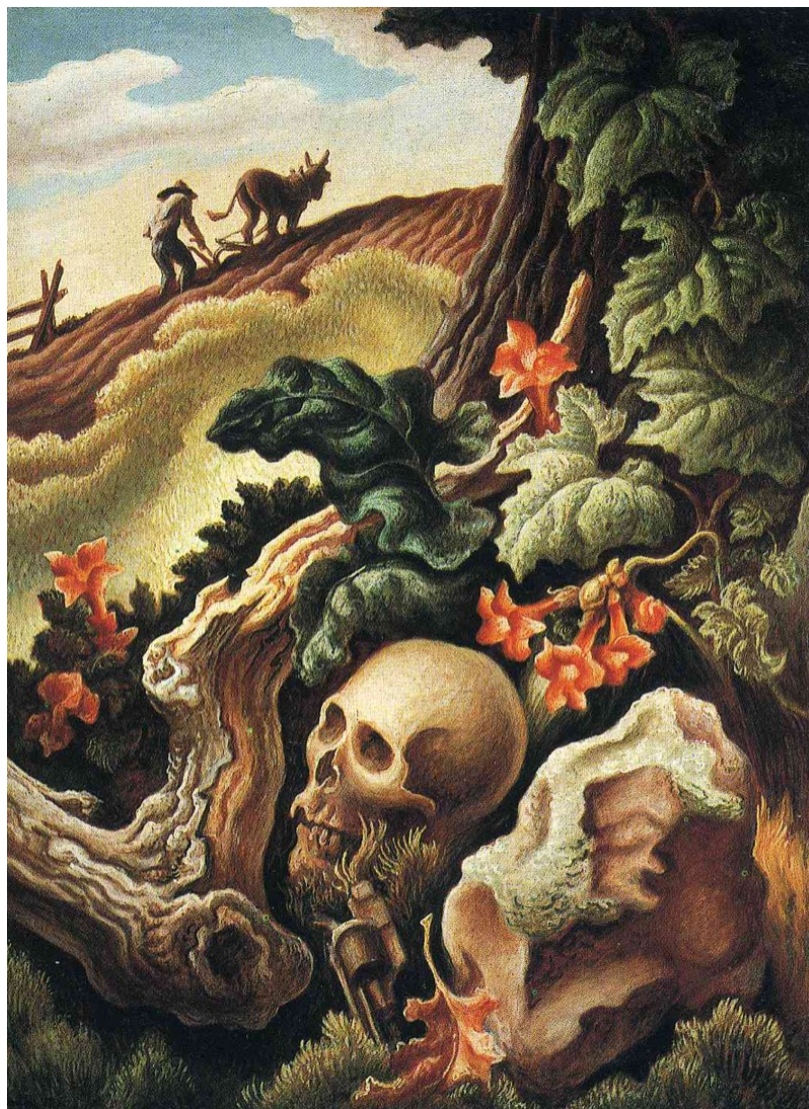


Interpretation

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

In 1945, when Thomas Hart Benton painted *After Many Springs*, the upheaval of World War II was in its final year and Benton was in the throes of a major transition in his career. Before the war, Benton was regarded as the leading figure among a group of social narrative artists, the Regionalists, whose work stood in stark contrast with the Modernist painters, whose work centered on individual, subjectivity. In 1934, Benton had the national recognition of being on the cover of *Time* magazine. By the late 1940s, Benton's former student, Jackson Pollack, was a rising star of the Abstract Expressionist era, and Benton no longer commanded the spotlight.

After Many Springs seems to be Benton's poignant expression of the changed reality of his life in art. In 1922, African American poet, Langston Hughes, wrote a poem with the same title, which may have been known to Benton. Though only a young man when he wrote the poem, Hughes reflects on the loss that comes inevitably as life moves unstoppably forward. Perhaps, Benton's *After Many Springs* also reflects on the inevitability of passing time. The skull, discarded revolver, and dead leaf hidden in a tangle of branches, blossoms, and vines suggest that death awaits even as new growth springs into life. In 1951 Benton confirmed the dramatic change in his artworld status when he explained,

As soon as World War II began substituting in the public mind a world concern for the specifically American concerns which had prevailed during our rise, [Grant] Wood, [Steuart] Curry, and I [the Regionalists] found the bottom knocked out from under us. The critical world of art had, by and large, as little use for our

group front as it had for me as an individual. (quoted by Bricker Balken, 2009, p. 193).

Twenty some years later, he seems to have gained perspective on this time in his life. He reflects that he "is just another sober and respected elder, not substantially different from the kind [he] had so often laughed at" (quoted by Adams, 1989, p, 327). Yet, I do not find *After Many Springs* to be a depressing statement by an embittered man. While the farmer and his mule toil on in the seasonal cycle of preparing fields for planting, intense red flowers erupt among writhing shapes of vibrant green leaves. Motion dominates the entire work. Henry Adams, professor of art at Case Western Reserve University, wrote of a somewhat earlier Benton painting,

Every plant and flower was based on meticulous preliminary studies. Every portion of the painting contains a complete little landscape or still-life composition, although each is rhythmically integrated with the overall design. The color has a glowing brilliance ...; he created it by painstakingly building translucent glazes of oil over tempera foundations (Adams, 1989, p. 200).

Adams offers his own more pessimistic interpretation of *After Many Springs*.

Benton used a foreground element to comment on what occurs in the far distance. Here a rusting revolver and a human skull, left over from a battle or a suicide, hint at the hardships of the farmer's life and comment on the futility of human existence (Adams, 1989, p. 319).

Adams goes further to conclude that,

The bitter mood of the painting doubtless reflects the artist's revulsion of the carnage of World War II (Adams, 1989, p. 319).

I am not convinced by Adams' conclusion that the work is "bitter." The exuberant movement, intense colors, and dynamic composition of *After Many Springs* is not different from but quite similar to many earlier works that Benton painted to celebrate the achievements of everyday, working people.



Thomas Hart Benton
1931
Mural from *America Today*
egg tempera
New School for Social Research
New York



Thomas Hart Benton
1938
Cradling Wheat
31 1/4" X 39 1/4"
tempera and oil on board
Saint Louis Art Museum

Perhaps, because of my own long, and evolving career in my own field, I am unduly persuaded by the acceptance and perspective Benton later expressed about his place

in the long, always changing history of art. I am more convinced by curator Bricker Balken's 2009 interpretation.

Benton knew that regionalism could never make a comeback. It would take the expiration of the modernist movement of the late 1960s for local narratives in contemporary art to capture attention again. In *After Many Springs*, he conceded as much with a lonely farmer tilling his field as a prominent skull looms in the lower part of the foreground (Bricker Balken, p. 194).

***After Many Springs* invites viewers to revisit it at different stages of their own lives and reflect on that which is enduring and that which comes and goes with the seasons.**

References

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