

# Art for America

## Race in Thomas Hart Benton's Murals, 1919-1936

AUSTEN BARRON BAILLY

In 1933, Thomas Hart Benton published a short essay in *Indiana, A Hoosier History* to accompany the reproductions of his recently completed Indiana Murals. Powerfully entitled “A Dream Fulfilled,” Benton’s essay actually addressed the specifics of the Indiana Murals only in the last two paragraphs. Instead, the artist focused on the development of his dream to paint a history of the United States, writing that “[t]his mural painting of Indiana sees the realization of a project that I have had in mind for fifteen years. In 1919 I set about making a history of the United States . . . I saw that for all the talk on the subject there could be no American Art unless its form was generated in the midst of meanings and values that were American.”<sup>1</sup>

The project to which Benton refers in his essay and this opening quote is his *American Historical Epic* (1919-1928).<sup>2</sup> The “self-commis-

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas H. Benton, “A Dream Fulfilled,” reprinted in Kathleen A. Foster, Nanette Esseck Brewer, and Margaret Contompasis, *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), facing p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>Austen Barron Bailly, “Painting the ‘American Historical Epic’: Thomas Hart Benton and Race, 1919-1936” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009).

sioned" *Epic* was Benton's earliest attempt at the kind of large-scale, commissioned public murals for which he became famous in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Although he had no building in which to house the project, Benton conceived of a series of up to seventy-five mural panels, divided into chapters covering the entire history of the United States from its discovery through the 1920s. "Discovery," "Palisades," "Aggression," "Prayer," "Retribution" (chapter one); "Clearing the Land," "Planting," "The Slaves," "The Witch" (chapter two); "The Pathfinder," [plate 11] "Over the Mountain," "The Jesuits," "Struggle for the Wilderness," "Lost Hunting Ground" [plate 12] (chapter three) are the original titles of the fourteen completed *American Historical Epic* mural panels, first conceived in 1919 as *History of the United States*.<sup>4</sup> Publicly exhibited in New York between 1923 and 1928, the murals did not lead to a commission for Benton, and he never sold a single panel from the series. After nearly a decade of work, he abandoned the project.

In the *Epic*, Benton treated American historical subject matter in provocative ways. He initially tried to determine "meanings and values that were American" by ignoring the conventional patriotic, celebratory, and heroic rhetoric of both historical narrative and mural painting. Benton instead focused on the nation's violent past with respect to black and Native Americans, and created exaggerated, elongated, even stereotyped or caricatured figures of Indians, white settlers, and black slaves,

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<sup>3</sup>The 1930s murals are *America Today* (The New School Murals), 1929-30, AXA Equitable Financial Inc., New York; *The Arts of Life in America* (The Whitney Murals), 1932, New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Conn.; *The Indiana Murals*, 1933 (Century of Progress Exhibition, Chicago, Ill.), Indiana University, Bloomington; *A Social History of the State of Missouri*, 1936, House Lounge, State Capitol, Jefferson City, Missouri. Only the Missouri mural is *in situ* in its original location.

<sup>4</sup>Major studies of Benton's art, including discussions of the *Epic*, are Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* (Kansas City, Mo., 1989); Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton* (New York, 1974); Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago, 1991); J. Richard Gruber, "Thomas Hart Benton: Teaching and Art Theory" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1987). Benton's two autobiographies are also important sources: Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America* (New York, 1937); Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, 3rd revised ed. (Columbia, Mo., 1968). The phrase "self-commissioned" was applied to the mural series in "Thomas H. Benton—American Modern," *The Survey*, 57 (October 1, 1926). It was not until the significant juncture of December 1928, when Benton abandoned the series and published a defense of his project, that he publicly assigned this title to these murals. He took his title from Lewis Mumford's 1927 article about the artist. Lewis Mumford, "An American Epic in Paint," *The New Republic*, 50 (April 6, 1927). In Benton's own essay, he asserted that as he worked on the murals his "conception of an American Historical Epic grew." See Thomas H. Benton, "My American Epic in Paint," *Creative Art*, 3 (December 1928), xxxi-xxxvi.

which he superimposed over invented scenes of American history. He also recast the nation's most celebrated historical themes—discovery, religion, westward expansion—as its most ambivalent and revealing moments by confronting the racial inequities embedded in the popular experience of these histories.

As he noted in his Indiana essay, “History was not a scholarly study for me but a drama. . . . The recorded parts of conventional history were, in my conception, subordinated to the more tremendous facts of common existence where man and his tools, under the constant pressure of every-day need, changed the face of a continent and became themselves something different in the process. And it was to this something different, the final involved and contradictory complex of American life, that I consecrated my history.”<sup>5</sup> Underlying these descriptions of his *Epic* is Benton's ongoing subtext, one he never openly articulated but to which his art attests: For Benton, America's “drama,” America's “tremendous facts of common existence,” its “pressure,” its “difference” from Europe, and its “involved and contradictory complex,” were all found in the nation's race relations.

Like many other cultural producers such as Van Wyck Brooks, whose seminal essay “On Creating a Usable Past” had appeared in 1918, Benton turned to American history in order to re-imagine the nation's past in relation to its present.<sup>6</sup> But rather than look to the past as a model, he sought to make American history conceptually and visually relevant to his own moment. Benton's preoccupation with racial figures and American history after World War I unavoidably connects the *Epic* to the related citizenship debates of the late teens and early 1920s. The marginalized bodies and histories suggest a contested notion of an American body, both in a political and visual sense, and underscore the identity questions, including both Benton's and America's own artistic identities, that marked the era.

This was a period bracketed by the release of D.W. Griffith's racist epic motion picture, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and the 1924 enactment of the Immigration Act (National Origins Act)—which drastically aimed to arrest the nation's changing demography—and the Indian Citizenship

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<sup>5</sup>Thomas H. Benton, “A Dream Fulfilled.”

<sup>6</sup>Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial; a Semi-monthly Journal of Literary Criticism, Discussion, and Information*, 64 (April 11, 1918), 337-41.

Act, which finally granted all American Indians citizenship. The intervening years were fractious ones, defined by influential events: municipal and federal Americanization efforts carried out in New York around World War I; the violent race riots of the summer of 1919, erupting nationwide as Benton conceived the *Epic*; extensive disenfranchisement in spite of the ratification of women's suffrage in 1919; and debates over revisions to U.S. history textbooks for New York City public schools between 1921 and 1922, just when Benton was developing his revisionist version of American history.<sup>7</sup> The *Epic* intersected with widespread and diverse attempts to construct American history and to define, or redefine, the United States and its people.

To confront the nation's exploitative history meant implicating and challenging entrenched racism and post-World War I nativist sentiments of "America Firstism," attitudes that threatened the viability of American democracy.<sup>8</sup> Since he set the entire *Epic* ostensibly in the nation's "prehistory" (the second-to-last panel references the French and Indian Wars), a mythic time before the official formation of the United States, his invented scenes from American history operate in a kind of jumbled historical limbo. The cycle is akin to an unending odyssey—a deliberately unfulfilled and incomplete journey to tolerance and full democracy, the success of which was still deeply uncertain in the early 1920s. The murals question where this national journey would end—in what kind of America? The titles of the panels that close each chapter—"Retribution," "Religion," and "The Lost Hunting Ground"—invite the question of how Benton's *Epic* could possibly offer an "official" picture of new nationhood. Not surprisingly, the exposed racism, violence, and

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<sup>7</sup>For an overview of the debate over U.S. History textbook revisions for New York City public schools see Chapter Five, "Anglo-Saxonism and the Revolt against the Professors" in Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2003).

<sup>8</sup>Benton's vehemence is still evident in his 1951 description of "America Firstism . . . as responsible for some of the worst and most irresponsible demagoguery our country has ever known. . . . It rose to a sudden and renewed strength immediately after the First World War when the failure of Woodrow Wilson's world idealism before the brute chauvinisms of Clemenceau and the English vengeance complexes of Lloyd George became apparent. The dissolution of the Wilsonian democratic world dream before the loot hungers of Europe forced America promptly back on herself . . . the initial moves here were atrocious. . . . The Ku Klux Klan with its anti-Negro, anti-Jew, and anti-Catholic platform stalked, white-robed and sinister, over the land . . . For nearly two years violence and counterviolence ruled over the postwar return of America to itself." Thomas Hart Benton, "American Regionalism: A Personal History of the Movement," in *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence, Kan., 1969), 157-58.

critique unexpectedly integral to the series overstepped conventional bounds for murals intended as public art and implicitly antagonized mainstream viewers. The failure of the murals was arguably highly overdetermined.

Toni Morrison has charged that “American means white.”<sup>9</sup> With its images of white, black, and Native Americans—their bodies together—the *Epic* had tried to challenge mainstream views of who constituted the American people and what constituted American character. It also confronted contemporary race theory, in which “native American,” had become defined by Madison Grant as the “purely Nordic, but also Teutonic, a very large majority being Anglo-Saxon . . . the blood was almost purely Saxon, Anglian, and Dane.”<sup>10</sup> Even picturing white as a broad and general category, perpetually in opposition to the interests of prominently depicted blacks and Indians, did not neatly align with dominant Anglo-Saxon conceptions of what was “white” in 1910s and 1920s America.<sup>11</sup> In this vein, the imagery in Benton’s *Epic* that posited white, black, and Indian as all inherently American conjured and complicated biological and national theories about race, implicitly contributing to fears that a pure Anglo-Saxon “American” race would be weakened and eventually be destroyed by miscegenation.<sup>12</sup> Matthew Guterl has stressed that Grant’s “‘new science of race’ emphasized—above everything else—

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<sup>9</sup>Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York, 1993), 64.

<sup>10</sup>Madison Grant, *The Passing of the White Race, or the Racial Basis of European History* (New York, 1916), 74. Reprinted annually in revised editions through 1924 (with the exception of 1920), Grant’s theories were propounded for nearly a decade and were instrumental to the formulation of the Quota Law of 1921, which expanded the 1917 Immigration Act and provided the foundation for the passage of the restrictive 1924 Immigration Act.

<sup>11</sup>Driving the framework of “national origins” was the categorization of “newcomers from southern and eastern Europe as different from the whiter and longer established northern and western European migrants and from the non-white Chinese and other ‘Asiatics,’” according to David Roediger. David Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 6. Not until well into the twentieth century were “Italian, Slav, Greek, German, French, Irish, and other European races . . . gathered under the term ‘Caucasian’ . . . and . . . unified as ‘conclusively’ white according to Matthew Jacobson.” *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>12</sup>Politicians sought to “protect” what Senator Ellison DuRant Smith of South Carolina described in 1924 in his now infamous speech “Shut the Door,” as “the largest percentage of any country in the world of the pure, unadulterated Anglo-Saxon stock.” Ellison DuRant Smith, “Speech (April 9, 1924),” 68th Congress Congressional Record, 1st Session, vol. 65 (1924), online at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5080> (accessed April 10, 2008). Benton’s

the biological basis of race and race traits. The body, not the home, was the foundation of the success or failure of the race."<sup>13</sup> Benton's fixation on the American body in the *Epic* implied generally that Euro-Americans and American Indians were the founding races of the United States. With the introduction of the 1925 panel "The Slaves," Benton effectively represented an entirely new concept of an "American race."

The racial content of Benton's American cycle, which he described somewhat cryptically in his 1928 defense as "specific human meaning," "insistent meaning," "shapes that were significant in their own right," or, in closing, "a genuine world also in its context," generated a kind of speechlessness, even for the artist.<sup>14</sup> Reviews of the *Epic* circumvented the discussion of racial representation almost entirely.<sup>15</sup> The murals demonstrate a profound ambivalence about the meanings generated by the invented types of historical American racial figures they depicted, imagery that Benton would try to clarify in subsequent murals.

As Benton suggested in "A Dream Fulfilled," a consideration of his *Epic*—which represented an unprecedented, even radical, approach to public art—is an important precursor to any discussion of his later murals. I believe that Benton's failure to engage viewers with the implications of the racial inequities he depicted compelled him to change his approach to race in his art. In the discussion that follows, I explore the visual strategies for racial representation that Benton developed in his 1930s public murals in his effort to connect more cooperatively with American audiences—implying, in the Toni Morrison sense, a white-majority public. These strategies built upon, but necessarily departed from, the critical approaches he had invented for the *Epic*.

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own marriage to the daughter of Italian immigrants defied what was known as the "law of inherited tendency" and renounced current attitudes about miscegenation. Proponents of eugenics would have constituted Benton's marriage to Rita Piacenza as "race suicide."

<sup>13</sup>Matthew Pratt Guterl, *The Color of Race in America, 1900-1940* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 40.

<sup>14</sup>Benton, "My American Epic in Paint."

<sup>15</sup>The published reviews are analyzed in chapter five of my dissertation. James Snead, a scholar of William Faulkner, has studied the ways in which "racial divisions show their flaws best in written form." See Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 66. Snead identified several fundamental techniques employed by white artists to deal with the presence of the racial other in their work and in American society. I applied the techniques not only to Benton's murals but to the reviews published about them. In several key instances, the published reviews reveal the author's tendency to conflate, deflect, dismiss, talk around, even render incoherent the racial presence they encountered in Benton's *Epic*.

Black and Native Americans appear in all four commissioned mural cycles—*America Today*, *The Arts of Life in America*, *The Indiana Murals*, and *A Social History of the State of Missouri*—in fundamentally different ways. Visual analysis of these more famous murals suggests that Benton still tried to emphasize marginalized contributions of blacks and Indians to American society. However, he no longer attempted to express their fundamental interconnectedness to mainstream white America in the caustic figural inventions characterizing the *Epic*, turning instead to a more overt use of stereotyping and caricature situated in readily identifiable regional, chronological, or historical contexts.

In an effort to ground his art in direct observations of America rather than in imaginative, even mythic, conceptions of its past, Benton started traveling extensively around the United States beginning in the summer of 1924. His travels encouraged him to revise his critical notion of a distinctly American historical epic in favor of an “epic of the continent,” as art critic Lloyd Goodrich characterized Benton’s drawings in 1929.<sup>16</sup> Benton later described this period: “I started going places . . . and plowed around in the back countries where old manners persisted and old prejudices were sustained . . . I took them as they came.”<sup>17</sup> This statement not only reflects his growing interest in the nation’s regions, but also suggests the beginnings of a certain reticence in viscerally confronting old manners and old prejudices, as he had in the *Epic* with both art historical and historical traditions and race. In “taking them as they came,” Benton realized that America’s specific inhabitants and regional histories could function directly as visual sources and organizing “acts” for his public murals.

*America Today* was Benton’s first attempt to put his drawings of regional types and traditions to direct use and to employ a regional organizational structure.<sup>18</sup> He drastically reduced the presence of American Indians; there is only one Indian in the entire series, a diminutive figure at the lower edge of “Changing West.” This was in marked contrast to the visual equivalent that he had established, in chapter three of his *Epic*, between “The Pathfinder” (1926), the first panel, and “Lost Hunting

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<sup>16</sup>Lloyd Goodrich, “New Benton Drawings,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1929.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, 4th rev. ed. (Columbia, Mo., 1983), 77.

<sup>18</sup>The most comprehensive study of these murals is Emily Braun and Thomas Branchick, *Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals* (Williamstown, Mass., 1985).



Chicago Century of Progress International Exposition poster, 1933

Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division



*Indiana Murals, Industrial Panel 4, "Home Industry"*

Courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

Photograph by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague.



*Indiana Murals, Industrial Panel 6, "Civil War"*

Courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

Photograph by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague.



*Indiana Murals, Industrial Panel 9, "Coal, Gas, Oil, Brick"*

Courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

Photograph by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague.



*Indiana Murals, Industrial Panel 11, "Indiana Puts Her Trust in Work"*

Courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

Photograph by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague.



*Indiana Murals, Cultural Panel 4, "Early Schools and Communities"*

Courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

Photograph by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague.



*Indiana Murals, Cultural Panel 7, "Woman's Place"*

Courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

Photograph by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague.



*Indiana Murals, Cultural Panel 9, "Colleges and City Life"*

Courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

Photograph by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague.



*Indiana Murals, Cultural Panel 11, "Parks, the Circus, the Klan, the Press"*

Courtesy IU Archives



*Indiana Murals, Cultural Panel 11, "Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought"*

Courtesy IU Archives



*The American Historical Epic, "The Pathfinder"*

Courtesy The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Bequest of the artist, F75-21/6.

Photograph by Jamison Miller. Copyright T. H. Benton and R. P. Benton Testamentary Trusts,  
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*The American Historical Epic, "Lost Hunting Ground"*

Courtesy The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Bequest of the artist, F75-21/10.

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*A Social History of the State of Missouri, "Pioneer Days and Early Settlers"*

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Thomas H. Benton, front endpaper for Leo Huberman,  
*We the People* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932.)



Thomas H. Benton, back endpaper for Leo Huberman,  
*We the People* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932.)



Thomas Hart Benton at work in his IU studio, 1941

Courtesy IU Archives

Ground" (1927-1928), the last. [plates 11, 12] Explicitly paired in a parenthetical arrangement of the figures, each scene also showed native dwellings: Navajo hogans and a quintessential pioneer's log cabin. The visual pairing functions not necessarily as an example of progress or economic determinism, but rather as a leveling. It sets up a parallel notion of the indigenous structure and settlement—one Indian, one white—and the versions of American history told from the "pathfinder's" or Native American's perspective. Alluding to the recent legally equal status of Indians as of 1924, the final chapter suggested that these two indigenous narratives were unequivocal and inseparable, but competing.

As the *Epic* unflinchingly shows, Benton saw Native Americans as central to American history, even as they were being written off in an influential history textbook authored by historian Charles Beard with William C. Bagley: *The History of the American People*. First published in 1918, Beard and Bagley's mass-distributed textbook was seen as one that "would put democracy into the study of history" and in which "colonial America is pictured as a melting pot of the races."<sup>19</sup> However, in the preface to the third edition in 1928, Beard and Bagley wrote that "the space given to the North American Indians has been materially reduced. They are interesting and picturesque, but they made no impress upon the civilization of the United States. In a history designed to explain the present rather than to gratify curiosity and entertain, Indian habits of life and Indian wars must have a very minor position."<sup>20</sup> But Benton's contemporaneous "The Lost Hunting Ground" shows the monumental Indian, equal in scale to his white counterpart in "The Pathfinder." Native Americans received what would be the last word in Benton's revisionist American history, but influential historians, not to mention school children nationwide, now saw American Indians as irrelevant to the present. Increasingly mindful of creating art that would resonate with the broadest possible audience, Benton must have internalized such dismissive attitudes, acknowledging that his visual "epic," prominently featuring American Indians, might make "no impress." Benton abandoned the *Epic* that same year.

<sup>19</sup>The California State Series of the textbook had a print run of 600,000 copies. Charles A. Beard and William C. Bagley, *The History of the American People*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1928). The quote is from a review in *The Nation* (December 7, 1918).

<sup>20</sup>Beard and Bagley, *The History of the American People*, iv.

Soon thereafter, in *America Today*, Benton pictured American Indians not as a monumental, inevitable presence but as a literally tiny minority in contemporary society, conveying the tension between their new citizenship and popular stereotypes and romantic images. These factors encouraged Benton to leave Indians virtually out of his vision of modern America and to underscore those very stereotypes and fanciful visions in his composition. In "Changing West," a cowboy and a large movie camera stand to the right of the sole Indian. To his left are a blond woman—possibly a Hollywood starlet—and a figure in a toque, a director or cameraman. These details suggest that the Indian we see is actually an actor, a movie character on the set; here the Indian has gone metaphorically from being an "Actor," a player in American society, to merely an "actor."<sup>21</sup> Benton has transferred the Indian's agency from real history to a Western movie script, in which the Indian is a projection—like the film to be—of the American imagination.

In contrast, African Americans represented to Benton a significant presence and force in contemporary American society. Although only two major black figures appear, in "Deep South" and "City Building," they stand at both ends of the mural panels and anchor the entire cycle. Effectively back to back, they are dressed identically, and their arms are raised in similar gestures. These rural and urban black figures represent the foundations of capitalist America from Benton's perspective: agricultural productivity and modern industrialization, both of them dependent on black labor.

The cotton picker's and the driller's arms encircle their faces. Benton's framing device is a subtle visual metaphor emphasizing each black head, symbolizing therein a kind of psychological boundary, and encapsulating in that frame certain realities of black American life. In "City Building" the link is to construction work: the jackhammer and the driller's chiseled face are enclosed within the dynamically compressed space of his powerful, muscular arms—features Benton has greatly exaggerated and heightened; in "Deep South," the link is to the region's dominant agricultural system, then referred to as King Cotton.

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<sup>21</sup>I am indebted to Peter C. Rowley, graduate student in U.S. history, Indiana University, Bloomington for these perceptive observations and the persuasive interpretation of the Indian in "Changing West." Rowley shared these ideas with me at "Thomas Hart Benton's Indiana Murals at 75: Public Art and the Public University," a public conference held at Indiana University, April 25-26, 2008, at which I presented a version of this article.

The cotton picker's face is set against a white background within the rigid square created by his upraised arms. The white highlights in the face function as literal and metaphorical reflections of white—they reference minstrelsy, suggest how white and black relations framed and structured life in the Deep South, and literally show against the black skin the white reflection from the pile of cotton emptied from the large sack. The unfilled bag and the vacant stare may suggest the emptiness and seeming inescapability of sharecropping but also that this era was finally drawing to a close: the man disgorges a bag of cotton, deliberately turning it upside down, perhaps, amazingly, for the last time. Alvin Johnson of the New School, who published an essay on these murals in the early 1930s, interpreted this figure as “the triumphant Negro.”<sup>22</sup>

In *America Today*, Benton worked to embed the racial realities he considered intrinsic to contemporary America. He moved away from the *Epic*'s violent allegories implicating whites, such as the newly arrived slaves being brutally whipped in “The Slaves,” a panel in chapter two of the *Epic*. Benton instead began to use race in a manner more palatable to white audiences, as he had in “Over the Mountains,” from chapter three of the *Epic*. In this panel, the artist had shown laborers, or slaves, as more powerfully modeled than the white pioneers. Their chiseled, extraordinary musculature represented a stereotypical physique desired by white culture, one traditionally missing from the white bodies. Similarly, the black figures in *America Today* were visually more prominent and compositionally more significant than most white figures. The black body could not be avoided. Benton forced viewers to acknowledge African Americans, if only visually. But he did so by depicting blacks, with their rippling muscles, in expected and relatively accepted roles—as construction workers or cotton pickers.

For his commission to decorate the Whitney Museum's reading room, Benton used the regional framework to consider American popular pastimes across the country, what he would call the *Arts of Life in America*. He wrote in his 1932 publication about the murals that “The Arts of Life are the popular arts and are generally undisciplined . . . uncritical.”<sup>23</sup> Benton tried to channel this freewheeling spirit of the popular, along with its accompanying “assertions of value,” in his words,

<sup>22</sup>Alvin Johnson, *Notes on the New School Murals* (New York, n.d.), 6.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas H. Benton, *The Arts of Life in America: A Series of Murals by Thomas Benton* (New York, 1932), 4.

becoming more brash in his use of stereotype and caricature. He described his “Indian Arts,” for example, as an “instance of romantic indulgence . . . one does not have to be a boy scout to understand and forgive this—through romance we Americans provide compensation for what we actually have done to the Indian.”<sup>24</sup>

In the “Arts of the South,” however, Benton privileged the section described as “Negro Singing,” because the black man leading the song dominates the composition. He is the largest figure, at the center, and his heft and position convey the importance of Negro song or spirituals to American culture—as well as their independence: it is a tradition that can turn its back on “white singing,” as Benton depicted.<sup>25</sup> Yet the dual tree trunks root the white and black expressions of faith and music literally in the same ground, and the same foliage encircles all the musicians and onlookers.

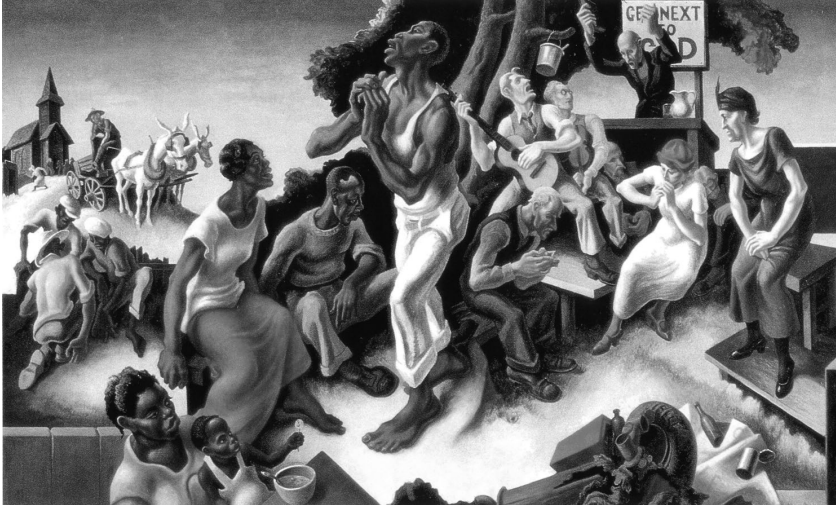
Consider also that what at first glance appears to be a deeply troubling parallel at the lower edge of the mural—the black mother and child at lower left next to the trash pile at lower right—may not be. The two sections are the edges of a broken circle, divided by the patch of dark green matter at the center. These two halves move in opposite directions. Follow the mother-and-child foundation clockwise towards the blacks gathered in song. On the other side, follow the trash pile counterclockwise around to what Benton called “Holy Rollers,” the “get next to God” worshippers and singers. Benton very well may have sought to link the presumed racism and hysterical righteousness of evangelical southern whites to “white trash,” a phrase invented in the nineteenth century, while elevating what he saw as the fortitude of the often-besieged black family and their experience in the South.

However, modern American artist Stuart Davis railed against Benton’s depictions in the magazine *Art Front* in 1935, calling his images

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Benton also created two ceiling panels for the Whitney commission: “Unemployment, Radical Protest, Speed” (ceiling panel 5), and “Folk and Popular Songs” (ceiling panels 7 and 8). In light of the importance of Negro song to “Arts of the South,” it is highly significant that more than half of the lyrics Benton quotes in “Folk and Popular Songs” are African American songs or spirituals. “Folk and Popular Songs” consists of a pattern of rectangular boxes and a series of triangular shapes emanating from megaphone or speaker-like forms at left and right. The fifteen different lyrics painted inside these shapes across the two panels have been identified by Benton scholar Leo Mazow, who determined the musical sources for each; nine are African American specifically. I am deeply grateful to Mazow for sharing this relevant discovery.



Complex and controversial, Benton's works were—and remain—both praised and criticized.

Where some see simplistically racist depictions, others find complex musings on the political, cultural, and social realities of American life and history. *Arts of Life in America*, “Arts of the South.”

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of blacks “gross caricatures” and “third rate vaudeville character cliché with the humor omitted. Had they a little more wit, they would automatically take their place in the body of propaganda which is constantly being utilized to disenfranchise the Negro politically, socially, and economically.”<sup>26</sup> Intent on his criticism of Benton as racist, Davis failed to appreciate the complexity of Benton's methods and the fact that the muralist may have been ridiculing not blacks, but whites. In addition to the “trash” foundation of the Holy Rollers, Benton further undercut the perceived piety and role of religion in southern life: just above the trio of black men playing a typical—to Benton—game of “Craps” (a scene and title that offended many, especially juxtaposed with the church), is a stooped white woman heading to an outhouse adjacent to the house of worship. Unremarked upon by critics is the fact that, while her driver waits and snoozes, she is surely going to “crap.”

<sup>26</sup>Stuart Davis, “The New York American Scene in Art,” *Art Front*, 1 (February 1935), 6.

Such apparently minor and vulgar details and compositional devices have been overlooked. But they reveal Benton's audacious endeavor to mix real observations of the life and experiences of ordinary Americans with caricature and stereotype, all at the expense of ideological leftist politics and urban intellectualism. Benton tried to elevate Negro song as an American art while at the same time offensively lampooning and devaluing New York intellectuals and caricaturing Jews, poking fun at the backwards aspects of white American life, celebrating the American folk and their pastimes (including gambling and drinking), and embracing the reality of America's romance with the Indian. He wrote that "practically every form is bound up with implications which take away from purely plastic values. This is deliberate."<sup>27</sup> Prominent art critic Paul Rosenfeld vilified the murals, calling them "crude, gross and ungracious."<sup>28</sup> Henry McBride, writing for the *New York Sun*, considered them examples of "pure tabloid" that in an "unnice manner" foisted a "caricturish [sic] insistence upon everything that is hectic and rowdyish in the American system of living."<sup>29</sup> The clear regional organization of these murals, combined with their attention to the folk, could not contain or counteract Benton's efforts to reveal authentic but contradictory aspects of life in America and its implications.

However, other critics and audiences delighted in what cultural critic and architectural historian Lewis Mumford described as "commentary as salty as the opening chapters of 'Moby Dick' and as juicy as the body of 'Huckleberry Finn.'"<sup>30</sup> *The Nation* honored Benton with their 1932 award for the "outstanding production for the year in American art."<sup>31</sup> In 1933, Benton received from the Architectural League of New York—where he had shown his *Epic* without acclaim—"the gold medal in decorative painting . . . for his decoration in the Whitney Museum in

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<sup>27</sup>Benton, *The Arts of Life in America*, 11.

<sup>28</sup>Paul Rosenfeld, "Ex-Reading Room," *New Republic*, April 12, 1933, 245-6.

<sup>29</sup>Henry McBride, "Thomas Benton's Murals at the Whitney Museum," *New York Sun*, December 10, 1932.

<sup>30</sup>Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries: Assorted Americana," *The New Yorker*, December 17, 1932.

<sup>31</sup>The description of the *Nation* award is McBride's. See Henry McBride, "Thomas Benton's Murals: Whitney Museum Decorations Still a Subject for Debate," *New York Sun*, December 31, 1932.

recognition of the freshness of his view point, the vigor and mastery of his technique and the authentic originality of his work.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite the popularity of the Whitney murals in many camps, attacks by rival artists and leading art critics in New York demonstrate that Benton's attempts to encompass racial history, experience, or culture posed problems for elite white viewers, especially his depictions of blacks, who functioned as a lightning rod in Benton's art in ways that Indians did not. In this light, it becomes clearer why Benton saw the Indiana Murals as “a dream fulfilled.” In his state history of Indiana, executed in 1933 for the Indiana pavilion at the Chicago Century of Progress International Exposition, far from the rarefied reading room of New York's Whitney Museum, Benton was able to provide a coherent, effectively linear structure to encompass official history, people's history, popular arts, and daily life, as well as marginalized or silent histories for tens of thousands of Americans.<sup>33</sup> He incorporated aspects of black and Native American history into a mainstream historical narrative. As he wrote, “my desire to represent a social progression made it possible for me to transfer my original historical plan from the United States as a whole to the state of Indiana, the context of whose history is symbolical of the entire country.”

The concept of social progression was deliberately troubled in the *Epic*, and at odds with the regionally organized *America Today* and *Arts of Life in America*. But it was realized in the Indiana Murals through a general chronology moving from prehistoric times to Indiana's modern industrial, educational, and cultural achievements of the early twentieth century. The chronological foundation of the Indiana Murals rested on pre-industrial American Indian cultures. The figures in “The Indians” and in “The Mound Builders” are among the few very large vertical figures, including Lincoln, visible at left, dominating and punctuating the whole composition horizontally. Benton neglected to show modern Indians in the mural, but he required viewers to address the fact that American industry and culture were predicated on Native American

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<sup>32</sup>“Citations Used in Medal Awards for Decorative Painting 1929-1938,” memorandum, Architectural League of New York, Jacques Seligmann & Co. Records, 1904-1978 [bulk 1913-1974], Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>33</sup>Foster et al., *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals*, 3. The well-regarded reception by about “fifty percent of viewers” of the murals, which were deemed “ultra modern” as well as “brutally truthful,” is discussed by Foster on p. 22.

precedent and achievement. They frame the entire history, with the First Americans narrative here writ large.

What is not writ large in the Indiana history are African Americans. Benton did include blacks, but embedded the figures within a historical narrative presented from a white perspective: abolitionists, Progressive Era reformers, even the Ku Klux Klan. In “Reformers and Squatters” we see slaves being helped by an abolitionist, a poster illustrating a runaway slave is featured in the Lincoln panel, and in “Parks, the Circus, the Klan, the Press,” a tiny black child (the only modern-era black figure in the mural) is tended to by a white nurse immediately beneath a small scene of a white-robed, flag-waving KKK rally. Instead of trying to represent blacks in independent cultural terms, as he had attempted with “Negro Singing” in the *Arts of Life in America*, Benton backpedaled in the Indiana Murals, despite the controversial inclusion of the Klan scene—which continued to offend viewers, and which sparked numerous protests that eventually helped to lead to Indiana University’s 2002 decision to develop a strategic plan for institutional and financial commitment to promoting and supporting diversity on campus.<sup>34</sup> [plate 9]

Benton’s final major mural commission of the 1930s, the *Social History of the State of Missouri*, was structured to emphasize the intertwined histories of black, Native, and white Americans as represented in Missouri. [plate 13] Towering above the ends of the room on either side of the viewer are over-life-sized panels illustrating to the left (the south wall), the ballad of Frankie and Johnny, and to the right (the north wall), the legend of Huck Finn and Jim. Consequently, African American characters out of Mark Twain’s literary imagination and out of a Reconstruction-era folk song set in a black saloon in St. Louis established the mural’s organizing vision. For each of these panels, Benton created a pyramidal composition leading up to a black American figure.

The mural cycle begins chronologically around Huck Finn and Jim, suggesting that the foundations of the entire mural are both in this pyramidal group and are also provided by the Indian trading and the black hauling lumber. The white fur trader, lumberjack, and Huck Finn occupy the center of the pyramid, at the pinnacle of which is Jim. At eye level (when seated in the house lounge chairs) is a small vignette show-

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<sup>34</sup>Nick Riddle, “Black Students Protest Benton Mural,” *Art News*, 101 (May 2002).

ing slaves being beaten. Benton did not shy from including such harsh aspects of Missouri's history throughout, but treasured Americana, in the form of these familiar stories, was what immediately set the stage for viewers. Only when one turns around to face the main entrance or to sit in the chairs facing the rear (east) wall does one see the legend of Jesse James, in which the train and water tower, more so than James (whose back is to us) are the uppermost details. Following the scenes to the left one recognizes a strong diagonal leading from the burning and lynching scene at the upper right down toward the center to a now limbless, lynching-proof tree, against which leans a black citizen.

Benton's *Social History of the State of Missouri* combined all types of references to American life and history, but what I want to stress is that in the Missouri cycle Benton relied on folklore and fiction to elevate black Americans specifically to the highest symbolic positions in the murals. He may have succeeded in privileging the position of black figures only by emphasizing the significance of black characters in the popular imagination. African Americans publicly objected to the scenes of slavery and brutality: one newspaper notice illustrated the offending vignette, described as "whipping of Negro slaves in Missouri in pre-Civil war days," with the heading "Negroes protest new mural in Missouri Capitol."<sup>35</sup> It was American literature and folklore, even with its inherent caricature, that appears to have legitimized the main panels in ways that were then acceptable, and may still be, to white and black audiences alike.

Early in his career, between 1919 and 1928, Benton sought to hold whites accountable for the nation's racial divisions and democratic crises through a critical history of the United States, his *American Historical Epic*. The alternative strategies he later developed to represent race were regional, chronological, popular, stereotypical, or caricatured. But these methods and the mural's racial subject matter have often elicited such emotional responses that Benton's approaches to race continue to be dismissed, avoided, or misunderstood. After 1928, Benton largely abandoned efforts to critique racial inequities viscerally in favor of picturing black and Native Americans in non-threatening ways for a majority-white audience. He came to accept, but tried to mitigate, a persistent national racial divide through visual representation. During a segregated era utterly disinclined to do so, Benton did represent black and Native

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<sup>35</sup>Undated newspaper clipping, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Mo.

Americans as important, serious, and inextricable subject matter for public art.

Throughout his career Benton grappled with questions formed by racial experience in the United States, questions that today compel many contemporary artists, including Kara Walker, whose cut-paper silhouette murals summon the nation's historical, "unspeakable" interracial experiences.<sup>36</sup> How can an artist publicly confront historical and social injustice? What visual and narrative techniques can be used to engage audiences with difficult histories and identities? In conclusion, we must ask if Benton's critical methods in the 1920s, or his appropriation of popular art in the form of stereotyping, caricature, fiction, or folklore through the 1930s compromised or furthered his unwavering goal to attend to race for American art.



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<sup>36</sup>Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, N.C., 2004).