

Action, Agency, Affect

Thomas Hart Benton's Hoosier History

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My longstanding interests as a cultural historian have repeatedly turned to issues of public popularity: to how and why certain kinds or styles of art become popular among the American public, how public tastes and preferences change, and how public popularity has affected and continues to affect the course of America's visual cultures. By extension, they have focused on issues of cultural conflict and controversy—issues that are especially relevant in the story of Thomas Hart Benton's 1933 mural, *A Social History of the State of Indiana*.

Benton was the leader of the Regionalist art movement, a strain of American art that dominated from the late 1920s through the early 1940s, or the era of the Great Depression. He was probably the best-known American artist of the era: depicted on the cover of *Time* magazine in December 1934; often covered in the pages of *Life* magazine and other popular periodicals; and even selected in 1940 by the Divorce Reform League as one of America's "best husbands" (along with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt).¹ Benton's brand of Regionalism

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¹Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* (New York, 1989), 299.

was a narrative, anecdotal style of modern art rooted in the specific social and political conditions of the interwar era. Benton was adamant about creating a uniquely American art rooted in American life and legend: a style of art fixed on the American Scene and, as Benton painted it in his murals of the 1930s, focused on a dynamic national landscape of hard-working men and liberal political reform.

Throughout the years of the Great Depression, Benton's national imaginary—his visual articulation of the America he imagined and desired—was shaped around his personal political convictions regarding democratic liberalism and in particular, support for the 1930s New Deal. Indeed, the Indiana Mural, which Benton painted soon after Roosevelt was elected in 1932 and as he began his first term in office in March 1933, embodies Benton's efforts to espouse the liberal politics of the New Deal through the modern art of Regionalism. It purposefully segued with the new president's New Deal aims and ambitions. As the artist explained in a letter to Richard Lieber, the man responsible for commissioning the mural, "the really momentous question of the day [is] that of our social and economic reorganization."² Or as Benton would later recall, "Regionalism was very largely affirmative of the social exploration of American society and resultant democratic impulses on which President Roosevelt's New Deal was based."³

Born in 1889 in Neosho, Missouri, Benton was the eldest son of a U.S. congressman with ties to populist and progressive politics. He was named after his great-uncle, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, the nineteenth-century champion of Manifest Destiny. "Politics was the core of our family life," Benton recalled in his 1937 autobiography *An Artist in America*, explaining how he was expected to continue in his family's political footsteps. "From the moment of my birth," he added, "my future was laid out in my father's mind. A Benton male could be nothing but a lawyer . . . only lawyers were equipped and fitted to possess political power."⁴ This Benton male, however, had other ideas. He remained

²Thomas Hart Benton to Richard Lieber, February 3, 1933, microfilm roll 1732, frames 14-15, Benton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

³Thomas Hart Benton, "American Regionalism: A Personal History of the Movement," in *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence, Kan., 1969), 192.

⁴Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, 4th rev. ed. (Columbia, Mo., 1983), 5, 10, 11; for an overview of Benton's public art politics see Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago, 1991).

committed to public life, but he did so in the realm of public art by synthesizing the inherited values of his politically engaged family with his particular brand of modern art, and by fronting his visual version of American politics in modern public paintings like *A Social History of the State of Indiana*. [plates 2-10] It was one of four major public murals that Benton painted in the 1930s, including *America Today* (1930-31, New School for Social Research, New York), *The Arts of Life in America* (1932, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York) [p. 161], and *A Social History of the State of Missouri* (1936, Missouri State Capitol, Jefferson City). [plate 13]

Benton's interests in large-scale public wall painting followed in the footsteps of the turn-of-the-century American mural movement, represented in the decorative, pastel-toned, and classically themed panels that Gilded Age artists like Edwin Blashfield and Kenyon Cox painted for worlds' fairs, municipal buildings, and public schools. Yet the dynamic rhythms and bright colors of Benton's murals, with their energetic scenes of everyday American life and their focus on the tense and often fraught conditions of American history, demonstrated Benton's keen interests in the active and affective conditions of American modernity.

Among the American Scene moderns, Benton was especially engaged in historical narrative, which he first pursued in *The American Historical Epic*. [plates 11, 12] Begun in 1919 and abandoned, unfinished, in the late 1920s, this multi-paneled mural embodied Benton's conviction that American history "was not a scholarly study . . . but a drama." American history, said Benton, was "a continuous flow of action having its climax in my own immediate experience."⁵ As he later explained, this first mural was intended "to present a peoples' history in contrast to the conventional histories which generally spotlighted great men, political and military events, and successions of ideas. I wanted to show that the people's behaviors, their *action* on the opening land, was the primary reality of American life."⁶

The American Historical Epic was ambitiously conceived as a series of ten chapters with five panels each, ranging in theme from European arrival, conquest, confrontation, and settlement in the New World,

⁵Thomas Hart Benton, "A Dream Fulfilled," statement in David Laurance Chambers, *Indiana, A Hoosier History, Based on the Mural Paintings of Thomas Hart Benton* (Indianapolis, 1933), 49.

⁶Benton, "American Regionalism: A Personal History of the Movement," 149.

through frontier exploration, slavery, the Civil War, and the emergence of modern American industry. Benton completed only three chapters, however, ending with colonial history. In 1928, he explained that the mural's style, which he called "representational dynamism," combined the "extensive experience one has of the real world" with the new art forms and principles that he called his "modern inheritance."⁷ Its energetic, muscular compositions, which critic Lewis Mumford described as "moving rhythmically through space and time," conveyed Benton's belief that social "action" defined American history, past and present.⁸

Yet much of Benton's dynamic depiction of American action centered on human conflict, struggle, and racial discord. All of the panels in the mural's first chapter focused on antagonism between European explorers and indigenous Americans, and the panels in the second chapter similarly centered on strife and destruction. Benton's social epic of American history, in other words, was an unceasing pattern of racial violence and human anguish; his focus on action showed conflict as the central metaphor in the American national narrative.⁹

Perhaps it was despair that this was the national imaginary that led Benton to abandon *The American Historical Epic* in the late 1920s. In subsequent murals Benton focused on scenes that gibed with his political convictions and, in particular, his faith in a liberal democracy shaped by the industry—and independence—of hardworking men. He did not entirely ignore episodes of racial terrorism, religious intolerance, and human conflict in his subsequent murals, however. In his Missouri mural, for example, he included scenes of slaves being beaten and the expulsion of the Mormons. [plate 13] And in the most controversial panel of the Indiana Mural, he painted a scene of the Ku Klux Klan staging a rally, accompanied by a burning cross and an American flag. Benton's reasons for including this scene stem from the specifics of the commission, and from his unwavering attention to the dynamics of social agency.

A Social History of the State of Indiana was unveiled at the Chicago Century of Progress International Exposition in late May 1933, inside

⁷Thomas Hart Benton, "My American Epic in Paint," *Creative Art*, 3 (December 1928), 31-36.

⁸Lewis Mumford, "Thomas H. Benton," *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹For a full discussion of these mural panels see Erika Doss, "American Historical Epic," in Margaret C. Conrads, ed., *American Paintings to 1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art* (2 vols., Kansas City, Mo., 2007), vol. 1, 52-70.



The Indiana Mural cycle, Indiana Hall, Chicago World's Fair, 1933.

A Social History of the State of Indiana Mural by Thomas Hart Benton, 1933/1 photographic print: b&w 16x27 cm.

Courtesy of the Wallace Richards Papers, 1932-1933, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

the Indiana pavilion in the Hall of States Building. Determined that Indiana be represented by something more impressive than “the usual state show of pumpkins, ears of corn, and photographs of pigs,” Richard Lieber hired Benton to paint a state-defining modern mural.¹⁰ Some people protested, calling Benton an outsider, but Lieber persuaded them of Benton’s artistic prominence—he had just received a gold medal from the New York Architectural League for his Whitney Museum mural—and of his ties to the state: Indiana’s Benton Township and Benton County, for example, had both been named after the artist’s great-uncle. Benton was awarded a \$10,000 commission, and in just five months produced an enormous mural that was 250 feet long and 12 feet tall. Mounted 10 feet off the ground, it appeared even larger inside the Indiana pavilion.

Featuring twenty-two panels, the mural was divided into scenes of Indiana’s industrial progress on one side, and the state’s reformist cultures on the other. As Wallace Richards, an art critic and superintendent of the Indiana pavilion, observed: “It was decided to do away with the conventional literary history in paint and to attempt something more

¹⁰Erika Doss, “New Deal Politics and Regionalist Art: Thomas Hart Benton’s *A Social History of the State of Indiana*,” *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies*, 17 (Cambridge, N.Y., 1992), 354-55.

fundamental—an economic and cultural history of Indiana’s growth.” Benton explained that his mural, ostensibly a portrait of only Indiana, was actually “symbolical of the entire country,” a national narrative ranging from the pre-contact era to the Great Depression.¹¹

Indiana’s mural was clearly intended as a “people’s history,” a history of the ordinary folk who conquered, settled, and built up the territory and the state (Indiana was admitted to the union in 1816). This social history emphasis was fairly radical for the time. The major American history textbooks of the era, for example *The Growth of the American Republic* by Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager (which was first published in 1930 and remained a top-selling college history text for four decades), stressed the expert guidance of American elites (presidents and politicians) in chapters such as “Liberty and Empire” and “The Peace of Paris.” Benton’s approach was different, focusing on “history from below” rather than “history from above,” and on issues of social dynamics and agency. While he included a few key historical players—Abraham Lincoln, for example, and Civil War-era Governor Oliver P. Morton—most of the 270-odd figures in the mural were modeled on modern-day Hoosiers that he sketched during his forays around the state.

Most of them were also men: while feminist Frances Wright was featured in a panel titled “Woman’s Place,” Benton mostly understood Indiana—and all American—history on masculine terms. [plate 7] Women were “touchy” subjects, he once remarked, and his 1937 autobiography is dotted with descriptions of “girls in whom I was much interested but with whom I could never seem to get along for any satisfactory length of time.”¹² Elizabeth Schultz explains that Benton’s “concern for ‘people in general’ appears restricted by the heterosexual and masculine basis of his assertions.” Benton’s hypermasculinity was colored, in part, by his politician father, who had expected his eldest son to follow in his footsteps and ridiculed artists as “mincing, bootlicking portrait painters” who “hung around the skirts of women” and “lisp[ed] a silly jargon about grace and beauty.”¹³ In the years following his father’s death in 1924,

¹¹Wallace Richards, “Memorandum to the Director,” January 27, 1933, microfilm roll 1732, frame 67, Benton Papers; Benton, “A Dream Fulfilled,” 49.

¹²Benton, *An Artist in America*, 79, 37.

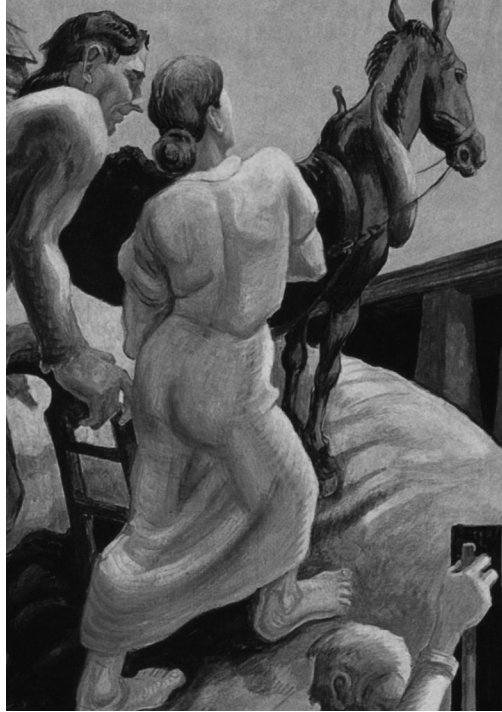
¹³Elizabeth Schultz, “An Artist in America: Thomas Hart Benton’s ‘Song of Himself,’” in R. Douglas Hurt and Mary K. Dains, eds., *Thomas Hart Benton: Artist, Writer, and Intellectual* (Columbia, Mo., 1989), 171, 186; Benton, *An Artist in America*, 12.

Benton overcompensated with big, bold paintings and murals that pictured a mostly masculine American Scene.

Soon after receiving the Indiana mural commission, Benton spent several weeks in the Indiana State Library researching the state's history. He then drove some 3,000 miles around Indiana, searching for the "characters" who defined the state and its historical narrative. He produced over 600 preliminary pen-and-ink sketches during his travels, including 150 individual character studies, and these became the core visual material of the mural. Aware of his outsider status, and anticipating the public outcry that might greet the mural, Benton also sketched various Indiana personalities who, he felt, could help him to "sell" his project.¹⁴ These included the journalists, columnists, and managing editors of various Indianapolis newspapers who were featured in panels such as "Leisure and Literature."

Benton's sense of agency—of who has social control, who determines the course of American history, and who is denied that national subjectivity—is revealed throughout the mural. In panels ranging from "Home Industry" to "Early Schools and Communities," Benton told the story of a hardworking and cooperative nineteenth-century commonwealth. [plates 2, 6] In the mural's two concluding panels, "Indiana Puts Her Trust in Work" and "Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought," he told the state's modern-day story: one that showed the problems of the present—note the scene of angry citizens shaking their fists at the closed doors of a bank—and found their solutions in the social reform agenda of the New Deal, symbolized in the small panel showing Governor Paul V. McNutt—newly elected in the Democratic Party landslide of 1932—pointing to the year 1933 and the words "State Reorganization," "Banking," "Unemployment," "School Salaries," and "Repeal" written above him. [plates 5, 10] Unfortunately, both of these small panels, originally placed on either side of the exit door in the Indiana pavilion, are now lost, but they summarized Benton's faith, and what he hoped was all Indiana's, in the New Deal.

¹⁴See Kathleen A. Foster, "Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals," and Nanette Esseck Brewer, "Benton as Hoosier Historian: Constructing a Visual Narrative in the Indiana Murals," in Kathleen Foster, Nanette Esseck Brewer, and Margaret Contompasis, *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), 7-32 and 136-181 for in-depth information and analysis.



With her ungainly dress and masculine figure, Benton's vision of the pioneer woman struck an unflattering, unromanticized note. Detail from Industrial panel 4, "Home Industry."

Courtesy Indiana University Art Museum

Was Benton's focus on populist agency a romantic gloss on American history? Few viewers found his depiction of the pioneer woman in "Home Industry"—the woman in the ugly pink dress, with the enormous feet and well-sculpted shoulders—very flattering. Further, Benton's Indiana history was all-inclusive—and that extended to those problematic people and unsettling events that, he explained, made up the whole "contradictory complex of American life."¹⁵ Benton's Indiana Mural included, for example, scenes of eighteenth-century

¹⁵Benton, "A Dream Fulfilled," 49.

French fur traders harassing Native Americans, and nineteenth-century soldiers forcing Indians off white-claimed lands. It included scenes of fugitive slaves and labor strikes. And it included a scene of the KKK. Benton did so to remind viewers of the Klan's potent political force in Indiana during the 1920s, when Grand Dragon D. C. Stephenson set up operations in Indianapolis and exploited "fears of Rome, Rum, Russia, Blacks, and Jews." Hoosiers in the 1920s eagerly supported the Klan: over 200,000 of them joined the party and some 400,000 subscribed to the Klan's newspaper, *The Fiery Cross*. Republican party candidate Ed Jackson largely owed his election as governor in 1924 to the Klan vote, as did the mayor of Indianapolis and scores of local politicians.¹⁶

Benton included the KKK in his Indiana Mural to emphasize the need for truly democratic politics in Depression-era America—and to warn viewers about backsliding. [plate 9] He included the KKK to advocate for constant vigilance in the shaping and sustenance of a just civic sphere. He included the KKK as an aberrant historical moment in a panel that otherwise celebrates the power of mass media—we see a typesetter at his printing press, a reporter and his typewriter, and a photographer with his box camera—and the social agency of those who work to improve the lives of others: from nurses and firefighters to entertainers—Peru, Indiana, was the winter home to many different circuses, including Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey—and conservationists. In the vignette on the lower right, Benton painted his patron, Richard Lieber, and a Purdue University biologist, planting a tree.

Benton's sense of social agency also extended to himself, emphasizing the role of the modern American artist, and the centrality of modern American art, in the national narrative. In the Indiana Mural, he is the figure holding the artist's palette and smoking a pipe, standing next to Thomas Hibben, the architect who designed the Indiana pavilion, and near newly elected Governor McNutt, the political architect of local New Deal reform. Placing himself between these two men, Benton cast himself, and his style of modern American art, on similarly significant and historically engaged terms.

On the one hand, this mural self-portrait was all about ego, and Benton was one of the biggest of the many big egos in twentieth-century American art. But Benton included himself to show the modern

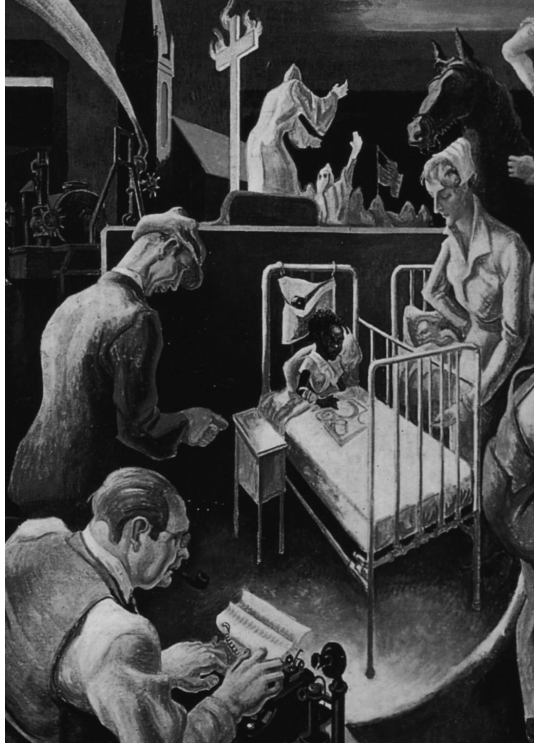
¹⁶James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), 290-91.

American artist as a figure engaged in, rather than alienated from, the American Scene. Benton saw himself as an agent of American history: the visual scribe of Indiana's working and cultural classes coming together in the "social and economic reorganization" of the early 1930s New Deal. He insisted that modern American art act as a force for historical change: these public murals were not intended as documents or illustrations, but as templates and guides for his imagined national future. Benton believed in a modern American art oriented toward social synthesis and reform rather than social hierarchy and civic disjunction, and his views were widely shared in the era of the Great Depression. As Social Realist artist Louis Guglielmi remarked in the mid-1930s: "I feel that it is necessary to create a significant art and not merely some super-deluxe framed wallpaper to decorate the homes of the wealthy. The time has come when painters are returning to the life of the people."¹⁷

Still, while American Scene moderns like Benton saw themselves as agents in American history, their sense of that history—and their participation in it—was often anxious and antagonistic. As Benton painted it, American history was bumpy and flawed—feelings that are conveyed in the loud, oppositional compositions and strident colors of his public murals, and in the historically despicable subjects that he often included. As much as Benton's Hoosier history is populated by hard-working and industrious men, and oriented toward a progressive narrative that ends on a note of upbeat, pro-New Deal sympathies, this is not "American history lite." This is "American history brutal": an unrelenting saga of social action and populist agency that, however factual, pictures the national narrative on frenzied, tumultuous, and tortured terms. Consider how the hundreds of figures that Benton painted rarely smile or laugh, and never seem to relax. How can they? All of them are muscle-bound titans—the figure of Lincoln, for example, stands over nine feet tall—who are completely focused on, and even obsessed with, the making, doing, and performing of Indiana's American Scene.

Benton viewed history as something more than a march through time of key events and players. He understood American history in terms of felt experience and affective conditions. History was emotional;

¹⁷Louis Guglielmi, "After the Locusts," in Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays From the 1930s By Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (New York, 1973), 114.



Benton's stark juxtaposition of "harsh, violent realities" beside examples of the "truly democratic politics of Depression-era America" presented a clear-eyed depiction of Indiana life and history. The murals acted simultaneously as both warning and celebration. Detail from Cultural panel 10, "Parks, the Circus, the Klan, the Press."

Courtesy IU Archives

history was engaged. And in his modern art drama, the emotional conditions that he repeatedly visualized were heightened states of anxiety. This becomes especially clear when we take in the full sweep of this Hoosier history: its syncopated rhythm of fires and clouds of smoke; its jam-packed narrative full of action, action, action; its repeated attention to the harsh, violent realities of human conflict in the making of America. It is no surprise that students and others at Indiana University have protested against this mural, and in particular against the scene featuring the KKK. Benton's focus on the affective conditions of the

American experience was—and is—purposefully unnerving. Benton wanted viewers to experience the dynamics of American history—and to recognize their own agency within those conditions.

Public murals are often the source of conflict and controversy on college campuses. At the University of Notre Dame, Luigi Gregori's Columbus Murals have prompted protest in recent years, including demands by some Native American students that they be removed. The murals, painted between 1882-1884 and located in Notre Dame's Main Building, feature twelve panels that tell the story of Columbus's journey to the New World. Those that some viewers find particularly offensive are "Taking Possession of the New World," which shows Columbus planting a cross and claiming the territory for the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, while various Taino Indians look on in awe, and "Return of Columbus and Reception at Court," which depicts Columbus's triumphant return to Granada, with Indian captives and the spoils of conquest in tow. Both are fairly ridiculous pictures, full of historical inaccuracies (such as the Plains Indian costuming that Gregori selected for the Indian captives) and insulting stereotypes.

The mural was conceived at a moment of Christopher Columbus mania: in 1882, the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic fraternal organization, was founded and a decade later, the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America was heralded in innumerable American memorials and in the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Painted, too, to combat decades of anti-Catholic sentiment in America, Notre Dame's mural was intended to unite the campus around a historical figure engaged in God's work. In 1997, a university committee was appointed to develop a nuanced historical interpretation and distribute a free full-color brochure of the murals, which states: "The University of Notre Dame recognizes that the Columbus murals reflect 19th-century white European views of race, gender and ethnicity which may be offensive to some individuals."

Dartmouth's Hovey Murals, on the other hand, were covered up and hidden away in the early 1980s after objections were raised to their mythologizing of that college's history and their soft-core pornographic depiction of Native American women. Painted in the late 1930s by Walter Beach Humphrey (a 1914 Dartmouth graduate), the murals illustrated Dartmouth's drinking song, a ditty written by Richard Hovey. Originally located in Hovey Grill, a rathskeller of sorts in Thayer Hall, the murals tell the story of Dartmouth College's founder, Eleazar Wheelock, venturing into the New England wilderness with some "five

hundred gallons” of rum, which he “served” to the Native American men he encountered from the school’s legendary silver punch bowl. Everyone gets drunk and has a fine time, including the half-naked females standing around—one of whom is depicted reading an upside-down book.

If once considered amusing, by the 1970s the Hovey Murals were the subject of intense debate at Dartmouth, serving as a generational dividing line between alumni who objected to the college’s move toward co-education (Dartmouth first admitted female students in 1972) and students incensed by their demeaning depiction of Native Americans. The drinking song itself implied that area Indians traded their land to Wheelock for alcohol; it also discounted the college’s original charter to educate the “youth of the Indian tribes in this land.” By the 1980s, the murals were placed in storage—although in 1993, Native American students asked that they be made public again. As Colleen Larimore, former director of Dartmouth’s Native American Program remarked, “While we still consider the murals to be degrading and offensive, we cannot deny how Native Americans were viewed in the past at Dartmouth and in this country. Rather than fleeing from this past, we must face it and learn from it.”¹⁸

Larimore’s comments are relevant in our consideration today of Benton’s Indiana Mural, some parts of which are certainly offensive and degrading. Yet however uncomfortable Benton’s active and anxious pictures make us feel, they serve to remind us of the nation’s legacy of conflict, violence, and racial struggle, and of our obligations as agents of American history to re-imagine and re-make America on less shameful terms.



¹⁸Colleen Larimore, comments made in 1993 as noted at “The Hovey Murals,” Dartmouth College, at: <http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/collections/overview/artoncampus/hovey.html> (accessed August 22, 2008).