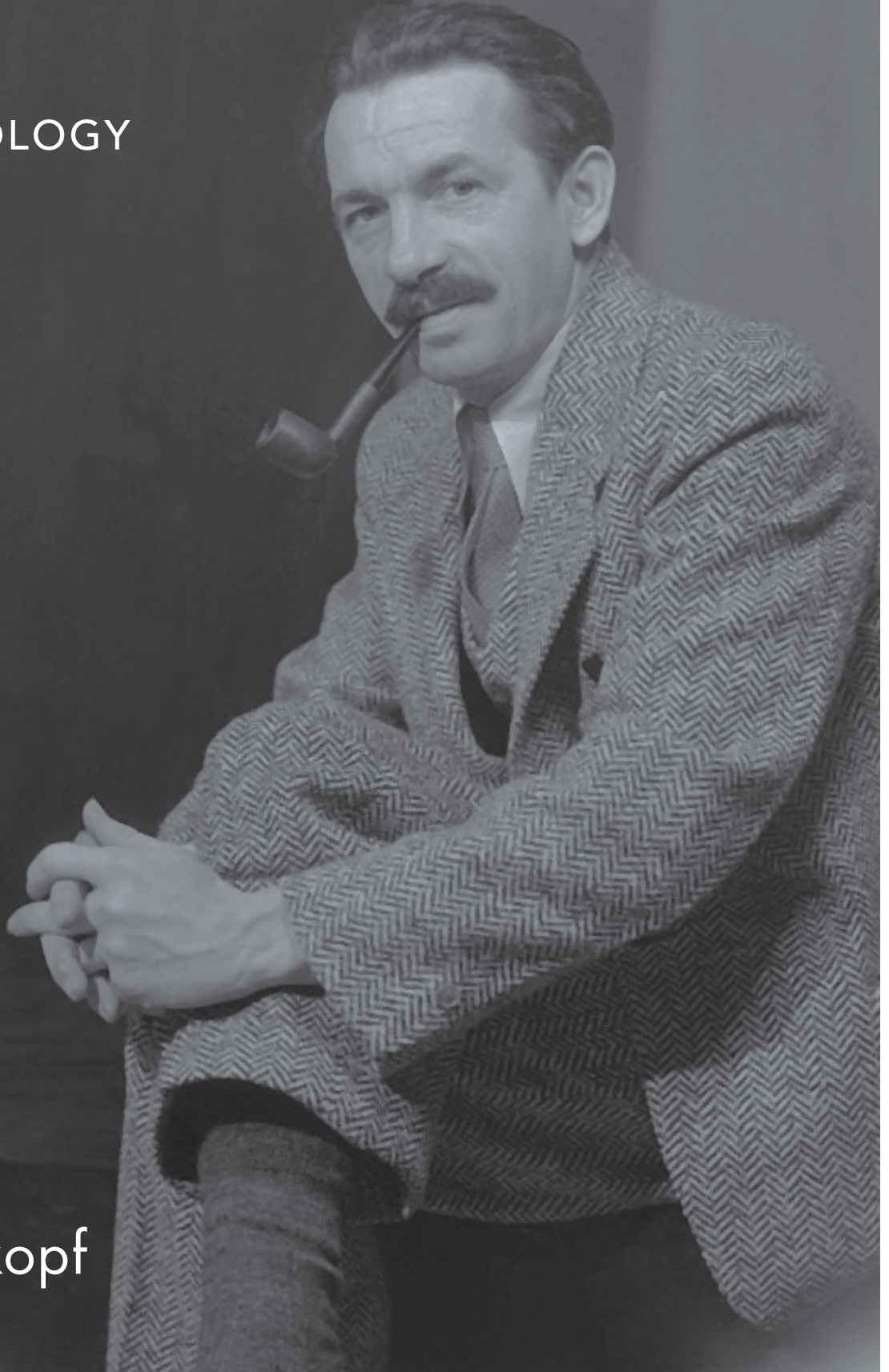


Thomas Hart Benton

(1889–1975)

CHRONOLOGY



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Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975)

Named after Missouri's first senator and his great-great uncle, Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) made a name for himself as both an artist and an American. Benton first declared himself an artist in a Missouri saloon at seventeen years old, before he ever set foot in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago or the Académie Julian in Paris. In the 1930s, Benton became well known for his innovative mural practice, sometimes compared to Spanish old master El Greco (1541–1614) and received public commissions up until his death in 1975. On December 24, 1934, Benton's face was seen across America when he became the first artist to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine in a self-portrait. His extensive travels throughout the United States imbued his work with rural themes and Benton was regarded as one of the three leading American Regionalist painters, alongside John Steuart Curry (1897–1942) and Grant Wood (1891–1942). Aside from his own contributions to American art, Benton was an influential teacher throughout his career; his most well-known student was Jackson Pollock (1912–56). Benton's work has been exhibited and recognized by scholars for over a century and is collected by the preeminent public collections throughout the country.

April 15, 1889

Thomas Hart Benton is born in Neosho, Missouri, to Maecenas E. (1848–1924) and Elizabeth Wise (1866–1952) Benton. He is the oldest of four children.

c. 1895

At about six years old Benton draws his first mural, a freight train extending from the base to the top of the stairs of his family's newly papered home.

March 4, 1897

After being elected to the House of Representatives for his home state of Missouri, Benton's father moves the family to Washington D.C. to begin his first term.

1897–1904

Benton attends school in Washington D.C. while his father serves in four consecutive congressional terms.

1904

Benton visits the Saint Louis World's Fair, also known as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, held in Saint Louis, Missouri, from April 30–December 1, 1904. At the fair, he meets Geronimo, an Apache chief who he had long imagined as a ferocious warrior.

1905

After Benton's father loses reelection to the 59th congress, the Benton family returns to Neosho full time. The political defeat takes a toll on Benton's father's disposition and their once-close relationship begins to suffer.



Cover of *Time* magazine, December 24, 1934, featuring *Self-Portrait, 1924–25*, by Thomas Hart Benton. © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Summer 1906

At seventeen years old, Benton works as a surveyor's assistant in the mining fields of Joplin, Missouri, about 20 miles north of Neosho. He declares himself an artist, inspired by an evening spent drinking in the House of Lords saloon where he is taunted by older patrons for his interest in a large painting hung behind the bar. Shortly after this interaction, he earns his first professional artistic experience as a cartoonist for a local newspaper, the *Joplin American*, and makes fourteen dollars a week.

Autumn 1906

Benton leaves his job at the American and enrolls at Western Military Academy in Alton, Illinois to appease his parents. He joins the football team and earns a varsity letter.

February 1907

Benton leaves the Academy to begin serious study of art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he studies under artists like Frederick Charles Oswald. He finds the curriculum "humiliating" because he already considers himself a professional artist and feels like a copyist in school. He enjoys life drawing classes, and when Benton tries painting for the first time, he gives up the idea of newspaper cartooning: "I made up my mind that I was going to be a painter. The rich, sensual joy of smearing streaks of color, of seeing them come out in all sorts of unpremeditated ways, was too much for me and I abandoned my prospective fortunes in the big-time newspaper business without a qualm."¹

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August 1908

At nineteen years old, Benton moves to France and settles in Paris, renting a studio on the Passage Guibert. He befriends two American artists, Abe Warshawsky (1883–1962) and George Carlock (1884–1918). He briefly enrolls at the Académie Julian but is again disappointed with school's curriculum. With Carlock, Benton begins to independently copy old master artworks at the Louvre.

1910

Benton meets American painter Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890–1973), an emerging modernist who introduces him to Synchronism, a movement that relies on music and color to free composition from representational associations.

August–October 1910

Benton travels through the south of France with Jeanette, a young French woman with whom he had formed a relationship.

1912

Benton returns to Missouri, living at home in Neosho then alone in Kansas City before ultimately moving to New York. In New York he lives in the Lincoln Square Arcade at Sixty-Fifth Street and Broadway, sharing an apartment with poet Thomas Craven (1888–1969). He works odd jobs, but frequently writes home to his parents in need of money for groceries.

October 1912

Benton returns to Neosho to spend time with his mother who has taken ill.

February 17, 1913

The Armory Show, also known as the *International Exhibition of Modern Art*, opens in New York. This is the first major exhibition of modern art in the United States. Benton misses the show because he is still in Missouri, but after seeing the positive response to the exhibition, he commits to participating in the next modernist show.

June 1913

Benton returns to New York.

1914

Through actor and director Rex Ingram (1895–1969), Benton earns jobs painting at the Fort Lee Studios, an early film epicenter across the river in New Jersey, which pay him seven dollars a day. He paints historical settings in black and white for movie sets and portraits of the leading actresses of the day.

Benton's first book illustrations are published in H. L. Mencken's *Europe After 8:15*. Eight full-page plates illustrating Europe's best bars are scattered throughout the text.



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

March 13, 1916

Benton is included in his first exhibition. *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Paintings* at the Anderson Galleries in New York spotlights sixteen American modernists including: Arthur Dove (1880–1946), Macdonald-Wright, John Marin (1870–1953), Alfred Maurer (1868–1932), and Marguerite and William Zorach (1887–1968; 1887–1966). He receives some attention and sells a few works.

1916

Benton becomes a member of the People's Art Guild, an organization founded by social theorist and critic Dr. John Weischel (1870–1946) with the intention of bringing art to the working class and enlisting the interest of Unions.

1917

Through his connections at the Guild, Benton becomes the director of the Chelsea Neighborhood Art Gallery and has his first solo exhibition, *Paintings and Drawings by Thomas H. Benton*, which opens in March. While at the Gallery he begins teaching free art classes. Most of his students are immigrants, including his future wife, Italian-born Rita Piacenza (1896–1975).

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Thomas Hart Benton, *People of Chilmark*, 1920. Oil on canvas, 65% x 77% inches (166.5 x 197.3 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966. © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

April 6, 1917

The United States enters World War I. Benton is in line for the draft and intends to join the Navy. Initially, he is barred from joining due to his short stature, but he uses his family's political affiliations to his benefit. Benton travels to Washington D.C. to meet with Alexander M. Dockery (1845–1926), the 30th Governor of Missouri and a friend of his father, who writes him a letter of recommendation for the Naval intelligence service.

1918

Benton enlists in the Navy and is stationed in Norfolk, Virginia as an architectural draftsman. He draws realistic depictions of shipyards which strongly influence his later artistic style. Later in the war, he works as a camoufler, drawing the camouflaged ships that enter Norfolk harbor. Benton later said that his work for the Navy "was the most important thing, so far, I had ever done for myself as an artist."²

1920

Piacenza invites Benton to spend the summer in Chilmark, Massachusetts, a village on Martha's Vineyard. While there, he paints *People of Chilmark (Figure Composition)* (1920), today in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The life-size canvas signals a new direction in his career as a modernist. Benton continues to return to Martha's Vineyard each summer for the remainder of his life.

February 19, 1922

Benton marries Piacenza in New York. Later that year the pair move to 42 Union Square.

February 3, 1924

Benton is included in the 119th Annual Exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art.

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Clockwise from right:

Thomas Hart Benton, *Oil Derricks*, before 1958. Pen and black ink, black crayon and brush and brown wash, 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 12 inches (22.5 × 30.4 cm). The Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Malcolm L. McBride, 1958.417

Thomas Hart Benton, *Boomtown*, 1928. Egg yolk and oil on canvas, 46 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 54 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (117.2 × 137.8 cm). Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester. Marion Stratton Gould Fund. 1951.1

Thomas Hart Benton, *Oil Derricks*, 1920s. Ink wash and graphite on paper, 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 7 inches (22.5 × 17.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of AXA Equitable, 2016, 2016.425.17



January 28, 1923

Benton exhibits *Discovery* (1920), the first panel from the mural series now known as *American Historical Epic*, at the Architectural League of New York's 38th Annual Exhibition. At the time, the painting is called *Symbolical History of the United States* from the series *History of the United States*. Benton continues to exhibit panels from the series at the Architectural League's annual exhibitions until 1928.

1923

Benton purchases a permanent summer home in Chilmark, Massachusetts.

April 1924

Benton travels to Missouri to visit his ailing father who dies of cancer on April 27, 1924. This trip back to the Midwest inspires Benton to revisit rural subjects in his artwork.

June 1924

"Form and the Subject," Benton's first article on modern

painting, is published in *The Arts* magazine. He would go on to become a widely published author of magazine articles, artist statements, and two autobiographies.

1926

Benton takes his first major sketching trip, a walking tour of the Ozarks in Arkansas, and later travels through Texas and New Mexico. Sketches made in Borger, Texas, inspire *Boomtown* (1928), today in the collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York.

December 1, 1926

Benton's son, Thomas Piacenza "T.P." Benton (1926–2010), is born in New York.

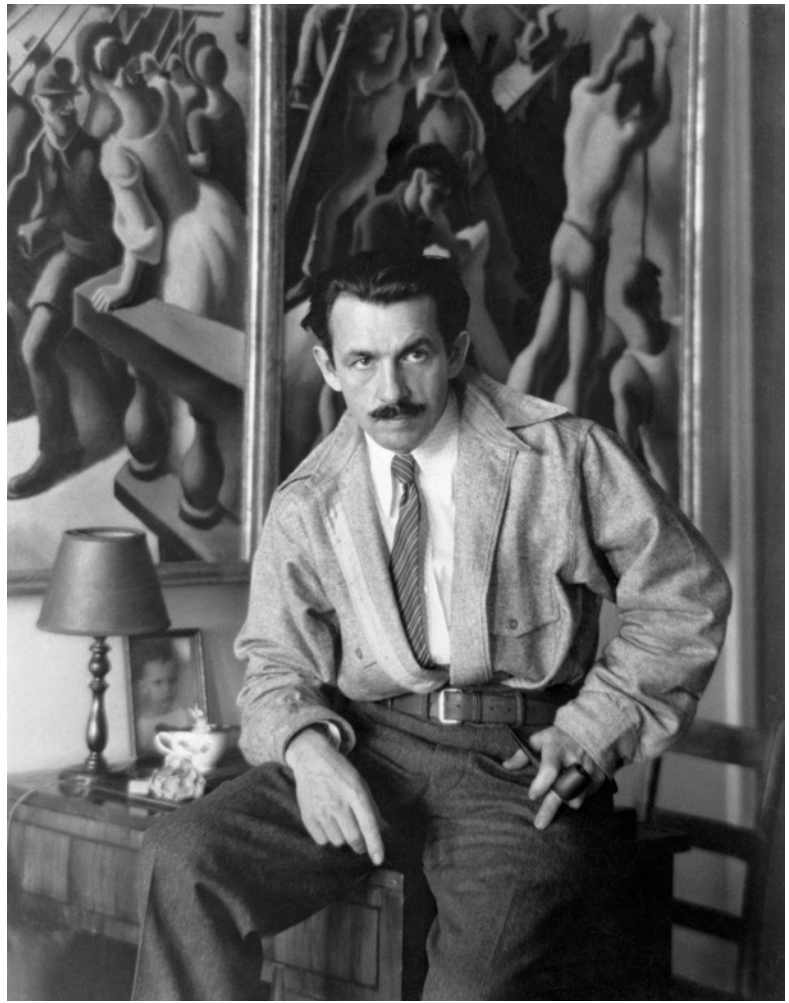
1926–36

Benton teaches painting at the Art Students League of New York. His most famous student is Jackson Pollock (1912–56), who studies under Benton from 1930–33.

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Thomas Hart Benton, *Study for "History of New York: 1653—Colonial Era (Pilgrims and Indians)"*, c. 1927. Oil on metal, 13¼ x 7¼ inches (33.7 x 18.4 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill



Thomas Hart Benton seated in front of *Civil War and New York Today*, two panels from his mural *The History of New York*, 1927. © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Getty Images/Bettman

1927

Benton completes a self-commissioned four-paneled mural series entitled *The History of New York* in an attempt to secure a commission from the New York Public Library, but the Library does not accept the panels.

1928

Benton travels through Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

October 14, 1929

Benton's solo exhibition, *The South*, opens at Delphic Studios in New York. The show, one of the first to celebrate the modern South, brings together more than 100 drawings and about a dozen oil paintings made during his 1928 travels. Sixty pictures are organized in a section called "King Cotton."

1930

Benton gets his first major mural commission thanks to the influences of Piacenza and Lewis Mumford (1895–1990). The pair convince Dr. Alvin Johnson (1874–1971), the first President of

The New School in Greenwich Village, New York, to let Benton paint nine mural panels, entitled *America Today*, for a boardroom at the school. The commission is unpaid, but the school pays for Benton's supplies. When the mural is completed, in 1931, it receives pushback from both radicals and conservatives. When asked later if he had anticipated this kind of reaction, Benton answered: "Hell, no. I thought I had made something that was going to please everybody."³

1931

The Whitney Museum of American Art purchases *The Lord is My Shepherd* (1926), becoming the first museum to purchase a work by Benton for their permanent collection.

October 31, 1932

Aggression (1923), a panel from the mural *American Historical Epic* (1920–28), is selected by curator Holger Cahill (1887–1960) for a loan exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. *American Paintings and Sculpture, 1862–1932* showcases work by the top artists in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American art.

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Right: Thomas Hart Benton, *Cotton Pickers, Georgia*, 1928–29. Tempera and oil on canvas, 30 x 35¾ inches (76.2 x 90.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. George A. Hearn Fund, 1933 (33.144.2). © 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

Below: Thomas Hart Benton, *Study for "The Arts of Life in America: Indian Arts"*, 1932. Oil on board, 18 x 15½ inches (45.7 x 39.4 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Olivia Divecchia



December 6, 1932

Benton completes and unveils the eight-paneled *Arts of Life in America* mural for the Whitney Museum Reference Library at 10 West 8th Street in New York. During the Great Depression, Piacenza asked founding director of the Museum, Juliana Force (1876–1948) to purchase some of Benton's work; instead, Force extended the couple a personal loan of \$3,000 which they interpreted as a down payment for the mural commission. Upon completion, Benton is paid \$1,000 more, but when the confusion between the terms of the payment is revealed, he returns it.

1933

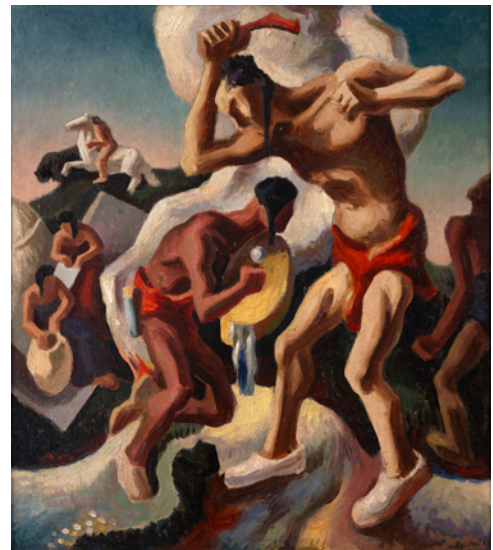
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, purchases its first work by Benton, *Cotton Pickers, Georgia* (1928–29) through Ferargil Galleries.

June 1933

The state of Indiana commissions Benton to paint *The Social History of Indiana* for the sum of \$5,000. The mural, which takes only six months to finish, is exhibited in the *Century of Progress* exhibition in Chicago. Benton is excited about the public commission claiming that, "the Democratic politicians who controlled the state regarded me as a brother and not just a damned New York artist."⁴

1934

Benton creates his first lithograph, *Plowing it Under*, for the Associated American Artists Galleries in New York. Started by Reeves Lewenthal (1910–87), the Gallery marketed affordable art to the middle and upper-middle classes with the intention of expanding access to fine art through prints. A limited edition of 12,000 Benton prints is available for purchase in department stores and sells out.



December 24, 1934

Benton's 1925 self-portrait appears on the cover of *Time* magazine, making him the first artist to appear on the cover of a magazine. The term "Regionalism" is coined in the corresponding article which groups Benton together with John Stuart Curry (1897–1946) and Grant Wood (1891–1942).

1935

Benton accepts a position as the head of the painting department at the Kansas City Art Institute and moves back to Missouri. The Institute welcomes his aid "in developing the kind of education that will prepare the young men and women of the region to live and work successfully, whether in the fine arts or the industrial or commercial arts."⁵

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Thomas Hart Benton in 1972 with his painting *Persephone* (1939). Photo credit: Getty Images/Heinz Klutmeier

1936

Completes the mural *A Social History of the State of Missouri* on commission for the Missouri State House in Jefferson City. Recognized by state legislature as one of the greatest living painters, his \$16,000 fee is more than the governor's annual salary. "If I have any right to make judgments," Benton recounted in a 1973 interview, "I would say that the Missouri mural was my best work. I was thoroughly matured. I had had the Indiana experience, and I knew what to do."⁶ Due to continued interest in the mural, Benton creates two lithographs, *Huck Finn* (1937) and *Jesse James* (1937), based on the series.

1937

Benton publishes the first edition of his autobiography *An Artist in America*. Still in print today, Benton revisits the project twice, adding the chapters "After" in 1951 and "And Still After" in 1968.

Benton tours southern Missouri to explore regions ravaged by flooding of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. This journey inspires several paintings including *Spring on the Missouri* (1945). Natural disasters will become important subjects throughout Benton's work.

August 1937

Benton spends time in Los Angeles, California, with behind-the-scenes access to 20th Century Fox Studios. While there, he creates a series of 40 ink and wash drawings called "Hollywood Notes" and one major oil, *Hollywood* (1937–38), today in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. *Hollywood* is exhibited at the 1938 *Carnegie International Art Exhibition* in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and reproduced in a *Life* magazine article about the show.

December 10, 1937

Benton is awarded the Limited Editions Club Fellowship alongside Curry, Reginald Marsh (1898–1954), Henry Varnum Poor (1887–1970), and Wood. Each artist receives \$2,000 and the opportunity to illustrate a work of American Literature for the Club's 1,500 members. Benton illustrates *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain.

May 24, 1938

The Museum of Modern Art's first international exhibition, *Trois Siècles d'art aux États-Unis (Three Centuries of American Art)*, opens at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in Paris, France, and includes two paintings by Benton: *Homestead* (1934), the first work by Benton in MoMA's permanent collection, and *Going Home* (1934).

1939

Benton purchases a home in Kansas City where he will live out the rest of his life.

Benton is photographed painting *Persephone* (1938–39), now in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, for the February 1939 issue of *Life* magazine and the March 1940 issue of *American Artist* magazine.

January 10, 1939

The Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri, purchases *Cradling Wheat* (1938) from Benton. The painting is one in a series of three devoted to agricultural life in America.

April 1939

Lewenthal opens his 30,000 square foot gallery at 711 Fifth Avenue and Benton exhibits two nudes, *Susanna and the Elders* (1938), now in the collection of the de Young Museum in San Francisco.

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Francisco, California, and *Persephone* (1938–39). Within two and a half weeks more than 43,000 people visit the Gallery. Benton remarks that he would prefer if his work hung in saloons instead of museums.

July 10, 1939

Benton's second child, his daughter Jessie Piacenza Benton (1939–2023), is born in Kansas City. Each year for her birthday, Benton would paint Jessie a picture, including his celebrated *Jessie with Guitar* (1937).

January 24, 1940

20th Century Fox commissions Benton to make lithographs promoting the films *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Swamp Water*. 20th Century Fox's film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* premieres in New York where Benton's lithographs appear on the movie poster and brochures. The film wins two academy awards, and the artist then creates 67 two-tone lithographs to illustrate a deluxe edition of the novel.

February 20, 1940

Benton is named one of the "'Best' Husbands" in America by the Divorce Reform League in New York. Alongside Barnum Brown, Lou Gehrig, Guthrie McClintic, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, he is praised in a newspaper article for refusing to hold that "a wife's place is in the home." The article is reprinted in newspapers across the country for the next week.⁷

November 3, 1940

Hollywood producer Billy Rose (1899–1966) purchases *Weighing Cotton* (1939), the third and final painting in Benton's series depicting agricultural life in *America*. Today, the painting is in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut.

April 9, 1941

Persephone (1938–39), then valued at \$12,000, is hung on the "red-plush walls" of "Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe night club," fulfilling Benton's dream of having his paintings hang outside of museums.⁸

April 28, 1941

Benton announces that he will no longer serve as the head of the painting department at the Kansas City Art Institute when his contract expires in May, as the Institute's board of governors did not agree to renewal.

1941

Benton, his son T.P., and friends record *Saturday Night at Tom Benton's*, a three-record set of harmonica music to be released as a part of Decca's Personality Series.

1941–42

Benton creates a series of seven propaganda paintings entitled *Year of Peril* in response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, with the intention of hanging them in Kansas City's Union train station to alert his neighbors to the dangers of war. Believing the works deserve greater exposure, Lewenthal arranges the sale of the series to Chicago-based pharmaceutical company, Abbott Laboratories. The Laboratories



Thomas Hart Benton, *Edge of the Field (Cotton Pickers)*, 1943–61. Egg tempera and oil on board, 23½ x 17 inches (59.7 x 43.2 cm). © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill

agree to the publication of an illustrated brochure and color reproductions to be distributed internationally by the U.S. government. When the paintings are exhibited at the Associated American Artists galleries in New York in April 1942, they attract over 75,000 visitors.

1943–44

Abbott Laboratories commissions Benton on two occasions to produce wartime series focused on the U.S. Navy's submarine force. Benton paints *Score Another for the Subs* (1943) and *Up the Hatch* (1943), today in the U.S. Navy Art Collection, while onboard the U.S.S. Dorado which is lost in action in October 1943.

1946

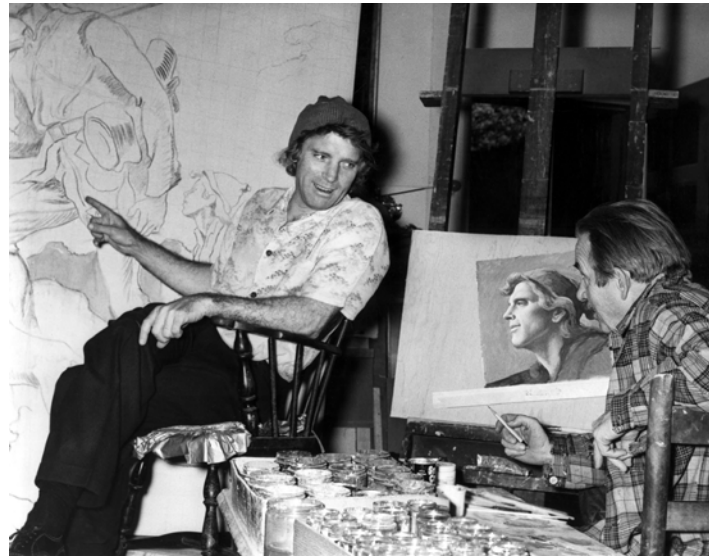
Benton is commissioned by Harzfeld's, a Kansas City department store, to paint the mural *Achelous and Hercules* (1947). The mural reflects Benton's penchant for painting water scenes, as the depiction of Achelous, the Greek god of rivers, parallels contemporary efforts to control the Missouri River. Benton's entire artistic process is filmed by Encyclopedia Britannica for the educational film *The Making of a Mural*, which is released on July 3, 1947. The mural was gifted to the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C., in 1984.

March 1946

Benton flies out to California to discuss the possibility of collaborating with Walt Disney on a project related to Davy Crockett. He ultimately turns down the opportunity and sells his interest in the project back to Disney for \$3,000.

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Left: Thomas Hart Benton paints actor Burt Lancaster in 1954 for a commission to produce a painting for the poster promoting the Hollywood movie *The Kentuckian*. © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Everett Collection/Bridgeman Images



Right: Promotional poster for *The Kentuckian*, 1954, commissioned by United Artists Corporation. © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Tom Morrill



1946

The Associated American Artists Galleries in Chicago opens a solo exhibition of Benton's work. At the exhibition, Harpo Marx (1888–1964) purchases *Spring on the Missouri* (1945), today in the collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art. Later that year, Benton gifts two more drawings to Marx—the sketch that inspired *Spring on the Missouri* and *A Marx Brother*; both are thoughtfully inscribed from the artist to the recipient.

1948

Benton is commissioned by producer David O. Selznick (1902–65) to paint a gift for his wife Irene. Benton paints *Poker Night* (from "A Streetcar Named Desire") (1948), now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

June 7, 1949

Benton receives an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Missouri and is inducted into Phi Beta Kappa.

1949

Benton travels to Italy and France. In Italy, he is made an honorary member of L'Accademia Fiorentina delle Arti del Disegno in Florence and of the Accademia Senese degli Intronati in Siena. On the trip, he has trouble reviving the French he learned as a teenager, as he now speaks with a Missouri accent.

1953

When the Whitney Museum relocates from 10th Street to 54th Street, the New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut, acquires five panels of *Arts of Life in America*.

1954

Regretful over his decision to bow out of the earlier frontier-themed Davy Crockett project, Benton jumps at the chance to paint a life-size canvas based on Burt Lancaster's film *The Kentuckian*. He fulfills the commission to make a promotional painting by the same name and *The Kentuckian* (1954), now in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California, is exhibited at the film's premiere in Washington D.C. The iconic work is reproduced on movie posters and collectible Beam's Choice whiskey bottles.



Thomas Hart Benton, *The Kentuckian*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 76½ x 60½ inches (193.4 x 153.4 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Burt Lancaster, M.77.115. © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY

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At the unveiling of *Trading at Westport Landing (Old Kansas City)*, 1956, at the River Club, Kansas City, Benton makes a speech to the gathered crowd on May 12, 1956. © T.H. and R.P. Benton Trusts / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: © Michael Mardikes

May 15, 1955

Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, installs Benton's recently commissioned mural, *Abraham Lincoln* (1955) in its Inman E. Page Library. Two years later, Benton will become an honorary Doctor of Letters at the University's 1957 commencement.

1956

Benton completes a mural commissioned by the River Club in Kansas City, an exclusive members-only organization established in 1948. *Trading at Westport Landing (Old Kansas City)* is displayed over the mantle in the clubhouse at 611 West 8th Street in Northwest downtown.

1957

Benton completes a two-panel mural for the New York Power Authority in Lewiston, New York, on commission from the chairman, *Robert Moses* (1888–1981). *Jacques Cartier Discovers the Indians and The Seneca Discover the French (Jacques Cartier's Discovery of the St. Lawrence Valley)* (1957) depicts Jacques Cartier's 1534–35 expeditions along the Saint Lawrence River and the Gulf of Saint Lawrence.

1958

Benton agrees to paint *Independence and the Opening of the West*, a mural for the lobby of the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri.

February 24, 1959

Moses announces that he has commissioned a \$35,000 mural by Benton for the exhibition room of the Niagara Power Project in Massena, New York. Benton is concurrently working on the murals for the Truman Library and the Niagara Power Project. Benton completes *Father Hennepin at Niagara Falls* (1961) for the visitor center of the hydroelectric power station.

1960

Benton travels west along the Santa Fe and Oregon trails to create preparatory sketches for the Truman Library mural.

Spring 1961

The dedication ceremony for *Independence and the Opening of the West* (1961) attracts a large crowd, including Former President Harry S. Truman (1884–1972) and Chief Justice Earl Warren (1891–1974).

May 1962

Neosho hosts a "Homecoming Celebration" for Benton attended by a small handful of friends from his youth as well as former President and Mrs. Truman.

1964

Benton takes a tour of the Canadian Rockies with his friend Lyman Field. At 75 years old, the nine-and-a-half-hour horseback journey from Banff to Mount Assiniboine is his first horseback riding trip in over thirty years. The views and sketches from this trip inspired his composition *Trail Riders*, which he translated into multiple finished works. In Ken Burns' 1989 documentary, Jessie Benton recounted how her father dedicated years to mastering the depiction of mountains, considering them some of the hardest subjects to paint: "You know, he took aside many, many years to paint the mountains. He said it was the damndest hardest things he ever did . . . and it took him years to finally paint a picture that he was satisfied with."⁹ Two examples of this composition are held in the collections of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1964–65), and the Denver Art Museum, Colorado (1964).

1965

Benton takes two major river trips. In July, he travels with staff members of the National Park Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on a three-week trip up the Missouri River. The

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Thomas Hart Benton, *America Today: Changing West*, 1930–31. Egg tempera with oil glazing over Permalba on a gesso ground on linen mounted to wood panels with a honeycomb interior, 92 x 134½ inches (233.7 x 341.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of AXA Equitable, 2012, 2012.478b. The mural was originally commissioned by the New School for Social Research in 1930. © 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



sketches that he makes along the Lewis and Clark Trail inspire his large canvas, *Lewis and Clark at Eagle Creek* (1967). Benton also canoes down the Buffalo River, through the Ozarks in Arkansas. In 1973, the Environmental Protection Agency would go on to produce a short documentary film entitled “A Man and a River,” exploring Benton’s love of the Buffalo River, how it factored into his artwork, and his efforts to conserve the river and its natural beauty.

Autumn 1965

Benton travels to Italy for two months to learn modeling in wax and try bronze casting with American artist Harry Jackson (1924–2011).

February 16, 1966

Benton suffers a stroke followed by a heart attack and is hospitalized for five weeks. When he recovers, he determines that his model of life has to change because he is now “one of the ‘old folks.’”¹⁰

1969

Benton’s lithograph, *Discussion* (1969), is published in an edition of 250 by Associated American Artists. Based on drawings the artist had made in 1937 when reporting on labor union disputes in Michigan for *Life* magazine, the print depicts a Black worker seated across from a union recruiter.

1969

Benton publishes his second autobiography, *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* with the University Press of Kansas. This text is more technical than the earlier *An Artist in America* and focuses on his artistic processes instead of his personal biography.

July 5, 1970

Benton suffers a second heart attack, but it is “not as serious” as the first. He is released from the hospital after four days.¹¹

1970

Benton returns to the Buffalo River for a five-day canoe trip. His journey is the topic of Robert F. Jones’ article, “The Old Man and the River,” in the August issue of *Sports Illustrated* magazine.

1971

Despite having claimed that he was through painting murals, Benton agrees to paint a large-scale mural for the centennial of the city of Joplin, Missouri. Benton gladly paints “the Joplin [he] knew as a boy,” even including his own likeness as a young cartoonist in the center.¹² The mural, *Joplin at the Turn of the Century*, is completed in April 1972.

January 19, 1975

Benton dies of a heart attack in his backyard studio in Kansas City while finishing *The Sources of Country Music* (1975), a mural commissioned by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee. His death is front-page news in the *New York Times* the following day.

1977

Benton’s carriage house residence and studio in Kansas City is designated as a Missouri State Historic Site.

May 1982

The *America Today* murals are removed from the New School for Social Research and are sold for a reported \$2,000,000 to a private collector.

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1984

The Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States purchases all ten panels of *America Today* for its new headquarters in Manhattan. The reported \$3,100,000 purchase sets the record for a corporate purchase of a 20th-century American artwork.

December 1986

The Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri, purchases *Persephone* (1939) for \$2,500,000, both the highest price ever paid for a single work by Benton and the highest price the Museum has ever paid for a work of art.

1988

A documentary on Benton by Ken Burns is released. Many friends and family members are interviewed for the project.

1995

The Neosho Arts Council hosts the first annual Thomas Hart Benton Art Competition and Exhibition, displaying works at the Big Spring Gallery inside the Neosho Area Chamber of Commerce. The competition is ongoing.

December 2012

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is gifted the *America Today* murals by AXA Equitable. They are exhibited in the 2014 exhibition *Thomas Hart Benton's America Today Mural Rediscovered* and are now on permanent view at the museum.

2015

The first major Benton exhibition in twenty-five years, *American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood* is organized by the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, in collaboration

with the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth. Bringing together nearly 100 works by Benton, the exhibition explores the relationship between Benton's art and movie making.

2022

The sale of Benton's 1953 painting *Nashaquitsa* at auction achieves \$5,580,000, breaking the record for the artist.

NOTES

1. Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, Fourth Revised Edition, Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1983, p. 31.
2. Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, p. 44.
3. Robert S. Gallagher, "Before the Colors Fade: An Artist in America," in Oliver Jensen ed., *American Heritage*, vol. 24, no. 4, June 1973, p. 85.
4. Robert S. Gallagher, "Before the Colors Fade: An Artist in America," p. 87.
5. Forbes Watson, "Out of Town at Midsummer," *New York Times*, August 4, 1935, p. 139.
6. Robert S. Gallagher, "Before the Colors Fade: An Artist in America," p. 87.
7. *News-Star*, "Luckiest Ladies in U.S.—They Married the 'Best' Husbands," *News-Star*, Monroe, Louisiana, February 19, 1940.
8. *New York Times*, "Benton Rejoices as Art is Hung in 'Saloon'; 'Persephone' Adorns the Diamond Horseshoe," *New York Times*, April 9, 1941, p. 27.
9. Jessie Benton in Ken Burns dir. *Thomas Hart Benton: A Film by Ken Burns*, Alexandria, Virginia: PBS Home Video, aired November 1, 1989.
10. Mary Curtis Warten, ed., *Thomas Hart Benton: A Personal Commemorative*, p. 18.
11. Rita Piacenza quoted in "Thomas Benton Has a Second Heart Attack," *New York Times*, July 15, 1970, p. 28.
12. Mary Curtis Warten, ed., *Thomas Hart Benton: A Personal Commemorative*, p. 31.

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Andrew Schoelkopf

Owner

914 886 2700

andrew@schoelkopfgallery.com

Alana Ricca

Managing Director

203 524 2694

alana@schoelkopfgallery.com

Schoelkopf Gallery

390 Broadway, 3rd Floor

New York, NY 10013

212 879 8815

schoelkopfgallery.com