



# THE GREAT STORM

Thomas Hart Benton's *Flight of the Thielens* depicts the horror experienced by the artist and his neighbors during the 1938 hurricane

BY TARA KENY

THOMAS HART BENTON  
*Flight of the Thielens*, detail, 1938,  
oil on board, 25¼ × 36¼ inches

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On September 21, 1938, a great storm traveled from the coast of West Africa across the Atlantic Ocean. Predicted to blow out at Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, weather reports from New York to Maine warned only of chilly rain. Within 24 hours, however, the storm hit New England and blew through Martha's Vineyard, obliterating the island village of Menemsha, Massachusetts. Traveling 600 miles in just 12 hours, an ominous, orange-tinted sky had forewarned locals of bad weather, but none could have imagined the first 25-foot wave that would submerge the town, nor the two that would follow. "Communications by land, sea, phone, telegraph, or teletype, were wiped out in those areas that had the most to communicate," recalled one local, Everett Allen, in his 1976 book on the history of the storm, *A Wind to Shake the World: The Story of the 1938 Hurricane*. "It was gray from trough to top," he continued. "It had a twenty-five-foot front, with spray and foam reaching ten feet above the actual

**ALFRED EISENSTAEDT**  
BELOW: Thomas Hart Benton at the barn house in Martha's Vineyard, 1937

OPPOSITE: Virginia Berresford painting in Martha's Vineyard, undated



PHOTO © ALFRED EISENSTAEDT



PHOTO COURTESY MARTHA'S VINEYARD MUSEUM. © ESTATE OF VIRGINIA BERRESFORD

wave . . . [it] seemed to come broadside, sweeping down along the shore, and it was followed by a second and a third." Winds peaked at 186 miles per hour. More than 600 people were killed by the storm, most by drowning. In Menemsha, only one member of the community was lost. Her name was Josephine "Lucy" Clark, and her last harrowing moments are the subject of Thomas Hart Benton's powerful *Flight of the Thielens*.

As the storm blew into Menemsha, where Benton and his neighbors (the writer Bob Thielen and his wife, artist Virginia Berresford) had summer homes, the Thielens were having tea. The windows trembled. "Hurricane weather," said Clark, the family's cook. Soon after, a window burst, knocking over an oil lamp. Clark, Thielen, and Berresford grabbed one another's hands and fled the house, hoping to make it to higher ground, but they found themselves quickly submerged in water. "We started to walk quickly toward the hilly side of the pond just as a swirl of sea water, flecked with yellowish foam, came around the house. It rose to our knees in a flash, then it was waist high. We had not bargained for this," Berresford wrote in her autobiography, *Virginia's Journal*.

In Benton's canvas, Berresford (at left) struggles to keep her head above water. Berresford later told the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society that her husband's oilskin trousers, which he had initially thought would protect him from the water, weighed him down as he tried to stay afloat. He quickly dove underwater to remove them, and in an instant, lost Clark's hand. That instant would cost Clark her life: The maid could not swim and was quickly swept away by the current. After diving several times in a panic to search for Clark, Thielen grabbed his wife as the second wave hit and pulled them both to land. Benton awaited them on a hilltop nearby and offered the couple shelter for the night. Berresford recalled of that night: "When we were sleeping upstairs in Tom Benton's house, my husband cried. I never saw him cry before or since. The next day he went with someone else to look for her body, and they found her, and they telegraphed her family in Jamaica and they asked us to send the body down, which we did."

Almost 10 years later, in 1946, Thielen published *The Lost Men*, which told the story of three World War I veterans caught in a hurricane. Some survived, and others were washed away, baptized by the hurricane waters. "Out of the tragedy of spiritual and social lostness there emerges the epic theme of survival and rebirth of the spirit of man," wrote one reviewer in *Arizona Quarterly*. One can't help but think he transferred some of the pain from this day to these fictitious veterans.

In Benton's painting of the storm, he chose to depict the moment before they lost sight of Clark, his friend's last moment of hope. In some respects, it serves as both a representation of their own personal tragedy and as a tribute to those who were lost that day. Like Thielen's novel, the painting represents an epic tale of not only death, but survival, and a type of rebirth for those who lived to tell it.

The hurricane had a lasting impact on Berresford as well, who painted the giant crested wave in watercolor in works entitled *The Wave* and *New England Hurricane*. Both were purchased by the Whitney Museum of Art in 1939, one year after the storm. In *The Wave*, white foam sprays against a menacing sky of black, deep blue, and burnt-yellow washes. A tree branch, outstretched like a hand from the water, is just visible above the current while rooftops drift in the background. Unlike in Benton's work, the human figure is absent from Berresford's wave, but its absence speaks for itself.

By 1938 (the year of the hurricane), Benton was a celebrated painter. Four years prior, his self-portrait graced the cover of *Time* magazine (he was the first artist to have a work published on a *Time* cover). He was well-known for his narrative depictions of rural life in America and garnered his greatest popularity during the Great Depression, portraying reassuring images of America's heartland. Having experimented with abstraction and modernism until the 1920s, a return to his home state of Missouri to visit his sick father inspired him to

turn his focus toward rural-American subjects. In paintings and murals depicting steel mills, coal mines, and cotton fields, he portrayed the heroism of America's working class. Influenced by the Spanish painter El Greco, he twists and turns his landscapes, infusing them with movement.

Both Benton and Berresford had studied Japanese printmaking as students. Its lingering influence on their practice is especially visible in these three works from 1938. Berresford's foreboding watercolors; her reductive, calligraphic

brushwork; delicate bleeding effects; and compressed composition in *The Wave* and *New England Hurricane* are similar to Japanese drawings from the Edo period (sixteenth to nineteenth century). As one critic noted in reviewing her second one-woman show in New York, "the grace and simplicity of her watercolors are often reminiscent of the Japanese, particularly with simple subjects. . . . Miss Berresford plays with contrasting textures and transparencies . . . explosions of violent color . . . [the works] show an effort to escape the charming

and the precise." Berresford had mastered modern painting techniques early in her career under Amédée Ozenfant who, with Ferdinand Léger, taught at the Académie Moderne in Paris. Paris' prestigious Galleries Bernheim Jeune held her first one-woman show in 1927, and her first solo show in the U.S. came the following year in New York at the New Gallery. She started working in watercolor in the 1930s, completing her *New England Hurricane* and *The Wave* the same year as Benton's *Flight of the Thielsens*.

**VIRGINIA BERRESFORD**  
OPPOSITE, INSET: *New England Hurricane*, 1938, watercolor on paper, 15 × 22 inches, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

THIS SPREAD: Menemsha Harbor, before the storm, undated



SPREAD: PHOTO COURTESY VINEYARD GAZETTE ARCHIVES

INSET: WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK; PURCHASE. © ESTATE OF VIRGINIA BERRESFORD



A close look at Benton's composition for *Flight of the Thielens* reveals striking parallels to Katsushika Hokusai's well-known print, *The Great Wave*. In the print, three boats row toward the whitecaps of a stormy sea. A great wave crests at its center, reaching over the summit of Mount Fuji in the background. The curled froth of the sea-foam in Benton's painting, rising at the center and middle left, echoes Hokusai's, much like the placement of Thielen's rooftop does Hokusai's Mount Fuji. Three figures fight the sea in Benton's scene, while three boats do the same in the print. In both, two are in the foreground, and one is swept right. Benton brilliantly paints the arms of both Berresford and Thielen reaching toward Clark, mirroring the tree branches that bend toward each of them (both recounted gripping tree branches to resist the pull of the current).

At the Art Institute of Chicago in 1908, Benton had the opportunity to see 650 Japanese prints in an exhibition organized by Frank Lloyd Wright. Benton recalled that his teacher, Frederick Oswald, taught students the compositional genius of Japanese printmakers while "encouraging con-

tinuous study of the way they were put together," teaching Benton to arrange his pictures "in definite patterns" and to appreciate, he recalled, "flowing lines which lasted all my life." Benton likely had seen *The Great Wave* at the Metropolitan Museum before leaving New York for Kansas City in 1935; he also would have seen it reproduced, as it was a well-known print among artists.

Benton revisited the hurricane subject once more in 1954, in a work entitled *Menemsha Hurricane* (private collection). While fishermen pull a dory to shore, a small wave crests in the center foreground, perhaps a nod to the great wave and the friends he had painted almost 20 years prior. Here, we see the storm's onset. While he did not include another artist in the composition of this work, he sold the piece to Alfred Eisenstaedt, a renowned photographer and photojournalist.

Born in Germany, Eisenstaedt fled to the United States as persecution against the Jews intensified. He became a photographer for *Life* magazine, where he published one of his most famous photographs: that of an American sailor kissing a woman in Times Square on the day

**KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI**  
*Under the Wave off Kanagawa (Kanagawa-oki nami-ura)*, also known as *The Great Wave*, from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji (Fugaku sanjūrokkei)*, c. 1830–31, woodblock print, ink and color on paper, 9<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 14<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

**THOMAS HART BENTON**  
BELOW: *Self-Portrait with Rita*, c. 1924, oil on canvas, 49 × 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

RIGHT: Virginia Berresford and Benedict Thielen in New York

World War II ended. He had met Benton in 1936, two years before the storm, when he photographed Benton for *Life* magazine. In 1937, Eisenstaedt did a piece on Martha's Vineyard and returned regularly afterward for vacation. Often staying at the Menemsha Inn, close to Benton's family home, the two artists maintained a friendship that endured until Benton's death. Eisenstaedt photographed Benton's student, Jackson Pollock, who lived behind Benton in what they called "Jack's Shack."

In 1954, two hurricanes hit Menemsha within ten days, and Eisenstaedt remembered witnessing Benton out sketching the aftermath of the first. On why Eisenstaedt purchased the painting, Benton scholar Henry Adams reasoned that "Eisenstaedt surely acquired the painting in part as a souvenir of a remarkable experience that he and Benton had shared. No doubt he was also fascinated by the way that Benton's painting contrasted with his own photographs of the event, and twisted every



element into a distinctively Bentonesque visual rhythm." Berresford had likely seen this painting as well because she continued to summer in Martha's Vineyard after the storm of 1938. The Thielens had bought the land where their house had landed post-hurricane and put back together what they could. Their cat, Finn, had survived by hanging on for his life up in the attic. When Berresford and Thielen divorced in 1949, Berresford bought a fishing shack in Menemsha in 1952, which she turned into a gallery to display the art of locals and provide lessons to the community. She did this each summer until her death in 1995.

Thomas Hart Benton painted *Flight of the Thielens* at the height of his career, and as he did best, represented a catastrophic moment in America's history through the humble eyes of those who survived it. Fighting against a force greater than themselves, the tale of Berresford, Cook, and Thielen on that fateful day and afterwards serves as a metaphor for loss, survival, and renewal. Additionally, the work provides a window into the life of Berresford, a lesser-known artist who may have been inspired by Benton devising his composition of that day, or the other way around. As great works of art so often do, *Flight of the Thielens* poignantly speaks to both a specific moment in time and to life's enduring waves of trial and wonder.