



**Thomas Hart Benton**  
AND MARTHA'S VINEYARD

Schoelkopf



## Thomas Hart Benton and Martha's Vineyard



Thomas Hart Benton in his Martha's Vineyard studio with his painting *Paint Mill Brook, Chilmark (Woodland Stream)*, 1969. Photo credit: Alfred Eisenstaedt/Life Pictures Collection/Shutterstock

Chilmark, Massachusetts, was a special place for American artist Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), a place that he first visited in 1920 and returned to every summer for over fifty years. Benton is often cast as a Midwestern Regionalist, a painter of Kansas landscapes and Missouri state history. Or he is recognized for his colorful, energetic scenes of modern urban life and industry, such as the ten-panel mural *America Today* (1930–31), now owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. But it was during the months and years he spent in Chilmark, a small town on the island of Martha's Vineyard south of Cape Cod, that Benton honed the artistic style and subjects that led to his celebrated reputation as a leading modernist painter.

"It was in Martha's Vineyard that I first really began my intimate study of the American environment and its people," Benton explained in his autobiography, *An Artist in America*, first published in 1937. He added:

Martha's Vineyard had a profound effect on me. The relaxing sea air, the hot sand on the beaches where we loafed naked, the great and continuous drone of the surf, broke down most of the tenseness which life in the cities had given me. It separated me from the Bohemias of art and put a physical sanity into my life for four months of the year. Providing me with a homely subject matter and a great quiet for reflection . . . [it] put me in a psychological condition to face America.<sup>1</sup>

The island's physical and psychic effect is clear in Benton's 1925 painting *Chilmark Landscape* (fig. 1), a pulsating summer scene of vibrant yellow, green, and blue forms depicting twisty roads, rolling hills, dense clumps of pitch pine and scrub-oak, rippling fields of salt hay and grains, and creamy, roiling banks of clouds. These undulating forms are anchored by more stable shapes representing wooden houses, telephone poles, and a horizontal strip of azure ocean. Starting from the lower right corner of the painting, Benton leads the viewer up the road, through the fields, and then down steep bluffs to one of Chilmark's

picturesque beaches. Standing like sentries, the telephone poles invite us to the waterfront, dutifully communicating Benton's central visual message: the dynamic and energizing environment of Martha's Vineyard.

Formed by the movement of the last continental ice sheet about 23,000 years ago, Martha's Vineyard was inhabited for millennia by the Wampanoag, who called the island Noepe, meaning "dry land among waters." European settlement began in the seventeenth-century and fishing, farming, whaling, lumber, and wool became economic mainstays. Until about 1900, much of the 24-mile long island was "a vast sheep pasture" ribboned with dry stone

walls.<sup>2</sup> By the time Benton first visited in 1920, sheep farming had dwindled and woody vegetation including low-canopied oak and beech trees had started growing in abandoned pastures, especially on the western side of the island's mostly sand-plain ecosystem. Today, woodlands cover about 55 per cent of the island.

By the late nineteenth-century, Martha's Vineyard was known for its two different sides, or personalities. The more crowded and ritzier east side, the "down-island" port and resort towns of Oak Bluffs, Edgarton, and Vineyard Haven catered especially to summer tourism, which started in the 1830s. On the Vineyard's hillier, rockier, and more isolated



**FIG. 1** Thomas Hart Benton, *Chilmark Landscape*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 18¼ × 23 inches (46.4 × 58.4 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Olivia Divecchia



west side, which included the “up-island” rural communities of Chilmark, Gay Head, Menemsha, and West Tisbury, farming and fishing continued to dominate. Founded in 1694, named after a town in England, and covering twenty square miles, Chilmark is the highest point on the island. In 1920, it consisted of several dozen small-scale farms, a series of ponds, an isolated island called Nomans Land, and a year-round population of around 240 inhabitants.

Up-island features some of the Vineyard’s most striking scenery, including Gay Head Cliffs, steep bluffs some 150-foot in height whose naming by English settlers was meant to describe their multi-colored layers of clay, formed from glacial sediments. (In 1997, the town of Gay Head was officially renamed Aquinnah, its former Wampanoag name.) Benton drew and painted the cliffs at Aquinnah and along Chilmark’s beaches multiple times. He told one biographer, “The first thing I ever did on the island was a sketch of the Wesquobsque [sic] Cliffs,” recalling a mile-long stretch of slumping bluffs that represent the second highest formations on Cape Cod.<sup>3</sup> In *Self-Portrait with Rita* (fig. 2), the cliffs on the Vineyard’s west side serve as a dramatic backdrop. During the many summers he spent in Chilmark, Benton made the landscape his primary artistic focus.

Benton’s future wife, Rita Piacenza, first encouraged a visit to the Vineyard, hoping that a summer of sunshine and sea air would be relaxing and rejuvenating for them both. Benton was broke and depressed in 1920, and deeply worried about his artistic future. He was not yet a successful artist and was struggling with family issues. The eldest son of a populist Missouri congressman, and the great-nephew and namesake of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, the nineteenth-century champion of Manifest Destiny, Benton was expected to continue his family’s political legacy. “From the moment of my birth,” he wrote, “my future was laid out in my father’s mind. A Benton male could be nothing but a lawyer . . . only lawyers were equipped and fitted to possess political power.”<sup>4</sup> But this Benton male had other ideas. He sustained his family’s public and political interests, but did so with a personal style of modern art that projected what he believed were the fundamental qualities of the American Scene: the dynamism of its landscape and the productivity of its people. Although he was called a Regionalist, Benton imagined all-America as an organic blend of diverse places and spaces, and produced a rhythmic and representational style of modern art that was particularly progressive and upbeat.

He spent the 1910s working out the details of his artistic system, experimenting with the diverse formalist innovations



**FIG. 2** Thomas Hart Benton, *Self-Portrait with Rita*, c. 1924. Oil on canvas, 49 × 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (124.5 × 100 cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack H. Mooney. © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

of avant-garde art and searching for a personal style that would be both unique and meaningful. “I was by turn visual realist, Impressionist, Neo-Impressionist, Cézannist, Synchronist, Constructivist, or I zigzagged between these,” he later recalled.<sup>5</sup> He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1907 and then lived for three years in Paris, where he was attentive to emergent strains of modern art ranging from Cézannesque structuralism to Cubism. He met American artists Stanton MacDonald-Wright and Morgan Russell and explored the style of Synchronism, making non-objective color-field paintings that were “like an explosion of rainbows.”<sup>6</sup> In 1916, he was one of sixteen artists invited to participate in the 1916 Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters at New York’s Anderson Galleries, along with Oscar Bluemner, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Charles Sheeler, and William

Zorach. In 1917, Benton was lauded as a “significant young American artist” and an “American painter of promise” in an International Studio review of his solo show at the Chelsea Neighborhood Association Art Gallery. In 1921, critic Paul Rosenfeld described Benton, Max Weber, and Stanton Macdonald-Wright as “three of the most ultramodern in tendency among modern American painters.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite his growing reputation as an American modern, Benton’s experimental abstractions did not sell and he scrambled to make a living. Work in the early movie industry, then located in studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey and Brooklyn, New York, provided “a basic, if sporadic income” for several years. Benton’s friend Rex Ingram, a sculptor and aspiring movie director, helped him get part-time jobs designing sets, painting backdrops, and pursuing historical research for Fox and Pathé studios, for seven dollars a day. Ingram also showed Benton how he “worked out” his ideas for various movie scenes in sculptural tableau prior to production, a technique that Benton himself soon adopted.<sup>8</sup>

“I began making clay models in 1917,” Benton wrote, describing his practice of creating preparatory studies in clay, somewhat like dioramas, to assess the qualities of light, shade, depth, and movement that he aimed to convey in his paintings.<sup>9</sup> He often tilted these sculptural models forward at a 45-degree angle to achieve a birds-eye view of the scene he intended. Like other American moderns, Benton rejected the formal conventions of Renaissance art including scientific perspective and static,

fixed compositions. But he did not reject the need for a system or methodology of 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. *Chilmark Landscape*, one of his earliest canvases to convey this sensibility, was most likely first modeled in “natural clay dug out of the very cliffs he was representing.”<sup>10</sup> The varied tones and intense values of its sloping, surging hills give the painting a particularly bold three-dimensional effect.

In 1917, Benton also started teaching art classes at the Chelsea Neighborhood Association Art Gallery, which is where he met Rita. Born in Italy, Rita Piacenza immigrated to New York in 1912 and found work in fashion design. She enrolled in Benton’s night class in drawing to improve her skills, and wound up marrying him (in 1922) and managing his career, including framing and pricing many of his paintings. When she suggested that they “vacation” at the Vineyard, Benton leaped at the chance to escape another sweltering New York summer and to live on the cheap for a few months.

Getting there was not easy, involving an overnight boat from New York to New Bedford, Massachusetts, a two-and-a-half hour steamboat to Oak Bluffs, and then an eighteen mile drive across the island to Chilmark. Rita paid for Benton’s fare had arranged for him and his roommate, the writer Tom Craven, to stay in a barn that they rented for \$50. Rita stayed in a nearby bungalow and rustled up fish and vegetables from the locals. During the summer, the island was a virtual cornucopia, teeming with clams, mussels, wild strawberries, blueberries, grapes, and mushrooms. Living conditions were inexpensive but crude on the Vineyard’s west side: there were lots of telephones, but little or no electricity or indoor plumbing. It did not matter: Benton was captivated by the island’s pace and contours and returned year after year to paint its undulating landscapes and colorful feast of flowers and foliage, its Cape Cod farmhouses, and its year-round residents.

For Benton, the island was less a summer vacation than an artmaking inspiration, a place where he successfully worked out his theories on modern painting in pictures of “Vineyard scenes and Vineyard characters.”<sup>11</sup> In 1928, he and Rita became full-time seasonal residents in Chilmark, buying a three-room cottage on a hill overlooking Menemsha Pond and Vineyard Sound. The property included a small barn that became his summer studio. Even after they moved to Kansas City in 1935, Benton, Rita, their



Thomas Hart Benton and his wife Rita Piacenza at their home on Martha’s Vineyard, 1969. Photo credit: Alfred Eisenstaedt/Life Pictures Collection/Shutterstock





**FIG. 3** Thomas Hart Benton, *Flight of the Thielens*, 1938. Oil on board, 25¼ × 36¼ inches (64.1 × 92.1 cm). Private collection © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

son T.P. (born 1926), and daughter Jessie (born 1939) regularly made the journey to Martha's Vineyard and spent three to four months of each year in Chilmark. "I haven't even begun to scratch the surface of the art treasure here," Benton remarked in 1941, adding: "For the first eight years that I lived here, I walked wherever I went. I had no car, and did not want one. Before the children came, my wife hiked with me, and always we searched for those lonely, isolated spots where people never go and where nature has been free to dress and decorate the landscape without help or hindrance. You would be astonished at the number of such places that I have found."<sup>12</sup>

Other artists also painted views of Chilmark, including Benton's neighbor Virginia Berresford, an American modern whose paintings and drawings of the island's cliffs

and sand dunes featured muted colors, flattened planes, and an overall emphasis on order and clarity. She and Benton were regularly included in the Carnegie Museum of Art's annual International Exhibition of Paintings in the 1930s. She and her husband, the writer Benedict Thielen, lived in a summer cottage in Chilmark on Stonewall Beach, facing the Atlantic Ocean. In September 1938, their home and the fishing village of Menemsha were destroyed during the Great New England Hurricane. Berresford and her husband managed to reach the shoreline of Stonewall Pond but their live-in cook, Josephine Clarke, drowned. Witnessing the scene from the high ground of his house on a nearby hill, Benton invited Berresford and her husband to stay with him and Rita, later capturing the storm's devastation in his painting *Flight of the Thielens* (fig. 3).<sup>13</sup>

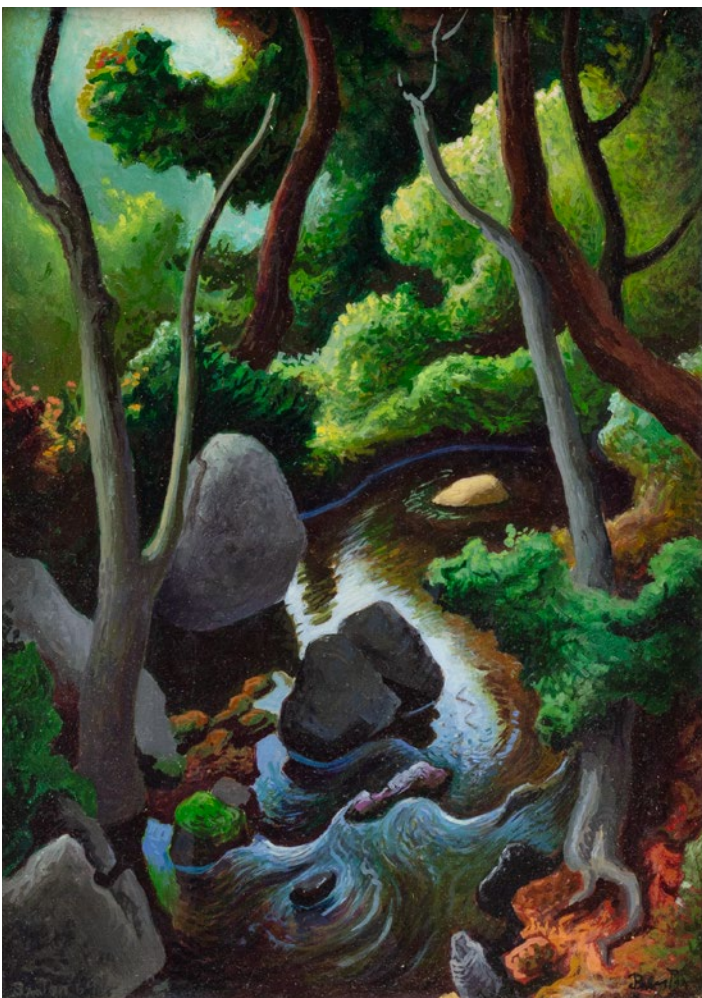


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Benton rarely painted scenes of the ocean, confiding to a local artist that “the sea is damn difficult to paint and I was never able to master it to my satisfaction.”<sup>14</sup> He concentrated instead on views of the countryside like *Chilmark Landscape* and *The Brook* (fig. 4), intent on capturing the feeling of walking or driving through the island’s hilly terrain and abundant foliage. Benton painted multiple views of Chilmark throughout his career, from *People of*

*Chilmark* (1920, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden), a large swirling portrait of figures including himself, Craven, Rita, and their friends horsing around on the beach, to *Sunrise on Menemsha Pond*, a quiet scene made expressly for Jessie as a thirtieth birthday present. He also painted the island’s full-time inhabitants, from *The Lord is My Shepherd* (1926, Whitney Museum of American Art), a portrait of an elderly deaf couple, to *July Hay* (fig. 5), a



**FIG. 4** Thomas Hart Benton, *The Brook*, 1969. Oil on board, 10¼ × 7¼ inches (26 × 18.4 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill



**FIG. 5** Thomas Hart Benton, *July Hay*, 1943. Egg tempera, methyl cellulose and oil on Masonite, 38 × 26¾ inches (96.5 × 67.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. George A. Hearn Fund, 1943 (43.159.1). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY





**FIG. 6** Thomas Hart Benton, *Sunbathers, Boat and Beach*, 1947. Watercolor on paper, 18½ × 25½ inches (47 × 64.8 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Olivia Divecchia

scene of farmers working the land. And he painted still lifes, or “florals” as he called them, organizing arrangements of local flowers, ferns, and gnarled driftwood to experiment with the technical issues of color, design, texture, and tone. Many of Benton’s florals were painted as gifts for family members and friends. Benton’s neighbor and biographer Polly Burroughs estimated that he produced hundreds of drawings, seven lithographs, and over 200 watercolors (see, e.g., fig. 6) and oil paintings during his summers on the island.<sup>15</sup>

Martha’s Vineyard was a lifelong touchstone for Benton. In a 1969 *Life* magazine article chronicling his life and accomplishments at age 80, with photographs by his Menemsha neighbor Alfred Eisenstaedt (see, e.g., pp. 2 and 5), Benton offhandedly remarked “man doesn’t

escape his environment.”<sup>16</sup> For over half a century, the environment of Chilmark, a subset of the larger American Scene, was Benton’s primary source of inspiration. He and Rita both died in Kansas City in 1975, Benton in January and Rita in April. Their ashes were scattered around the island, including under trees that they had planted around their Chilmark house decades earlier.



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## NOTES

1. Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, 4th ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 63.
2. Clark L. MacKenzie, Jr., "History of Dairy Farming on Martha's Vineyard," *The Dukes County Intelligencer* 39, no. 1 (August 1997): 4.
3. Benton quoted in Herbert Mitgang, "How Martha's Vineyard Influenced Benton's Art," *New York Times* (June 23, 1981): C-11.
4. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 10.
5. Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1968), 43.
6. Benton, *An American in Art*, 33.
7. Willard Huntington Wright, "Modern Art: An American Painter of Promise," *The International Studio* 61, no. 244 (June 1917): 95-96; Paul Rosenfeld, "American Painting," *The Dial* 71 (December 1921): 660.
8. On Benton's work in the movie industry see Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 42-44, and Erika Doss, "Mining the Dream Factory: Thomas Hart Benton, American Artists, and the Rise of the Movie Industry," in *American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood*, ed. Austen Barron Bailey (Munich: Prestel, 2015), 64-82.
9. Benton commented on his clay model making in a reply to a telegram from Betty Chamberlain at Time-Life, Inc., published as "Appendix 2: Benton the Model Maker," in Bob Priddy, *Only the Rivers Are Peaceful: Thomas Hart Benton's Missouri Mural* (Independence, MO: Independence Press, 1989), 272-275.
10. Benton quoted in a letter to *The Arts* c. 1924 as noted in Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 44; Henry Adams discusses Benton's use of local clay in his essay "Thomas Hart Benton and Martha's Vineyard" in the exhibition catalogue *Benton on the Vineyard* (New York: Owen Gallery, 2008), 14.
11. "Painter and Author, In His Spare Time Thomas Benton Transposes Difficult Music to Play on His Harp," *Vineyard Gazette* (July 16, 1937), at <https://vineyardgazette.com/news/1937/07/16/painter-and-author-his-spare-time-thomas-benton-transposes-difficult-music-play-his>
12. Benton quoted in Joseph Chase Allen, "Artist on the Island: Benton on Vineyard," *Boston Daily Globe* (July 3, 1941).
13. Berresford also captured the storm's devastation in her watercolors *The Wave* and *New England Hurricane* (both 1938), which were purchased by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1939; see Tara Keny, "The Great Storm," *Now Modern*, New York: Schoelkopf Gallery, 2023, p. 61.
14. Benton quoted in Polly Burroughs, *Thomas Hart Benton, A Portrait* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981), 129.
15. Burroughs, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 186.
16. William A. McWhirter, "Tom Benton at 80, Still At War with Bores and Boobs," *Life* (October 3, 1969), 70.