

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Collection Highlight

Thomas Hart Benton

Louisiana Rice Fields, 1928





Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889–1975) *Louisiana Rice Fields, 1928*

Egg tempera and oil on Masonite, 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 47 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (76.5 x 121.6 cm)
Brooklyn Museum, John B. Woodward Memorial Fund, 38.79

About the Artist

Thomas Hart Benton is best known for capturing scenes of American life and progress in the early to mid-twentieth century. Born into a family of politicians in Missouri in 1889, Benton spent much of his youth in Washington, D.C., where his father was a congressman. His family initially encouraged him to pursue a career in law. Instead, he followed his passion and spent his early adult years studying art. Although he experimented with abstraction, he ultimately adopted a realistic style that allowed him to incorporate his political views. Using vibrant color, dramatic shading, and dynamic composition, he painted recognizable social types and emphasized simpler, nonindustrialized ways of life. During his career, he received both praise and criticism for his iconography.

As a young adult, Benton attended the Art Institute of Chicago and the Académie Julian in Paris. While in Paris, he was influenced by a fellow American painter, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, cofounder of a colorful style of Cubism called Synchronism.

Benton returned to the United States in 1912, settling in New York. He spent World War I in Norfolk, Virginia, as a draftsman for the Navy. The sketches he completed in that capacity exemplify his interest in realism. In 1924, he returned to Missouri to care for his dying father. This return home and reconnection with his family had a deep impact on his focus on the Midwest as subject matter for his work.

In 1934, *Time* magazine ran an article in which Benton and his contemporaries Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry were hailed as the leaders of American Regionalism, a new movement characterized by its realist depictions of the American scene. Benton's self-portrait was featured on the cover of the magazine.

The following year, Benton moved back to Missouri to paint a mural in the state capitol and accepted an academic position as the head of the painting department at the Kansas City Art Institute. He settled in Kansas City and spent his summers on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts until his death in 1975.

Description of the Artwork

The painting depicts farmers harvesting rice in the flatlands of Louisiana. Growing rice begins with submerging rice seedlings in water, and water can be seen along the horizon as well as in the foreground of this work. To the left is a steam-driven tractor supplying energy to a threshing machine in the center of the composition. Steam tractors, often powered by coal or wood, were used until the 1920s in America. Smoke rises from the tractor in a squiggly formation in the top center of the picture, and a pile of coal can be seen slightly to the left in the foreground. The threshing machine, used to separate the rice from the husk, is attached to a wagon with two mules. Two farmers assist in loading the husks into the thresher while a third collects the rice in a burlap sack. On the right, three farmers assist one another in loading sacks of rice onto a flatbed truck.

About the Artwork

In 1928, Benton travelled around the United States making sketches of the people and landscapes he encountered along the way. The imagery he recorded served as source material not only for large-scale murals such as *America Today* (painted for the New School for Social Research in 1930) and *The Arts of Life in America* (done for the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1932) but also for a series of easel paintings such as this one.

To paint *Louisiana Rice Fields* Benton used egg tempera, a concoction of pigment and egg yolk. Tempera was used by mural and easel painters during the Renaissance and experienced a revival in the 1920s. One of the properties of the medium is that it dries quickly. This enabled Benton to complete the painting within two days, but it also made it difficult for him to make corrections or changes.

Questions for Viewing

What's going on in this painting? Describe what you see happening and where it is taking place. Use visual clues to support your response.

What colors do you see? Based on the colors you notice, what mood or feeling is being expressed?

At first glance, *Louisiana Rice Fields* might appear to be divided into three areas where different activities are taking place. Upon closer inspection, the painting's components come together as a unified whole. Describe and identify the visual elements and principles of design Benton includes to unify the artwork.

Benton illustrates examples of transportation, comparing older and newer technologies. Identify and discuss each example.

After viewing and discussing this painting, would you agree or disagree that Benton was proud to be American? Explain your answer.

Classroom Activities

Social Studies

Benton depicted scenes of American life from across the United States. Look for stories about American laborers in various parts of the country today. Make a drawing that depicts some of the challenges those individuals face or other interesting points about their lives. Discuss with the class how you composed your drawing, what you decided to include, and why.

Art and Writing

After looking closely at *Louisiana Rice Fields* and other examples of American Regionalist artworks, imagine life in the United States in the early to mid-1900s. Pick a character you would like to learn more about. Write a short biography about this character's life. Read the biography aloud to your classmates. Work in groups to create a short skit that would educate others about life in the United States in the early to mid-1900s. Videotape your skit and share it with others to encourage feedback and discussion.

Art Making

Visit a busy local city center. Sketch the area and the people you see: merchants and vendors, or people running errands or taking part in an outdoor activity. Discuss with a partner what you observed. Consider how your sketch might be arranged into a final composition. Generate a rough draft to prepare for a finished painting. Complete the painting using tempera or acrylic paint.

Resources

www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/onview/

The Brooklyn Museum's online collection database, featuring a search function that indicates artworks currently on view and their locations.

www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/educators/teacher_resources.php

This webpage offers links to free web interactives and Teaching Resources (PDFs) supporting K–12 instruction.

www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19341224,00.html

Time magazine cover featuring Thomas Hart Benton self-portrait, December 24, 1934.

www.pbs.org/kenburns/benton/

This webpage devoted to Ken Burns's film about Benton includes a profile of Benton, a timeline, links to other resources, and a lesson plan related to Benton for grades 7 to 12.

Adams, Henry. *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1989.

A comprehensive biography of Benton and a general introduction to his work.

Carbone, Teresa A., ed. *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties* (exh. cat.). Contributions by Teresa A. Carbone, Bonnie Costello, Randall R. Griffey, and Sarah M. Lowe. New York: Brooklyn Museum in association with Skira Rizzoli, 2011.

This book, written in conjunction with a Brooklyn Museum exhibition of the same name, features artwork by Benton.

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