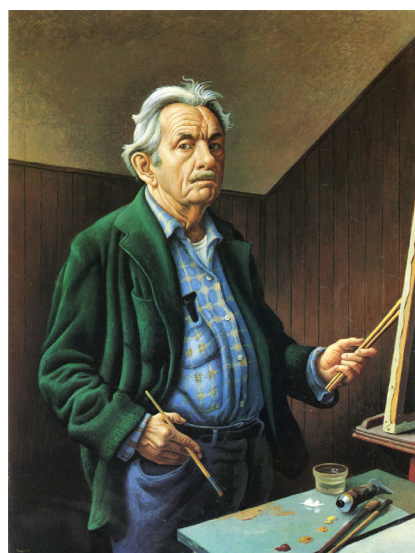


Thomas Hart Benton

a biography

Benton & Pollock

the teacher & the pupil



Self-Portrait, 1970
Polymer tempera on canvas, 39 1/2 x 29 1/2 in.
Lyman Field & United Missouri Bank of
Kansas City, NA
Trustees of Thomas Hart & Rita P.
Benton Testamentary Trust

The son of a famous Missouri political family, Thomas Hart Benton was born in Neosho, Missouri. He was shaped by his family's small-town attitudes and ideals and also by his extensive travels in this country and in Europe. After training at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Academie Julian in Paris, Benton spent more than twenty years working in New York City. Benton studied art history and read widely in French literature and philosophy; the writings of John Dewey, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, and had a thorough knowledge of American history. He was also an accomplished writer and musician.

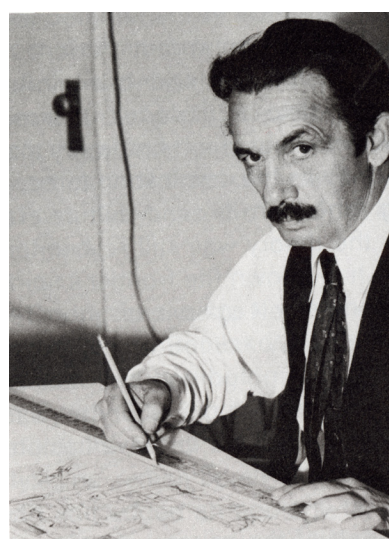
Out of his early experiments with various modernist techniques (impressionism, neo-impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Synchronism), Benton developed a realist style. The sinuous quality of his line and the drama of his chiaroscuro are reminiscent of the sixteenth-century Italian Mannerists he admired, but in the overall undulating rhythms of his forms, Benton preferred to see the energetic dynamism of American life.

Benton's dedication to the American scene stemmed from his study of the French historian Hippolyte Taine's theory that art should be firmly rooted in a specific time

and locality, a product of experience rather than a statement of aesthetics. This theory, together with Benton's deep respect for his own heritage, formed the basis for the artist's passionate Americanism and pursuit of a truly indigenous art. The turning point in Benton's career came in 1924, when he returned to Missouri to visit his dying father, whom he had not seen in years. The talks he had with his father and with his father's old political cronies filled the artist with a desire to reconnect with the world of his childhood.

In 1934 Benton's fame was clinched when he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine – an honor never before awarded to an artist. The article in *Time* linked with two other Midwestern artists, John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood. From that point on, Benton was best known to the public as the leader of the "Regionalist Movement" in American art, which opposed European modernism and focused on scenes of the American heartland.

Benton's populist beliefs are reflected in the media in which he chose to work as well as in the form and content of his pictures: his large scale mural projects, book illustrations, and lithographs addressed a broad general public rather than a small intellectual elite. Benton never abandoned the tradition of easel painting, and he died in his Kansas City studio on January 6, 1975.



Thomas Hart Benton in his studio,
1936. Photo courtesy of *The
Kansas City Star*.

..... Exploring *The Hailstorm*



Thomas Hart Benton, American 1889-1975
Running Before the Storm, 1940
Watercolor
Collection of William C. Foxley, 2006

The Hailstorm is an excellent illustration of Benton's conviction that the artist base his work on what he knows rather than on imagined or vicarious experience.

The painting was created after Benton left New York to return to his real home in Missouri, where he hoped to find the true wellspring of his art. In this picture the gently rolling hills of Missouri, with a characteristically wide expanse of sky, creates the setting for an archetypal drama of man in nature.

The diagonal of the farmer fleeing before the deluge of hailstones and lightening is continued in the gnarled



The Hailstorm, 1940
Tempera on canvas mounted on panel

tree that seems to also bend away from the storm. A second diagonal is carried through the broken tree trunk on the left, the raining hail, the plowman struggling to restrain the excited mule, and the fork of lightening emanating from the threatening clouds. The oblique line is paralleled by the slats of the lean-to on the right side of the painting. Against the tight compositional framework, Benton's active forms become the perfect analogue to the agitation of the landscape.

In the watercolor study for this picture, *Running Before the Storm*, Benton has shown the mule alone in the field. He later recalled, "It occurred to me...that no farmer would leave his mule...in the kind of storm depicted. So I added the figure behind the plow [in the finished painting]."

Through his intimate knowledge of the subject and the place, the artist has achieved a "trueness" of content in addition to a realism of style. *The Hailstorm* preserves in paint Benton's philosophy of art as well as his strong commitment to an accessible style and his devotion to the rural America as he knew so well.

Glossary

Agrarian: relating to the progress of agricultural groups.

Chiaroscuro: depicting in terms of light and shade without regard to color

Indigenous: originating in a particular region and possessing set characteristics of that region.

Regionalism: a realist modern American art movement that was popular during the 1930s. The artistic focus was from artists who shunned the city life and rapidly developing technological advances to create scenes of rural life.

Rhythm: repeated element or motif creating a harmonious work.

Regionalism at Joslyn Art Museum



Grant Wood,
American, 1891-1942
Stone City, Iowa, 1930
Oil on wood panel, 30 1/4 x 40 in.
Joslyn Art Museum

Grant Wood's pamphlet *Revolt Against the City*, published in Iowa City, 1935, asserts that American artists and buyers of art were no longer looking to Parisian culture for subject matter and style. Wood wrote that Regional artists interpret the physiography, industry, and psychology of their hometown, and that the competition of these preceding elements creates American culture. He wrote that the lure of the city was gone, and hopes that art of the widely diffused "whole people" would prevail. He cites Thomas Jefferson's characterization of cities as "ulcers on the body politic."



John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood, photograph
Museum of Art, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

John Steuart Curry's paintings are some of the best examples of the art movement which became known as Regionalism. With the advent of the Depression, Americans looked backward to this country's rural origins and saw country people as upholders of traditional values. These regionalist artists saw the subject matter as a primary motivation, but developed the themes within a framework of purely artistic concerns.



John Steuart Curry
American, 1897-1946
Manhunt, 1931
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 1/4 in.
Joslyn Art Museum



Thomas Hart Benton
American, 1889-1975
Going West, 1930
Illustration for Leo Huberman's
We The People

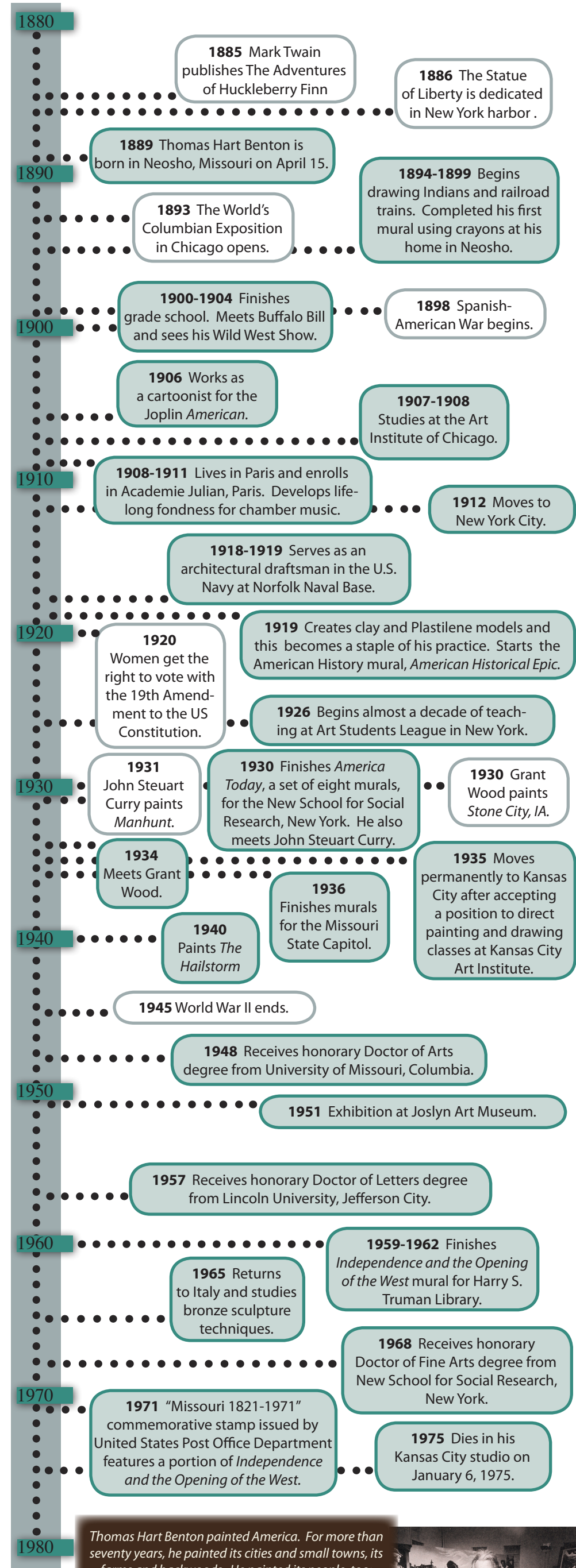
Jackson Pollock,
American, 1912-1956
Going West, c. 1934-1935
Oil on fiberboard.
National Museum of American
Art, Smithsonian Institution.
Gift of Thomas Hart Benton.



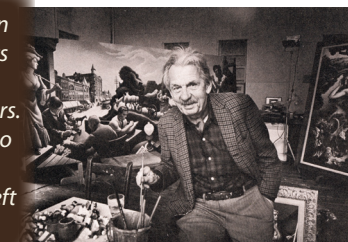
Pollock's early painting, *Going West*, which has often been compared to the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder, was obviously based on Benton's illustration of the same subject for Huberman's Marxist history of the United States. Harper Brothers, 1947.

Timeline

featuring Thomas Hart Benton



Thomas Hart Benton painted America. For more than seventy years, he painted its cities and small towns, its farms and backwoods. He painted its people, too; everyone from faith healers to politicians to movie stars. Most of all, Benton wanted to make his art available to the ordinary man. In doing so, he shook up the art world, embroiled himself in endless controversy and left a legacy of paintings that detail an entire age.



Thomas Hart Benton in his Kansas City studio, April 1972. KODE-TV photograph by Karl Lee
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