



Thomas Hart Benton
American (1889-1975)
Boomtown, 1927-1928
Oil on Canvas

Boomtown captures the moment when a new town is “born,” a view full of the optimism and energy of Texas in the 1920s.

The Art:

Boomtown is Benton’s first Regionalist (or American Scene) masterpiece and the result of a 1926 summer sketching trip which took him to Borger, Texas. Early in 1926, oil was discovered in the Panhandle of Texas; real estate promoter “Ace” Borger purchased land and created the town whose population soared from zero to 30,000 within days!

Benton wrote of Borger:

Out on the open plain beyond the town a great thick column of black smoke rose as in a volcanic eruption from the earth to the middle of the sky. There was a carbon mill out there that burnt thousands of cubic feet of gas every minute, a great, wasteful, extravagant burning of resources for momentary profit. All the mighty anarchic carelessness of our country was revealed in Borger. But it was revealed with a breadth, with an expansive grandeur, that was as effective emotionally as are the tremendous spatial reaches of the plains country where the town was set. One did not get the feeling, in spite of the rough shacks and dirty tents in which the people lived, of that narrow cruelty and bitter misery that hovers around eastern industrial centers. There was a belief, written in men’s faces, that all would find a share in the gifts of this mushroom town....Borger on the boom was a big party....where capital...joined hands with everybody in a great democratic dance.

Arthur Strawn, “An American Epic”
Outlook & Independent.
March 26, 1930

Benton’s verbal description of Borger is confirmed by photographs taken that same year: swarms of cars, the “theatre” and hotel, the billboards and telephone poles, the lines of oil rigs and billowing black smoke. However, Benton’s painting, *Boomtown*, is not a realistic “photograph” of Borger taken directly from his sketches. Despite his desire to develop an American voice Benton was influenced by European styles; the tipped-up viewpoint, the angular shapes of the buildings, and the flatness of the composition reflect the Cubists’ influence. To enhance the drama of the scene, Benton combined the background billowing smoke and the foreground fight, events he had sketched on two different days in Borger! To further increase the scene’s energy and vitality, Benton exaggerated the vertical elements and intensified the color palette in a manner he had admired used by Tintoretto. To achieve the three-dimensional impact similar to that of Michelangelo’s paintings, Benton molded all his human figures first in clay and studied their poses, shadows and musculature. The result is a study of energetic rhythm, rich stimulating color and dynamic objects, the essence of a “boomtown.”

America:

Regionalist artists wanted to establish a genuinely American art by using local themes and repudiating avant-garde European styles. They reflected a nostalgic desire to glorify, or to at

least record, rural and small town America. Flourishing during the Great Depression and at this time of profound national doubt, they reasserted America's faith in itself, giving the public pictures with which they could readily identify. Their work was often produced under the auspices of the Federal Art Project (1935-1943) of the WPA.

Benton's oil painting, *Boomtown*, illustrates the thriving economic growth and expansion in Texas during the 1920s. He has captured Borger, Texas in 1926, the evidence of its rapid growth in the electric lines, the automobiles, and the oil rigs. The crowded streets, the active people, and the looming signs of the oil industry in the background evoke a mood of prosperity. While the town seems to exist isolated in space, a train in the distance links it to the rest of America. The various people suggest the variety of occupations springing up in the new town. Texas' engine of growth was the petroleum industry which rapidly replaced the agricultural economy. By 1928 Texas had become the nation's largest producer of crude oil. By 1930 Texas ranked fifth in population nationally as its population grew by 24.9% in the decade since 1920. Mexican immigrants flooded into Texas and by 1930, 38.4% of the population was foreign born. During the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was very active in Texas with programs attacking local law breakers – bootleggers, gamblers, wife beaters and community troublemakers – as well as immigrants, Catholics, Jews, and Communists.

The Artist:

Thomas Hart Benton, painter, illustrator and lithographer, was dedicated to portraying American themes and values. A student of art and of American history, Benton's background included formal art training in Chicago and Paris, but he also spent years observing Indian territory in Oklahoma, the coal fields of Pennsylvania, the tobacco farms of Virginia and the oil boom towns of Texas. In 1926 and again in 1928, he traveled throughout the American heartland sketching the people and small towns of America, sketches which he would draw upon for the rest of his career. Benton rejected the modernist's view of art for art's sake, and was committed to art for a human purpose – to make the American people alive to their own reality. A Regionalist, Benton recorded rural and small town America, particularly the "heartland" region. Criticizing the snobbish atmosphere of the American art world, he once declared he would rather his paintings hang in saloons, where normal people could see them, than in museums!

By the 1930s, Benton had left New York City and was living in his native Missouri, teaching at the Kansas City Art Institute and painting large-scale murals, often with very political and social messages. As a child and the son of the US congressman, Maecenas B. Benton, Thomas Hart Benton had seen the murals in Washington's public buildings and understood the power of the visual to inform and inspire the viewer. Using images from popular culture such as Hollywood films, pin-up posters and commercial advertising, Benton wanted to create art that appealed to the general public. When Regionalism declined in popularity in the 1940s, Benton began his murals of epic scenes from American history; again his goal was to depict the story of the American people, not that of famous political or military events. However, his work was scorned by the New York art world which by then preferred the Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock, ironically once a student of Thomas Hart Benton.

Learning to Look: Observation and Description

- What do you see? What can you identify?
What do you think the people are doing? What are they looking at?
What sounds would you hear? What odors would you smell?
- Where is this? What clues can you find in the painting?
How big is this town? How far away are the background details?
What is happening in the background? How far away are these objects and events?

- Where do you think the artist is? From what vantage point did he paint this scene? Is anyone paying any attention to him?
- What time period does the scene depict? What clues do you have?
- What colors does the artist use? What do these colors tell you about the season or time of day?
- What is missing in the painting? What details has the artist left out?
- If you could put yourself into the painting, here would you be and what would you be doing? What would you see from your vantage point?

Looking to Learn: Questioning and Interpretation

- What is a “boomtown?”
How does Benton capture the sense of a “boomtown?”
Where did these people come from and why are they there?
Why isn’t anyone in the painting paying any attention to the black smoke?
What is going on in America in 1927 and 1928?
- Is this an accurate depiction of the town? If this is a real place, where is it?
Why has he drawn the cars in such an unrealistic way? What other details are not realistic?
- Why would Benton want to paint Borger, Texas?
- What is the purpose of a landscape?

Ideas for Discussion and Activities:

- Compare Benton’s *Boomtown* with photographs of Borger, Texas in the 1920s. Photographs can be found at <http://www.texasescapes.com/TOWNS/Borger/borger.htm>
Compare and contrast the details you see.
What is the difference in purpose between the photographs and the painting?
(NYS Standards: Art 2; Social Studies 1)
- The billowing smoke is from a carbon mill that burned thousands of cubic feet of gas/minute. Research the history of drilling for Texas oil.
(NYS Standards: Social Studies 1; Science 5)
- Explore the picture of America portrayed by the Regionalists or American Scene artists? What was the role of art and artists during the 1920s and 1930s, times of prosperity flowed by a depression, international activism but also nativism, social opportunity but also class conflict.
An excellent resource is *American Visions*, vol. 6, *Streamlines and Breadlines*, available in the Teacher Resource Center.
(NYS Standards: Art 1, 4; Social Studies 1)
- Research the Federal Arts Project and discuss the role of the government in financing art and artists.
Investigate some of the projects financed by the WPA. What were their themes? What artists were able to find work during this time? What projects were undertaken in Rochester?
Artists at Work: a Film on the New Deal Art Projects, a 35 minute videocassette is available in the Teacher Resource Center
(NYS Standards: Art 4; Social Studies 1)

- Roll the cameras! The movies were America’s most popular entertainment in the 1920s. Benton’s experience painting stage sets and his love of the Hollywood film medium have influenced his painting style.
 In what ways is the Boomtown scene similar to a stage or movie set?
 Assume the poses of figures in *Boomtown*; how does the pose feel? How do you think the character would move next?
 Prepare a dialogue for the main characters.
 What films would people see in the 1920s?
 Compare the *Boomtown* scene with the Texas street scene in the classic western film, *High Noon* (1952).
 (NYS Standards: Art 1; ELA 1; Social Studies 1)
- Compare Benton’s verbal description of Borger with his visual portrayal.
 How has he translated his specific word descriptions into the painting?
 One of his 1926 pencil sketches of Borger can be found at <http://www.thebrogan.org/Archives/benton/bent.html>
 (NYS Standards: Art 1; ELA 1, 2; Social Studies 1)
- Take a photograph of a special place.
 Do a drawing from the photograph in which you capture the important details.
 Create a new drawing or painting which “interprets” or expresses your feelings about the place. How would you use lines, color, composition, or other elements of art to express your feelings or ideas?
 (NYS Standards: Art 1; ELA 1)
- Describe or sketch the people in the painting.
 How does Benton use the body language of pose, gesture and movement to tell a story?
 Stand like one of the figures and hold the pose. What does it feel like? Can you tell if the people are tense and angry, or relaxed and friendly, or standing still or moving rapidly?
 How does Benton use pose and gesture as well as body physique to reflect the physical environment of Texas’s wide-open spaces?
 (NYS Standards: Art 1; ELA 1, 2; Social Studies 1)

Materials available in the Teacher Resource Center:

Thomas Hart Benton.

Ken Burns. Alexandria, VA: PBS Home Video, New York: Turner Home Entertainment, 1996
 86 minute videocassette

Thomas Hart Benton: Drawing From Life.

Henry Adams. New York: Abbeville Press, 1990.

The Indiana Murals of Thomas Hart Benton: Visions of the Past, Lessons for the Present and Treasures of the Future.

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Instructional Support Services, 2001.
 41 minute videocassette

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