



Thomas Hart Benton
Home and Studio
State Historic Site

Teachers' Guide

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Missouri Department of Natural Resources

Thomas Hart Benton Home and Studio State Historic Site

Teachers' Guide

Goal

To provide a fundamental basis for the interpretation of the life and art of Thomas Hart Benton.

Objectives

Instructors utilizing this guide will be able to adapt the information provided for a variety of education levels.

The Thomas Hart Benton Home and Studio Teacher's Guide will support the study of fine arts, communication arts, history, and sociology.

Background

Thomas Hart Benton was born in Neosho, MO in April 1889. He was named after his great-great-uncle, Thomas Hart Benton, the first and longest-serving U.S. Senator of Missouri. Tom's father, M.E. Benton, was a renowned lawyer and politician, who served four terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. Elizabeth, Tom's mother, was a beautiful girl from Texas, and a helpful ally in his struggle to become an artist.

At the age of 17, aspiring to become a newspaper cartoonist, Benton began attending the Art Institute of Chicago. It is here that he discovered his love for painting. Soon after he was off to Paris where he met many influential people. As his funds began to dwindle, he returned to the United States, settling in New York, where he struggled as an artist. In 1918, because of World War I, Benton enlisted in the Navy. He was sent to Norfolk, Virginia where his duties included making sketches and realistic drawings of items around the base, such as ships. Having plenty of free time on his hands, he made similar drawings and paintings for himself. Upon returning to New York, he exhibited a number of these works, which received moderate attention. Benton was beginning to be recognized in the art world.

In 1922, Benton married Rita Piacenza. Tom was teaching art classes for a neighborhood association and she had been one of his students. She was an Italian immigrant who moved to the United States with her family as a young teenager. They had a son, Thomas Piacenza (T.P. for short), in 1926. Rita worked as her husband's business manager and was a great force behind his success.

Benton's first mural commission was for the New School for Social Research in New York City. His focus was on the development of new technology; calling it *America Today*. Yearning to try mural painting, he agreed to be paid only for the supplies used, but benefited in other ways. The mural cast him to the front of the art world where he received national attention. More mural commissions followed after this and in 1934, Tom Benton was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine.

In 1935, Benton was offered a mural commission and teaching position, both in Missouri. The mural was to be *The Social History of Missouri*, which would reside in the House of Representatives' Lounge in the State Capitol in Jefferson City. The teaching position was at the Kansas City Art Institute. These two things, plus Benton's growing dislike for the art world of New York, influenced him to move back to his home state.

In 1939, the Bentons moved into a large, limestone house at 3616 Belleview in Kansas City, MO. Later that year, their daughter Jessie was born. It was this residence, which is now the Thomas Hart Benton Home and Studio State Historic Site, where the Bentons raised their children to maturity and where much artwork was produced. The studio was also the site of Tom's death on January 19, 1975. He had been working on a mural for the Country Music Hall of Fame, called *The Sources of Country Music*, which was nearly complete. After dinner he told Rita he was going out to the studio to take another look. While in his studio a heart attack struck him and he passed away at the age of 85. The mural now hangs in Nashville, unsigned. Rita, his wife for fifty-two years, followed him in death just 11 weeks later.

Vocabulary

Before coming to the site, the students should be familiar with the following terms:

Regionalism - A style of painting, popular in the 1930s and '40s that depicts scenes from everyday life in various areas of the United States. Benton, along with John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood, were leaders of the Regionalist movement, but it faded quickly when abstract artists such as Jackson Pollock found popularity. (Benton painted farm scenes of the Midwest, church scenes of the South, rodeo scenes of the West, and industrial scenes of the Northeast.)

Mural - A very large painting applied to a wall or ceiling. (Benton's murals were not usually painted directly onto the walls. He would construct large panels to paint his murals on and then apply the panels to the wall. This has allowed several of his murals to be moved from their original location.)

Commissioned - To be hired to produce a painting or mural for a certain person or group. (For example, Benton was commissioned to paint *The Social History of Missouri* mural by the state representatives for the House Lounge in the Missouri Capitol in Jefferson City).

Lithograph - A print that is produced by the process of Lithography. An artist will draw on a flat stone with a greasy crayon, wet it, apply ink, and then print the image onto paper. Using this process the artist can create multiple copies of a work. (Benton produced over 90 lithographs.)

Subject and Setting - What the painting is about and where the action takes place. (For example, Benton painted a group of people at a church service. The churchgoers are the Subjects and the church interior makes up the Setting; together they are the Scene.)

Exaggeration - To paint something bigger than it normally is. (Benton often made the hands, feet, and facial features of the people in his paintings larger than they actually were.)

Egg Tempera - A type of paint medium in which color pigments are mixed with egg yolk and water. (Benton experimented with this mixture because its use had not been popular for quite some time.)

Hollow and Bump - Benton's technique in which the lines and shapes in a picture interlock in a series of curves or waves. Wherever there is a "bump", there is a corresponding "hollow" for it to fit into. Soft recessive spaces, balanced with forceful projecting areas, developing into a rhythmic pattern.



Pre-Visit Activities

- ◆ Have each student prepare a nametag that reflects the area where he or she lives, or an artistic theme.
- ◆ Introduce the students to the artwork of Thomas Hart Benton. Use the vocabulary terms as a reference for discussion.
- ◆ Look up the work of other regionalists, such as John Steuart Curry (Kansas) and Grant Wood (Iowa). How do they compare and contrast to Thomas Hart Benton?
- ◆ Thomas Hart Benton painted America as he saw it. Have your students think about how they see America, either past or present, and ask them to creatively depict it.

On-Site Activities

- ◆ On-Site, students will be given a guided tour through Thomas Hart Benton's home and studio. The tour guide will ask a variety of questions, stimulating student participation. Students are also welcome to develop questions to ask before, during, or after the tour.

Post-Visit Activities

- ◆ Ask the students to pick one of Benton's works and develop a story about the characters or scene.
- ◆ Benton has been called a realist painter because of his depiction of scenes of everyday life. Ask the students if they agree and why. Have them use examples of his work to support their answer. (Some people see Benton's portrayal of people as unrealistic because of the way he exaggerates their features.)
- ◆ List some of the significant events and eras from 1900-1975. Ask the students to find a painting of Benton's that reflects the things they have studied. For example, industrialization would be represented in Benton's first mural, *America Today* for the New School for Social Research; or the "Outreaching Hands" panel of *America Today* symbolizes the Depression.
- ◆ Benton's work also contains historical elements from before his lifetime. Ask the students to research his works and find some of the historical events he painted.

NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

Anchor Standard 6:

Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic works

Enduring Understanding: Objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented either by artists, museums, or other venues communicate meaning and a record of social, cultural, and political experiences resulting in the cultivating of appreciation and understanding.

Essential Question(s): What is an art museum? How does the presenting and sharing of objects, artifacts, and artworks influence and shape ideas, beliefs, and experiences? How do objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented, cultivate appreciation and understanding?

Anchor Standard 7:

Perceive and analyze artistic work

Enduring Understanding: Individual aesthetic and empathetic awareness developed through engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, the natural world, and constructed environments.

Essential Question(s): How do life experiences influence the way you relate to art? How does learning about art impact how we perceive the world? What can we learn from our responses to art?

Enduring Understanding: Visual imagery influences understanding of and responses to the world.

Essential Question(s): What is an image? Where and how do we encounter images in our world? How do images influence our views of the world?

Anchor Standard 8:

Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

Essential Question(s): What is the value of engaging in the process of art criticism? How can the viewer "read" a work of art as text? How does knowing and using visual art vocabularies help us understand and interpret works of art?

Anchor Standard 9:

Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: People evaluate art based on various criteria.

Essential Question(s): How does one determine criteria to evaluate a work of art? How and why might criteria vary? How is a personal preference different from an evaluation?

Anchor Standard 11:

Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Enduring Understanding: People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

Essential Question(s): How does art help us understand the lives of people of different times, places, and cultures? How is art used to impact the views of a society? How does art preserve aspects of life?

STUDIO HABITS OF MIND		
Observe	Looking closely & noticing	
Reflect	Question & Explain	talking about [students'] work and working process
	Evaluate	talking about what works well, what does not, why, in works by self and others
Understanding Art Worlds	Domain	Learning about what artists make
	Communities	Learning to collaborate and understand that artists often work in groups
STUDIO STRUCTURES		
Talking About Art	Students look at each other's works or works of artists from outside the classroom and offer descriptive and evaluative comments.	

MISSOURI LEARNING STANDARDS

Social Studies		
Elementary	1.E.3.	Describe the character traits and civic attitudes of influential Missourians.
	6.C.2.	Recall stories and songs that reflect the cultural history of peoples from various regions in the United States including regional folk figures, Native American legends and African American folktales.
	6.C.3.	Research stories and songs that reflect the cultural history of Missouri.
	6.D.3.	Describe how people in Missouri preserve their cultural heritage.
Middle	5.4.6-8.	Analyze artistic, intellectual, and religious movements to show how they reflect the aspirations and beliefs of the developing nation
High	1.2.9-12.C.	Trace the contributions of individuals and institutions on social, political, artistic and economic development.
	5.4.9-12.D	Analyze the impact of the Great Depression and World War II on the arts and culture.

English Language Arts		
Elementary	Speaking/Listening: 1.A.3.b.	Develop and apply effective listening skills and strategies in formal and informal setting by asking questions to check understanding of information, and linking comments to the remarks of others.

Middle	Reading Literary Text: 3.C.7	Explain how characters and settings reflect historical and/or cultural contexts.
High	Reading Informational text: 1.C.6-12	Interpret visual elements of a text including those from different media and draw conclusions from them

Bibliography

Middle School Level

Edelman, Nancy. Thomas Hart Benton Murals in the Missouri State Capitol. (Missouri State Council on the Arts, 1975). **Brief illustrated guide to the murals, including personal information on Benton, his technique, and restoration process.

Yeo, Wilma and Helen K. Cook. Maverick with a Paintbrush: Thomas Hart Benton. (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977). **Biographical in content, with a few examples of Benton's work.

High School Level

Adams, Henry. Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original. (Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

**Extensively discusses the life of Benton, his artistic writings and developments, together with numerous color reproductions of his work.

Baigell, Matthew. Thomas Hart Benton. (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974). **Contains a great number of color reproductions along with biographical information.

Benton, Thomas Hart. An Artist in America. 4th revised edition (University of Missouri Press, 1983). **Benton's autobiography.

Berardi, Marianne. Under the Influence: The Students of Thomas Hart Benton. (St. Joseph, MO; The Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, 1993). **Shows Benton's influence on younger artists and his teaching methods & theories.

Braun, Emily and Thomas Branchick. Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals. (The Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States, 1985). **Contains information on the interpretation, reproduction, and restoration of Benton's 1930 mural, *America Today*.

Gruber, Richard J. Thomas Hart Benton and the American South. (Morris Museum of Art, 1998). **Discusses the depiction of the South in Benton's work.

Fath, Creekmore, ed. The Lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton. (University of Texas Press, 1969). **Reproductions of Benton lithographs, each with personal remarks from the artist.

Foster, Kathleen A., Nanette Esseck Brewer, Margaret Contompasis. Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals. (Indiana University Art Museum, 2000). **Contains historical aspects, interpretation, reproductions, and conservation treatment on the 1933 Indiana Murals.

Hurt, Douglas and Mary K. Dains, ed. Thomas Hart Benton: Artist, Writer, Intellectual. (State Historical Society of Missouri, 1989). **Includes eight articles, by various individuals, each discussing assorted aspects of Benton and his career.

Marling, Karal Ann. Tom Benton and His Drawings: A Biographical Essay and a Collection of His Sketches, Studies, and Mural Cartoons. (University of Missouri Press, 1985). **Biographical information is interwoven with reproductions of Benton drawings, separated by subject.

Priddy, Bob. Only the Rivers are Peaceful: Thomas Hart Benton's Missouri Mural. (Independence Press, 1989). **Detailed information on the history of the mural, the uproar surrounding it, and an interpretation of what it represents.

College Level

Dennis, James M. Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Stuart Curry. (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

**Discusses the relationship of Wood, Benton, Curry, and other regionalists with modern art.

Videos/DVDs

“Ken Burns’ America: Thomas Hart Benton”. PBS Video. (Florentine Films, 1988). **A documentary on Benton's life from start to finish.

“Thomas Hart Benton: The Sources of Country Music”. (Chip Taylor Communications).

**Records the development of the last mural of Thomas Hart Benton.

Group Tour Information

Hours:

Monday: 10 – 4

Tuesday & Wednesday: Closed

Thursday – Saturday: 10 – 4

Sunday: 11 – 4

- ◆ If hours do not meet your groups' needs please call to see if other arrangements can be made.

Group Tours:

- ◆ To schedule a tour, please call **816-931-5722**. It is suggested that reservations be made at least two weeks before scheduled tour.
- ◆ **Tours last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.** Our staff will lead visitors through the home and studio while discussing the life of Thomas Hart Benton, his art, and the elements of his home. More specific tour themes can be arranged.
- ◆ **Group size is limited to approx. 50 people or less.** Most groups will be split into two or three smaller sections to assure everyone will be able to hear and see our staff. If your group is larger than 50, accommodations should be made to bring a number of visitors at different times. For example, a group of 100 can be split into 50 at 10:00am and 50 at 11:00am.
- ◆ **Please bring an appropriate number of chaperones.** It is suggested that there be 1 chaperone per every 10 students. Chaperones are helpful allies in making sure students respect museum rules and that everyone gets the most out of this educational experience.

Cost:

	Adults (18+)	Student (6-17)	Children (5 & under)
Groups <u>under</u> 15 people	\$5.00	\$3.50	Free
Groups of 15 people +	\$4.00	\$3.00	Free

- ◆ Teachers, reasonable number of chaperones, and bus drivers are free of charge.
- ◆ Tax is included in these prices. If you are a school group, tell us your school's tax ID number at checkout to remove tax from the admission cost.

Parking: The Benton Home is in a residential area and parking is limited to the street side. There is typically plenty of room for buses to park for the duration of our tours.

ADA Accessibility: There are six steps from the street level to the house. If your group has someone in a wheelchair, a staff member can open the gate so the driveway can be used instead. Please note, the driveway is made of historic cobblestones, so wheelchairs will need to go slowly for the person's safety. The 1st floor of the house, the studio, and visitor center are all ADA accessible. Although the 2nd floor of the home is not ADA accessible, a flipbook with pictures of the upstairs rooms will provide an alternate experience.

Restrooms: The site has only one restroom on the first floor of the house. If possible, large groups should try to take care of this need before arriving or allow plenty of time before their scheduled tour time.

Other Benton Sites in Missouri:

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art - Kansas City
www.nelson-atkins.org/collections/american/american.htm or 816-751-1278

The Harry S. Truman Library and Museum (Benton Mural) - Independence
www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/bp/bp2.htm or 816-833-1225

Missouri State Capitol (video tour including the Benton Mural) - Jefferson City
www.mostateparks.com/jeffersonland.htm or 573-751-2854 or 1-800-334-6946

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P.O. Box 176
Jefferson City, MO 65102