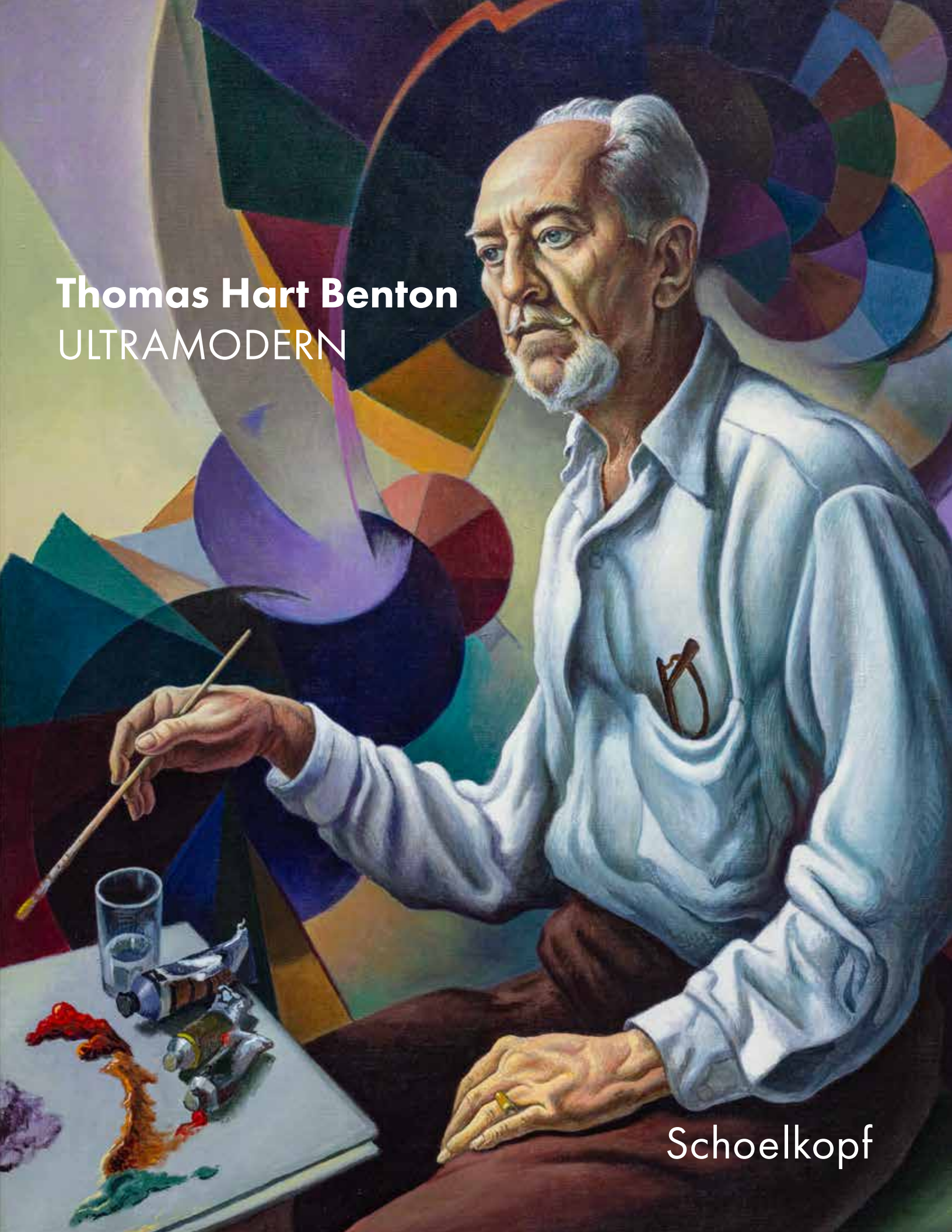

Thomas Hart Benton
ULTRAMODERN

Schoelkopf

Thomas Hart Benton: Ultramodern

Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) is generally considered a representational artist, a painter of colorful and dynamic pictures highlighting American landscapes, laborers, and everyday life. During the interwar era, from the late 1920s through the early 1940s, Benton was known as a Regionalist, working in a style of modern American art named for its focus on distinctively Midwestern scenes and subjects. Along with Grant Wood, who painted the rolling hills and stoic farmers of Iowa, and John Steuart Curry, who painted the people, places, and legends of Kansas, Benton was championed as the leader of a "Regionalist Triumvirate" for his realistic paintings of the farmscapes, folk tales, and cultural histories of Missouri, his home state.

While labeled a Regionalist, Benton's artistic interests were much more expansive. His animated and boldly colored paintings sought to capture the energy, intensity, and productivity that he felt epitomized modern America. As Benton later wrote, "I was after a picture of America in its entirety . . . I ranged north and south and from New York to Hollywood and back and forth in legend and history."[1] He painted that picture of America on modern terms, rejecting academic or traditional strategies of composition, perspective, and naturalistic color for new techniques including collage, overlapping, spatial flattening, and highly saturated pigments. Abstract works ranging from *Constructivist Still Life* (1917; fig. 1) to *Demonstration* (1973; fig. 2) reveal Benton's lasting engagement with the formal characteristics of modern art, and his consistent experimentation with lines, shapes, and colors that might convey the dynamism of modern times.

FIG 1 Thomas Hart Benton, *Constructivist Still Life*, 1917. Oil on cardboard, 12½ x 8 inches (31.8 x 20.3 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill

FIG 2 Thomas Hart Benton, *Demonstration*, 1973. Oil on canvas, 17¾ x 23¾ inches (45.1 x 60.3 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill

When a cache of his early abstract paintings and sketches was exhibited in 1981, after being hidden in a suitcase in Paris for over fifty years, art critic Hilton Kramer exclaimed that Benton was "in his youth an enthusiastic and accomplished modernist."[2] Kramer was only half-right: Benton maintained a robust style of modern American art throughout his long career, crafting abstract forms and representational subjects in his paintings, drawings, and murals. The skewed perspectives, vibrant colors, and dynamic rhythms of his abstract studies set the pace for Benton's signature style of modern American art. "Contrary to general belief," he remarked in 1969, "the 'Regionalist' movement did not in any way oppose abstract form. It simply wished to put meanings, recognizable American meanings, into some of it." Or as he noted elsewhere, "My representational work has abstraction in it. It has never completely left my figurative painting."[3]

Benton's artmaking started early in life, from copying book illustrations of "hunters and pioneers" when he was a boy to sketching local scenes for *The Joplin American*, a Missouri newspaper that hired him as a staff cartoonist when he was seventeen years old. In 1907, he enrolled at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago where "the rich, sensual joy of smearing streaks of color" on canvas and board confirmed his determination "to be an artist."[4] Benton's enthusiasm for the medium of painting was anchored by lifelong interests in artistic methods and techniques, including concentrated visual observation, preparatory models, and theories of composition. In his 1937 autobiography, *An Artist in America*, Benton reflected on his difference in "a family devoted to such practices as law, politics, and business." He had, he wrote, an "artist's interest" in the conceptual nature of things: "I was liable, as are all artists, to abstract every idea of

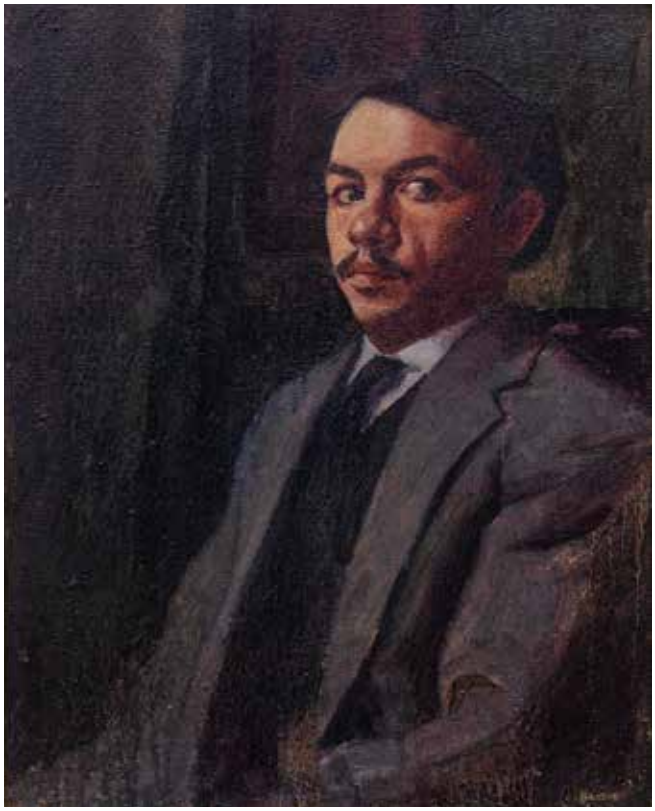

FIG 3 Thomas Hart Benton, *Self-Portrait*, 1909–10. Oil on canvas, 19½ x 15½ inches (49.5 x 39.4 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill

FIG 4 Thomas Hart Benton, *Self-Portrait*, 1912. Oil on canvas mounted on board, 31 x 22¼ inches (78.7 x 56.5 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill

purpose from a thing just because its mere existence, its color or form, would grip me. I could sit for long periods simply staring at something."[5] Two early self-portraits dating to 1909–10 and 1912 attest to Benton's intense and serious gaze, and suggest his deep sense of artistic identity and purpose (figs. 3–4).

Living in Paris from 1908 to 1911, and moving to New York in 1912, Benton "backed away from traditional training" and experimented with different painting styles and theories, later recalling: "I was by turn visual realist, Impressionist, Neo-Impressionist, Cézannist, Synchromist, Constructivist, or I zigzagged between."[6] He befriended American modernist Stanton Macdonald-Wright, who introduced him to the color-saturated style of Synchromism that he and Morgan Russell pioneered in the early to mid-1910s. Decades later, he painted a portrait of Macdonald-Wright in his studio (fig. 5), haloed by the planes of color that Benton, viewing an exhibition of Synchromist paintings at the Carroll Galleries in New York in 1914, described as "an explosion of rainbows."[7] Benton adopted Macdonald-Wright's Synchromist style in abstract canvases such as

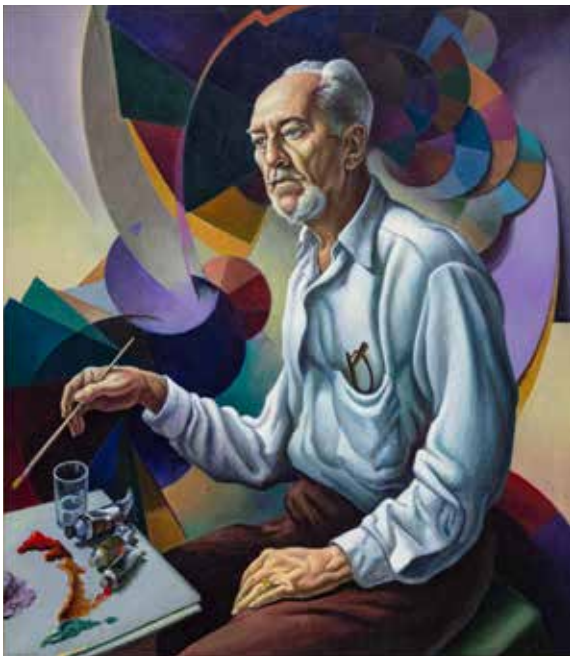

FIG 5 Thomas Hart Benton, *Portrait of Stanton Macdonald-Wright*, 1961–62. Oil on canvas, 40 x 34 inches (101.6 x 86.4 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill

FIG 6 Thomas Hart Benton, *Bubbles*, 1914–17. Oil on canvas, 22 x 17 inches (55.9 x 43.2 cm), Baltimore Museum of Art. Gift of H.L. Mencken, Baltimore, 1947.317. © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Baltimore Museum of Art / Bridgeman Images

FIG 7 Thomas Hart Benton, *Rhythmic Construction*, 1919. Distemper on canvas mounted on panel, 28 x 22 inches (71.1 x 55.9 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill

Bubbles (c. 1914–17; fig. 6) and showed several similarly non-objective works in the *Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters* at New York's Anderson Gallery in 1916. In a 1921 review in *The Dial*, art critic Paul Rosenfeld listed Benton as one of "the most ultramodern in tendency among modern American painters."[8]

Benton refined his early "ultramodern" art in a series of abstract paintings focused on dynamic representation; indeed, Rosenfeld described Benton's compositions as "powerfully felt, rhythmical, full of bull-dog vigour."[9] *Rhythmic Construction* (1919; fig. 7), for example, depicts geometric forms including ovals, crescents, cylinders, rectangles, polyhedrons, and triangles amassed against a muted blue background. Some of the forms are interconnected, while others float freely in space. Somewhat akin to the sharp focus and smooth, reductive style of Precisionism, Benton's geometric abstraction seemingly foreshadows the labyrinthine chain-reaction contraptions illustrated by American cartoonist Rube Goldberg in the late 1920s.

But Benton's focus in these abstractions was less on the superficial character of the things being depicted than on the pictorial problems of volume, light, and deep space, or how to create the illusions of depth and dimensionality on flat, two-dimensional surfaces. He later explained that *Rhythmic Construction* and related abstractions were meant to communicate the "representation of real objects in a real space," adding: "The 'real' objects in this case were folded or cut out pieces of colored paper or cardboard set up like a 'constructivist' sculpture."[10]

During the late 1910s, Benton set up many similar experiments, making maquettes out of paper, cloth, wood, and

FIG 8 Thomas Hart Benton, *Abstract Phantasy*, c. 1925-26. Oil on paper, 11 x 8¼ inches (27.9 x 21 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill

FIG 9 Thomas Hart Benton, *Twelve Planes and a Silver Egg*, 1934. Tempera on board, 8¾ x 5 inches (22.2 x 12.7 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill

wire and reassembling them in various abstractions, from painterly works such as *Constructivist Still Life* (1917; fig. 1) and *Abstract Phantasy* (c. 1925–26; fig. 8) to the smooth contours depicted in *Twelve Planes and a Silver Egg* (1934; fig. 9). He also began making preparatory models in clay, a practice he sustained throughout his career, to assess the properties of light, shade, and depth that he aimed to represent in his two-dimensional paintings. In the 1920s, Benton translated his experiments with dynamic form and pictorial composition in multiple media, including abstract designs for ceramics and embroidery which were often fabricated by his wife, Rita. Joining the Design Workshop organized by progressive modern art educator and printmaker Ralph Pearson, Benton created hand-hooked rugs and decorative screens that, like his abstract paintings, disclosed his focus on the underlying structural forces of form.[11] The screen panel *Sea Phantasy I* (1925–26; fig. 10), for example, commissioned for the den of well-known sportsman Albert Briggs, features many of the same pictorial elements as Benton's oil *Abstract Phantasy*.[12]

Like other American moderns, Benton rejected the formal conventions of Renaissance art including scientific perspective and static or fixed compositions. But he did not reject the need for a system or methodology of modern painting. Throughout his career, Benton was committed to perfecting an aesthetic method that would "catch the swing of the modern world" in a rhythmic, open-ended style.[13]

Benton elaborated on his theories about dynamic modern picture making in the five-part essay "Mechanics

FIG 10 Thomas Hart Benton, *Sea Phantasy I*, 1925–26. Oil on tin, 63 x 47 inches (160 x 119.4 cm). Private collection © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

of Form Organization in Painting," published in *The Arts* from 1926 to 1927.[14] He wrote it in part as a manual for the classes in Life Drawing, Painting, and Mural Composition that he taught at New York's Art Students League from 1926 to 1935. Charles Pollock, who studied with Benton during his first year at the school, recalled that his teaching manifesto involved "an intensive study" of Renaissance art by Titian, Tintoretto, and Rubens to help students understand how pictorial elements such as lighting, shading, and modeling challenged the spatial limitations of flat, two-dimensional surfaces.[15]

Benton himself explained that his essay was intended to "strip plastic form to its barest essentials" by illustrating the "fundamental mechanical factors which underlie what we generally respond to as aesthetic values." In the fourth section, for example, he included diagrams of "movement and counter-movement along rhythmical lines," and in part five he employed a "cubic analysis" of forms in deep space. The "mechanical principle which we share with all life," Benton concluded, "can be abstracted and used in constructing and analyzing things which also in their way have life and reality."[16] The abstractions he painted throughout his career were designed to illustrate this principle, and powerfully represent Benton's lifelong focus on the dynamic forms of modern American life.

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NOTES

1. Thomas Hart Benton, "American Regionalism, A Personal History of the Movement," (1951), reprinted in Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art, A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1969), 148.

2. Hilton Kramer, "Art View: Benton, The Radical Modernist," *New York Times* (January 10, 1982): Sect. 2, 25. The exhibition, *Thomas Hart Benton: Synchromist Paintings 1915–1920 From a Private Collection*, which featured Benton's "suitcase abstractions," was held at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries in New York, December 2, 1981–January 30, 1982.

3. Benton, *An American in Art,* 77; Micheline Keating, "He Got Away from Psychic Inversions," *Tucson Daily Citizen* (May 3, 1958).

4. Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, 4th rev. ed. of 1937 book (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 13, 20–21, 31.

5. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 23–24.

6. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 34, *An American in Art*, 43.

7. Benton, *An American in Art*, 33.

8. Paul Rosenfeld, "American Painting," *The Dial* 71 (December 1921): 660.

9. Rosenfeld, "American Painting," 661.

10. Thomas Hart Benton, letter to Edmund Kuehn, Assistant Director of the Columbus Museum of Art, August 6, 1962, collection Columbus Museum of Art, Colunbus, Ohio.

11. For a photograph of Benton's rug titled *Railroads* see "Rugs Designed by Americans," a full-page ad promoting Pearson's design firm that was published in *Creative Arts* (February 1929); for a discussion of Pearson's perspectives on modern art and design see Cynthia Fowler, *Hooked Rugs: Encounters in American Modern Art, Craft, and Deisgn* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

12. See the discussion of Benton's *Phantasy Series* in the exhibition catalogue *Thomas Hart Benton: Mechanics of Form* (Palm Springs, FL: Surovek Gallery, 2019), 66.

13. Thomas Hart Benton, letter to *The Arts* c. 1924, in the Forbes Watson Papers, Microfilm Roll D-54, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; see also Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernisn: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 44–45.

14. Thomas Hart Benton, "Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting, Part I," *The Arts* 10, no. 5 (November 1926): 285–89; "Part II," *The Arts* 10, no. 6 (December 1926): 340–42; "Part III," *The Arts* 11, no. 1 (January 1927): 43–44; "Part IV," *The Arts* 11, no. 2 (February 1927): 95–96; and "Part V," *The Arts* 11, no. 3 (March 1927): 145–58. Quotes from "Part I," 285, "Part IV," 96, and "Part V," 145.

15. Charles Pollock quoted in J. Richard Gruber, "Thomas Hart Benton: Teaching and Art Theory," PhD diss. (University of Kansas, 1987), 197. In 1929, Benton gave Pollock the suitcase filled with his early abstractions; see endnote 2.

16. Benton, "Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting, Part I," 285, "Part IV," 96, and "Part V," 145.