

# Thomas Hart Benton: Discoveries and Interpretations

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Scholars interested in the Midwest will be pleased to see four essays connected to the region. Matthew Pehl looks at Detroit autoworkers in the 1950s, exploring how the experience of industrial work shaped their religious practices. Kerry Pimblott uses Cairo, Illinois, to show how Black Power activism relied heavily on the town's black churches. Erik Gellman also highlights the religious dimensions of Black Power activism, examining the 1960s life of Chicago's Urban Training Center for Christian Mission. Jarod Roll, on the other hand, looks at a more rural setting: the mining town of Galena, Kansas, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He explores the "belief world" of the town's miners and how their faith in the myths of capitalism shaped the development of Pentecostalism. Dan McKanan's essay is somewhat connected to the Midwest as well: it provides a close reading of the popular fiction of George Lippard (a Pennsylvanian) and Ignatius Donnelly (a Minnesotan). But McKanan's piece is largely devoid of a sense of place, striking a bit of a discordant note compared to the other essays in the book.

Essay collections have a negative reputation in some quarters; they can be perceived as superfluous or incoherent, lacking thematic unity. But *The Pew and the Picket Line* is an example of a collection done right. With an outstanding introductory essay on the historiography of religion and labor by Cantwell, Carter, and Drake, along with cutting-edge research throughout the rest of the book, this collection should be essential reading for historians of American religion and labor. With substantial attention given to communities in Illinois, Kansas, and Michigan, it should also be of interest to scholars of the Midwest.

*Thomas Hart Benton: Discoveries and Interpretations*, by Henry Adams. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015. xi, 364 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 hardcover.

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*Thomas Hart Benton: Discoveries and Interpretations* provides a retrospective look at art historian Henry Adams's career-long fascination with Missouri muralist Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975). One of American Regionalism's "Big Three," along with Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry, Benton painted narrative scenes of midwestern history, mythology, and modern life that resonated with Depression-era audiences; in December 1934 he became the first American artist to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine. Yet Benton also regularly defied expectations and provoked critics with candid depictions of controversial subject

matter, such as the lynching of an African American at the Missouri State Capitol, and incendiary rhetoric about the art world establishment. In 1935 Benton famously swapped insults with American modernist Stewart Davis in the pages of *Art Front*, and he was later fired from his teaching post in Kansas City for making derogatory remarks about the curators at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

Adams began working on Benton in 1986, when he joined the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art as curator of American art. Among his earliest exhibitions for the Kansas City museum was a major retrospective of Benton's work to commemorate the centennial of the artist's birth. The landmark show helped to restore popular and, albeit more slowly, critical appreciation for Benton's homegrown modernism, which fell out of favor after World War II. Since that time, Adams has authored three book-length studies on Benton: *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* (1989), *Thomas Hart Benton: Drawing from Life* (1990), and *Tom and Jack: The Intertwined Lives of Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock* (2009). This latest volume features 13 essays drawn from previous public lectures, unpublished writings, and hard-to-find articles in popular magazines and small-run exhibition catalogs.

According to Adams, the collection reflects a historical moment when Benton and his art stood "at odds with the approved direction of modern painting toward ever-greater abstraction and with an art world that was rigidly controlled by critics and dealers in New York" (ix). The 54-page introduction, titled "Playing with Fire: The Risks and Rewards of Studying Thomas Hart Benton," presents a meandering narrative that integrates Benton's biography with Adams's professional development against an evolving field of study. Prominent scholars and critics appear both as heroes and villains, and Adams employs provocative language to describe his decades-long struggle to bring acclaim to Benton's art. He asserts that "even today, to some New York art critics [Benton] is still the number-one bad boy of American art, a kind of apostate, even a Satanic figure, because of the way he turned his back on modern art" (3).

Now a professor at Case Western Reserve University, Adams seems still on a campaign to overturn critical aspersions that cast Benton as a bigoted, reactionary, and antimodern artist. Adams tracks the precipitous rise and fall of Benton's career through individual case studies covering topics ranging from country music to art market fakes to representations of race and place. Despite their varied tone and approach, the essays cohere around several key arguments. First, Adams aims to rehabilitate popular assumptions about Benton's political views by discrediting his adversaries, highlighting his ethnically and racially diverse social circle, and demonstrating a steadfast antifascist agenda

in his teaching and his art. Second, Adams strives to situate Benton alongside such Missouri cultural luminaries as Mark Twain and George Caleb Bingham, arguing that Benton has been unfairly vilified for following a similar approach to local subject matter and popular culture. Finally, Adams maintains that Benton translated the expressive color and pulsating rhythm of Synchronism, an avant-garde style of American modernism, into representational form and regional subject matter. It is in this same commitment to rhythm that Benton's influence can be discerned in the paintings of his most famous pupil, Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock.

Adams is at his best when he allows his breadth of professional experience to guide his analysis. In addition to university teaching and museum work, Adams has consulted for galleries and auction houses; the essays derived from these activities—his in-depth study of Benton's artistic activities at Martha's Vineyard, his insightful analysis of Benton's technical process in drawing and printmaking, and his illuminating discussion of authentication and connoisseurship—not only add to our understanding of Benton, but also make a meaningful contribution to a scholarly field that too often excludes dealers, collectors, and other actors and aspects of the art market. Nevertheless, the desire to present a collection of essays that can each operate independently has resulted in a volume that is both longer and more repetitive than necessary. Typographical errors are also frequent enough to be distracting.

Written over the course of three decades, the book is less a reinterpretation of Benton's art than it is an album of scholarly snapshots that tell the story, in aggregate, about the intellectual journey of a single scholar within the changing field of art history. As Adams himself explains, it was precisely because "attitudes about Benton and his art are going through a dramatic shift; the old animosity toward his work seems to be fading" that the time had arrived to assemble his writings on Benton for publication (x). As this backward-looking impetus for the collection suggests, some chapters seem outdated in methodology and in argument, particularly when compared to the rapidly expanding literature through which contemporary readers can learn about Benton and his art. Interested readers will want to supplement Adams's book with the exhibition catalog *American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood* (2015), which contains essays by prominent art historians and covers much of the same ground as Adams's book. Other publications of note include Erika Doss's *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism* (1991), Justin Wolff's biography *Thomas Hart Benton: A Life* (2012), and Leo Mazow's award-winning *Thomas Hart Benton and the American Sound* (2012).