Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889–1975)

Ozark Autumn
1949
Oil and tempera on panel (wood)
20 7/8 x 32 1/8 inches
Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts
Gift of the Ida Belle Young Art Acquisition Fund, 2015.6
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The frame on this work was said by the previous owner to have been placed on the work by Mrs. Thomas (Rita) Hart Benton before the painting was sold.
Meet Thomas Hart Benton

Thomas Hart Benton was a controversial and influential character in both the art and social worlds in early and mid-twentieth century America. He was born on April 15, 1889 in Neosho, Newton County, Missouri into that state’s most politically powerful family. His great-uncle, also named Thomas Hart Benton, was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1820 when Missouri became a state. His father, “Colonel” Maecenas Eason Benton (called M.E.), was a U.S. district attorney for Missouri and was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1896. During his father’s time in Congress, 1897–1905, Benton lived in Washington, D.C. He finished grade school there, and was first introduced to an appreciation of fine art at the Library of Congress and the Corcoran Gallery during this time. He also studied art for the first time in Washington D.C. at Western High School in Georgetown. In the March 1, 1937 issue of Life magazine, an article titled “Thomas Benton Paints a History of His Own Missouri,” suggested that Benton’s family history had much to do with his success as an artist: “The Bentons of Missouri are that state’s most revered political family. Missourians say that if Tom Benton were not a Benton he never could get away with such unconventional murals” (Gruber 13). It does seem that Benton’s heritage influenced the way in which he approached his career. As a campaigning politician might do, he made certain that his name and theories of art were publically known and promoted. Through his outspokenness, writings, and large-scale public mural projects, Benton became known as a voice for both political and art issues in Depression-era America.

In 1906–1907 Benton began studying painting at the Chicago Art Institute, and the following year he continued his studies at the Académie Julian in Paris. In 1912 he moved to New York where he was involved in the early abstract art scene, and where his works were displayed in exhibitions like the Forum Exhibition of 1916, which was his first public exhibition. During his “modernist period” in New York, 1912–1918, Benton worked as a commercial artist, set designer, and for the early film industry as a portrait and reference artist at Fort Lee, New Jersey. He also joined the People’s Art Guild, through which he was given a position as gallery director and art teacher for the Chelsea Neighborhood Association. In the subsequent years, as Benton matured as an artist, his style became less abstract and more representational. His first works done from observation were drawings, shown at the Daniel Gallery in 1919, which depicted daily activities of the Naval base in Norfolk where he was stationed after his enlistment during World War One. In 1922 his reputation was enhanced when he sold a work to the influential Philadelphia art collector, Albert C. Barnes. He eventually secured a commission for a mural painting titled America Today (1930-1931) at the New School for Social Research, where his drawings were exhibited in four groups: “King Cotton,” “The Lumber Camp,” “Holy Roller Camp Meeting,” and “Coal Mines.” Around the time of America Today’s completion Benton met John Steuart Curry and, soon after, Grant Wood. His association with the two American Scene painters, along with the 1934 Time magazine cover story about Benton, established his reputation as a Regionalist painter. He wrote about his, Curry’s, and Wood’s public identities: “We came into the popular mind to represent a home-grown, grass-roots artistry which damned ‘furrin’

influence and which knew nothing about and cared nothing for the traditions of art as cultivated city snobs, dudes, and aesthetes knew them. A play was written and a stage was erected for us... We accepted our roles" (Gruber 15). Benton not only accepted, but also exploited his role as "Ozark hillbilly" to capture media attention and interest. Benton's identity brought praise along with criticism. His work was often criticized as superficial and provincial, but it was also praised for its cultural synthesis.

In 1935 Benton was commissioned to create a mural for the Missouri State Capitol. That same year he was asked to serve as head of the painting department at the Kansas City Art Institute. This offer gave him a reason to move from New York, where his subjects and conservative style were pointedly criticized by the art establishment inclined to look more favorably on European-based Modernism, back to Missouri, where he hoped to gain more appreciation for his work (Fath 214). In 1937 he began writing an autobiographical book, An Artist in America, which mainly reported on his travels across America. During this time he also made sketches and paintings for Life magazine, a series of drawings depicting floods in Southeast Missouri for the St. Louis Post Dispatch and the Kansas City Star, and painted Susannah and the Elders (1938, The de Young Museum, San Francisco). He garnered significant attention, and caused a widely reported public controversy, for this work because Susannah's nudity was unsettling to contemporary audiences. In depicting this story from the Biblical book of Daniel, Benton placed it in a modern setting, which destroyed the illusion of historical distance. In 1939 Benton achieved his first substantial success and acceptance in New York through a retrospective exhibition that was first shown at the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery in Kansas City, and from which the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased Roasting Ears (1938). After Pearl Harbor, he began a series of war paintings that were purchased by Abbott Laboratories and presented to the U.S. government in poster and book form. These war paintings resulted in his employment by the government from 1943 to 1944 painting and drawing wartime scenes: industrial plants, training camps, and oil fields. The latter years of his career, 1946 through 1961, were filled with both exhibition activity and commissions for mural paintings. His work was exhibited at the Chicago galleries of Associated American Artists; he had retrospective exhibitions at the Joslyn Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, New Britain Institute in New Britain, Connecticut, and University of Kansas Museum of Art. He painted the murals Old Kansas City for the Kansas City River Club, Independence and the Opening of the West for the Truman Memorial Library, and depicted the discovery of the St. Lawrence River and Niagara Falls in murals for the Power Authority of New York.

Benton began to slow a bit in 1962 after he developed a bursitis condition. Due to his age and declining health, he began to execute more easel paintings and fewer murals. He traveled often from 1963 to 1965, and some paintings were exhibited in the Missouri Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair in 1964, which was followed by exhibitions at Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois and Birmingham Arts Festival in Birmingham, Michigan in 1966. That same year he suffered a stroke and a heart attack. He wrote the final chapter of his autobiography, An Artist in America, the next year.

In 1968 and 1969, Benton exhibitions were held at the Graham Gallery in New York, the Library of Congress, and by the Associated American Artists in New York. After another heart attack in 1970, the last five years of Benton’s life were spent completing a mural for the 100th anniversary of the incorporation of Joplin, Missouri, and working on a mural exploring the origins of country music for the Country Music Foundation. Exhibitions of his work were held during this time, including *Thomas Hart Benton: A Retrospective of His Early Years, 1907-1929* at Rutgers University Art Gallery; a retrospective exhibition at Spiva Art Center at Missouri Southern State College in Joplin, Missouri; and *Thomas Hart Benton: An Artist’s Selection, 1908-1974* at the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art. Thomas Hart Benton died in his studio located behind his Kansas City home on January 19, 1975. A major retrospective of his work, *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original*, was organized in 1989 by the Nelson-Atkins Art Museum in Kansas City, Missouri.

**Ozark Autumn**

Beginning around World War I, Benton began actively engaging with subjects inspired by American history, society, and culture with the intention of “finding an American purpose for his art,” rather than looking to Europe. “Benton belonged to the last generation of artists who considered seriously the dreams and myths of the country. The end of a line that reached back to the early years of the Republic, these artists wanted to provide Americans with a democratic art easily accessible to the average citizen.” This process was enabled by his practice of regular travels, particularly in the American South and Midwest, observing the cultural environment, landscape, and common people, recording his observations through drawings. “The first of these wanderings in 1926 centered on southwest Missouri and northwest Arkansas where he had traveled as a boy with his father during his father’s political campaigns…. During his first trip through the Ozarks he would hike fifteen to twenty miles per day, which did not leave much time to sketch. As he traveled these trips developed into an artistic mission—to make a visual record of the face of America, and particularly to discover the hidden pockets of old-fashioned culture that still existed in the world of their own, isolated from the bustle of the cities.” He later returned to these drawings in his studio, and used them as the source material for his easel paintings, as well as for the larger mural commissions he received. Benton’s preferred medium was a combination of tempera paint with oil glaze, imparting bright, clear color, which was durable and (in the case of the murals) was waxed to seal the surface. By the time Benton painted *Ozark Autumn* in 1949, America had entered a period of profound transformation. After the Second World War, the evolution from an agrarian to an industrialized society had been accomplished, and Americans shifted from an emphasis on domestic issues, to an engagement with international concerns—America was on the brink of becoming the world power economically and politically that it became in the second part of the twentieth century.
“As early as 1940, Benton confessed that the rural America he knew best had begun to change. ‘Things are different back in the hills,’ he commented. ‘Ten years ago I’d start out with a pencil and a notebook and a harmonica. I’d head for the country roads, cut across pastures and fallow fields, working along the way. Along about dark, I’d stop at a farmhouse, ask for a meal and a night’s lodging, and even pay for it sometimes with my harmonica playing. We’d all sit around the parlor and play and talk. When I left, the whole family would stand on the front porch waving and calling to me to come back sometime. You can’t travel like that now. After the hazards of the Depression too many persons are bitter and suspicious. So many families are on relief you’re likely to be taken for a WPA snooper sent out by the government to see if families deserve their $23 a month.”

Ozark Autumn is one of the artist’s elegiac, landscape-based tributes to the experiences he recorded above. He depicted a farming practice that had long since been replaced by mechanized methods of sowing and harvesting. (As early as 1931 Benton had incorporated a scene of industrial agricultural methods in his Midwestern panel of America Today, the commission created for the New School for Social Research, and now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York.) His focus on this anachronism (the harvesting of crops by hand) as the subject of the painting referenced the traditions and dignity of hard labor associated with the early settlers that Benton believed to be the foundation of twentieth-century American society. As compared with his earlier mural commissions from the 1920s and 1930s in which urban America played a central role, by the 1940s he began imparting to his work a greater sense of grandeur and a less frenetic pace, as the artist relished his own memories of a simpler time in American life and paid it homage.

The composition depicts a corn-harvesting scene, which according to the painting’s title, occurs in autumn in the geographic region of the Midwest known as the Ozarks. A single male harvester dressed in overalls and a pink-colored shirt, with a large, high-peaked, grey cap with oversized bill is kneeling in the foreground over corn that is gathered on the ground before him. The figure is seen in three-quarter profile, facing the proper right side of the painting. He is engaged in shucking an ear of corn, presumably to place it in the round basket that rests beside his left leg, holding previously shucked ears. On the same plane as the corn shucking figure is a large stack of cornstalks, forming a massive triangular shape. In the middle ground, two other figures dressed in work clothes in tones of grey are visible loading a mule-drawn cart with a basket. One of the figures stands on the ground, handing up the container to a second figure standing in the bed of the wagon. Two more cornstalk stacks are visible on this plane, with possibly a small portion of a third barely visible on the proper right edge of the panel. The foreground and middle ground planes are largely described by undulations of grassy field, with the suggestion of a hedge or other foliage separating a back section of the middle ground, painted in shades of a yellow green color. The background plane is defined by an elevated hillside described in tones of orange, yellow, and plum rising to a small, grey farm building and partial fence at the horizon line. Near the building, left and right, are suggestions of haystacks.
Over the rise of the hillside a tree line is described in plum tones, silhouetted against the sky. About 20 percent of the total composition is devoted to the sky, which is described in blue and gray tones, with streaks of thin, high clouds painted in a bluish white.

Benton, *Ozark Autumn*, and Art History

In the post-World War II era, Benton’s bucolic agrarian themes also reflected an impact of the War on American society, and specifically rural life, that was as much economic as it was political and social. As a consequence of the fact that so many young men, a significant source of farm labor, had entered the armed services, wages increased, and improved economic conditions overall insured better prices for the farmers’ products. While earlier agrarian subject paintings focused on the poverty and the hard times referenced in his quote above, by the mid to late 1940s Benton was conveying a sense of satisfaction in the bounty produced in the American heartland, signified by the laboring figures whose forms are tightly integrated into the monumental and peaceful landscape.¹

As previously noted, beginning in the 1920s Benton made sketching trips (primarily in the Midwest and the South) during which he would record the landscape and people he saw along the way. In May of 1926, Benton returned to Missouri and committed to a three-week walking trip through the steep hills and isolated villages of the Ozark Mountains of southern Missouri and northern Arkansas. He later recalled, “This was the beginning of those studies of the American rural scene which would hold so much of my interest…It was the beginning of what came to be called my ‘Regionalism’.”²

Near the end of World War II, in 1944, he painted a composition that is notably similar to the MMFA’s *Ozark Autumn*. *Winter Wheat and Corn*, now in the collection of University Art Galleries, Texas A&M University, in College Station, Texas, is likewise a harvest scene and a nostalgic record of an encounter on a farmstead as fall turns to winter. In a 1975 letter to the dealer who held the work, Benton noted, “The picture you have is an Ozark Autumn scene which I ran into on one of my many trips down in South Missouri…”³

Whether he refers to the trips of the 1920s, or to later forays, the drawings that Benton made in his home state, and the emphasis on


the agrarian tradition, clearly captured his artistic imagination during that crucial period in the late 1940s. Both compositions are similarly structured, emphasizing the anachronistic practice of harvesting by hand, with a focus on the harvesters and the product of the harvest. The process is visually summarized in each—the corn is gathered, loaded into a mule-drawn wagon, and is to be transported to the farm building that sits on the horizon line.

Throughout his career Benton adapted compositional devices and figural forms that he gleaned from the study of European Renaissance and Mannerist painting, particularly the work of Michelangelo (Italian, 1475–1564), Tintoretto (Italian, 1518–1584), Jacopo Pontormo (Italian, 1494–1557), and El Greco (Spanish, 1541–1614). In his later works he references these traditional styles, using great, sweeping brushstrokes to model the forms and unify his composition, conveying a sense of rolling hills, cloud-studded skies, while integrating the almost sculptural forms of the landscape itself and the figures. It is a tight, linear construction in which each compositional element and color plays a consistent plastic role binding it to the whole across the planes of the composition—beginning with the layers of landscape from the foreground up to the sky. The matte character of the tempera paint further unifies and intensifies the strong sense of a flat, linear design, and helps to fashion a composition that is a series of strong silhouettes receding into space.

Although Benton’s painting style and subjects were considered hopelessly old-fashioned after the ascendance of Abstract Expressionism at mid-century, for many Americans his work continued to represent the essence of our national heritage and identity. The American themes in his work were designed to be accessible to the general public and to convey the traditional values he admired from his Middle Western childhood—an appreciation for freedom, democracy, personal accountability, pragmatism, and hard work. In the latter part of Benton’s career he embraced these themes even more fully, grounding his art and this work in the country’s agrarian past.

Margaret Lynne Ausfeld  
Curator of Art, MMFA

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3 When originally purchased, the work now titled *Winter Wheat and Corn* carried an alternate title of *Ozark Autumn*. The information quoted was provided via email by the University Art Galleries, Texas A&M University, College Station, July 7, 2016.