

## *Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) – The American Story*

Thomas Hart Benton was known as a Regionalist artist of the American Scene from the early 1930's to the late 60's. He belonged to the last generation of artists who wanted to provide Americans with a democratic art easily accessible to the average citizen. Regionalism refers to the work of a number of rural artists, mostly from the Midwest, who came into prominence in the 1930s. What they shared was a humble, anti-modernist style and a desire to depict everyday life. Benton was at the forefront of the American Scene movement along with Grant Wood who was known for his famous painting of American Gothic.

Benton was born April 15, 1889, in Neopsho, Missouri. He began drawing at an early age, but his first influential teacher was Frederick Oswald, under whom he studied at the Chicago Art Institute in 1907-1908. It was here that he studied both watercolor painting from life and composition, by analyzing Japanese prints, from which he acquired a taste for linear rhythms. From 1908 to 1911 he studied at the Academie Julien in Paris, where he was initially influenced by the visual realism of the Academie, and especially Courbet, and Manet. Later he had a bout with impressionism, and then neoimpressionism but it was the work of artist Paul Cezanne (dates) that had the most influence on the development of his style. Benton zigzagged continually between different styles of painting. From 1912, to late 1915 Benton wavered between different styles, from visual realism through various forms of modernism. He also experimented in many mediums and around 1919, Benton began experimenting with sculpture. Inspired by the Renaissance painter Tintoretto, he began modeling compositions in clay before executing them in paint, to increase solidity of form. This became a permanent compositional practice and the basis for his mural style during the twenties.

The influence of the American environment upon Benton and his work was significant. It was a natural for him to become allied in the early thirties with the Regionalist group of American paintings, which included Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, Reginald Marsh, and Charles Burchfield. After 1919 nearly all of Benton's work was based on the American scene and its folklore. He did murals, easel paintings, and drawings, working in oil, oil and tempera, tempera, watercolor and more.

In 1929, Benton made his first lithograph, *The Station*. He had met George Miller, the master lithographic printer, and this lithograph was the first collaboration between them. George Miller printed all of Benton's lithographs. Benton preferred lithography to other graphic media because of the range of tone possible, and liked working with George Miller because he knew exactly the kind of light and shade contrasts Benton wanted. In *The American Artist* in September 1943 on "The Craft of Lithography," George Miller wrote: "*It takes a fine artist and a skilful printer to make a good lithograph. The most brilliant drawing by a Daumier will not make a good lithograph unless its merits are fully exploited by an expert lithographer. On the other hand, no lithographer can produce a good lithograph from a weak and characterless drawing.*"

Benton's lithographs were done both for and from paintings, as preparations in some cases, as re-interpretations in others. He preferred stone to metal for etching, but a number of his larger lithographs were done on zinc plates. The number of prints in each edition of a lithograph has been determined by what records survive at Associated American Artists who marketed Benton's lithographs, and by the memory of Benton. When the prints were distributed by the Associated American Artists it was the practice of George Miller to produce an edition of 250, with 25 prints reserved for Benton. In some cases, however, the stone did not produce as large a number of satisfactory prints. All prints went under Benton's review. In many cases he would not approve all the prints thus the edition was far less than 250.



Mural in the Harry S. Truman Library by Thomas Hart Benton, *Independence and the Opening of the West*. The mural was begun in early 1960.

Benton was also an outstanding mural painter in American history and created many notable and many times controversial murals in buildings around the mid west which include four murals in the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City and one in the

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library. President Truman and Benton were good friends and Benton gave the opening speech at the dedication event for the mural at the Truman Library on April 15, 1961.

For well over a generation Thomas Hart Benton was one of the most famous and talked about painters in America. When the first color cover of *Time* magazine appeared on December 24, 1934, it was a self-portrait in color of Thomas Hart Benton. Benton was known to be controversial with gusty realism and restless vision. He was accused of having an aggressive personality, but it was conceded that he had absolute confidence in his own artist convictions.

Throughout his career, Benton continued to reject the orthodoxies of modernism, which he saw as elitist, neurotic, and obscurantist. He mentored the acclaimed modernist artist, Jackson Pollack from 1929 to 1931 during Benton's tenure as an art instructor with the prestigious Art Students League in New York City which began in 1926. Later, Pollack turned his attention and style to the abstract expressionism, a style Benton publicly rejected. Benton's belief was that art is renewed from life, not from art, not a surprising belief coming from an artist who was also the proud descendant of a conservative political family, closely tied to the advancement of the frontier and the settlement of the West.

Benton witnessed America's transition from a rural, agricultural nation at the turn of the century to an urban, industrialized world power. The changing America had a great affect on not only his beliefs, but the way he portrayed the subjects of his work. Benton was an artist and historian, an acute observer. Benton today can be considered the most American of artists. The past, the present and the future of our country have been his main focus during an artistic career spanning more than half a century.