

THOMAS HART BENTON

ARTIST IN THE HEARTLAND

If you've never had an opportunity to view the famous murals, drawings, and paintings created by the Regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) during his prolific, seven-decade-long career, you'll surely find some in almost any major U.S. art museum. If, however, you also want to see where Benton conceived and created some of those masterpieces — as well as the books he read, the instruments he played, the environment where he communed with his family and fellow artists, plus many lesser-known drawings, studies, and sculptures — consider visiting the Thomas Hart Benton Home & Studio State Historic Site.

Located in the upper-class Roanoke neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri, the house and stable-turned-studio were purchased in 1939 by Benton and his wife, Rita, for \$6,000 cash. Originally built in 1903 by architect George Mathews, the three-story limestone house encompasses an impressive 7,800 square feet and is surrounded by lush trees and shrubbery. Here Benton spent the last 36 years of his life developing several now-renowned murals, most notably *Achelous and Hercules*, *A Social History of the State of Missouri*, *Independence & the Opening of the West*, and *Sources of Country Music*, as well as the easel-size paintings *Hailstorm*, *The Year of Peril*, *Cave Spring*, and *Lewis & Clark at Eagle Creek*. Today the site is one of 55 within the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Historic Artists' Homes & Studios network.

BECOMING BENTON

Benton was widely admired as a draftsman, painter, muralist, and instructor who — like many long-lived artists — moved through various stages of stylistic experimentation, though he is best remembered as the outspoken, articulate voice of American Regionalism. Along with Grant Wood (1891–1942) and John Steuart Curry (1897–1946) — they were dubbed the Regionalist Triumvirate — Benton pursued both art and activism during the Great Depression, helping to foster a uniquely American brand of realism that was particularly proud of agriculture and manual labor. His depictions of rural life in the South and Midwest championed working-class laborers while eschewing foreign and elitist influences.

One of Benton's best-known murals, the 10-panel *America Today*, became a paragon of this ethos and was inspired by a six-month sketching trip he made across the country in 1928. The project was



Thomas Hart Benton in his studio painting *Achelous and Hercules*, 1947



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) One facade of the Bentons' three-story limestone residence ■ The self-portrait of Benton that appeared on the cover of the December 24, 1934 issue of *Time* magazine (oil on canvas, 30 x 24 in., private collection) ■ *Self-Portrait with Rita*, c. 1924, oil on canvas, 49 x 39 3/8 in., National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

commissioned by the New School for Social Research in New York City and focused on the distinct personalities and cultural characteristics of each American region, with scenes ranging from farming and religion to industry and urban life. Where Benton shines brightest in this mural, however, is in the closely observed, sensitively portrayed portraits of the varied people who together make America what it is. In all of its scenes, Benton's message is clear: hard work and a respect for

both the land and the citizenry are what America was founded on and what would, in time, lead the country back to prosperity.

Benton developed such down-home ideals growing up in the small town of Neosho, Missouri. But he was also exposed to a broader worldview from a young age, which he would continue to develop throughout life while traveling and reading. The key to his cosmopolitanism was the fact that his father was a lawyer and U.S. Congressman, who relocated the family to Washington, D.C., for eight years and often took his son along on his travels. Spending his teenage years as a cartoonist for a local newspaper, young Benton eventually convinced his father to allow him to attend the Art Institute of Chicago in 1907; the following year he headed to Paris to study at the Académie Julian and Académie Colarossi.

In 1911 Benton returned to the U.S. and settled in New York City. He began working in the silent-movie studios of New Jersey and teaching at the Chelsea Neighborhood Association. There he met his future wife, Rita Piacenza, an art student from Italy who would become the most pivotal figure in his life. Benton remained in Manhattan for just over 20 years, marrying Rita at the age of 33. His nine-year stint as an influential instructor at the Art Students League of New York (1926–1935) is remembered best via the legacy of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), who took Benton's instructional wisdom and anti-establishment philosophy to heart.

COMING HOME

In 1935, aged 46, Benton returned to Missouri to head the painting department at the Kansas City Art Institute, and also to undertake a major mural commission for the Missouri State Capitol. Although he had



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) A baby grand piano is a key feature of the Bentons' living room. ■ Benton's studio is lit by a large north-facing window. ■ Tom, Rita, and their son "T.P." playing music, c. 1935

spent his early career as a stereotypical starving artist, Benton was returning to his home state as — arguably — America's most successful, albeit controversial, artist; he had recently become the first artist to have a work (the self-portrait illustrated here) appear on the cover of *Time* magazine.

Over the next 36 years, the Bentons' Kansas City property evolved not only into a "live/work" space but also a place of business and cultural activity where the couple entertained collectors, fellow creatives, and political figures. "You could make an appointment to come to the house and buy a painting right off the wall," site administrator Steve Sitton says. "Rita was a sharp businesswoman, but also cautious. If you couldn't afford a Benton, or if she didn't know or trust you, you had to buy one of his drawings or one of his students' works. Once she saw you were serious and not just looking to flip the work, then you could buy a Benton painting. Rita was extremely crucial to Tom's success, and he freely admitted it. She handled all the behind-the-scenes administration, but he got the glory. We talk about her quite a bit on the tours here, about the instrumental role she played in his career."

The art collection displayed in the home and studio totals roughly 25 original Bentons: paintings, drawings, and lithographs, as well as three tabletop bronze sculptures. All have been obtained through loan, donation, or purchase. "Although we don't have any Benton masterpieces," Sitton notes, "we do have a lot of his studies and preparatory work for murals and larger paintings. And we have several extremely rare works you wouldn't necessarily associate with Benton: some of his early student pieces, still life paintings, paintings of the far West, and large abstractions from both very early and late in his career. One of the most interesting items is a satin tablecloth he painted for his mother when he was 22, with a Matisse-like design. These works help us see the entire arc of Benton's career and some of those searching and experimental stages. He was pigeonholed into Regionalism, but there is far more to him than that."

Here visitors also find evidence of other artistic pursuits Benton explored during his life — what Sitton calls "the sides of him



Bootleggers, 1927, egg tempera, oil, and acrylic on canvas mounted to aluminum panel, 65 x 72 in., Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem



I Got a Gal on Sourwood Mountain, 1938, lithograph in black on paper (edition of 250), 12 7/16 x 9 3/16 in., private collection

Benton primarily played the harmonica — in 1942 he and his son recorded an album of folk and chamber music — but he also listened to and appreciated classical music, like symphonies and opera. While sketching and painting around the country, he heard and played folk music, which wasn't written down by anyone before the 1930s, and he would find ways to notate it so he could play it back home. He essentially came up with his own method of transcribing music from one genre or instrument to another through a system of numbers and arrows. Hohner Harmonica eventually started printing this method in its own instruction manuals. The musicality that Benton possessed is evident even in his paintings, with their rhythmic, lyrical lines and several subjects and titles taken from hymns, folk songs, or well-known musicians.

WORKING UNTIL THE END

Heading to the former carriage barn on the property, visitors discover Benton's studio, which — like the residence — has remained essentially untouched since his passing. "That's exactly the feeling we want visitors to have," says Sitton. "It seems as if the Bentons have stepped out for the afternoon, and you get to take a peek inside. Fortunately, we have photographs dating from when Benton lived here, and several people alive today who were neighbors or visitors have given us firsthand accounts of the site's appearance and atmosphere."

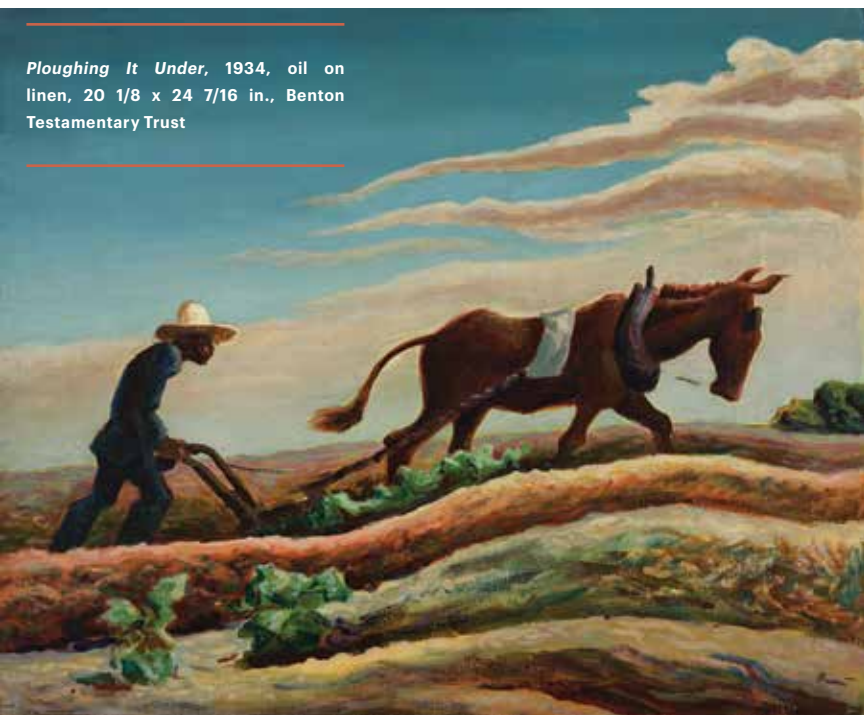
With its high ceilings and large, north-facing window, Benton's studio gave him ample space to create his large murals. Its no-frills decor — coffee cans filled with brushes, tubes of acrylic paints strewn about, a stretched canvas on a large easel, baby-food jars filled with pigment, artworks stacked in corners — reveals much about Benton's mindset and working methods. "Most importantly, it was a workshop," Sitton shares. "Benton didn't see this as a magical place where the muse would strike while he waited. It was a place to go to work. And he really preached that viewpoint to his students. It's not natural talent and inspiration that make an artist, he would say, it's practice and hard work. In the third edition [1968] of Benton's 1937 autobiography, *An Artist in America*, his last line was, 'The only way an artist can personally fail is to quit work.'"

Benton practiced what he preached up until his very last breath and brushstroke: he died at 85 of a massive heart attack while working in the studio, preparing to sign the mural *Sources of Country Music*, destined for the Country Music Hall of Fame. Rita understandably felt lost in the wake of Benton's passing; the house and studio were empty, and the pace of running Benton's business, which kept her busy for five decades, had suddenly ended. Eleven weeks later, she too passed away. In 1977, the home and studio were bought by the State of Missouri and turned into a historic site.

Together, Thomas and Rita Benton were a team committed to both art and activism. Their hard work secured the legacy of a man who today is revered nationally as the leader of American Regionalism but who, back home, is remembered for so much more. Sitton notes, "One of our themed tours centers on the duality of Benton's personality and life. Yes, he was raised in the Ozarks of Missouri, but he lived in Manhattan and Paris and could read French and Italian. Yes, he played the harmonica, but he also played Bach and Beethoven. He liked folk tales, but he also discussed Plato's theory of relativism and how it applies to art. Out in the world, he was an outspoken activist with controversial viewpoints, but here in Missouri, he was a father, a husband, a great conversationalist and thinker, and of course a consummate artist." ●

Information: mostateparks.com, artistshomes.org. All photos illustrated here © Missouri State Parks.

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Ploughing It Under, 1934, oil on linen, 20 1/8 x 24 7/16 in., Benton Testamentary Trust

you might not have otherwise known." A gifted storyteller and writer, Benton penned two autobiographies and kept a library well stocked with books that clearly influenced him. Music was another passion, particularly folk and country, so it's appropriate that two harmonicas, a baby grand piano, and a collection of sheet music remain in the home. Sitton explains: