, Benton would go over the main lines with India ink and cover the rest of the sketch with a thin wash of watercolor to hold the pencil drawings, a technique that later came to be accepted as his drawing style.

During the same era, Benton became interested in the Mexican school of art through the works of such muralists as Diego Rivera and Clemente Orozco. Although he did not agree with the communistic philosophy to which most of their art was dedicated, he appreciated its humanistic

¹Ibid., pp. 58-59.

Letter 2. Letter from Thomas Hart Benton
to Jim Owens, March 22, 1970.

THOMAS H. BENTON
3616 BELLEVIEW AVENUE
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI 64111

March 22 - 76

Dear Jim —

I've made several attempts to see you on my trips through Branson but seem always to have just missed you. I'll try again this Spring when I head for the Buffalo.

Yes I did make a lot of sketches when I took that '39 float with Red Miles but they have passed out of my hands long ago. People have liked my Egark drawings and they have nearly all found a market.

One batch I lost a few years ago. I made a tour of our floatable rivers with the Missouri Conservation Dept. and filled a box with drawings. Then I went down on the Buffalo and just below Punt tipped over. Could never find the box, my shoes and a rain suit. All got snagged under water.

Maybe there's a moral. "Go only with Jim's toys."

Best regards
Cordially
Tom.

direction toward the common people. He wrote, "The Mexican concern with publicly significant meanings and with the pageant of Mexican national life corresponded perfectly with what I had in mind for art in the United States."¹ Also, Mexican painters were given many opportunities for painting murals in public places. Benton began to wonder if he should continue his history series without similar support.

Nevertheless, his first public mural was painted in 1930 and 1931 for the cost of the materials in the board room of the New School for Social Research in New York. He utilized his sketch books as a source of subject matter to paint a scene of current America. The "America Today" mural presented a problem that was to come up again and again in his later mural commissions; the theme called for the representation of many varying subjects which were quite unrelated to each other. The organization of the New School mural posed a problem of composition where all of the parts had to be made to function together as a pictorial form. Benton wanted to compose each pictorial unit so that around the edges it could be connected with forms on the edges of other units. However, each unit was different in context, and such subjects as agricultural scenes were difficult to

¹Ibid., p. 61.

smoothly merge with industrial views. So Benton finally used pieces of wooden molding in the design of the mural to separate the different sections. The composition included scenes of industrial growth, activities in cities, and agricultural life. Benton conveyed the energy and confusion of a rural society changing to a technological and urban culture.¹

The mural, which took six months to complete, was painted on heavy linen coated with gesso that had been glued to panels of wallboard. The actual paint used was distemper and egg-tempera. In some places transparent glazes of oil paint were added.²

Benton's next mural project was for the library of the Whitney Museum in 1932. The theme, "The Arts of Life in America," was chosen to show the popular arts of and for the general public. Benton found that he had become more proficient in composing murals; no wooden mouldings were needed to separate sections of the design.

Almost immediately following the completion of the Whitney mural, he was commissioned to paint another, "The Social History of the State of Indiana," for the Chicago World's Fair which opened June 1, 1933. Benton had six

¹Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, pp. 111-14.

²Benton, An American in Art, pp. 63-64.

months in which to paint a space twelve feet high by two hundred feet long. The first month was spent in research and traveling in Indiana. The following six weeks were spent composing the pictorial units, preliminary drawings, and three-dimensional clay models. The actual execution took three months of constant work. After the World's Fair closed, the mural was placed at Indiana University.¹

The Indiana mural created interest in a similar project in Benton's home state of Missouri, and the Missouri legislature commissioned a mural for the Capitol in Jefferson City in 1934. In less than eight years Benton's artistic career had developed considerably, and he was rapidly establishing himself not only as a muralist but also as a knowledgeable authority on art. In 1939, soon after accepting the Missouri mural commission, Benton was offered a job teaching drawing and painting at the Kansas City Art Institute. He accepted the position and moved his family to Kansas City.²

Expression in Method

The Missouri State Capitol mural was considered by Benton himself to be the point in his career where everything came together--the beginning of his mature style.³

¹Ibid., pp. 69-70.

²Ibid., p. 71.

³Ibid., p. 74.

There were, of course, some modifications of style later on, but these elaborations did not change his basic way of working.

The mural, entitled "A Social History of the State of Missouri," (Figure 4) provided Benton the opportunity for integrating facets of his development. In this mural his own heritage and native environment were his subject matter, and it was well suited to his methods of painting. He had just returned to his home state after living in New York City for many years. His enjoyment of living in the Midwest again and his appreciation for the local people and the geography of his home state seem to be reflected in the mural which is calmer and less hectic and busy than his previous works done in New York.¹

The Missouri Mural covered three walls, each of which had a door. The problem of incorporating the doors into the design was solved by extending them into the mural itself and by making architectural frames for the mythological scenes.² This technique, reminiscent of the New School of Social Research mural, framed and separated the areas over the doors to give a practical and compositional organization to the various ideas presented in the mural. The subjects ranged from the earliest settlements in the area

¹Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, pp. 143-47.

²Benton, An American in Art, p. 72.

Fig. 4. "A Social History of the State
of Missouri." 1936.
Thomas Hart Benton.
Oil and egg tempera on linen
mounted on panels.
Missouri State Capitol, Jefferson City.



to later events that occurred during Benton's lifetime, and included the artist's interest in local legends and stories: Huck Finn, Frankie and Johnny, and Jesse James.

Benton included scenes of family life, agriculture, mining, a court of law, horse trading, a political meeting, and even a lynching. Although he was obviously proud of his home state, Benton did not hesitate to add some of the less desirable aspects of life in Missouri. He painted what he thought was an honest history. However, the subject matter he had chosen became the source of much controversy even before the mural was completed:

Good old hidebound, middle-class Missouri conservatives . . . saw its "common life" representations as an insult to the State. However the mural is still in the State Capitol and has grown so respectable that school children from all over Missouri are now bussed to see it.¹

After the completion of the Missouri mural, Benton began to concentrate more on still life subjects, life studies, and landscapes that emphasized nature. He became very interested in Flemish painting techniques during the thirties and forties and began to pay more attention to the surface effects of texture, color, and chiarascuro. For a short time his paintings even took on Surrealist overtones, but he soon returned to his previous style.²

¹Ibid.

²Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, pp. 154-56.

When World War II began in 1941 with the attack on Pearl Harbor, Benton was outraged. He turned his complete attention to a series of ten large paintings dealing exclusively with war. They were propaganda paintings and were created deliberately to awaken feelings of American patriotism. Subsequently reproduced over fifty-five million times in newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets, the paintings were executed as rapidly painted cartoons.¹ The profiles of the figures are tight and sharp with very precise edges. They seem to have been stopped in action.

After World War II, the public taste in art reversed. Suddenly abstract art began to be appreciated more, but Benton, who was totally committed to his philosophy and style for recognizable images, did not change. Instead of respecting him and his place in art history, he was condemned by art critics as a provincial painter. No important artist developed from Benton's style. Students either ignored him or reacted against him.

Benton's most famous and successful student was Jackson Pollack. Benton was Pollack's teacher from 1930 to 1933 at the Art Student's League. They remained close friends until Pollack's death in 1956. However, Benton does not claim any credit for Pollack's influence on

¹Ibid., p. 167.

American art. The linear rhythms of both artists have often been compared, but they are obviously different in character. Benton's rhythms are contained in areas of compositional pattern, while Pollack's style emphasizes continuity throughout a painting. Although Benton was happy with Pollack's success, he still felt that painting consisting only of design and color was not in the interest of the humanism which he considered most important and valid in art. He would never agree with an art that seemed to develop from art and not from life itself.¹

Benton quickly became weary of the art establishment and, although he would occasionally level a barrage of criticism at the modern art world, he more or less ignored the "isms," as he called them, and kept his attention on his own interests. Throughout Benton's career, he depended heavily upon his contacts with the common people. This became more and more difficult to accomplish as he grew older due to the movement toward urbanization. When he first began making trips into the backwoods areas in search for subject matter, people were generally friendly to outsiders and were happy to talk with him. As more and better roads were built, life began to move faster. People became suspicious of strangers. The culture of the entire nation became more homogenized with fewer uniquely picturesque

¹Ibid., pp. 174-76.

provincial areas. The opportunity for him to record a region and its inhabitants' particular characteristics disappeared. Benton became, of necessity, more of an historian than ever before.¹

Increasingly, he concentrated on specific local subject matter which included both the people and the geography and less on a national American style and stereotyped scenes. There is an intimate understanding revealed in his pictures of Missouri during this period. Benton thoroughly knew, loved, and respected this subject matter which he interpreted in a personal way. Because of a narrower focus at this stage in his career, the profoundness of his art increases. His landscapes during this time were perhaps the best of his lifetime:

In these, it would appear that Benton's overwhelming love for America found its true outlet--in the streams, hills, and mountains of the country, populated by people unsuspectingly living out their time, quietly enjoying themselves, living easily on the land, celebrating nothing more than their existence.²

In 1968 Benton was offered a three year commission to paint a mural for the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Missouri. The mural, "Independence and the Opening of the West" (Figure 5), shows the bustling activities of the town when it was the departure point for the

¹Ibid., p. 178.

²Ibid., p. 183.



Fig. 5. "Independence and the Opening of the West."
Thomas Hart Benton, 1959-62.
Acrylic polymer on linen mounted on panel, 19 x 32'.
Museum of the Harry S. Truman Library,
Independence, Missouri.

overland routes to the West. It is composed of symbolic figures and symbolic happenings including settlers, mountain men, French explorers, Indians, blacksmiths, strings of pack mules, and wagon trains.

For the first time in a mural, Benton used one point perspective. This was suitable for the particular wall used in the Truman Library because the entire wall could be seen from a single point of view. In previous murals, it was necessary for the viewer to change positions to be able to see all of the painting.

After finishing the Truman mural in 1961, Benton declared that he was too old to climb around on scaffolding to paint anymore. However, when the city of Joplin, Missouri, asked him to do a mural for its Centennial celebration in 1971, he was persuaded to paint another. This job appealed to him sentimentally, because he had begun his career as an artist working for a Joplin newspaper. It was small enough to paint in his studio, and he enjoyed telling the story of what Joplin looked like back in 1906 (Figures 6 and 7).

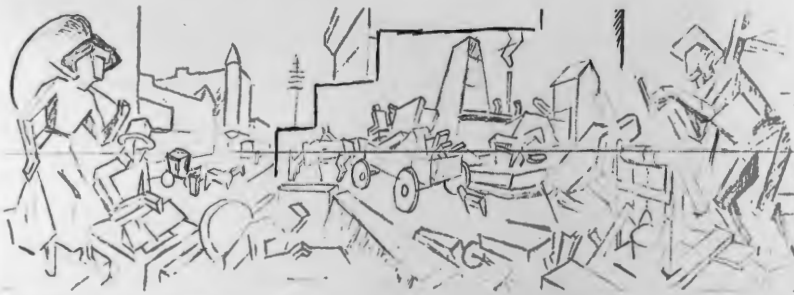
Benton wished to portray Joplin as a boom town and to show what made it that way. Although he basically knew what he wanted to paint, he visited Joplin before beginning work on the mural and studied the native minerals and exhibits of early mining equipment in the Joplin Mineral



Fig. 6. "Joplin at the Turn of the Century,
1896-1906." 1972.
Thomas Hart Benton.
Acrylic on canvas mounted on panel,
5½ x 14'.
Foyer of the Municipal Building,
Joplin, Missouri.



ROUGH PRELIMINARY DRAWING, 1971
Thematic Concept of "Joplin at the Turn of the Century, 1896-1906"
Pencil, 5 3/4 x 14 3/4"



THE ARTIST'S DRAWING FOR THE ARCHITECT, 1971
Noted for Scale and Horizon Line
Pencil, 7 1/4 x 22"



WORKING DRAWING FOR THE CARTOON, 1972
Scored to Scale
Pencil, 11 x 28 1/2"

Fig. 7. Three Sketches for the Joplin Mural. 1971-72.
Thomas Hart Benton.

Museum. He also carefully researched old photographs to jog his memory for specific and accurate details of objects and scenes to be included in the composition. In 1906 Joplin had street cars, but most people traveled in horse-drawn vehicles. Benton painted a wagon of settlers just arriving in town and a buggy traveling down main street. The elegant lady contrasted with the rough, hard working miners to represent two aspects of Joplin society. The Bible, symbolizing the town's religiosity, contrasted with the temptations that were also present, symbolized by the poker game and the House of Lords saloon. The Keystone Hotel was painted much as it appeared when Benton worked in Joplin, and he has included himself as a young newspaper cartoonist.¹

Benton considered the mural to be among his best works, and, encouraged by its success, he soon agreed to paint yet another mural, "Birth of Country Music," which was commissioned for the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee. For this last mural, as always, he did extensive research for detailed accuracy. When eighty-six years old, he made a special trip in October, 1974, to the Ozarks to make portrait sketches of the native people.

¹Warten, pp. 32-36.

The "Birth of Country Music" mural (Figure 8) is composed around a central dance floor. It includes dancers, fiddlers, and a dulcimer player representing the Appalachian and Ozarks mountain areas, a banjo player symbolizing the South, and a cowboy playing a guitar representing the West. In the background there are gospel singers and a country church. The train and the riverboat also symbolize aspects of country music with their whistles and natural rhythmic sounds. The composition, like the Truman mural, utilizes one-point perspective. The slant of the dance floor adds depth to the space that visually extends far into the distance beyond the riverboat.

This was indeed to be Benton's last mural. He had completed the painting late in the afternoon of January 19, 1975. Returning to his studio after supper to examine it again, he died there of a sudden heart attack. He had remained a productive artist until the day of his death.

Even though his critics implied otherwise, Benton was an exceptionally intellectual artist. He read widely in many fields including art history, psychology, art theory, and history. He was a talented writer with command of several literary styles. Not only did he write entertaining stories which he often illustrated, but he also lambasted critics and museum curators in their own patronizing style and wrote about extremely intellectual theories



Fig. 8. "Birth of Country Music." 1975.
Thomas Hart Benton
Acrylic on canvas mounted on panel.
Country Music Hall of Fame,
Nashville, Tennessee.

concerning form and composition. Benton's skills for narration prevailed in all of his creative work:

His art . . . is not only a matter of chronology, stylistic development, and artistic insight. It also carries elements of a saga, and one can observe how it was created in relation to the culture that nourished it.¹

Thomas Hart Benton had held firmly to his personal philosophy of art:

I have a sort of inner conviction that for all the possible limitations of my mind and the distorting effects of my processes, for all the contradicting struggles and failures I have gone through with, I have come to something that is in the image of America and the American people of my time. This conviction is in me pretty deeply . . . My American image is made up of what I have come across, of what was "there" in the time of my experience--no more, no less.²

¹Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, p. 21.

²Thomas Hart Benton, Thomas Hart Benton (New York: exhibition catalogue printed for Associated American Artists, 1939), p. 24.

CHAPTER II

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES IN THE WORK OF THOMAS HART BENTON

Benton's extensive research into the styles and techniques of master painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries included methods of the artists: Tintoretto, El Greco, Michelangelo, and Poussin. Of all artists he studied, Benton felt a particular affinity to these four, and carefully amalgamated influences from their work into his own style.

In 1917, Benton began a period of concentrated analysis of the anatomical forms and the organization of the sculpture of Michelangelo. One work which particularly impressed him was the "Battle of the Centaurs."¹ This sculpture, completed in 1492, is one of Michelangelo's first marble reliefs (Figure 9). It shows the use of considerable compositional skill in arranging male bodies in various positions of violent action.

Benton made many sketches of variations of similar group compositions, and he even tried combining some of these figures with brilliant color. In his painting "The

¹Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, p. 33.



Fig. 9. "Battle of the Centaurs." 1492.
Michelangelo.
Marble, 33 1/4 x 35 1/8".
Casa Buonarroti, Florence.

Bather" from 1917 (Figure 1), Benton shows a modeled, muscular, and twisted figure unmistakably influenced by Michelangelo which incorporates strong color derived more from the contemporary Parisian art movements. Similar use of the plastic qualities of the human body for dramatic expression was retained throughout Benton's career.

Benton's human figures of a later date may also be compared to those of Tintoretto from whom he frequently borrowed formal sequences and figural attitudes. Both artists stressed a plastic vitality in the human form while striving for an impressiveness of single figures. Examples of their respective work which may be effectively compared are "Over the Mountains" (Figure 10) from Thomas Hart Benton's "History of America" series and two details from Tintoretto's mural "The Crucifixion": "Man Digging" (Figure 11) and "Man Pulling Rope" (Figure 12).

The swelling muscles of the human bodies make curvilinear forms which continue the visual rhythms in the composition. The figures are designed as an essential part of the whole pictorial form: they are not merely fused with the rest of the painting but built into it. To achieve these kinds of results, infinite care had to be taken with the preliminary work of designing and sketching. In spite of the theatrical exaggeration of postures and gestures, the movements seem credible. Although Benton's paintings



Fig. 10. "Over the Mountains (History of America)." 1924-26.
Thomas Hart Benton.
Oil on canvas, 72 x 84".
Estate of artist.



Fig. 11. "Man Digging (The Crucifixion)."
1565.
Tintoretto.
Venice, Scuola di San Rocco,
Salla dell' Albergo.



Fig. 12. "Man Pulling Rope (The
Crucifixion)." 1565.

Tintoretto.

Venice, Scuola di San Rocco,
Salla dell' Albergo.

owe much to Renaissance influences, they are comparatively simplified and are executed in a cubistic manner.

Thomas Benton knew that El Greco was one of the first who "comprehended the representation of form the way the modern cubists did in the early part of this century."¹ El Greco had combined elements of Byzantine art with more naturalistic and three-dimensional designs of the early Italian mannerists. The emphasis of verticality, movement, and dramatic light as exemplified in his painting "Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple" (Figure 13) were aspects of his art that influenced Benton who incorporated many of these elements into his own highly mannered and expressive style.

He loved these great galumphing curved forms because they were rhythms. And you could sense his awareness of the pulse and the movement and the forces that exist in clouds and in trees and in streams and in entire landscapes.²

The timeless theme of the mother and infant son relationship was considered by Benton in a painting of his wife and child, "Rita and T. P." (Figure 14). This painting may be compared to "The Holy Family and Saint Mary Magdalene" (Figure 15) by El Greco. Even though El Greco's painting is obviously of a religious nature while Benton's appears secular, they may be collated.

¹Paul Watkins, Jr., "Thomas Hart Benton Remembered," Missouri Life, March/June, 1975, p. 54.

²Ibid.



Fig. 13. "Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple." c. 1600.

El Greco.

Oil on canvas, 41 3/4 x 51".

National Gallery, London.



Fig. 14. "Rita and T. P." 1928.
Thomas Hart Benton.
Oil and tempera on canvas
mounted on panel, 33x 25".
Estate of Rita Benton.



Fig. 15. "The Holy Family and Saint Mary
Magdalene." c. 1590-95.

El Greco.

Oil on canvas, 51 7/8 x 39 1/2".
Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio.

Benton used a pyramidal pictorial form comparable to compositions traditionally used for similar subject matter. The apex is the top of Rita's head while the left side of the triangle is formed by the head, shoulder, arm, and leg of T. P. and the edge of his mother's skirt. The right diagonal line coincides with the side of Rita's body. A similar pyramidal form is created by the shape of El Greco's madonna, but it is further expanded by the additional figure on each side of her.

The background and sky formed by almost flat areas of color in Benton's painting reflect a peaceful stillness. The line of the horizon is precise and hard; two small pyramid-shaped hills form accents that repeat the triangle of the main composition. In El Greco's work the jagged cloud formations serve the same purpose. In both paintings an angular, stylized treatment of drapery continues the rhythm of the overall design as the folds repeat the basic pictorial form. The treatment of the drapery is not concerned with disclosing the anatomy underneath. Although "Rita and T. P." could be compared with other works which employ the classical canons of portraiture, this example by El Greco is particularly suited for comparison because of its sense of volume and overall aesthetic similarity to Benton's painting.

One especially significant technique used by the artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and adopted by Benton was the use of small three-dimensional models of compositions to help achieve concentrated areas of light and shade or chiarascuro and a heightened illusion of spatial depth along with solidity of form. Literature of the Renaissance period often refers to these dioramic models. Their use was evidently widespread, but specific knowledge of how the actual procedure was carried out had diminished throughout the years. They were not considered works of art in themselves because of the necessary distortions and angles that made them useful as references for achieving pictorial space. Therefore, they were probably systematically destroyed, and no examples survive. Benton found that these models were quite distracting if he kept them within his view as a work was nearing completion, because they continued to suggest alternate approaches.¹

Tintoretto was an expert in matters of spacial illusionism and perspective. He had carefully developed a method to give illusionistic results. He studied the actual lighting conditions of the proposed location for a mural; then the construction of a small scenographic model facilitated location of highlights and shadows in the actual

¹Benton, An American in Art, pp. 73, 74.

composition. By changing the light source, many variations of light and shadow could be created.¹ Benton followed a similar procedure.

The next step was to sketch the composition in chiaroscuro. In Tintoretto's compositions, as in Benton's, single forms were an integral part of the whole. If the position of one figure was changed, the others were repositioned in relation to it. This arranging of relationships was an essential preliminary step in a composition. Both Tintoretto and Benton made great efforts to balance depth and plane in the spacial illusion. After completing studies of three-dimensional form, each would make character studies of a live model for every individual figure included within a picture.

Benton's description of his working procedure for the mural "A Social History of the State of Missouri" (Figure 4) includes an account of his use of a three-dimensional model:

The sculptured model of the Missouri mural was the most elaborate and also the largest I had ever made. It was twelve feet long and nearly four feet high, and it took me three months to complete. It differed from other models I had made in that it encompassed the total mural space. The others had been modelled sectionally. Also, for the first time I worked out my general color scheme on the model, painting the

¹Hans Tietz, Tintoretto: The Paintings and Drawings (London: Phaidon Press, 1948), p. 22.

different areas with the approximate colors to be used in the mural. The effect of the whole, when completed, was similar to some of the painted reliefs seen in the churches of Italy and Spain. Many people who saw this model deplored the fact that I intended to destroy it after its purpose was served. . . . I knew that it was not sculpture and that because of its construction it could not serve as such. . . . I did not try to set up true sculptural continuities in any of my models, but only to make a relief map of the projections and recessions of an illusionary pictorial design. I saw the models only as steps in painting, not as aesthetic products in themselves.¹

The sculptural diorama used by Benton during the creation of the "Joplin at the Turn of the Century" mural (Figure 6) was saved for educational and historical reasons.

Benton admired the work and philosophy of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), and admitted being influenced by him. Both men were scholars of many subjects including philosophy, history, and music although their tastes were not necessarily synonymous. These two artists were similar in other ways as well. Each was extremely theme oriented and leaned heavily toward a didactic purpose in his work. Between the first conception of an idea and the completed work, no amount of research, study, or effort was spared that might have made a contribution to the final painting. Each of them studied more than custom dictated for artists in their respective times.²

¹Benton, American in Art, pp. 71-72.

²Walter Friedlaender, Nicholas Poussin: A New Approach (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d.), p. 33.

He [Benton] was meticulous in his research and preparation. . . . Tom Benton did more physical preparation in terms of early sketches, drawings, color sketches, three-dimensional clay models, complete small renditions of his plan, than any artist I've ever heard of¹

Both Benton and Poussin held the conviction that an original idea must be clarified to the greatest degree possible if the resulting painting was to be effective in its form and message. Due to this segment of their philosophy, their paintings achieved a higher intellectual and symbolic plane than if they had been merely naturalistic. Both artists aimed for a degree of accuracy that communicated a truthfulness to the viewer. Poussin and Benton both had an interest in illusions and perspective. In their painting, each used a technique of layering visual planes one behind the other to suggest depth. This method reduced the necessity of relying completely upon linear perspective and foreshortening to achieve an illusion of distance.

The space of painting is, at least theoretically and ideally, a total space involving all the sensational as well as the constructive response of the human mind in the actual experience of real space.²

Benton's concept of space perception seems to have been more a matter of personal choice than necessity; for while he preferred the overlapping of forms, he also often

¹Watkins, "Thomas Hart Benton Remembered," p. 54.

²Thomas Hart Benton, "The Dead and the Living," The University Review (University of Kansas City) 7 (March 1941): 172.

used the linear perspective approach, particularly within the separate spatial planes. He realized that perspective was important for certain spacial illusions, but he also felt that it did not necessarily offer the best solution to pictorial depth. Benton was more interested in the flow of his compositions from one area to another rather than a one-way kind of perception. He wanted a continuity which would serve to unify the whole and could be readily apprehended as moving through space, not just projected into the space.

Our perceptions of depth come more from the superpositioning of objects--from our recognition that one is behind or forward of another--than from following their perspective lines. We most certainly do not perceive our visual worlds through the laws of perspective . . .¹

In many of their respective works, Benton and Poussin composed with groups of figures. In paintings with these group compositions, however, each individual human form has a specific character. Benton and Poussin may also be compared because of a similar interest in psychology.² Both did portrait sketches of live models for each face in a painting. Individual figures from their respective works radiate a calculated tenseness and vitality that, to them,

¹Benton, An American in Art, pp. 74-75.

²Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, p. 71; Friedlaender, Nicholas Poussin: A New Approach, p. 36.

represented the character of life. Neither Benton or Poussin believed color to be the most important aspect of painting, and, although both artists were influenced by Titian's color, they frequently used brilliant varied hues which often incorporated a primary triadic system.

In addition to their similarities in philosophy, interests, and style, Benton and Poussin each painted series or sets of paintings that were part of a common program. In fact, Benton's first major works were of this type: the "History of America" series done in 1923 to 1926 (Figures 3 and 10). This was an idea, however, that he later abandoned in the strict sense with which the "History" was executed.

Italian artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often utilized Biblical and mythological themes adapted to settings of their own time. Poussin chose these subjects frequently and often presented them with didactic meanings born of his own stoic philosophy.¹ Benton also did this although his philosophy may be less instructive. Some of the well-known examples including the paintings "Persephone," "Susanna and the Elders," and the "Achelous and Hercules" mural in Harzfeld's department store in Kansas City represent a twentieth-century interpretation of

¹Friedlaender, Nicholas Poussin: A New Approach, p. 37.

classical morality. The Greek myth of Persephone tells of her abduction by the kind of the underworld, Hades. In Benton's painting of 1938 and 1939 (Figure 16), Hades is portrayed as an aging Missouri farmer. The obvious humor is inescapable, yet there is a sense of relevance to Benton's portrayal of the theme. "Susanna and the Elders" is a painting of a Biblical story. Again, Benton's elders are Ozarkian characters, and Susanna is portrayed as a fashionable American girl of the 1930s.

Interesting comparisons may be drawn between Tintoretto's painting "Susanna Bathing" (Figure 17) and Benton's "Susanna and the Elders" (Figure 18). The same theme has been adapted to each artist's own time and place. While Tintoretto's Susanna bathes in an idyllic Italian garden, Benton's sits on the bank of a small stream edging a field in the Ozarks. The nudes are in similar, if not exact, positions. Each has downcast eyes and a left leg partially submerged in the water. Both of the nude figures reflect the standards of female beauty that were relevant to their respective cultures.

Tintoretto's Susanna is true to the feminine ideal of the Renaissance, "a plump and rounded figure, small breasts, a slightly accentuated stomach, a strong neck and a small head which conformed with the classical



Fig. 16. "Persephone." 1938-39.
Thomas Hart Benton
Oil and tempera on canvas,
71 x 52½".
Estate of Rita Benton.

Fig. 17. "Susanna Bathing."
Tintoretto.
56½ x 76".
Vienna, Gemäldegalerie.



Fig. 18. "Susanna and the Elders." 1938.
Thomas Hart Benton
Egg tempera on canvas mounted on -
panel, 60 x 42".
California Palace of the Legion
of Honor, San Francisco.



proportions."¹ The Italian Susanna wears ornate bracelets and a coiffure of intertwined braids. The clothing scattered on the ground near her is intricately embroidered and beaded.

Benton has portrayed Susanna in a twentieth-century style that shows a comparatively slim figure. However, the undulating outline of her hip and thigh is quite similar to that of the female form in Tintoretto's painting. The American Susanna gazes at her reflection in the water rather than in a mirror. Her hair style is characteristic of the 1930s, her nails are painted red, and she wears a diamond engagement ring. The clothing strewn beside her is less ornately delicate than the clothing in the Italian painting.

The men in both paintings represent highly respected elders of the church engaged in clandestine activities. In Benton's painting this point is reinforced by the small white country church seen in the distance, and he restates the ageless satirical theme of religious hypocrisy. Benton has placed the elders in the right side of the composition in a location behind Susanna, and they seem to be of a more conspiratory nature than those of Tintoretto.

The composition of Tintoretto is based upon the geometrical form of a triangle placed within a grid of

¹Paul Hamlyn, The Life and Times of Titian (London: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1968), p. 61.

vertical lines. The triangle is formed with points on the heads of the three figures and reinforced by the diagonal lines of the screen, the line of the horizon, and the line from the top of Susanna's head, down her right arm, across the edge of the shadow to the arm of the reclining elder. This triangle alludes to a smaller one found in the shape of the outline of the female figure.

Benton's composition is primarily vertical with undulations in the landscape which repeat the directions and forms of Susanna. He utilizes many echoes, repeats, and counter-directions as he develops and extends his composition based on the central figure. The bend of the knees is echoed in the curve of the stream and its bank. The rock on which Susanna is sitting serves as an upward counter thrust to the descending motion of her body. Her bent right elbow repeats the forking of the trees and helps to illustrate one of Benton's credos for tensions through opposing directions; the arm going one way, the tree limb the opposite way, and the other arm placed so that the entire composition rotates around the central figure. Benton's design philosophy centered on the idea of letting a form suggest its own movement and then complementing these movements through the juxtapositions of other forms.

The tree branch with leaves which is held by Susanna and the high creek bank bring the eye of the viewer back

into the composition. The same function is performed by the woven vegetative screen, the slant of the mirror, and the inclined heads of the elders in Tintoretto's painting. Each nude is seated before a large tree trunk which, from the opposite side, slants toward the center of the composition.

The overall color in Benton's painting seems considerably warmer than that of Tintoretto. The Italian garden is cool and damp, while Benton's creek seems to offer relief from a hot, dry summer day. The reddish-orange of Susanna's hair is repeated several times throughout Benton's painting in her clothing, shaded skin tones, leaves, and gravel on the creek bank. The variations of red in Tintoretto's painting are placed at the three points of his large compositional triangle. In both paintings the strong contrasts in color are those of value and the oppositions of cool and warm tones.

The Benton painting is a clear example of his attitude toward color which he jokingly equated with a child coloring in a coloring book.¹ There is strong emphasis on the primary color sense against a balance of neutrals. Benton felt his strength lay in composition and in lighting with some obvious interest in texture. Backlighting, he

¹Interview with Steve Miller, Ralph Foster Museum, Point Lookout, Missouri, 6 October 1974.

said, presented the form; texture gave life to the form through surface quality.¹ These qualities are represented in the painting.

The twenty-four by seven feet "Achelous and Hercules" mural in Harzfeld's was completed by Benton in 1947. It was his most ambitious attempt to adopt a classical legend to his painting. The Greek myth represented the struggle with nature for control of fertile river bottom land:

The river god Achelous fought Hercules for the hand of Dejanira. Finding himself no match for Hercules's power, Achelous transformed himself successively into a serpent and a bull, but in the end was defeated. In the final struggle Hercules tore a horn from Achelous's head, and this became the cornucopia, or horn of plenty. As an allegory of the Middle West this hero tale may be explained as follows: Achelous was a river that overflowed its banks in the rainy season. It was thought of as a snake because of its winding and a bull because of its force. In vanquishing the river god, and tearing off a horn, Hercules had halted the floods (by embankments and canals). The lands, now reclaimed and fertile, were symbolized by the horn of plenty. Under this guise Benton referred to the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, the floods and their control, the richness of the land, the cattle industry and the strength of the settlers.²

In these reinterpretations of ancient stories Benton felt that he had reinforced their universal and timeless meanings by making them more relevant to early twentieth-century America.

¹Ibid.

²Baigell, Thomas Hart Benton, p. 176.

Like the classical works, Benton considered his art "illustrative, storytelling, and popular in content or so intended."¹ Fortunately, he did not rely exclusively on Greek mythology for his themes. By the early 1920s, Benton had come to believe that the story of American life and culture must be communicated through American art, and that art had to come from the authentic culture of the artist rather than from pseudo-cultivated ideals.

Cultivation, education, may help the artist, but it cannot make a consequential art. Art is not science, whose terms arise from conditions identical the world over. It is not scholarship either, though some of the disciplines of my art may involve scholarship. Art in past history and still today, if it is to be significant art, is an expression of the values of life within a culture.²

Although Benton's paintings are concerned with the life and behavior of the common American people and are actually a kind of folk art intentionally created to appeal to a popular audience, they are created from a vast knowledge of the structure, composition, and technique of art styles throughout history. The primary sources of his technique are found in neo-Renaissance art. The distance seems great from Italian Renaissance saints to characters of the Ozark Mountain region, but there are valid grounds

¹"Benton versus Adams," Time, 4 March 1946, p. 49.

²Thomas Hart Benton, "To the Artists of Brazil: An Exchange of Letters," The University of Kansas City Review 10 (Summer 1944): 246.

for comparison in the strong and complicated rhythms, solid three-dimensional forms, and similar compositions.

At first glance, perhaps Benton's paintings appear to be simple; but, in actuality, they are extremely complex and often contain dichotomies such as concurrent but separate qualities of sensitivity and coarseness. His paintings were often of the representational type even though the typical people and landscapes were genuine and achieved only after thorough and detailed research.

He was an artist who worked hard to achieve a standard and found particular satisfactions in having someone share his unpopular philosophy about art. When an early Benton critic was remembered as labeling his paintings as quotations from the old masters, he acknowledged that they were. But, he went on to clarify that:

The whole modern movement has been an exploration of the past. We have re-learned that design is the important element in painting. But having found that design was an integral part of all art, modern painting still seemed empty. I found my painting sterile, and I parted company with the so-called modern movement--its dry patterns, its unoriginal repetition of historical forms.

To make an original form, it seemed necessary to me to have references beyond art. I had to find something which would be a soil for growth. I found it when I became interested in the background of American life. . . .¹

¹Ruth Pickering, "Thomas Hart Benton on His Way Back to Missouri," Arts and Decoration, February 1935, p. 19.

Benton was very conscious about how his profession was viewed by the common people, especially those with whom he had a great deal of contact, often to the point of inventing explanations for certain aesthetic decisions which he knew not everyone would understand. It was important to Benton to be understood by those individuals whom he championed in his art.

It became almost a ritual with Benton to annually float the Buffalo River in northern Arkansas doing sketches and gathering information for future works. In the course of these outings, he became good friends with many people of the area, friendships which he valued and thoroughly enjoyed. Like many artists, Benton often worked sequentially from a drawing to a lithograph to the finished painting, working out certain compositional and thematic ideas at each level of development. One such scene shows the lengths to which Benton would go to give a logical explanation to his art.

In 1939 Benton took one of his celebrated Buffalo River float trips and, as usual, did a series of sketches. One of these, "The Young Fishermen" or "Down the River" was later worked into a lithograph. In both the drawing and the lithograph the two boats are going the same direction: away from the viewer. Later when he made a painting of the

same subject, he endeavored to improve the organization of the picture by reversing the direction of the farthest boat, thus drawing the viewer's eye back into the composition (Figures 19 and 20). He admitted this when talking to people who knew about artistic composition,¹ but, when explaining the alteration to his river guide, he gave a different reason: one that made sense to an average American. The boat was turned back into a fishing hole to give his son "another crack."²

In spite of his deep roots in the styles and motivations of the past, Benton was more contemporary and innovative than is generally thought.³ Many elements of importance in his work are subtle carryovers of influences from his early experiments with the Impressionist, Cubist, Synchronist, and Constructivist styles which, he said, he later abandoned as being decadent. He would often rationalize modern art as "a good way to learn."

I grew out of French impressionism and cubism. I grew out of the period where much interest was

¹Interview with Steve Miller, Ralph Foster Museum, Point Lookout, Missouri, 6 October 1974.

²Thomas Hart Benton letter to Jim Owens, Ralph Foster Museum, Point Lookout, Missouri, n.d.

³Alfred Frankenstein, "Thomas Hart Benton, 1889-1975," Art News, March 1975, p. 78.

Fig. 19. "The Young Fishermen." 1939.
Thomas Hart Benton
Lithograph, 10 x 12½".
Edition of 250.
Circulated by Associated American
Artists, New York City.



Fig. 20. "The Young Fishermen." 1962.
Thomas Hart Benton.
Oil on canvas mounted
on panel, 40 x 38".
Collection of Thomas P. Benton.



devoted to the abstract. All my early study was in procedure.¹

And, although he enjoyed his much acclaimed status as a vulgar and self-reliant figure, he was a sensitive, articulate individual who continued to employ his extensive knowledge of modern concepts to his painting. As late as 1973, when he was eighty-five years old, his self-portrait conveys the angularity of cubism in an economy of form that is thoroughly modern. Although he abandoned modern art per se, he never abandoned what it had taught him. As Jansen pointed out in 1946:

His work still reverberates with the muffled echoes of impressions he received. . . . [in Paris]. The undulating decorative line of the early Matisse; the glaringly bright color of Van Gogh and Gauguin; the emaciated bodies and the visceral crowding of pliable shapes, reminiscent of the time when El Greco was being rediscovered as an ancestor of modern esthetic; all these are essential ingredients of Benton's style.²

It was not style alone but a combination of style and content which Benton saw as his art. Early in his career, he developed a strong desire to paint what he knew and what he saw. And, he did completely abandon the modernist concept of inventing form.

¹Pickering, "Thomas Hart Benton on His Way Back to Missouri," p. 19.

²H. W. Janson, "Benton and Wood, Champions of Regionalism," Magazine of Art 39 (May 1946): 198.

I never start anymore with a preconception of the nature of the form; I start with faces, tree trunks, old shoes. I go on trips through the country, I make thousands of drawings. I see something that interests me, and the formal relations follow.¹

Benton's assorted background of varied artistic experiences together with a serious study of nineteenth-century Japanese prints combined with influences from the Italian Mannerist and Baroque periods in Benton's mature style. His hybrid art contains an extraordinary amount of action, color, and life. Benton created a strong, vibrant, personal, and unique art in his endeavors to maintain the old at the same time as expressing the new.

¹Pickering, "Thomas Hart Benton on His Way Back to Missouri," p. 20.

CHAPTER III

THOMAS HART BENTON AND REGIONALISM

A popular interest in American history, brought about in part by Roosevelt's emphasis on internal American problems and in part by the Depression, is reflected in the art of that time. Earlier, during the late 1920s, many artists in the United States had become interested in an art of native American subject matter. This movement developed into the Regionalist style of the early 1930s. Benton, along with John Stuart Curry and Grant Wood, was a leader of Regionalism which, because of the origins of the artists, came to be primarily associated with the midwest area.

Although Benton, Wood, and Curry painted many scenes from the middle western United States, their art was not as limited in scope as is often implied. The Middle West was composed of a variety of diverse regions--in both geography and local customs. Regionalism actually reflected national experiences as well as local ones. It represented the realization of a popular idea that a true American art style, apart from the art influenced by Europe, would materialize in the parts of the country that had least been

affected by the current Parisian modes.¹ Benton, Curry, and Wood each thought of himself as an American painter and did not limit his work to depictions of any one particular area. They all painted a lot of rural and agricultural scenes, but, after all, America at that time was primarily a rural culture.

Benton held strong political beliefs concerning the importance of the role of the working people in society, and he had a great respect for the frontier past of America. These attitudes influenced his choice of subject matter. He had personally observed the changes in midwest America from Indian Territory to industrialism, and he endeavored to record this dynamic and hectic energy in his painting with moving and gyrating forms.

Benton's realism was quite technical and involved the adaptations of Baroque rhythms and illusions of three-dimensional space to American subject matter. Wood was inspired by Dutch and Flemish genre painters and emphasized meticulous and realistic details, texture, and color. Curry had begun his artistic career as an illustrator, and his faithfulness to subject matter carried over into his later painting style.

¹Matthew Baigell, "The Beginnings of 'The American Wave' and the Depression," Art Journal 27 (Summer 1968): 387.

Each of these three artists reached his theoretical conclusions separately, worked in a different style, had a temperament different than the others, and approached art in a unique and personal way. Only after they had been classified together as Regionalists did they become acquainted and, to a slight degree, influence each other. Although basically remaining very individualistic, they shared some ideas and beliefs about art and what it should be. They all considered subject matter to be of the utmost importance and firmly believed that art should grow from, have deep roots in, and reflect its native culture.¹ They wished to use art for representational purposes to which the average common people could respond.

If subject matter determined form and the subject matter was distinctively American, then we believed an American form, no matter what the source of technical means, would eventually ensue. If this form had public significance, and we felt from our own experiences that it must, then a public demand for it would grow.²

All three of these leaders in the Regionalist movement were well-educated, had a good knowledge of art history, and understood (and rejected) modern French art. Nevertheless, the term "Regionalist" came to carry connotations of "provincial" and "hick" and was used in a derogatory

¹Thomas Hart Benton, "What's Holding Back American Art?" Saturday Review of Literature 15 (December 1951): 9.

²Benton, An American in Art, p. 155.

sense.¹ The style's popularity lay with the public more than with collectors, museums, press, and professors.

The same groups which looked suspiciously at me alone looked even more suspiciously at the three of us together. Although this animosity had many critical facets, it was sparked by two main lines of thought. One of these was political, the other aesthetic. These lines were often intertwined and so mixed up that the contradictions . . . which they involved were obscured.²

Traditionally, Americans had looked to Europe as a source for culture and, in this respect, thought of their own society as being second-rate. Paris had provided a creative atmosphere, and artists of many nationalities had converged there and formed a unique and superficial society of their own. Benton felt that the art of this group did not reflect or grow out of deep cultural roots, but rather was created and marketed as a status symbol much as Paris fashions in clothing. The Regionalists did not consider the Parisian art styles appropriate for expressing American meanings.

We felt that Parisian aesthetics which denied the value of the subject for painting was denying the only thing which could generate an American form. We were aware of the fact that the great arts of the European motherland itself were arts which were based on subjects willing to carry public significance.³

¹Ibid., p. 151.

²Ibid., p. 164.

³Ibid., p. 188.

Art has been treated by most American practitioners as if it were a form of science, where like processes give like results all over the world. . . . This put inventive method rather than a search for the human meaning of one's life at the center of artistic endeavor and made it appear that esthetic creation was a matter for intellectual rather than intuitive insight. . . . Without those old cultural ties which used to make the art of each country so expressive of national and regional character, it has lost not only its social purpose but its very techniques for expression.¹

The Regionalists were dedicated to the idea of artists' involvement in and understanding of American life as it was experienced by the majority of the people. They thought that it was only in this way that a vital art style could have a valid and essential role in our society. Benton felt that the people who wanted art to remain elite and above "vulgar" contacts reacted against the Regionalist movement. Many criticisms were written against Regionalism by relatively uninformed people. "The philosophy of our popularism was rarely considered by our critics."²

The Mexican art of the 1930s was an inspiration to the Regionalist painters even though they did not share the Mexican painters' devotion to Marxism. It was a vital art that reflected the people's life and history. Benton saw the two movements, the Mexican and the Americanist Regionalism, as the only real attempts to rescue art from "its privatism

¹Benton, "What's Holding Back American Art?" p. 10.

²Ibid., p. 11.

and return it to a meaningful place in Western society."¹ But, as Benton himself pointed out, neither was successful in that respect. Benton attributed this failure to maintain influence to several factors. One of the most basic of these was the underlying Anglo-Protestant feeling that art was not a necessity but a self-indulgent luxury.

When advertising became popular during the latter part of the nineteenth century, art at last began to function as a vital part of life in America. However, in the process it was degraded to extremely low forms of commercial vulgarity.

Along with fraudulent verbiage, a fraudulent, re-touched photograph type of realism was erected which gave to all realism a suggestion of sham. The popular appeals of this stuff also gave to any serious attempts at popularism, such as those inherent in regionalism, a suspicion of venality.²

Advertising purported to be real, sincere, and honest while it was obviously fraudulent, and caused people to begin to lose faith and become distrustful of all realistic art forms. This destroyed the cultural basis for a flourishing art of realism.³

The American concept of the country's relationship to the rest of the world began to change in the late 1930s.

¹Benton, An American in Art, p. 190.

²Ibid., p. 191.

³Ibid.

Problems of an international aspect began to demand the attention of all the American people.¹ The focus ceased to be on American culture and its unique features; Regionalism was no longer relevant.

¹Benton, "What's Holding Back American Art?" p. 10.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

Benton was well-known as an American Regionalist. He was the "first modern American artist to emphasize the importance of the subject in the growth of an original style,"¹ and he was significant as an artist who integrated traditional Renaissance techniques with twentieth-century art.

The development of his distinctive style began with early artistic experiences including frequent sketching as a young boy, a job as a newspaper cartoonist, and formal training at the Chicago Art Institute and at the Académie Julien in Paris. Benton experimented with many modernist styles and studied Italian Renaissance paintings in the Louvre. Following some years of varied artistic endeavors in New York City, Benton served in the Navy during World War I when his duty was to make representational sketches. The years between 1919 and 1926 were critical in Benton's artistic development. That he had begun to work out his mature style by 1926 is evident in his "History of America"

¹George Michael Cohen, "Thomas Hart Benton: A Discussion of His Lithographs," American Artist, September 1962, p. 25.

murals. In the "America Today" mural done for the New School of Social Research in 1930 his attitudes about the function of art in society had developed. He was in tune with the prevalent philosophy of his time which advocated a truly American artistic movement.

As the United States endeavored to recover from the economic breakdown of 1929, there was a great concentration on American culture by the people themselves. The Regionalists benefitted from this interest as it coincided with the subject matter of their paintings. Benton endeavored to paint the actualities of human behavior rather than portray an ideal. He greatly respected his mid-western heritage and valued the American pioneer spirit.

Benton integrated many influences to form his own unique and eclectic style utilizing what he had learned from the modernists in combination with structural devices derived from the Renaissance.

His forms appear in high relief as he cleverly juxtaposes one volume beside another, overlapping planes, creating recession and an atmospheric perspective, and weaving volumes into rhythmic units. Block forms play against and foil each other as they are balanced by several minor masses, all circulating around poles of interest. Benton's surfaces are distorted and disturbing, but there is an underlying classic logic. Beneath the appeal of character and scene, we feel a sweeping rhythm imbued with an infinite variety of line and volume. His chaotic style of contrasting forms represents the collective psychology, energy, and vulgarity of a people distraught with social change

and persecution. Their tight lips, tense, bulbous muscles, and physically and mentally worn appearance reveal a self-conscious, strained, accelerated existence.¹

For several years after World War II Regionalism was ridiculed, and the American art movement returned to Paris for its inspiration. Benton's art became unpopular. He made few sales, and he did not receive commissions. In 1963 the tide began to turn when, unexpectedly, a Benton painting sold in New York for about ten times its appraised value. Benton said, "Everything changed after that. I could never explain it any more than I could the eclipse. We run in curious fashions and spasms."² Perhaps this happened because of growing sentiments of nostalgia toward the quickly vanishing agrarian era that Benton had recorded in paint.

The demand for Benton's work became very strong during his last years as his work revived in popularity. Having survived the period of rejection, he enjoyed his reinstated success. His "Joplin at the Turn of the Century" mural was dedicated in 1973 by John Canaday, a critic from

¹Ibid., p. 75.

²William A. McWhirter, "True Grit: Thomas Hart Benton at 85," TWA Ambassador, November 1974, p. 11.

New York, who had once called him "one of the worst cornballs in American art."¹

Although Benton concentrated on his native area and its indigenous culture, much of his work has value for people everywhere. The irony is that the more narrowly he focused on specific locations and specific customs, the more universally significant his art became; the more personal his reactions reflected in his art, the more universally valid it became.

Thomas Hart Benton spent a lifetime investigating the structural problems of art. He continuously studied the art of the past for its interrelated structure and order and carefully selected elements which he combined to create his unique eclectic style. Always intensely involved with form, he once said,

Only knowledge which is deeply and profoundly a part of one can be communicated through the logical conventions of a form. Such knowledge is found, not on the intellectual fringe of life, or in the illusions of cloistered sensibilities, but in life itself where the drive of a people is felt and shared.²

Thomas Hart Benton was an innovative artist in one of the most fascinating times in art during the twentieth century.

¹Ibid., p. 12.

²Pickering, "Thomas Hart Benton on His Way Back to Missouri," p. 20.

He was a kind of eye for us. Many people thought he saw clearly for us. I suspect enough of them did that we can justify stating that he is a permanent part of the history of art.¹

¹Watkins, "Thomas Hart Benton Remembered," p. 55.

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