THOMAS HART BENTON

Where Does the West Begin?

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Schoelkopf

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Essay by Lauren Kroiz

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Thomas Hart Benton seated in front of *Civil War* and *New York Today*, two panels from his mural *The History of New York*, 1927

Acknowledgments

Schoelkopf Gallery is honored to represent the Thomas Hart Benton Trust and to serve its trustees and the trust beneficiaries. *Thomas Hart Benton: Where Does the West Begin?* is the gallery's first important exhibition supporting the artist's legacy. I have been involved in and familiar with Benton's market for over thirty years, but it was a revelation researching the Trust's holdings and has inspired this presentation and a series of subsequent exhibitions that will unfold at the gallery in the future. In 2026, the gallery will present a major retrospective of Benton's work.

Benton has been so famous for most of a century that we all have a picture in our minds of who he was and the subjects he painted. While he was a defining American modernist and worked in a variety of modes of expression including abstraction, he is perhaps best known as the founder of Regionalism, and his aura is an integral part of the fabric of America's heartland. "I was after a picture of America in its entirety," Benton explained. "I ranged north and south and from New York to Hollywood and back and forth in legend and history." The thrust of this exhibition is to explore Benton's creative response to cultural perceptions of the West and to his own travels to the region.

Benton started painting the West in the 1920s with the triumphant *American Historical Epic* composed of fourteen panels in three chapters. The third chapter highlights the West, and includes panels titled: *The Pathfinder*, *Over the Mountain*, *The Jesuits, Struggle for the Wilderness*, and *The Lost Hunting Ground*. The West would feature as prominent subject matter in his work for nearly five decades following this epic opening salvo, culminating in ambitious compositions that emphasize the sense of limitless possibility offered by the western landscape, such as *The Plains*, 1953; *The Sheepherder*, 1955–57; and *Trail Riders*, 1964–65.

As you dig into the publication and exhibition, we wish to thank Lauren Kroiz who contributed the essay. Dr. Kroiz is Associate Professor in the History of Art Department at the University of California, Berkeley and an expert on American modern art. She is the award-winning author of *Cultivating Citizens: The Regional Work of Art in the New Deal Era* and many other insightful books and articles on American art and culture. It has been our delight to work with Dr. Kroiz, and we thank her for the engrossing story and insights shared in the pages which follow.

My colleagues and I would also like to thank Benton's family and the trustees of the Thomas Hart Benton Trust. And the gallery's friend Megan Fox Kelly who we are always appreciative to collaborate with. We are additionally grateful for the generous contributions from Henry Adams and Andrew Thompson who are compiling their research in a forthcoming catalogue raisonné of Benton's work along with fellow committee members Anthony Benton Gude and Michael Owen, under the aegis of the Thomas Hart Benton Catalogue Raisonné Foundation.

We would also like to share a special note of thanks to the River Club of Kansas City, its members, and particularly its leadership, Mike Mayer and Trey Humphrey, for the opportunity to share in this publication and the gallery's exhibition their monumental *Trading at Westport Landing (Old Kansas City)*, 1956 which was commissioned by the organization in 1955 and is being shown outside of Kansas City for the first time.

—Andrew L. Schoelkopf

Thomas Hart Benton: Where Does the West Begin?

By Lauren Kroiz

Thomas Hart Benton opened the penultimate chapter of his 1937 autobiography by asking: "Where Does the West Begin?" The painter, who would travel in the region for nearly five decades, answered by tracing the "marked change of country" to "a zigzag pattern up and down the ninety-eight degree line."[1] In choosing the specific meridian, Benton drew on historian Walter Prescott Webb's 1931 book *The Great Plains*, which shifted from the older hundredth-degree marker. A massive tome acclaimed by academics and the popular press, Webb's controversial thesis tied the distinctness of the West to its aridity, identifying the technological innovations—revolver, barbed wire, and windmill—that allowed whites to colonize and change the environment. The latter two innovations are visible in Benton's *The Plains* (1953, pl. 21), and a viewer can easily imagine the revolver on the hip of the foreground rider. While the bucolic subject might seem far from familiar, spectacular images of Westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, such as John Gast's 1872 crowded *American Progress* (fig. 1), Benton's invocation of Webb in defining the West's beginning suggests we see his depictions of the region's environment as a kind of mid-twentieth-century history painting.

Benton read widely, but he also traveled west. First, in 1928, he spent months driving from Appalachia to West Texas and New Mexico, one in a series of 1920s trips crisscrossing the country that was, as the painter later put it, "the beginning of what came to be called my 'Regionalism.'"[2] In 1934 *Time* magazine launched Benton to national fame by featuring his self-portrait on its cover (fig. 2), consolidating

Fig. 1
John Gast
American Progress, 1872.
Oil on canvas, 11½ × 15¾ inches (29.2 cm × 40 cm). Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles. Museum purchase, 92.126.1

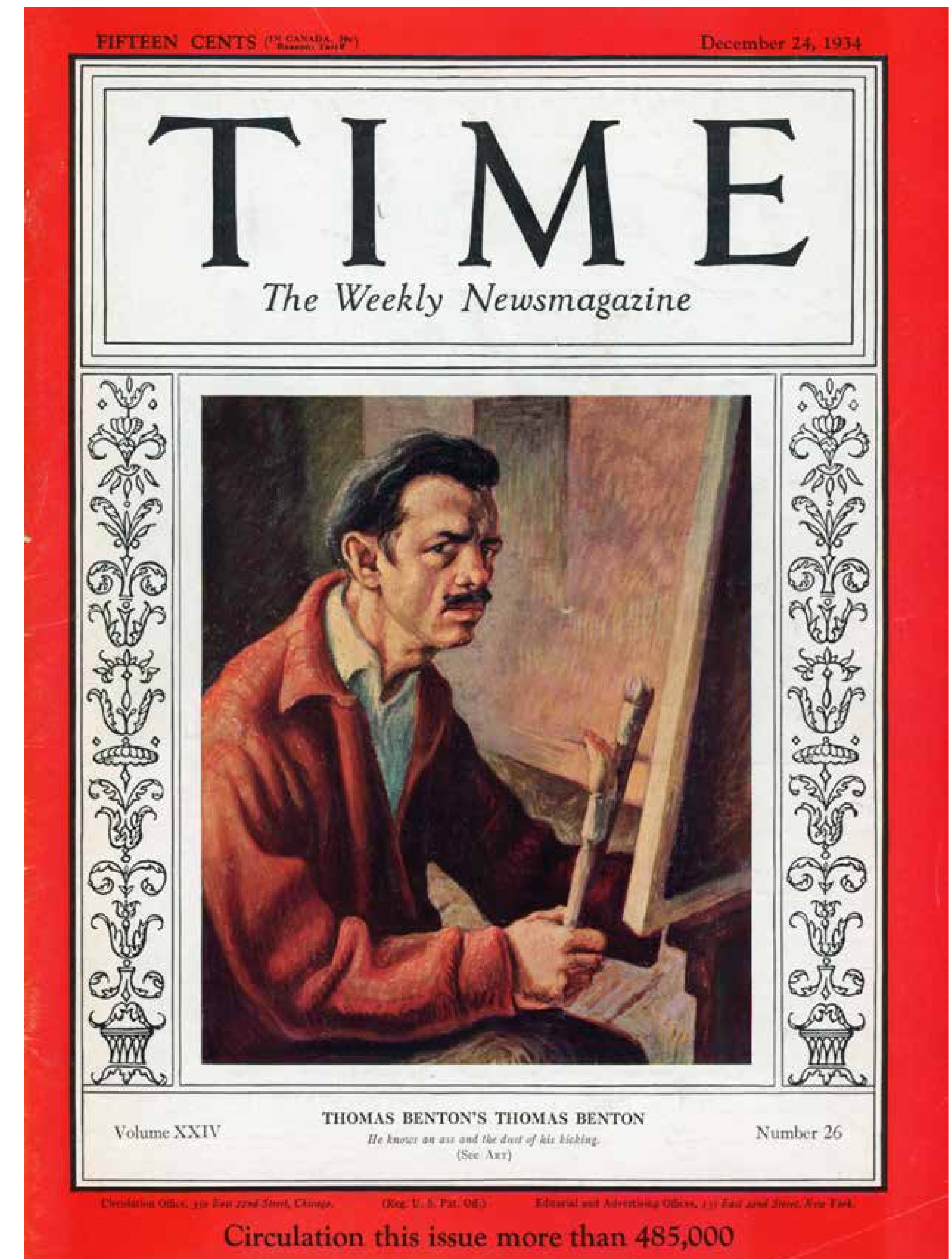


Fig. 2
Cover of *Time* magazine, December 24, 1934, featuring *Self-Portrait*, 1924–25, by Thomas Hart Benton

Fig. 3
F. Otto Becker
Custer's Last Fight, 1896–1920. Chromolithograph, 24 × 38 inches (61 × 96.5 cm). Division of Home and Community Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

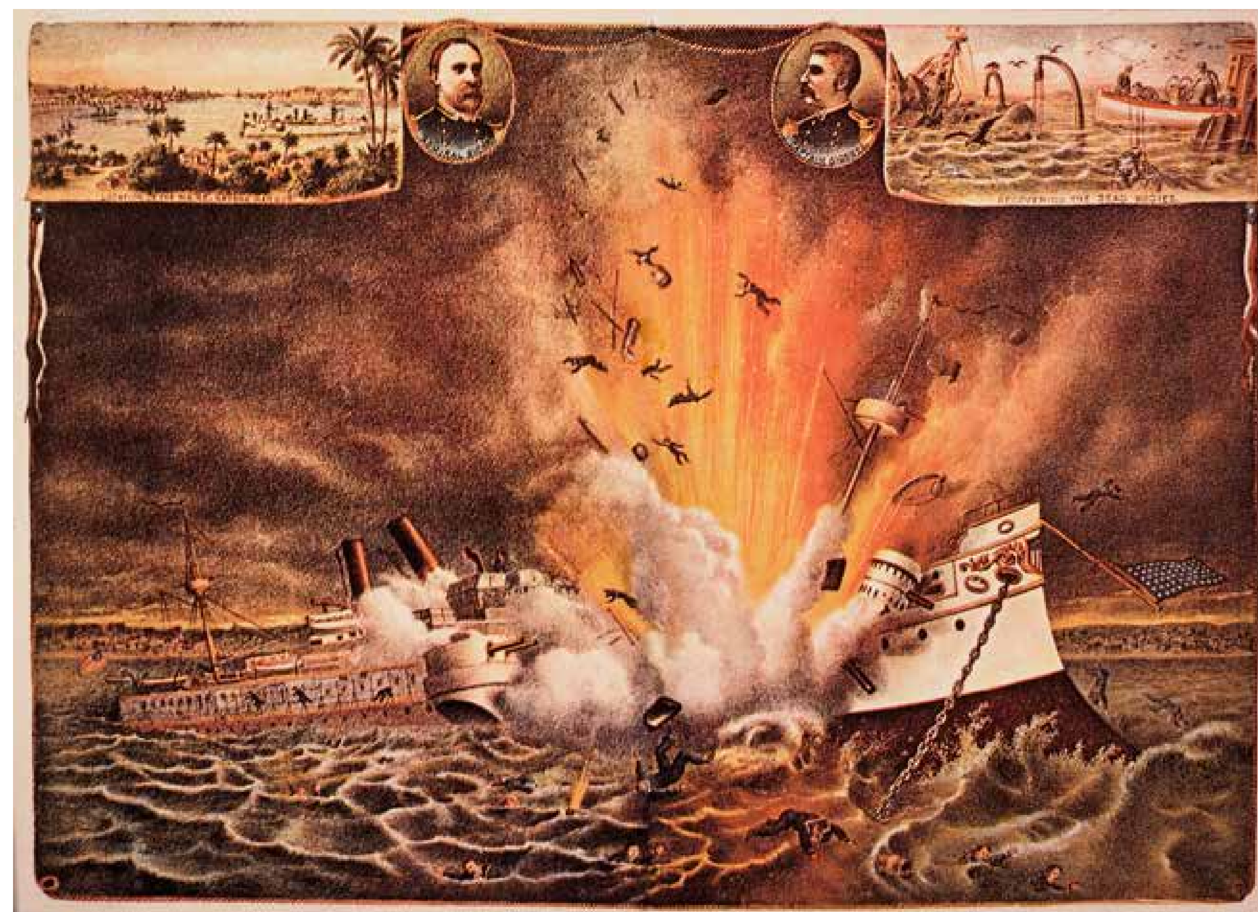


Fig. 4
Kurz and Allison
Destruction of the U.S. Battleship "Maine" in Havana Harbor, February 15, 1898, 1898. Chromolithograph

what became known as the Regionalist movement.[3] A year later, Benton moved from New York to his home state Missouri, locating himself in the Midwest and exploring the West for the remainder of his life to experience what he termed the landscape's "releasing effect." While the painter allowed other places might be flat, only the West had the "character of infinitude"—a sense that the world continued to unfold even beyond the horizon, pulling the viewer restlessly ever onward, a tug that propelled Benton's work for nearly five decades.[4]

Born in 1889, Benton claimed to have taken his early childhood inspiration for artmaking from engravings in his father's history books, preferring bloody battles, as well as "the famous barroom prints of 'Custer's Last Stand' and the blowing up of the Battleship *Maine*."[5] Invoking these origins in his artistic autobiography, Benton tied his painting to iconic episodes in military history and popular lithographs of the late nineteenth century, inspiring readers to imagine the dense *Custer's Last Fight* circulated by the Anheuser Busch Brewing Company to commemorate the influential battle of the Great Sioux War of 1876 and the catastrophic explosion of a U.S. battleship in the Havana Harbor in 1898 that led to the Spanish-American War (figs. 3–4). Benton described himself as "a sort of Turner in paint," invoking an earlier historian, Frederic Jackson Turner, whose influential 1893 "Frontier Thesis" argued the encounter with harsh wilderness transformed European immigrants into Americans.[6] Benton also remembered childhood trips fishing in Oklahoma Indian Territory and being taught by his congressman father the era's dominant idea that Native Americans "were wrongly occupying more good lands than they could use!"[7] Removal policies in the 1830s had forced Tribes off their eastern homelands west of the Mississippi. In 1887, two years before Benton's birth, a federal law divided large tribal territories into small allotments to be farmed by individuals, an attempt to assimilate Native Americans to white norms. Benton came of age during an era in which Federal Indian Policy and popular culture located Native American people in the past, part of a genocide against contemporary Indigenous people. His key childhood images and events suggest the period's celebratory vision of the nation struggling to expand ever westward, aligned with Turner's thesis and what scholars now term settler-colonialism and imperialism.

Benton's series, *American Historical Epic*, painted between 1920 and 1928, used his developing artistic technique to create a new version of the history he had learned as a child. From Neosho, Missouri, the painter moved first to Chicago in 1907, then to Paris in 1908, and finally to New York in 1911 to study art. Benton studied the techniques of Renaissance masters, particularly those who were painters and sculptors like Tintoretto and El Greco—crafting his modernism through the rediscovery of historical materials, including freshly mixed egg tempera, and techniques, such as small-scale sculptural models, grisaille painting, and other methods to study a composition's varied aspects. The combination of modeling and painting emphasized what Benton termed "the bump and the hollow," animating the surfaces of his paintings with his formal theory of dynamic composition that he also published in a series of 1920s theoretical essays.[8] Studies for three panels from the third and final chapter, *Colonial Expansion*, of the epic mural cycle begin with *The Pathfinder,* a name given to John Charles Frémont

(1813–90), an explorer, military officer, and Benton ancestor (fig. 5, pls. 1–2). Filling the left side of the canvas, pushed into the foreground with muscled back turned to the viewer, Benton's Frémont looks from a slightly elevated position over a schematic Native American settlement set in the middle distance against mounded structures that seem to mimic the hills. Benton's value studies suggest the rhythmic band of shadow across the center of the painting and the vibrating light geometries along the central axis, a scheme retained in the final painting's limited color palate to add an off-balance, tense anticipation to the scene. In the following panels, Benton depicted a Jesuit whose raised arm rhymes with the outstretched arm of the abstracted Native American figure and a densely peopled *Struggle for the Wilderness,* which even in its grisaille study captured violence that, unlike the historic lithographs Benton invoked, did not show white Americans as the victims, but rather as the aggressors (figs. 6–7 and pls. 3–5). Benton's series culminated in a panel entitled *The Lost Hunting Ground* in which a Native American figure taking the same pose as Frémont observes white men building log homes and farms beneath a bluntly geometric mountain (fig. 8). Unlike paintings that downplayed genocide against Indigenous people, in this early period, Benton shocked white audiences by drawing attention to the violence that undergirded American history.

Fig. 5
Thomas Hart Benton
American Historical Epic: The Pathfinder, c. 1926. Oil on canvas mounted on aluminum honeycomb panel, 60⅛ × 42⅛ inches (152.7 × 107 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City. Bequest of the artist, F75-21/6

Fig. 6
Thomas Hart Benton
American Historical Epic: Jesuit Missionaries, c. 1924–26. Oil on canvas mounted on aluminum honeycomb panel, 65⅞ × 29 inches (182.9 × 89.2 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City. Bequest of the artist, F75-21/8

Fig. 7
Thomas Hart Benton
American Historical Epic: Struggle for the Wilderness, 1927–28. Oil on canvas mounted on aluminum honeycomb panel, 66¼ × 72¼ inches (168.3 × 183.5 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City. Bequest of the artist, F75-21/9

Fig. 8
Thomas Hart Benton
American Historical Epic: Lost Hunting Ground, c. 1919–24. Oil on canvas mounted on aluminum honeycomb panel, 60¼ × 42⅛ inches (153 × 107 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City. Bequest of the artist, F75-21/10

In 1926, Benton began regular teaching at the Art Students League in New York and traveling during the summers. First walking alone near his Missouri birthplace, the artist soon shifted to driving with his students, including, in 1928 on his on his first trip past the ninety-eighth-degree line (to West Texas oil country and New Mexico), Bill Hayden, who was young, "very inexperienced with rustic character," and comically underscored the distance traveled from the city by ordering iced coffee or elaborate egg dishes and "always making some high-toned faux pas."[9] Benton also recalled traveling in Wyoming and Colorado "in a broken-down and temperamental Ford with Slim, another student," who knew the West well, and in oil country of the Texas Panhandle with "an old Neosho friend, Mr. Frank Miller," a businessman who owned oil and gas wells.[10] In an era before highways—the iconic Route 66 became the first fully paved in 1938—Benton's travel was rarely comfortable. The painter evocatively described the feeling of arriving with Bill in New Mexico in 1928: "For two months of steady driving our kidneys had been pounded by the vibrations of the car seat and we were just about done for."[11] Nonetheless, for Benton, travel became both an essential feature of his art, as well as a "release from art, or from the world of art," an escape from what the painter saw as the "overspecialized and narrow world to which modern circumstance had confined" artists.[12]

Fig. 9
Thomas Hart Benton
White Horse, 1955. Oil on canvas, 22 × 30 inches (55.9 × 76.2 cm). Private collection

Out of the city, in the landscape, Benton explained that while portions of the Midwest might be flat, the clear horizon line "acts as an enclosure and sets a limit to things." In contrast, the West seemed to extend "indefinitely" with "no limits":

> Even the mountains rise in such a way, tier behind tier, that they carry your vision on and on, so that the forward strain of your eyes is communicated to all the muscles of the body and you feel actually within yourself the boundlessness of the world. You feel that you can keep moving forever without coming to any end. This is the physical effect of the West. [13]

Benton envisioned the force of this continual recession in *White Horse* (1955, fig. 9): a small outcropping in the foreground, possibly a haystack, gives way to yellow hills, brown mounds, dark blue mountains, and icy white peaks framed by clouds, powerfully carrying the eye beyond the titular subject into the distance. Although the scenes in *White Horse*, *The Plains,* and other of Benton's Western paintings look initially pastoral, the painter articulated unsettling experiences in the vast spaces. Many found it "unbearable," especially those he termed "cozy-minded people" who need "the sense of intimacy." Some experienced "the monotony, the weariness, the oppressiveness" of the plains landscape. Benton felt a "releasing effect" and "immense freedom of spirit" that allowed him to escape even beyond his own busy mind.

Instead of ruminating, Benton made quick drawings and sketches on these trips, which he later described as "*maps* of form," discerning "the basic anatomy of things." He sometimes made multiple drawings of a subject, capturing general forms and details in a way he termed "exploratory," "reportorial," and most of all, "useful." With them, he aimed to "cut a memory impression and thus help build up the general image of America."[14] Benton often returned to the drawings to develop paintings, for example, using sketches of oil derricks (see figs. 10–11, pls. 7–9) in *Boomtown* (1928, fig. 12).[15] Benton described his stay in a West Texas Panhandle oil

Opposite, clockwise from top left:

Fig. 10
Thomas Hart Benton
Oil Derricks, 1920s. Ink wash and graphite on paper, 8⅞ × 7 inches (22.5 × 17.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of AXA Equitable, 2016, 2016.425.17

Fig. 11
Thomas Hart Benton
Oil Derricks, before 1958. Pen and black ink, black crayon and brush and brown wash, 8⅞ × 12 inches (22.5 × 30.4 cm). The Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Malcolm L. McBride, 1958.417

Fig. 12
Thomas Hart Benton
Boomtown, 1928. Egg yolk and oil on canvas, 46⅛ × 54¼ inches (117.2 × 137.8 cm). Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester. Marion Stratton Gould Fund. 1951.1

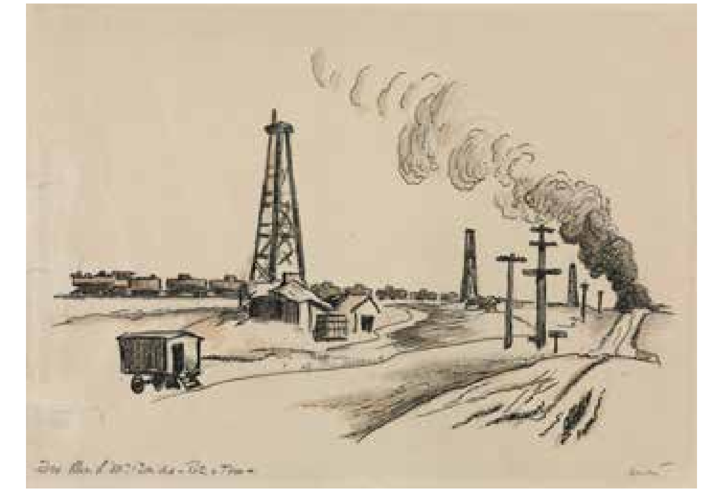


Fig. 13
Thomas Hart Benton
America Today: Changing West, 1930–31. Egg tempera with oil glazing over Permalba on a gesso ground on linen mounted to wood panels with a honeycomb interior, 92 × 134½ inches (233.7 × 341.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of AXA Equitable, 2012, 2012.478b. The mural was originally commissioned by the New School for Social Research in 1930.

Fig. 14
Eanger Irving Couse
Elk-Foot of the Taos Tribe, 1909. Oil on canvas, 78¼ × 36⅜ inches (198.6 × 92.4 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Gift of William T. Evans, 1910.9.5

Fig. 15
Robert Henri
Miguel of Tesuque, 1917. Oil on canvas, 24⅛ × 20¼ inches (61.3 × 51.4 cm). American Museum of Western Art, The Anschutz Collection, Denver

Fig. 16
John Sloan
Chama Running Red, 1925. Oil on canvas, 30½ × 40¼ inches (77.5 × 102.2 cm). American Museum of Western Art, The Anschutz Collection, Denver

boom town, where dust created a disorienting sense of boundlessness and even the road "had no definite edges," motorists simply moving over when the rains made the dirt surface impassible. A carbon mill released thick, black smoke —a "great, wasteful, extravagant burning of resources for momentary profit"—that gave visual expression to "the mighty anarchic carelessness of our country."[16] The carbon mill, derricks, and blurred boundaries also appear centrally in the *Changing West* panel of Benton's New School mural *America Today* (fig. 13), bleeding into airplanes on the left and a cattle rancher and sheepherder below a dry mesa and windmill on the right. As New School director Alvin Johnson pointed out, the visions of oil "must be contrasted with the residual Indian and beaten white in a low frontier den . . . Benton knows that something has to be paid for industrial efficiency."[17] Benton used his sketches to capture the visual effects, as well as the environments and people threatened and empowered by changes in the West.

Benton was not the only artist looking west in the 1920s and '30s. In recounting his travels, he reported a conversation about the many who flocked to Taos and Santa Fe in the summer. He had stumbled into the topic with a group of locals drunk on whiskey at a southwestern New Mexico canyon shack when asked, "What do you think all them nuts come out to Santy Fe for?" Answering—the landscape—Benton also distanced himself from the New Mexico art world, arguing that the visiting eastern artists worked in French styles that set them apart and often took on "superior or patronizing airs" toward locals.[18] Benton likely meant Taos Society of Artists painters, including Joseph Henry Sharp (for example, *Sunset Dance—Ceremony to the Evening Sun,* 1924, Smithsonian American Art Museum) and Eanger Irving Couse (see fig. 14), as well as New York Ashcan school artists Robert Henri and John Sloan (see figs. 15–16), who frequently

traveled to Santa Fe beginning in the 1910s, drawing inspiration from the dramatic landscape, as well as Pueblo and Spanish life, and thereby popularizing Southwestern imagery in the early twentieth century. In his influential 1919 book *Our America*, critic Waldo Frank argued that Mexican and Indian "buried culture" of the Southwest should be rediscovered and integrated into the national culture. (Frank believed, however, that both were doomed as independent cultures in modern society.) Other artists followed Frank's advice by traveling to New Mexico. For example, Marsden Hartley arrived in 1918 (see fig. 17) and Georgia O'Keeffe first visited in the summer of 1929. Overwhelmed, like many visitors, by the expansive landscape, O'Keeffe turned to things, depicting her growing collection of Zuni and Hopi kachina dolls and later, famously, cattle skulls (see fig. 18).[19] Abstractionist Adolph Gottlieb moved to Tucson in 1937 in search of a healthful climate and painted objects from the desert in a Surrealist style (see fig. 19). Benton's most famous student, Jackson Pollock, was born in Wyoming in 1912. Still, his study with Benton in New York encouraged a cross-country trip to Los Angeles in 1931, and his early painting *Going West* (c. 1934–35, fig. 20) evidenced the sculptural techniques of his teacher.[20] Although Benton painted the desert, including gnarled logs and bovine bones, as in *Desert Still Life* (fig. 21, pls. 11–13) and *The Desert* (1956, pl. 37), unlike many modernists, over the decades he connected with the visual immensity of the entire region west of the ninety-eighth meridian.

Fig. 17
Marsden Hartley
El Santo, 1919. Oil on canvas, 36 × 32 inches (91.4 × 81.3 cm). New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe. Gift of the artist, 1919, 523.23P

Fig. 18
Georgia O'Keeffe
Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue, 1931. Oil on canvas, 39⅞ × 35⅞ inches (101.3 × 91.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1952, 52.203

Fig. 19
Adolph Gottlieb
Symbols and the Desert, 1938. Oil on canvas, 39¾ × 35⅞ inches (101 × 91.1 cm). Collection of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation

Fig. 20
Jackson Pollock
Going West, c. 1934–35. Oil on fiberboard, 15⅛ × 20¾ inches (38.3 × 52.7 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Gift of Thomas Hart Benton, 1973.149.1

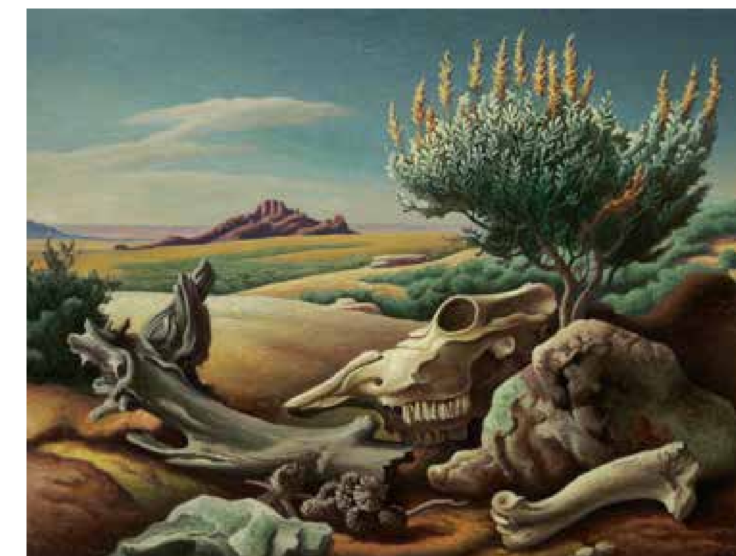


Fig. 21
Thomas Hart Benton
Desert Still Life, 1951. Tempera with oil on canvas mounted on panel, 27⅛ × 35⅜ inches (68.9 × 89.9 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City. Bequest of the artist, F75-21/45

Fig. 22
Thomas Hart Benton
The Race, 1942. Lithograph, image size: 8⅞ × 13⅛ inches (22.5 × 33.3 cm), sheet size: 10¾ × 15 inches (27.3 × 38.1 cm). The Thomas Hart Benton Trust

Benton's own *Going West* (1934, based on a 1926 painting) foregrounded mechanization and rail that moved forward with relentless speed, even seeming to blow backward the lineless utility poles along the tracks, suggesting dynamism and change (pl. 22). Benton reprised the careening train in *The Race* (1942, fig. 22), pitting the locomotive against a galloping horse. Although the horse appears to be leading in the short term, in 1937, Benton wrote, "The pioneer West has gone beyond recall. The land is largely fenced," cowboys replaced by "tractors and combines."[21] In the late 1930s, the country itself also began shifting. Benton described the era of Theodore Roosevelt and the New Deal as "overwhelmingly Americanist," focused on domestic issues and culture. As war broke out in Europe in 1939, "American particularisms" became eclipsed by international conflict.[22] Benton remembered his struggle for a way to paint this new era. Travel that had once inspired him became logistically easier but connected him less to people. After World War II, rugged rural dirt paths gave way to paved roads and "the fast moving vehicles for which they were built." Chance meetings became impossible as "the new countryman whizzed by."[23] Speedier transportation, urbanization, and industrialization collapsed the country into the city.

In the 1940s, Benton also began to experience his own mortality. After an exhausting period of exhibition and travel, he received news of his brother's fatal heart attack. Benton recalled falling into a depression while trying to follow his doctor's instructions. Sober, he worried his dance moves and slang were decades old. However, moving to Kansas City, the painter had left small walk-up apartments for a sprawling house (now a historical site). He remembered noticing "the spring flowers growing in our yard and got an itch to paint some of them," immediately feeling better. The everyday, personal exposure to nature pushed Benton artistically to devote "more and more attention to the texture of things," a shift evidenced in his 1950s desert still lifes and the increasing botanical and geological details offered in the foreground of his landscapes.[24] Using his Kansas City home as a base for frequent travels further into the West, Benton returned to painting but gave up "public hoopla," living more quietly in the years that followed.[25]

Retrospectively, Benton called his brief depression the moment he began moving away from his prior ideas, focusing less on the "Regionalist present" and more on becoming a "painter of history," returning to the "imaginative historical subjects" of the 1920s, but in new ways.[26] He discovered his sense of competition increased as he aged. He began measuring himself "not with the contemporary world, but with the past," continuing his relentless artistic experiments with the old masters as his rivals.[27] He had once foregrounded people and used nature as an "accessory," now the relationship reversed.[28] In the 1950s, Benton traveled west from Missouri to the Great Plains and Rockies, filling sketchbooks with natural scenes. Within Benton's landscapes, there often remained "human content, or something of life that suggested such content," which he felt connected paintings to viewers (and was lacking in pure abstraction). This often took the form of tiny horses, which suggest both the landscape's vast scale and the presence of a rider nearby. While the grisaille *Study for "Utah Highlands"* (1953, pl. 26) first appears empty, a close study shows Benton experimenting with a small deer in the center, an idea he carried further in the related gouache *Utah Highlands* (1954, fig. 23),

Fig. 23
Thomas Hart Benton
Utah Highlands, 1954. Gouache on paper mounted on board, 21 × 28 inches (53.3 × 71.1 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City. Lent by the Shawnee Mission School District, 44.2015

Fig. 24
Thomas Hart Benton
The Kentuckian, 1954. Oil on canvas, 76⅛ × 60⅜ inches (193.4 × 153.4 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Burt Lancaster, M.77.115

Fig. 25
Promotional poster for *The Kentuckian*, 1954, commissioned by United Artists Corporation

Fig. 26
Jim Beam's Choice, collector's edition volume III whiskey bottle featuring *The Kentuckian*, 1954, by Thomas Hart Benton

whose purchase by Kansas City high school students as a senior gift in 1957 suggests his success in connecting to varied audiences.

Benton's "imaginative historical subjects" had resonance with widespread post-war phenomena, including the burgeoning Western film genre. In 1953, he was commissioned to publicize Burt Lancaster's Technicolor film *The Kentuckian* (1955), the story of an 1820s widower who plans to move with his son to Texas. The film offers a rationale for westward expansion that resonated in the rapidly suburbanizing America of the 1950s: "It ain't that we don't like people, we like room more." Benton read the script, watched some filming, and sketched the stars, focusing tightly on the central subjects (fig. 24, pls. 29–32).[29] His Cubist sketch suggests how Benton crafted dynamic forward momentum through the abstraction he had explored in the fragmented planes of Synchromism with Stanton MacDonald-Wright in the 1910s. Over the decades, Benton learned to use this way of understanding space in conjunction with more representational grisaille studies that worked out the same momentum in value, creating dark diagonals toward the left across the landscape that align with the rifle and clouds above. Benton's painting appeared on film posters (fig. 25) and Beam's Choice whiskey labels (fig. 26), tying it to the Kentucky product, even as the main character struggles to move West.

Fig. 27
Thomas Hart Benton
The Sheepherder, 1957. Oil on canvas, 48 × 66 inches (121.9 × 167.6 cm). American Museum of Western Art, The Anschutz Collection, Denver

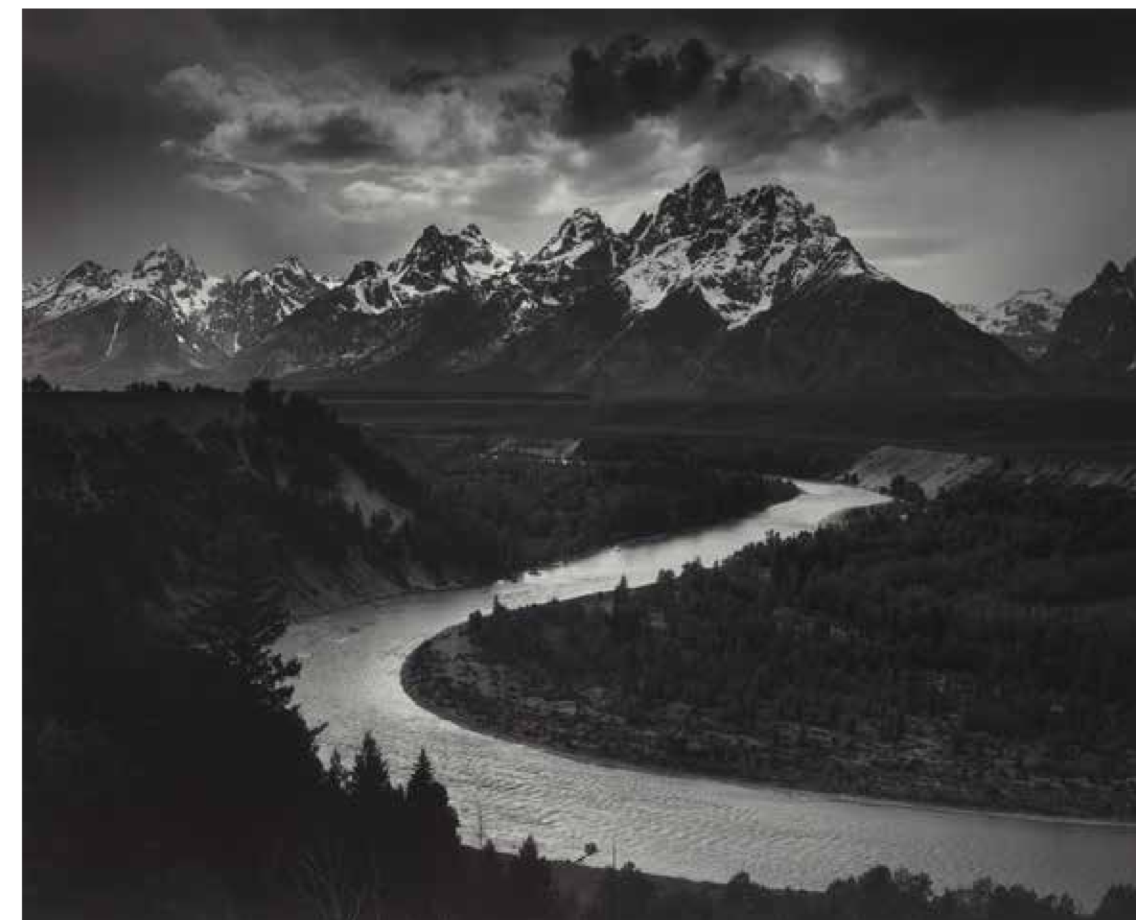


Fig. 28
Ansel Adams
The Tetons and the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, 1942 (1980). Gelatin silver print, 19 × 15⅜ inches (48.3 × 39 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Virginia B. Adams

Benton also painted overtly historic murals in the 1950s, including a 1955 commission from the River Club, which he described as "an exclusive businessmen's organization in Kansas City." The group requested an overmantle mural for the lounge "depicting Old Kansas City—pioneer Kansas City."[30] The assignment suggests Benton's increasing integration into Kansas City and willingness to depict a more harmonious vision of Western settlement (pls. 38–39). The white settler family engages in trade with a Native American man and woman, rendered with some ethnographic specificity likely to evoke the Pawnee Tribe. The Native American man holds a pipe rather than a weapon, although the white man has a revolver on his hip, as stagecoaches and cattle stream upward from the Missouri River and boats below. Benton idealized and abstracted, but he did capture the sharp bend in the river that characterized the elevated view from the Northwest edge of downtown Kansas City, where the prestigious club is located, suggesting environmental continuity contributed to the resonance of imagined history.

Benton also repeatedly traveled in the West, particularly in the diverse landscape of Wyoming. He described the location of the mountain scene in *The Sheepherder* (fig. 27, pls. 33–34) as "a view of the Tetons in western Wyoming," which comprised his "first effort with 'grand' scenery."[31] Benton placed grand in quotation marks, suggesting he felt some distance from the spectacular mountains, a new challenge for the artist after decades of sketching the state, including its residents (see pl. 10). Indeed, although the Tetons, a fault block mountain range, famously rise sharply without foothills, Benton's painting creates an undulating landscape for his sheepherder by amplifying the small mounds along the Snake River visible from Route 89—a scenic road linking Grand Teton and Yellowstone in Wyoming (as well as five other National Parks along its length) that Benton likely traveled. Photographer Ansel Adams used his view *The Tetons and the Snake River* (1942, fig. 28) as the cover of his 1950 book celebrating National Parks, suggesting the landscape's iconic status as increasing numbers of Americans visited national parks in the 1950s. Benton sketched the infrastructure facilitating this travel, including roads in *Lake (Yellowstone Park)* and *West Butte* (pls. 24, 41). The painter also visited Wyoming's famous Wind River Range south of the Tetons twice, sketching Squaretop Mountain in *Lake in the Mountains* (1950, pl. 25) and *Mountain Lake* (1965, pl. 40). Alongside this "grand" scenery of Wyoming's Southern Rockies, Benton continued depicting the state's Great Plains. This experience of representing the varied West proved to be a life-giving challenge for Benton. Looking back on his career at seventy-four, Benton explained: "I wouldn't stop painting 'cause there's always something I've got to learn yet. Just mere problems of drawings; there are always some things you can't do, and there's always a draftsman who did it better. So your life is full."[32] The artist wrote that he felt at peace, having learned artistic practice was its own reward; "The only way an artist can *personally* fail is to quit work."[33]

Fig. 29
Thomas Hart Benton
Trail Riders, 1964–65. Oil on canvas, 56⅛ × 74 inches (142.6 × 188 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of the artist

In 1964, Benton's trip to the Canadian Rockies with his friend Lyman Field, a Kansas City lawyer and arts advocate, resulted in *Trail Riders* (fig. 29). Benton claimed of the journey from Banff to Mount Assiniboine "nearly ten hours on horseback, indicated that in spite of my age I still possessed a pretty good measure of endurance—especially since I had been in the saddle very little since my boyhood."[34] Although Benton's narrative might suggest that the painting documents his journey, his varied compositions provide fascinating insights into his imaginative process. His tempera grisaille features three riders and a spare horse (pl. 45), his oil on canvas mounted on board one rider alone (pl. 46), and his oil on canvasboard two riders and a spare horse (pl. 47). The latter most closely resembles Benton's narrative of travel with a friend; it also matches the version at the National Gallery of Art, but in that large canvas the ragged lake's edge Benton developed in the grisaille reappears, suggesting Benton's palimpsestic, laborious way of working through the difficult mountain landscapes. Benton's description of horseback riding linked the trip with his childhood, and indeed, although the painter may not have known it, Mount Assiniboine had been named in 1885, when a surveyor thought its shape with cloud cover resembled smoke rising from a tepee. The name of a Great Plains tribe, Assiniboine (a term taken into English from French settlers), is used within a Rockies landscape that is the traditional territory of the Ktunaxa or Kootenai First Nations people, a naming that ignores one lived Indigenous presence on the land by substituting an explorer's perceived visual resemblance to another. This slippage returns us to Benton's early paintings, suggesting where the West begins might be a question that is never far from the region's history and the violence of colonization with which Benton began.

NOTES

1. Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America* (New York: R. M. McBride & Co., 1937), 199.
2. Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1969), 58.
3. The art historian Henry Adams observes: "From reading about himself in *Time,* Tom had discovered that he was the leader of a Midwestern art movement," in Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 236. Adams, Justin Wolff, and myself provide more on this moment, see Adams, *American Original*, 238–48, Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 228–38, and Lauren Kroiz, *Cultivating Citizens: The Regional Work of Art in the New Deal Era* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).
4. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 199.
5. Benton, *An American in Art*, 11.
6. Benton, *An American in Art*, 149. Benton also considered his "indebtedness to Turner" in Thomas Hart Benton, "American Regionalism: A Personal History of the Movement," *University of Kansas City Review* 18 (Autumn 1951): 148–49.
7. Thomas Hart Benton, "My American Epic in Paint," *Creative Arts* 3 (December 1928): 35.
8. Thomas Hart Benton, "Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting," *The Arts,* November 1926, 285–89; December 1926, 340–42; January 1927, 43–44; February 1927, 95–96; March 1927, 145–48.
9. Benton, *An American in Art*, 61, 81.
10. Benton, *An American in Art*, 81. For information about Miller, see William E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans* (Chicago: Lewis, 1918), 228.
11. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 122.
12. Benton, *An American in Art*, 61.
13. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 199–200.
14. Benton, *An American in Art*, 59–60.
15. Thomas Hart Benton, "Thirty-six Hours in a Boom Town," *Scribner's Magazine* 104, no. 4 (October 1938): 16.
16. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 202–03.
17. Alvin Johnson, *Notes on the New School Murals* (New York: New School for Social Research, 1943), 6–7.
18. Benton, *An American in Art*, 235.
19. I discuss this at greater length in Lauren Kroiz, *Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 173–84.
20. Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: C. N. Potter, 1989), 196.
21. Benton, *An Artist in America*, 211.
22. Benton, "American Regionalism," 192.
23. There are four editions of Benton's 1937 autobiography. He authored new chapter updates appended at the end "After" (1951 edition) and "And Still After" (1968 edition), both are included in the posthumous edition that I cite: Thomas Hart Benton, "After," *An Artist in America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 328–29.
24. Benton, "After," 290.
25. Benton, "After," 313.
26. Benton, "After," 330.
27. Benton, "After," 309.
28. Benton, "And Still After," 327.
29. For further discussion of *The Kentuckian* and Benton's relationship to the West as mediated through film, see Austen Barron Bailly, "True West: Thomas Hart Benton and American Epics," *American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum; New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 30–43.
30. Benton, "And Still After," 330.
31. Benton, "And Still After," 365
32. Homer Brown, "'The Work of Art': An Interview with Thomas Hart Benton, Part 2," recorded May 6, 1962, *Missouri Historical Review* 108, no. 1 (October 2013): 8.
33. Benton, "And Still After," 369.
34. Benton, "And Still After," 366.

Plates

* An asterisk denotes a work that will be included in the forthcoming catalogue raisonné being prepared by the Thomas Hart Benton Catalogue Raisonné Foundation, comprised of Committee Members Dr. Henry Adams, Anthony Benton Gude, Andrew Thompson, and Michael Owen

1.

* **Study for "American Historical Epic — Colonial Expansion: The Pathfinder"** c. 1924–26
Oil on board
11⅞ × 8⅞ inches (30.2 × 22.5 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton 2[illeg.];
inscribed on verso: Epic of Amer. —2nd series.

2.

* **Study for "American Historical Epic — Colonial Expansion: The Pathfinder"** 1926
Oil on board
9 × 6¾ inches (22.9 × 17.1 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton '26;
inscribed at lower right on board: Epic of America

3.

* **Study for "American Historical Epic — Colonial Expansion: The Jesuits"** 1926
Oil on board
13¾ × 6⅝ inches (34.9 × 16.8 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton / '26

4.

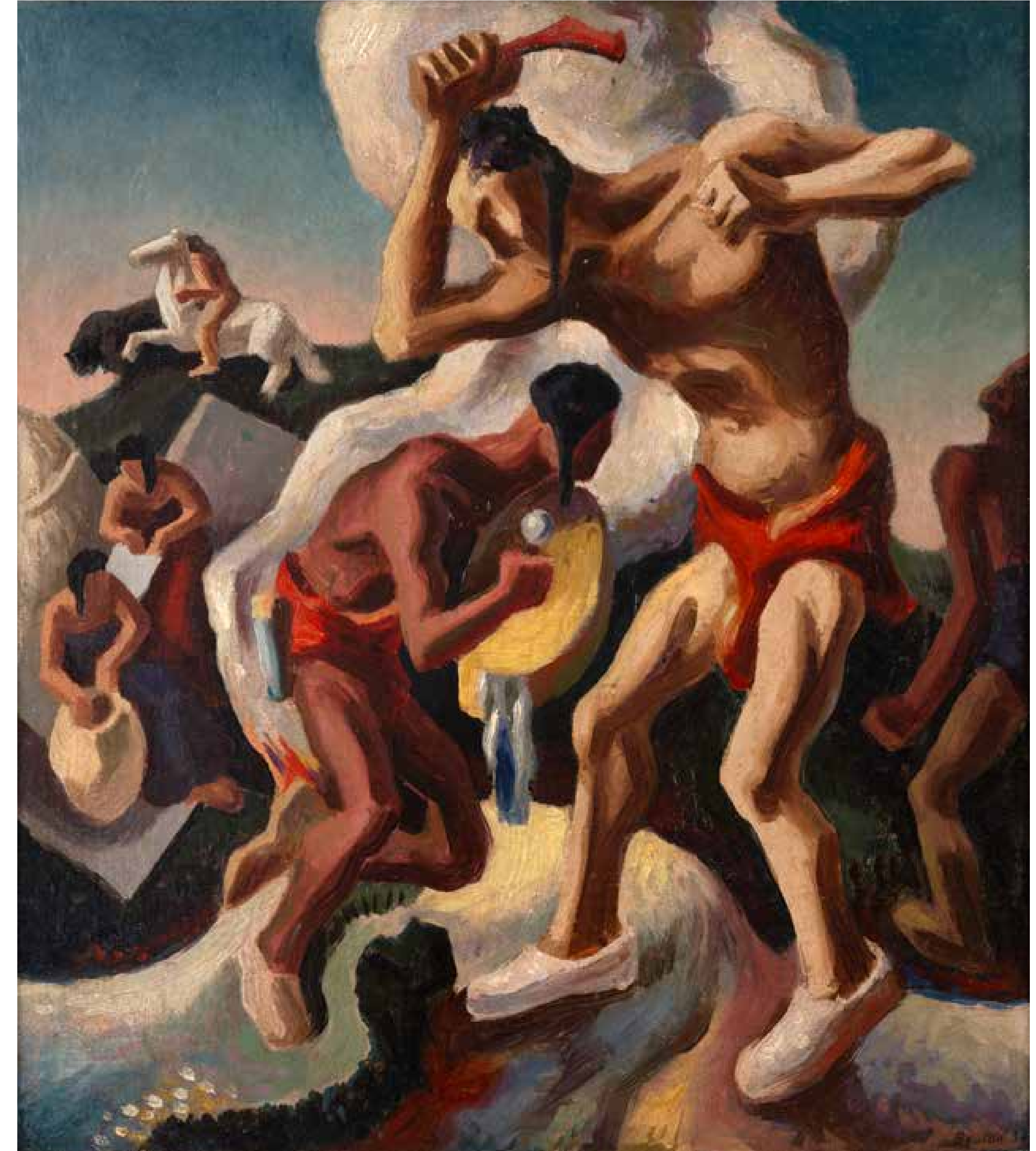
Study for "American Historical Epic — Colonial Expansion: The Jesuits" c. 1926
Crayon and pencil on paper
19½ × 14¼ inches (49.5 × 36.2 cm)
Signed at lower center: Benton

5.

* **Study for "American Historical Epic — Colonial Expansion: Struggle for the Wilderness"** c. 1924–26
Oil on paper
18⅞ × 21¼ inches (47.9 × 54 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

6.

* **Study for "The Arts of Life in America: Indian Arts"** 1932
Oil on board
18 × 15½ inches (45.7 × 39.4 cm)
Signed and dated at lower right: Benton '32



7.

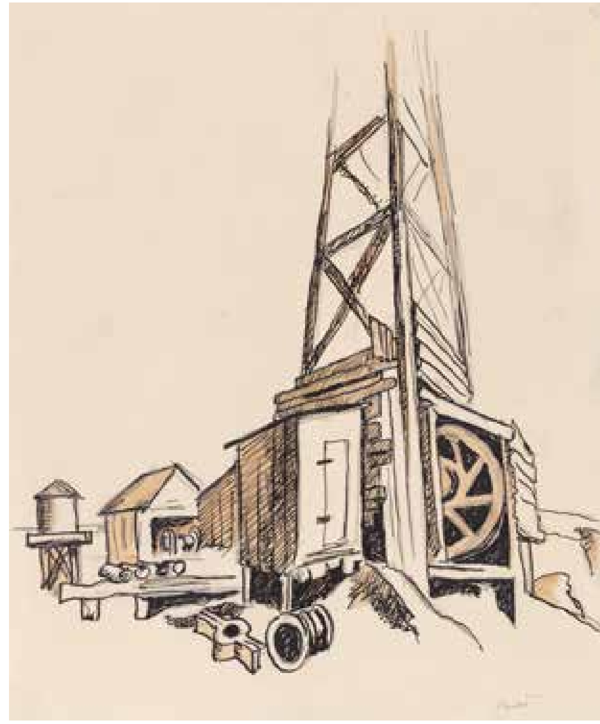
Base of Derrick c. 1928
Ink and pencil on paper
8¾ × 7 inches (22.2 × 17.8 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

8.

Oil Derrick c. 1928
Ink and pencil on paper
7 × 8¾ inches (17.8 × 22.2 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

9.

Oil Rig c. 1928
Ink and pencil on paper
7 × 7½ inches (17.8 × 19.1 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton



10.

Portrait of Will Ream 1928–30
Ink, wash and pencil on paper
12 × 9⅛ inches (30.5 × 23.2 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton; inscribed at lower left: Will Ream / Tullis, Wy; inscribed on verso: Wyoming / Citizen

11.

* **Study for "Desert Still Life"** c. 1951
Oil on board
7½ × 8½ inches (19.1 × 21.6 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

12.

* **Desert Still Life** c. 1951
Oil on board
5 × 7 inches (12.7 × 17.8 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

13.

* **Desert Still Life** c. 1951
Oil on board
6¾ × 9½ inches (17.1 × 24.1 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

14.

Wyoming Landscape
Ink and pencil on paper
9 × 12 inches (22.9 × 30.5 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

15.

Plains Country
Ink and pencil on paper
9 × 12 inches (22.9 × 30.5 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton; inscribed with the title on verso: Plains Country

16.

Cowboys and Horses c. 1930
Ink and pencil on paper
9 × 12 inches (22.9 × 30.5 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

17.

Cattle Auction 1938
Pencil on paper
18 × 10 inches (45.7 × 25.4 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton.

18.

* **Study for "Utah Desert"** 1952
Oil on board
6 × 6½ inches (15.2 × 16.5 cm)

19.

* **Utah Desert** c. 1952
Oil on board
5½ × 7½ inches (14 × 19.1 cm)
Signed at lower left: Benton

20.

* **Desert Dawn** c. 1961
Oil on board
3 × 3½ inches (7.6 × 8.9 cm)
Signed at lower left: Benton

21.

* **The Plains** 1953
Oil on canvas mounted on board
18¼ × 26¼ inches (46.4 × 66.7 cm)
Signed and dated at lower right: Benton '53;
signed and inscribed with the title on the
stretcher: "THE PLAINS" / Benton; inscribed
with the title on verso: "THE PLAINS"

22.

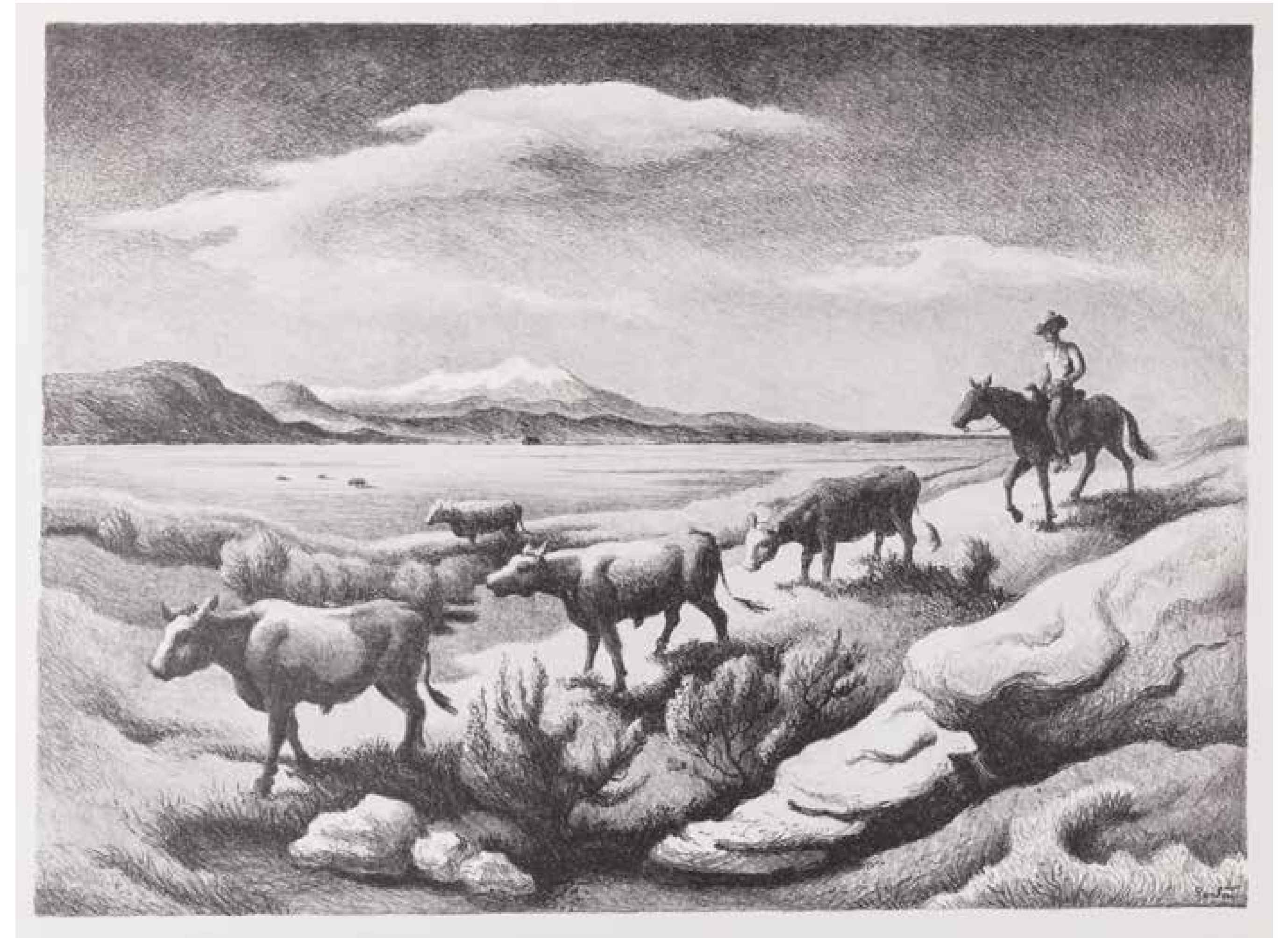
Going West 1934
Lithograph
Image size: 12⅜ × 23⅜ inches (31.3 × 59.2 cm)
Sheet size: 20⅞ × 28⅞ inches (53 × 73.3 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

Conceived in oil in 1926 and circulated as lithographs by Ferargil Galleries, New York, in 1934 in an edition of 75.

23.

Wyoming Autumn 1974
Lithograph
Image size: 17⅛ × 23¼ inches (43.5 × 59.1 cm)
Sheet size: 22 × 28 inches (55.9 × 71.1 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

Conceived in oil in 1958 and circulated as lithographs by Associated American Artists, New York, in 1974 in an edition of 250.



24.

Lake (Yellowstone Park)
Ink and pencil on paper
11 × 14 inches (27.9 × 35.6 cm)
Signed at lower left: Benton; inscribed with the title on verso: Lake (Yellowstone Pk.)

25.

* **Lake in the Mountains** 1950
Watercolor and ink on paper
10¼ × 13 inches (26 × 33 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton '50
Private collection, Kansas

26.

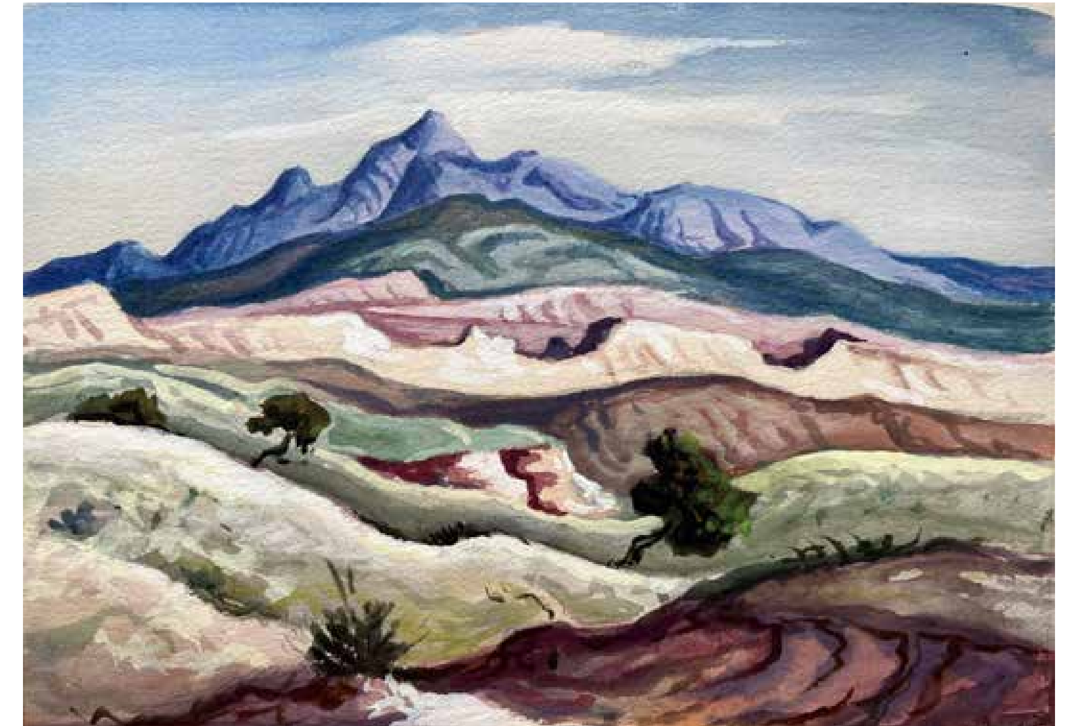
* **Study for "Utah Highlands"** 1953
Gouache on paper
14½ × 20 inches (36.8 × 50.8 cm)
Signed twice and dated at lower right:
Benton / Benton 53

27.

* **Western Landscape** 1954
Watercolor on paper
8½ × 12 inches (21.6 × 30.5 cm)
Signed and dated at lower right: Benton 54
Private collection, Kansas

28.

* **Desert Landscape** 1954
Watercolor on paper
8¾ × 10½ inches (22.2 × 26.7 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton 54
Private collection, Kansas



29.

Study for "The Kentuckian" 1954
Pen and ink and pencil on paper
11 × 8⅜ inches (27.9 × 21.3 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

30.

Study for "The Kentuckian" 1954
Pencil on paper
11¾ × 17 inches (29.8 × 43.2 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

31.

* **Study for "The Kentuckian"** 1954
Watercolor, gouache and pencil on paper
25 × 19¾ inches (63.5 × 50.2 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

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*

32.

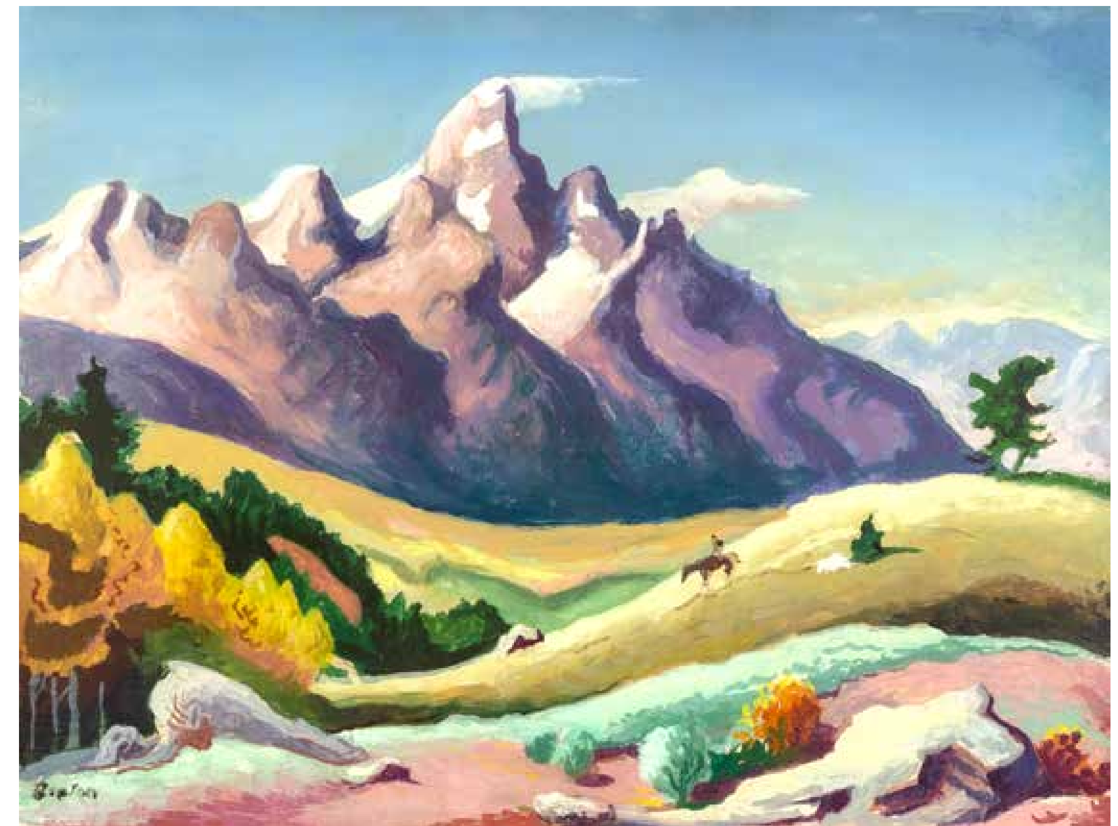
* **Study for "The Kentuckian"** 1954
Oil on board
15 × 10½ inches (38.1 × 26.7 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

33.

* **The Sheepherder** 1955
Watercolor and gouache on paper
15½ × 19½ inches (39.4 × 49.5 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton '55

34.

* **The Sheepherder** c. 1955–57
Oil on board
7¾ × 10¾ inches (19.7 × 27.3 cm)
Signed at lower left: Benton



35.

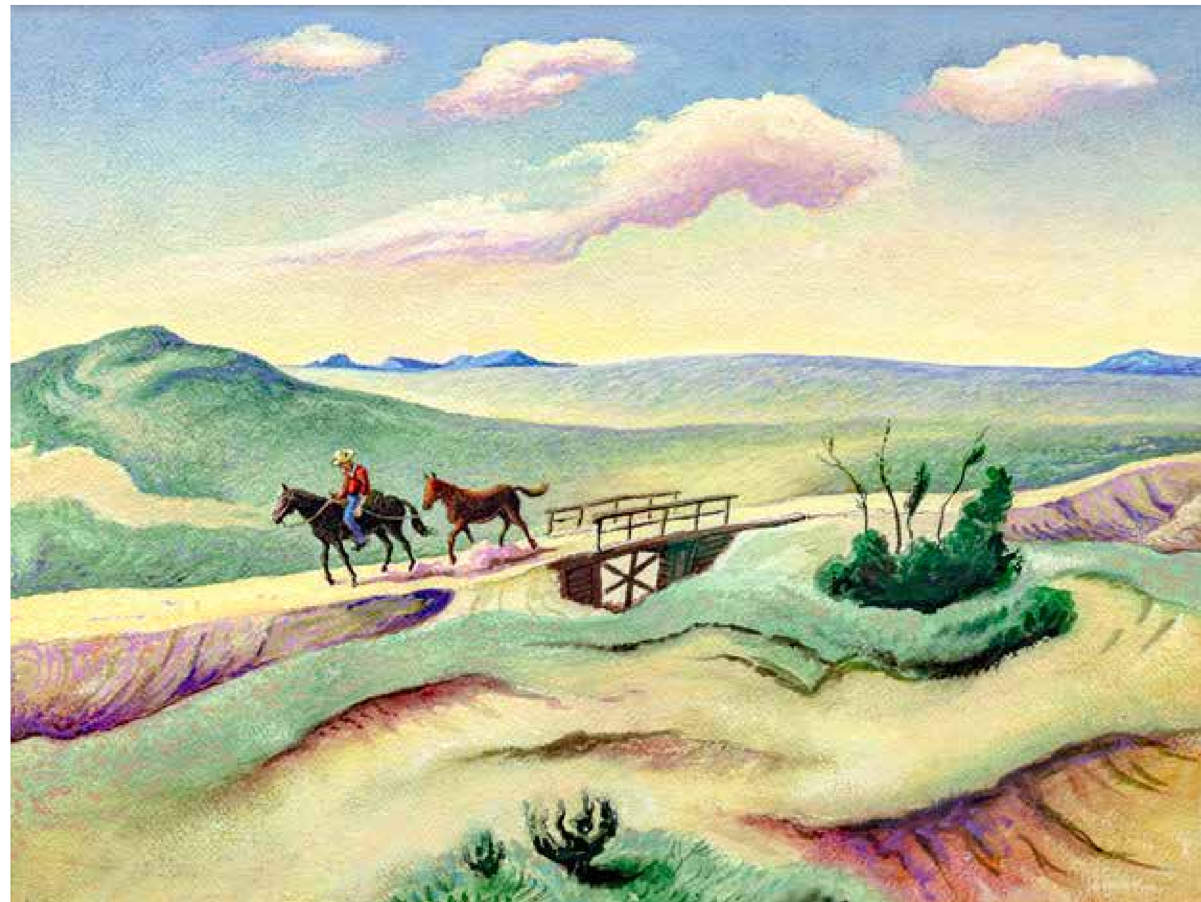
* **Western Desert**
Watercolor on paper
4½ × 10 inches (11.4 × 25.4 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

36.

* **Wyoming Landscape** c. 1955–60
Watercolor on paper
16½ × 22¼ inches (41.9 × 56.5 cm)
Signed at lower left: Benton

37.

* **The Desert** 1956
Tempera on paperboard
21 × 28½ inches (53.3 × 72.4 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton '56



38.

* **Study for "Trading at Westport Landing (Old Kansas City)"** c. 1956
Oil on board
6⅜ × 11⅞ inches (16.2 × 30.2 cm)
Signed at lower left: Benton

39.

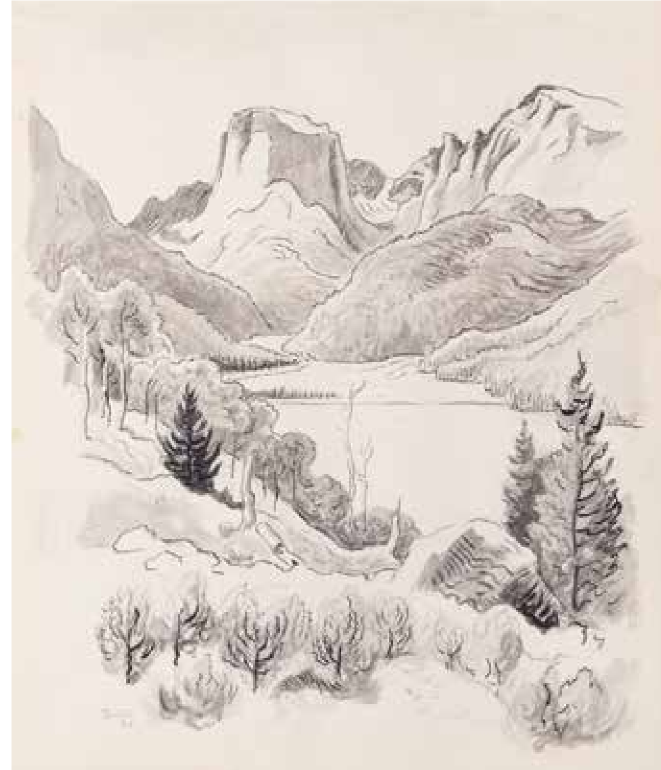
* **Trading at Westport Landing (Old Kansas City)** 1956
Tempera on canvas mounted on panel
50 × 88 inches (127 × 223.5 cm)
The River Club of Kansas City

40.

Mountain Lake 1965
Ink and pencil on paper
12 × 10 inches (30.5 × 25.4 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton / '65

41.

West Butte
Pen and ink and pencil on paper
9 × 12 inches (22.9 × 30.5 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton



42.

Utah
Ink and pencil on paper
10½ × 14 inches (26.7 × 35.6 cm)
Signed and inscribed with the title at lower right: Benton / Utah

43.

Wyoming
Pencil on paper
8¼ × 12¾ inches (21 × 32.4 cm)
Signed and inscribed with the title at lower right: Benton / Wyoming

44.

Storm in the Mountains
Pen and ink and pencil on paper
8¾ × 11½ inches (22.2 × 29.2 cm)
Signed and inscribed with the title at lower right: Benton / STORM IN THE MOUNTAINS

45.

* **Study for "Trail Riders"** 1964
Tempera on paperboard
19½ × 26 inches (49.5 × 66 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton '64

46.

* **Trail Riders** c. 1964–65
Oil on canvas mounted on board
11¾ × 16 inches (29.8 × 40.6 cm)
Signed at lower right: Benton

47.

* **Trail Riders** c. 1964–65
Oil on canvasboard
15¼ × 19¼ inches (38.7 × 48.9 cm)
Signed and inscribed with the incorrect date at lower right: Benton '63

48.

* **Wyoming Landscape** 1967
Oil on Masonite
10½ × 19½ inches (26.7 × 49.5 cm)
Signed and dated at lower left: Benton '67

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Pages 6–7: *Trail Riders*, detail, c. 1964–65 (pl. 47)
Pages 28–29: *Trading at Westport Landing (Old Kansas City)*, detail, 1956 (pl. 39)
Inside back cover: *Study for "The Kentuckian,"* detail, 1954 (pl. 31)
Back cover: *Study for "The Kentuckian,"* detail, 1954 (pl. 32)

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