Thomas Hart Benton, *Industrial Panel #9* (1933)

Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) was a bold and influential American painter and a major figure of the Regionalist movement that focused on images of the rural American heartland in the 1930’s. Born in Neosho, Missouri, Benton began his artistic career working as a cartoonist. In 1907, he moved to Chicago to enroll at the Art Institute, and later he moved to Paris. Returning to the United States and settling in New York, Benton became concerned with expressing meaning and values in art through color and form. He wished to create an art that could speak directly to average people and not just cosmopolitan elites. His art was realistic in style, easily readable, filled with storytelling and social commentary. He was particularly interested in mural painting because of their accessible, public format.

Ringing the Indiana Hall at Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition in 1933 was a bold and colorful cycle of paintings by Benton depicting the industrial and cultural histories of the Hoosier state from the age of the Mound Builders to the 1930s, including Indiana basketball and the early days of the Indianapolis 500.

In this dramatic 250-foot mural, permanently displayed on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University since 1940, Benton created the first full-scale treatment of the state’s history. Painted with extraordinary speed over a period of just three months and boldly modeled in egg tempera, this mural was densely packed with identifiable Midwestern and Hoosier iconography.

Benton’s mural was intensely controversial, both praised and condemned for its content and style. Liberals were offended by the inclusion of the Ku Klux Klan and conservatives often disapproved of Benton’s emphasis on the common man as a populist’s theme. Some found his use of color crude, his drawing rough, and his figures distorted and ugly. Others disliked his exaggerated realism or his lack of historical accuracy. Yet in time, his murals have become famous hallmarks of Indiana culture, a courageous and exuberant memorial to the heroism and contradictions in everyday society.

In *Industrial Panel #9*, Benton presents the heavy industrialization of Indiana, particularly the coal-producing area around Terre Haute. Here, Benton depicts a muscular
man with a bright carbide head lamp. Benton hints at the labor disputes that plagued the Indiana coal industry: union leaders and activists rallied the workers to fight for better wages and safer working conditions. Occasionally, physical violence broke out; one of the more controversial elements of the mural is the crouched figure in the midground to the right, poised to throw a rock at a hired guard. Benton also references the brick, coal, and natural gas industries of Indiana by including appropriate and identifiable structures in the midground of the painting.

For more information, please see the web module, *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals*, under “Teach and Learn” and “E-Learning,” on the Indiana University Art Museum’s website.
Questions to Consider

1. Where does Benton focus our attention?
2. What are people doing in this painting?
3. Based on the gestures, stances and positions of the figures, how does Benton comment on the unionization of workers? Do you think his portrayal is positive, negative, or neutral?
4. How does Benton represent the deforestation that sometimes is associated with industry?

Connections

Geography: Terre Haute, IN
Historical connections: Strikes, Unions, natural resources

Further Reading


http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/online_modules/benton/activities/03.html (accessed October 9, 2008).
Teachers’ Extensions

Work: Industrial Panel #9: Coal, Gas, Oil, Brick

Artist: Thomas Hart Benton

Location of work: Indiana University Auditorium

Vocabulary/Key Concept(s):

**Natural Resources** Gas, coal, oil, (natural ingredients for brick manufacture) that are found in nature and are mined and extracted from the earth.
- Coal
- Natural Gas
- Oil
- Petroleum
- Brick

**Industrialization (Industrial Revolution)** Period of important changes from making goods by hand to making goods by machine in factories. The United States Industrial Revolution, with the greatest economic and technological progress, occurred between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 20th century. During this period the United States was transformed from a primitive agricultural economy to the foremost industrial power in the world.

**Labor Unions** Labor unions in the United States are legally recognized as representatives of workers in many industries,

**Strikes** Refusal of workers to work until business owners meet their demands.

**Century of Progress Exposition for the Worlds Fair of 1933**
Thomas Hart Benton Murals titled *Social History of the State of Indiana* portray the growth of the state from the first habitation to the industrial age. The murals decorated the Indiana Hall at the Century of Progress exposition at the Chicago Worlds Fair in 1933. They depicted the Social and Industrial History of Indiana.

**Art Connection(s):**

**Regionalist Art (Regionalism)** An art movement of the 1930’s that focused on portraying aspects characteristic of American life. Midwestern painters are identified most closely with the trend, depicting scenes of rural America, often with nostalgic tone, but some regionalists also focused on urban life.

**Mural** A large image, such as a painting, applied to a wall or ceiling

**Geography Connection(s):**
- Terre Haute, Indiana (Pulaski County) – coal producing center
Time Line Connection:
1850 coal, oil and gas: extraction of resources and brick production begin
1933: Chicago Century of Progress Exposition

Resources:
National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) *Picturing America* website:
http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/

Connect to web links below by clicking on individual address or access through the NEH site for Additional Resources at:
http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/about.php?subPage=about_ad_res

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=634
National Endowment for the Humanities, EDSITEment, *Everything in Its Right Place*, a curriculum overview to a four-part lesson on the structural elements of a painting, featuring Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, for Grades 9-12.

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=641
National Endowment for the Humanities, EDSITEment, *Horse of a Different Color: An Introduction to Color in the Visual Arts* has two lesson plans on color; the first: In-Depth with the Full Spectrum, for Grade 9-12, introduces students to color basics, the color wheel, and how artists manipulate color to draw attention to the aspects of their work.

http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/building_lessons/
Getty Museum Education department Web site, *Teachers’ Programs and Resources*, is designed for K-12 teachers who wish to introduce art and art history into their classrooms. The site uses works form the museum’s collection along with pages A Grade-by-Grade Guide, The Elements of Art (teaching the formal components of art such as line and color) and a PDF file, Lesson Template.

http://www.nga.gov/education/amercan/figure.htm
National Gallery of Art Web site, *Themes in American Art*, covers topics such as abstraction, historical subjects, narrative art, and portraiture; illustrated by works in the collection. Includes a glossary.

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=620
National Endowment for the Humanities, EDSITEment, *Realistic Impressions: Investigating Movement in the Visual Arts*, for Grade 9-12, teaches students about the meaning of the terms “movement” in the visual arts, and covers the major movements of Impressionism, Realism, and Romanticism, with links to other movements in the arts.

Monroe County Public Library (MCPL) Bloomington, Indiana University (812) 349-3050 – To Reserve Resource Materials

Thomas Hart Benton

*Who Is the Artist: Painters of the American Scene (Hooper, Wood, Benton)*
Video Series
Call Number: J709 Who (Children’s Collection)
Industrial Revolution

*America’s Transition from Agriculture to Industry* by Greg Roza
Call Number: J338 Ro (Children’s Collection)

*Life in America 100 Years Ago: Industry and Business* by Linda Leuzzi
Call Number: J338.09 Le (Children’s Collection)

*The Rise of Industry: 1869-1900* by Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier
Call Number: J338.09 Co (Children’s Collection)

*Picture This Century: An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Art* by Felicity Woolf
Call Number: J709.04 (Children’s Collection)

*Working and Union Songs* by Keith and Rusty McNeil
CD – Music Collection (2 discs)
Call Number: J789.213 (Children’s Collection)

Indiana University School of Education Library

*Going Places*
Lesson Plan: Social Studies, Art, History
Grade: 5
Call Number: Educ TXT N350 .C64 2000 gr 5
Includes: Lesson plans Objectives, Images of Thomas Hart Benton’s *Boom Town*, Vocabulary, Teacher Guide, Discussion Questions, and Assessment

Web sites:

Thomas Hart Benton Murals

Indiana University Art Museum Web Site
[http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/iuam_home.php](http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/iuam_home.php)

The murals of Thomas Hart Benton with accompanying images, pdf Teachers file and additional information and references is located on this site.
- click on Teach and Learn
- click on E-Learning
- click on Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals
- click on individual panels – information will accompany each panel
- Scroll down for PDF (Fourth Grade Guide to The Benton Murals)
- click on For Elementary Teachers

Industrial Revolution

Includes: Information and movies on the Industrial Revolution and Gas and Oil, Electricity, and Assembly Lines.
Indiana Academic Standards – Visual Arts Grade/Level 5

RESPONDING TO ART: History

Standard 1
Students understand the significance of visual art in relation to historical, social, political, spiritual, environmental, technological, and economic issues.
5.1.1 Identify the relationship between a work of art and the geography and characteristics of the culture, and identify where, when, why, and by whom the work was made (Focus: North America).
5.1.2 Identify and compare works of art and artifacts with similar functions.
5.1.3 Identify themes and symbols used in works of art and artifacts throughout history that portray universal ideas and beliefs.

Standard 2
Students recognize significant works of Western and non-Western art and understand the chronological development of art movements.
5.2.1 Identify and be familiar with a range of selected works of art identifying artists, culture, style, and period.
5.2.2 Identify distinguishing characteristics of style in individual artists work and art movements.

RESPONDING TO ART: Criticism

Standard 3
Students describe, analyze, and interpret works of art and artifacts.
5.3.1 Analyze the artist’s use of sensory, formal, technical, and expressive properties in a work of art.
5.3.2 Construct meaning in the work based on personal response, properties found in the work, and background information on the context of the work.
5.3.3 Use appropriate art vocabulary.

Standard 4
Students identify and apply criteria to make informed judgments about art.
5.4.1 Listen to multiple critiques of works of art by peers, teachers, people from the art world and identify criteria used.
5.4.2 Apply criteria based on properties found in the work and research from the historical context of the work to make informed judgments.

RESPONDING TO ART: Aesthetics

Standard 5
Students reflect on and discuss art theories and aesthetic issues concerning the meaning and significance of art.
5.5.2 Identify and analyze a variety of well reasoned points of view on aesthetic issues (censorship, plagiarism) and develop a personal point of view.

Standard 6
Students theorize about art and make informed judgments.
5.6.1 Identify artwork made from the artist’s philosophy that art is at its best when it moves people to act for the betterment of society (instrumentalism).
5.6.2 Understand that personal preference is one of many criteria used in making judgments about art.

INTEGRATED STUDIES

Standard 13
Students identify and make connections between knowledge and skill in art and all other subject areas such as humanities, sciences, and technology.
5.13.1 Compare characteristics of a theme, historical period, or event through the multiple
perspectives of different disciplines.
5.13.2 Create products or performances (debates, critiques, papers) that communicate in-depth knowledge gained through integrated study of a theme, historical period, or event.

**National Academic Standards – Visual Arts – Level 5**

**Content Standard #3:** Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

*Achievement Standard:*
Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks. Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks.

**Content Standard #4:** Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

*Achievement Standard:*
Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures. Students describe and place a variety of art objects in historical and cultural contexts. Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art.

**Content Standard #5:** Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

*Achievement Standard:*
Students compare multiple purposes for creating works of art. Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry. Students describe and compare a variety of individual responses to their own artworks and to artworks from various eras and cultures.

**Content Standard #6:** Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

*Achievement Standard:*
Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context. Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts.