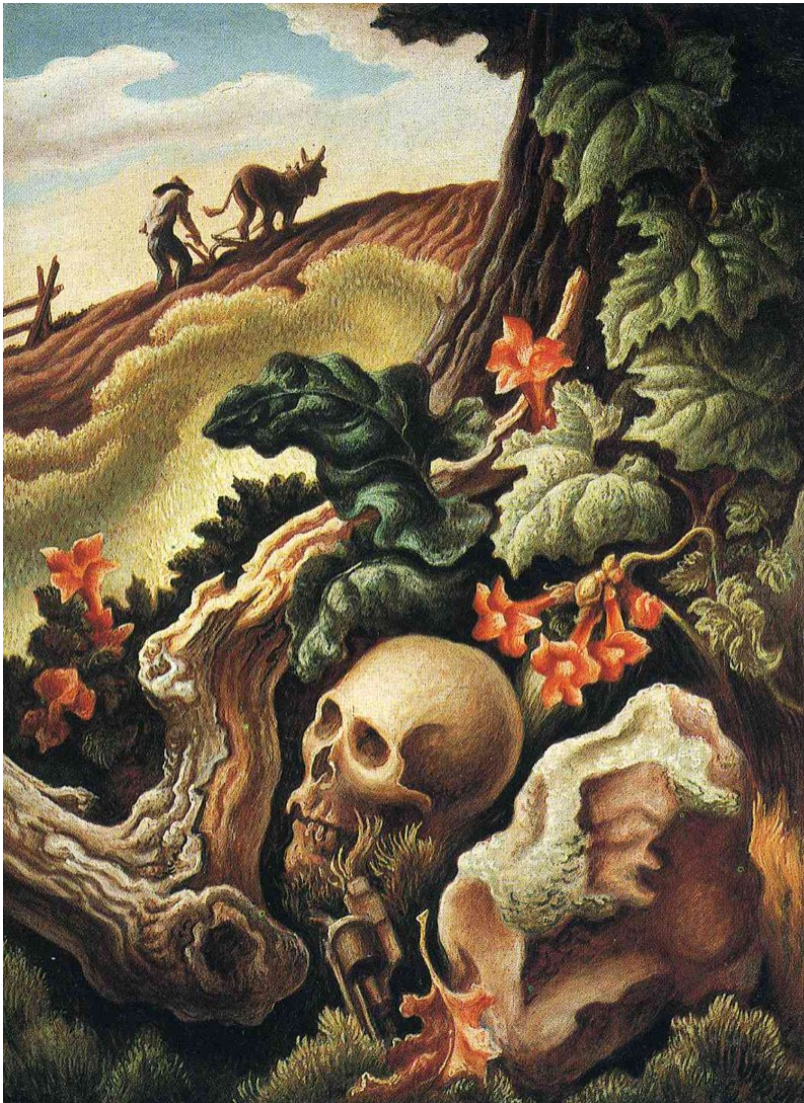


Feature Article

by

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Thomas Hart Benton

American

After Many Springs

1945

egg tempera and oil on

masonite

30" X 22 1/4"

Collection of the

Thomas Hart Benton Estate

Kansas City, Missouri

Thomas Hart Benton was born in 1889 in southwestern Missouri. Both his parents were southern "hill folk" though his father's family was more well-to-do than his mother's. His great uncle, after whom he was named, was a US Senator. Tom grew up in the small town of Neosho, Missouri with his parents, two sisters, and a brother. Tom's mother took her children to Texas to visit her family in the summertime. As a boy, Tom experienced farming and hunting. Tom went campaigning in the backcountry when his lawyer father, a Populist and a Democrat, ran for Congress. His father won election to the US House of Representatives, and the family moved to Washington, DC, where Tom saw and was impressed with the newly painted murals in the Library of Congress. The family returned to Missouri in the summers, where Tom had a pony, took care of a cow, and worked as a strawberry picker. After his father lost re-election and the family returned to Missouri, Tom got a job as an artist for a newspaper in Joplin, Missouri.

Benton was always interested in drawing. After a brief time at a military school in Alton, Illinois. Tom moved to Chicago where he attended the Art Institute in a program designed to prepare commercial artists. In Chicago, he experienced a modern city with cars and skyscrapers for the first time. As a young man, Benton traveled to France to study art. In Paris he tried Impressionism and experimented with Cezanne-inspired drawing in the south of France. He was influenced by Stanton Macdonald-Wright, whose Synchronist paintings explored colors (See figure 1). Benton had his first one-person show in France.

Some of Benton's historical influences were Michelangelo, Tintoretto, and El Greco. More contemporary influences were the American painter, Thomas Marin, and the Mexican revolutionary muralists, Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco.

Upon returning to the US, Benton took up residence in New York City, where he met John Weichsel, the Marxist founder of the People's Art Guild. At the People's Gallery, Tom taught a young woman whom he would later marry. He also taught at New York City's Art Students' League. In the 1920's he painted a series of paintings called *The American Historical Epic*. Benton was a very successful artist prior to World War II. He made easel paintings and prints. But he was best known for his murals. In the 1930s he painted murals at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York entitled *The Arts of Life in America* and *A Social History of Indiana*, a mural for the 1933 World's Fair. Later Benton completed a series of murals in the Missouri State Capitol, *A Social History of Missouri*.

Benton maintained a connection to working people throughout his life. He, his wife, and their two children got away from New York City in the summer to vacation in a small fishing and farming village on Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. In the 1920s Benton took a train to New Orleans and then north to Little Rock, Arkansas, after which he walked through the backcountry to Springfield, Missouri. He drove a Model-T Ford to Texas and Oklahoma, where he visited oil boomtowns. In 1928 he travelled in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and the Smokey Mountains. He continued to New Orleans and then up the Mississippi River returning eventually to New

York City. Even as an old man, Benton travelled to Wyoming, where he painted the Grand Teton Mountains.

The Philadelphia businessman turned art collector, Albert Barnes, was a supporter of Benton. The writer, Thomas Craven, became a strong advocate of Benton's work. Craven grouped Benton with other artists from the Midwest, Grant Wood and Steuwart Curry under the name, Regionalists. During the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, US unemployment reached 25% and the rural regions of the Midwest were hard hit. Under Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the federal government funded many arts projects, including mural and printmaking projects that honored working people. In 1934 Benton's self portrait made the cover of *Time* magazine, the first time an artist ever appeared on the cover of that publication.

The New York artworld of the 30's and 40s was divided into two camps. Alfred Stiegliz promoted Modernism with its focus on autonomy and subjectivity, while Thomas Craven promoted Regionalism with its narrative social focus. Prior to World War II, political sentiments ran high. When Benton was accused by Communists of being a Fascist, bigot, and racist, Benton responded "I still believe that collectivism may result from democratic procedures without the violent disruption of our social services, and without the need of armed forces installing and protecting a dictatorship." In 1935, Benton left New York to teach at the Kansas City Art Institute, where he taught till 1941. When the largely democratic Allies (including the Communist Soviet Union) defeated the Facists in

1945, Modernism became the dominant movement in the US artworld, eclipsing Benton and the Regionalists.

Benton continued to paint murals with social and historical content till he died in 1975, while completing *The Sources of Country Music*, his last mural, for the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee.

Figures



Figure 1: Stanton MacDonald-Wright

1918

"Oriental"; Symphony in Blue-Green

oil painting

36 X 59"

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Figure 2: Michelangelo

1508-1512

The Flood (Detail)

Fresco

Sistine Chapel, Vatican

Figure 3: Grant Wood,

Young Corn

1931

oil on masonite panel

24 x 29 7/8"

Cedar Rapids Museum of Art

Cedar Rapids, Iowa

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