



Missouri Department
of Natural Resources
Division of State Parks

Thomas Hart Benton Home and Studio State Historic Site Teacher's Guide

Goal

To provide a fundamental basis for the interpretation of the life and art of Thomas Hart Benton.

Objectives

Instructors using this guide will be able to adapt the information provided for a variety of education levels.

The Thomas Hart Benton Home and Studio State Historic Site Teacher's Guide will support the study of fine arts, communication arts, history and sociology.

Background

Thomas Hart Benton was born in Neosho, Mo., in April 1889. He was named after his great-great-uncle, Thomas Hart Benton, the first and longest-serving U.S. Senator of Missouri. Tom's father, M.E. Benton, was a renowned lawyer and politician, who served four terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. Elizabeth, Tom's mother, was a beautiful girl from Texas, and a helpful ally in his struggle to become an artist.

At the age of 17, aspiring to become a newspaper cartoonist, Benton began attending the Art Institute of Chicago. It is here that he discovered his love for painting. Soon after, he was off to Paris where he met many influential people. As his funds began to dwindle, he returned to the United States, settling in New York, where he struggled as an artist. In 1918, because of World War I, Benton enlisted in the Navy. He was sent to Norfolk, Va., where his duties included making sketches and drawings of items around the base, such as ships. Having plenty of free time on his hands, he made similar drawings and paintings for himself. Upon returning to New York, he exhibited a number of these works, which received moderate attention. Benton was beginning to be recognized in the art world.

In 1922, Benton married Rita Piacenza. Benton was teaching art classes for a neighborhood association and she was one of his students. She was an Italian immigrant who moved to the United States with her family as a young teenager. The Bentons had a son, Thomas Piacenza (T.P. for short), in 1926. Rita worked as her husband's business manager and was a great force behind his success.

Benton's first mural commission was for the New School for Social Research in New York. His focus was on the development of new technology, calling it America Today. Yearning to try mural painting, he agreed to be paid only for the supplies used, but benefited in other ways. The mural cast him to the front of the art world, where he received national attention. More mural commissions followed after this, and in 1934, Benton was featured on the cover of Time magazine.

In 1935, Benton was offered a mural commission and teaching position, both in Missouri. The mural was to be The Social History of Missouri, which would reside in the House of Representatives' Lounge in the state Capitol in Jefferson City. The teaching position was at the Kansas City Art Institute. These two things, plus Benton's growing dislike for the art world of New York, influenced him to move back to his home state.

In 1939, the Bentons moved into a large, limestone house at 3616 Belleview in Kansas City, Mo. Later that year, their daughter Jessie was born. It was in this residence, which is now the Thomas Hart Benton Home and Studio State Historic Site, where the Bentons raised their children to maturity and where much artwork was produced. The studio is also the site of Benton's death on Jan. 19, 1975. He had been working on a mural for the Country Music Hall of Fame, called The Sources of Country Music, which was nearly complete. After dinner, he told his wife he was going out to the studio to take another look. While in his studio he suffered a heart attack and passed away at the age of 85. The mural now hangs in Nashville, unsigned. Rita, his wife for 53 years, followed him in death just 10 weeks later.

Vocabulary

Before coming to the site, the students should be familiar with the following terms:

Regionalism - A style of painting, popular in the 1930s and '40s that depicts scenes from everyday life in various areas of the United States. Benton, along with John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood, were leaders of the Regionalist movement, but it faded quickly when abstract artists such as Jackson Pollock found popularity. (Benton painted farm scenes of the Midwest, church scenes of the South, rodeo scenes of the West, and industrial scenes of the Northeast.)

Mural - A very large painting applied to a wall or ceiling. (Benton's murals were not usually painted directly onto the walls. He would construct large panels to paint his murals on and then apply the panels to the wall. This has allowed several of his murals to be moved from their original location.)

Commissioned - To be hired to complete a painting or mural for a certain person or group. (For example, Benton was commissioned to paint The Social History of Missouri mural by the state representatives for the House Lounge in the Missouri Capitol in Jefferson City).

Lithograph - A print that is produced by the process of lithography. An artist will draw on a flat stone with a greasy crayon, wet it, apply ink, and then print the image onto paper. Using this process, the artist can create multiple copies of a work. (Benton produced over 90 lithographs.)

Subject and Setting - What the painting is about and where the action takes place. (For example, Benton painted a group of people at a church service. The church goers are the subjects and the church interior makes up the setting; together they are the scene.)

Exaggeration - To paint something bigger than it normally is. (Benton often made the hands, feet, and facial features of the people in his paintings larger than they actually were.)

Egg Tempera - A type of paint medium in which color pigments are mixed with egg yolk and water. (Benton experimented with this mixture because its use had not been popular for quite some time.)

Hollow and Bump - Benton's technique in which the lines and shapes in a picture interlock in a series of curves or waves. Wherever there is a "bump," there is a corresponding "hollow" for it to fit into. Soft recessive spaces, balanced with forceful projecting areas, develop into a rhythmic pattern.



Pre-Visit Activities

- ◆ Have each student prepare a name tag that reflects the area where he or she lives, or an artistic theme.
- ◆ Introduce the students to the artwork of Thomas Hart Benton. Use the vocabulary terms as a reference for discussion.
- ◆ Look up the work of other Regionalists, such as John Steuart Curry (Kansas) and Grant Wood (Iowa). How do they compare and contrast to Thomas Hart Benton?
- ◆ Thomas Hart Benton painted America as he saw it. Have your students think about how they see America, either past or present, and ask them to creatively depict it.

On-Site Activities

- ◆ On-site, students will be given a guided tour through Thomas Hart Benton's home and studio. The tour guide will ask a variety of questions, stimulating student participation. Students are also welcome to develop questions to ask before, during or after the tour.

Post-Visit Activities

- ◆ Ask the students to pick one of Benton's works and develop a story about the characters or scene.
- ◆ Benton has been called a realist painter because of his depiction of scenes of everyday life. Ask the students if they agree and why. Have them use examples of his work to support their answer. (Other people see Benton's portrayal of people as unrealistic because of the way he exaggerates their features.)
- ◆ List some of the significant events and eras between 1900-1975. Ask the students to find a painting of Benton's that reflects the things they have studied. For example, industrialization would be represented in Benton's first mural, *America Today for the New School for Social Research*, or the "Outreaching Hands" panel of *America Today* symbolizes the Depression.
- ◆ Benton's work also contains historical elements from before his lifetime. Ask the students to research his works and find some of the historical events he painted.

Bibliography

Middle School Level

Edelman, Nancy. Thomas Hart Benton Murals in the Missouri State Capitol. (Missouri State Council on the Arts, 1975). **Brief illustrated guide to the murals, including personal information on Benton, his technique and restoration process.

Yeo, Wilma and Helen K. Cook. Maverick with a Paintbrush: Thomas Hart Benton. (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977). **Biographical in content, with a few examples of Benton's work.

High School Level

- Adams, Henry. Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original. (Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).
**Extensively discusses the life of Benton, his artistic writings and developments, together with numerous color reproductions of his work.
- Baigell, Matthew. Thomas Hart Benton. (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974). **Contains a great number of color reproductions along with biographical information.
- Benton, Thomas Hart. An Artist in America. 4th revised edition (University of Missouri Press, 1983). **Benton's autobiography.
- Braun, Emily and Thomas Branchick. Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals. (The Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States, 1985). **Contains information on the interpretation, reproduction, and restoration of Benton's 1930 mural, America Today.
- Gruber, Richard J. Thomas Hart Benton and the American South. (Morris Museum of Art, 1998). **Discusses the depiction of the South in Benton's work.
- Fath, Creekmore, ed. The Lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton. (University of Texas Press, 1969). **Reproductions of Benton lithographs, each with personal remarks from the artist.
- Foster, Kathleen A., Nanette Esseck Brewer, Margaret Contompasis. Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals. (Indiana University Art Museum, 2000). **Contains historical aspects, interpretation, reproductions and conservation treatment on the 1933 Indiana Murals.
- Hurt, Douglas and Mary K. Dains, ed. Thomas Hart Benton: Artist, Writer, Intellectual. (State Historical Society of Missouri, 1989). **Includes eight articles by various individuals, each discussing assorted aspects of Benton and his career.
- Marling, Karal Ann. Tom Benton and His Drawings: A Biographical Essay and a Collection of His Sketches, Studies, and Mural Cartoons. (University of Missouri Press, 1985).
**Biographical information is interwoven with reproductions of Benton drawings, separated by subject.
- Priddy, Bob. Only the Rivers are Peaceful: Thomas Hart Benton's Missouri Mural. (Independence Press, 1989). **Detailed information on the history of the mural, the uproar surrounding it, and an interpretation of what it represents.

College Level

- Dennis, James M. Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry. (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).
**Discusses the relationship of Wood, Benton, Curry and other regionalists with modern art.

Videos/DVDs

- “Ken Burns’ America: Thomas Hart Benton”. PBS Video. (Florentine Films, 1988). **A documentary on Benton's life from start to finish.
- “Thomas Hart Benton: The Sources of Country Music”. (Chip Taylor Communications).
**Records the development of the last mural of Thomas Hart Benton.

Show-Me Standards - Missouri Educational Goals

Many states have set up educational standards to help students develop a lasting foundation of knowledge and skills. The Thomas Hart Benton Home and Studio State Historic Site Teacher's Guide, along with a tour of the home, can help students meet these standards. Those listed below fit the Missouri Show-Me Standards, but they can be adapted to fit other states' criteria.

Communication Arts

#6 - Participating in formal and informal presentations and discussions of issues and ideas.

Fine Arts

#1 - Process and techniques for the production, exhibition or performance of one or more of the visual or performed arts. #2 - The principles and elements of different art forms. #3 - The vocabulary to explain perceptions about and evaluations of works in dance, music, theater and visual arts. #4 - Interrelationships of visual and performing arts and the relationships of the arts to other disciplines. #5 - Visual and performing arts in historical and cultural contexts.

Social Studies

#2 - Continuity and change in the history of Missouri, the United States and the world. #5 - The major elements of geographical study and analysis (such as location, place, movement, regions and their relationships to changes in society and environment. #6 - Relationships of the individual and groups to institutions and cultural traditions.

Other Benton Sites in Missouri

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art - Kansas City
www.nelson-atkins.org/art/American.cfm or 816-751-1278

The Harry S. Truman Library and Museum (Benton Mural) - Independence
www.trumanlibrary.org or 816-833-1225

Missouri State Capitol (video tour including the Benton Mural) - Jefferson City
www.mostateparks.com/statecapcomplex/index.html or 573-751-2854 or 800-334-6946

The Woodcock Museum - St. Louis
<http://www.umsl.edu> or 314-516-7240

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www.mostateparks.com/benton.htm