Introduction

The Benton Murals of Indiana

KATHRYN LOFTON AND MATTHEW PRATT GUTERL

"History was not a scholarly study for me but a drama"
Thomas Hart Benton, "A Dream Fulfilled" (1933)[1]

In 1933, an ambitious muralist, Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975), rapidly completed an enormous cycle for the Indiana Hall at the Chicago Century of Progress International Exposition. Even in an era distinguished by the work of such great muralists as Jose Orozco, Aaron Douglas, and Diego Rivera, Benton's Indiana project stood out for its mammoth scale, its political temper, and its artistic impact. The artist's notoriety in the wake of the appearance of the Indiana Murals landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine. He went on to become one of the nation's most respected and influential artists, completing a lengthy series of sweeping historical murals elsewhere. But he would never repeat the speed, scale, and intensity of the Indiana Murals project.

With the closing of the fair, Benton's twenty-two panels disappeared. The exposition was a fleeting event, and so much of what seemed important in 1933 was simply packed up and stored away or discarded. It might have been that way for the Indiana Murals, and they

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[1]Cited in Kathleen A. Foster, Nanette Esseck Brewer, and Margaret Contompasis, *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), facing p. 32.

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might never have resurfaced, except that a few years later Indiana University president Herman B Wells tracked them down, plucking them from the Manufacturer's Building at the Indiana State Fairgrounds. A self-styled visionary responsible for the Bloomington campus's grandiose Fine Arts Plaza, Wells hoped to make the installation of the mural panels at IU a central feature in his campaign to expand and beautify the campus. But the panels were so enormous, so tall and wide, that no single building on campus could display them simultaneously. Since 1940, then, the great bulk of the mural panels have been broken apart. What was shown in Chicago as an unbroken line of Regionalist history is now split into three discrete venues: the IU Auditorium, the University Theater, and a classroom in Woodburn Hall. Controversial in their day, they serve even now as the focus for continued dispute.

Today, the controversial aspect of the mural sequence has little to do with its rough-hewn women or its dignified working folks. It has everything to do, however, with a single feature of one panel—Cultural panel 10, "Parks, the Circus, the Klan, the Press," or "the Klan mural," as it is colloquially known on the Bloomington campus. There, Benton set a cross burning in the background of the panel—the tawdry Indiana past, fading to memory—and prominently foregrounded a hospital scene, with an attentive white nurse providing a meal to a black child in an integrated hospital. [see plate 9] The juxtaposition and placement encouraged interpretive ambiguity. And, thinking nationally, other campuses house far more troublesome artworks—the Tiffany window extolling the Confederacy in Ventress Hall on the Ole Miss campus, for instance, or Dartmouth College's Hovey murals, representing rum-drunk Native Americans. Still, the mere presence of a burning cross in a public classroom has encouraged generations of students to sit-in, to march, to vandalize, or to petition for the removal of this particular panel.

If you look at the murals today, situated unceremoniously in university buildings, it seems hard to imagine that they could cause so much trouble. From Benton's perspective, though, it was no surprise: "it could well appear that my interest in art has been largely absorbed by problems."[2] Benton's life story swells with belligerence and dispute,

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[2]Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence, Kan., 1969), 75. Also see Foster, et al., *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals.*

including decisions to withdraw work, fights with other artists over their work, and adamant political stands. As art historian Henry Adams writes, "from childhood Thomas Hart Benton was constantly engaged in controversy."[3] Adams and others describe Benton's artistic production as a problematic in the history of twentieth-century visual expression. This vexing narrative location has received extensive treatment by scholars intrigued by Benton's chronological and social positioning within the aesthetic and political histories of the 1920s and 1930s. Despite his profligacy, despite his fame during his lifetime, and despite his connections amidst the American avant-garde, Benton's location within the canon—indeed, any canon—seems indeterminate. Enduring praise of his work emphasizes his starring role in the history of Regionalism; more critical appraisals note his loyalty to figuration, his use of religious themes, and his nostalgic celebration of the American past as reasons to exclude him from laudatory histories of modern art. "In the middle of the Machine Age he based his style on organic rhythms," writes one observer, "just as New York was emerging as an art capital he moved to the Midwest; and during the triumph of abstraction he continued to be figurative."[4] Depending on which story you consult, Benton has been called provincial, academic, leftist, sectionalist, Regionalist, Modernist, reactionary, cloying, abstract, anti-intellectual, even fascist.[5]

All of these labels suggest that no matter what Benton was or was not, he is someone about whom we cannot seem to stop talking. Who is this man who made such trouble? Thomas Hart Benton was the son of a congressman, and namesake grandnephew of a Free-Soiler senator. His art training began in his teenage years, when he took Saturday morning classes at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., while his father sat in Congress, before enrolling at the Chicago Art Institute in February 1907. There, his childhood delight in the historical paintings and murals hung in the Capitol Rotunda and Library of Congress joined new admiration for Japanese prints, pen-and-ink drawings by the Spanish illustrator Daniel

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[3]Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton: Drawing from Life* (New York, 1990), 12.

[4]Elizabeth Broun, "Thomas Hart Benton: A Politician in Art," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art,* 1 (Spring 1987), 59.

[5]Matthew Baigell, "Thomas Hart Benton and the Left," *Thomas Hart Benton: Artist, Writer and Intellectual*, R. Douglas Hurt and Mary K. Dains, eds. (Columbia, Mo., 1989), 1-34; Robert L. Gambone, "Religious Motifs in the Work of Thomas Hart Benton," Ibid., 65-94; Douglas Wixson, "Thomas Hart Benton's New York Years," Ibid., 191-218.

Vierge, and paintings by Frans Hals and Diego Velázquez. In mid-August 1908, Benton traveled to Paris, where he began coursework at the Académie Julian and, subsequently, the Académie Collarossi; it was there that he first divided his interests "between opposed and contradictory styles of painting," as he would write in his autobiography.[6] He studied Impressionism and Pointillism; he learned about the genius of Paul Cézanne; he took courses from the French history painter Jean-Paul Laurens as well as Neo-Impressionist Paul Signac, master of the spectral palette. While in France, he briefly left Paris so that he could "forget all theories, return to painting directly from nature, and see if I could produce any finished pictures."[7] He did finish some, participating in the 1911 Spring Salon, before returning to America in July 1911, when he ran out of money.

Back in the United States, Benton prowled for work in Missouri and then, in 1912, moved to New York City, where he would live for twenty-three years. Joining the New York art scene at the moment of the 1913 Armory Show, Benton began attending meetings of the Socialist-oriented People's Art Guild, showing annually at the Architectural League, and also associating with the artistic circles of Alfred Stieglitz and John Weischel. To earn money, he did commercial work, such as designing panels for a Coney Island dancing pavilion and supplying decorative pieces for other public spaces; he painted scene backdrops for movies; and he taught drawing classes for adults in one of the Chelsea public schools. During World War I, Benton served as an architectural draftsman at the Norfolk Naval Base. Throughout this time, Benton grazed manifold trends, including Synchromism—a coloristic school of painting invented by Canadian scientist-artist Percyval Tudor-Hart—but also conducted close readings of Michelangelo's sculptural structures and Tintoretto's *Last Supper*. "It took me eleven years to go through my first phase and dig a method out of the artistic jungles of my time," Benton would write. "It would take some seven or eight more to explore the second phase and make it serviceable for expressing the meanings that my experiences in American life were to provide."[8]

In 1923 he began his history paintings, finishing the first chapter of *The American Historical Epic* in 1924. This turn in his work encour-

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[6]Benton, *An American in Art*, 16.

[7]Ibid., 24.

[8]Ibid., 50.

aged commissions, as Benton became associated with large works of public art. Around the same time, Benton went home to the bedside of his dying father, where he reconnected, in his later retelling, with the land and relationships of his boyhood. As he made money from his New York work, Benton used it to fund trips to the West—the Ozarks, West Texas, New Mexico, anywhere he could pursue the American panorama. The drawings he created from his Ozark hike supplied material for a winter 1926-1927 show at the Daniel Galleries in New York City. This exhibition baptized Benton as the leading Regionalist artist.[9] Benton's contribution to this aesthetic included an emphasis on a strain of democratic liberalism deeply sympathetic to the sorts of policies legislated by the New Deal. When *America Today* was unveiled at the New School for Social Research in 1930, Benton moved into the heyday of his talent, "which was the application of my methods, by now thoroughly under control, to the scenes, behaviors, and mythologies of American life."[10]

This emphasis on Americana and public art murals obscures Benton's role in the foundations of abstraction. During his teaching years at the Arts Students League of New York (1926-1935), Benton not only taught a young Jackson Pollock, but also authored "Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting," published between 1926 and 1927 in *The Arts*, a series of influential scholarly articles. Scholars reviewing those diagrammatic mechanics have said that in their rendering "it is as though Benton's . . . luridly sentimental subjects have been 'stripped bare' to reveal their modernist heart."[11] The New School mural and history paintings were, for some critics, a revolution in painting, combining figuration and expressionist painterly style. But Benton would constantly endure scathing criticism for his subsequent productions and for his political loyalty to liberalism over and against more idealist social visions. Benton's commitment to the American producer tradition, for example, put him in conflict with the communists, whose utopianism

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[9]Regionalism referred to the work of a set of Depression-era painters including John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood committed to a naturalistic depiction of Midwest small-town, rural life, depictions which exploded the flat myth of a pioneer idyll.

[10]Benton, *An American in Art*, 66.

[11]Barbara Jaffee, "Jackson Pollock's Industrial Expressionism," *Art Journal*, 63 (Winter 2004), 70; Francis V. O'Connor, "The Genesis of Jackson Pollock: 1912-1943," *Artforum*, 5 (May 1967), 16-23; Stephen Polcari, "Jackson Pollock and Thomas Hart Benton," *Arts Magazine*, 53 (March 1979), 120-24.

demanded didactic art that represented the struggles of the workers.[12] As Erika Doss writes in this issue, "the Indiana Mural, which Benton painted soon after . . . Roosevelt was elected in 1932 . . . embodies Benton's efforts to espouse the liberal politics of the New Deal through the modern art of Regionalism" (p. 128).

The "Social History of the State of Indiana" arrived on Benton's workbench, then, just as his reputation, notorious and celebrated, hit its peak. Solicited by the state to paint the mural for display at the Chicago World's Fair of 1933, Benton relocated to Indianapolis in 1932 to begin the commission. He read books, visited the state library, and, in 1933, with only five months to complete the project, began to tour southern Indiana, guided by H. K. Roberts, chief of maintenance for the state's conservation department. After assembling a set of archival materials and notes from his travels, Benton retreated to the empty dance hall on South Delaware Street in Indianapolis that served as his studio. There, a large crew of assistants from the Herron School of Art and the state conservation department joined in the process of assembling his two-prong, chronological tale of Indiana history. "These murals," Joy S. Kasson reminds us in her essay, "took their viewers on a walk through history in order to look toward the future" (p. 140). On the one side, cultural history was retold; on the other, industrial history was pictorially related, rolling in opposite directions around the room and meeting in a montage of civilization in the machine age. The effect was meant to be dizzying, but reassuring, too.

From a distance, the murals seem charming, slashes of Technicolor in gray institutional spaces. The oversized figures, with their oversized features, enduring outsized wind, rain, smoke, waves, sunshine, and heavy, unceasing toil, seem merrily reposed. "But for Benton," as one later observer explains, "history is a passage and a movement; he tries to give his works the narrative power of literature. . . . Figure bends to figure, scene yields to scene, and as one's eye wanders, led onward by the sequence of forms, group harmonies dissolve and refocus. In the way Benton's humans and machines contort as they near each other, there is almost relativity, a special gravity that distorts pictorial space."[13] The Indiana Murals stirred criticism and praise because of this movement

[12]Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago, 1991).

[13]Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Thomas Hart Benton Came from Missouri—and He Showed 'em," *Smithsonian,* 20 (April 1989), 87-88.

and repose; viewers could not decide just what Benton was trying to say with all that contortion and light. Many Indiana artists were predisposed to reject work done by an artist not from Indiana. Modernist critics disparaged his realism, while conservatives agonized over the unappealing contours of his human subjects' faces and bodies. Some viewers saw socialist overtones, while others judged his rendition of the Klan too kind. Fair visitors and subsequent commentators on the work claimed that it was either too expressive or not celebratory enough; either overly descriptive or anemically symbolic. These questions continue to haunt viewers of the mural panels, but we are now also more closely attuned—or able to talk about—other concerns, such as the role of race in Benton's Hoosier imaginary, unpacked here by Austen Barron Bailly, or the mural's compelling narrative of melodrama, illuminated by Casey Nelson Blake.

Following the fair, there was some talk, quickly dismissed, of transporting the murals for installation in the Indiana State House. Instead, though, they went into storage in the Manufacturer's Building at the Indiana State Fairgrounds, where they were rescued by Harry Engel, a professor of painting in the Fine Arts Department at Indiana University; Herman B Wells, the university's new president; and W. G. Biddle, the comptroller. It is this story—and the work of the institutional man at its heart—that James Capshew tells here. The placement of the murals in a university setting pleased Benton. Reflecting on his time in Paris, Benton wrote:

> There were no movies, no radios or other inexpensive sources of entertainment, so the habit of reading was widespread—much more so than in student circles of today, where it is rare to find a young artist who has information beyond that provided by the "arty-critiky" columns of the current newspapers or weeklies. Neophyte artists devoured books and attended Saturday morning lectures at the Sorbonne. They concocted theories, sought historical justifications for these, and the studios and cafes rang with arguments. Few painters took their easels before nature without ideas to test or exploit. Though most of these were immature and half-baked, some even ludicrous, they arose from a genuine and lively spirit of enquiry. And they fed a constant urge toward new and novel experimentation.[14]

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[14]Benton, *An American in Art*, 20-21.

As the essays in this issue attest, the Benton murals experiment with ideas of democracy, production, and human ingenuity. Through continued study and examination of their complexity, students today and in the future may concoct their own theories, experimental and figurative, abstract and applied, for their school, their state, and their country.