

SEEING AMERICA: Thomas Hart Benton's *Boomtown*, 1928

B

oomtown captures the spirit of a Texas oil town in the 1920s.



Thomas Hart Benton (1889 – 1975)

Boomtown, 1928

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.1

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

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The Art

Benton's painting was the result of a summer sketching trip that took him to Borger, Texas. Early in 1926, oil had been discovered in the Panhandle of Texas; real estate promoter "Ace" Borger purchased land and created the town whose population, in just ninety days, soared from zero to thirty thousand.

Benton wrote of Borger, Texas:

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. (Seeing America, 213)

Benton's verbal description of Borger is confirmed by photographs taken that same year, showing swarms of cars, the "Theatre" and hotel, the billboards and telephone poles, the lines of oil rigs and billowing black smoke.



Largest Producer in Panhandle

11000 Barrel Gusher near Borger, Texas, 1920s

Postcard

Courtesy Ken Sharpe Photography Collection

However, *Boomtown* is not a “photographically” realistic view of Borger. 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. 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 influence of **Cubism**.

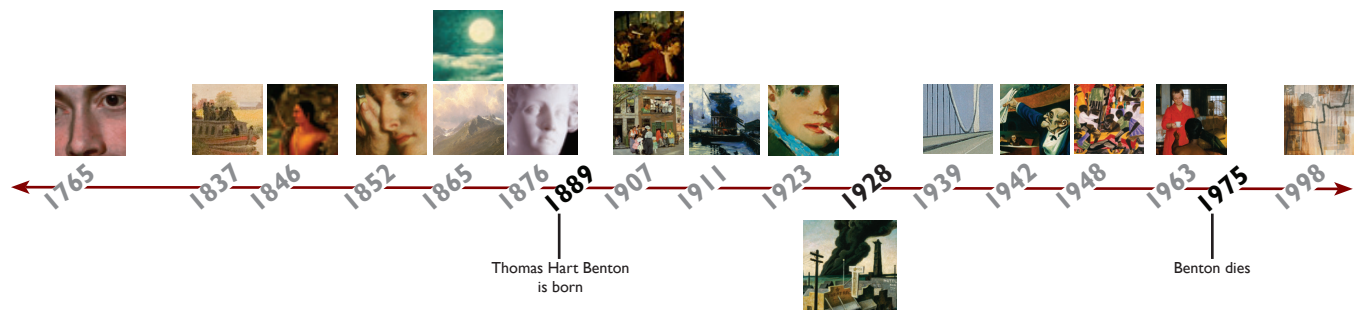
To further increase the scene’s energy and vitality, Benton exaggerated the vertical elements and intensified the color palette in the manner he admired in the works of **Tintoretto**. And to achieve the three-dimensional impact similar to that of **Michelangelo’s** paintings, Benton molded all his human 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.”

Glossary

Cubism: Early 20th century avant-garde art movement in painting begun in Paris characterized by fracturing familiar objects into geometric plans and reassembling them, attempting to render three-dimensions on two-dimensional surfaces.

Tintoretto (1518-1594) and Michelangelo (1465-1564): Artists of the Italian Renaissance.

The Artist



Thomas Hart Benton, painter, illustrator, and **lithographer**, was dedicated to portraying American themes and values. Though he had formal art training in Chicago and Paris, he also spent years observing Indian territory in Oklahoma, the coal fields of Pennsylvania, the tobacco farms of Virginia, and the oil boomtowns of Texas. In 1926 and again in 1928, he traveled through the Deep South and the Southwest, making sketches of the people and the small rural and industrial towns that he would draw upon for the rest of his career. In so doing he helped to popularize a brand of realism known as **American Scene Painting**, or **Regionalism**. Rejecting the modernist’s credo of “art for art’s sake,” Benton was committed to art for a human purpose—to make the American people, particularly those of the “heartland,” alive to their own reality. Ill at ease in the snobbish New York 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 political and social messages. As a child and the son of the U.S. congressman, Maecenas E. Benton, Thomas 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, he began his murals of epic scenes from American history. Again his goal was to depict the stories of the unsung American

Glossary

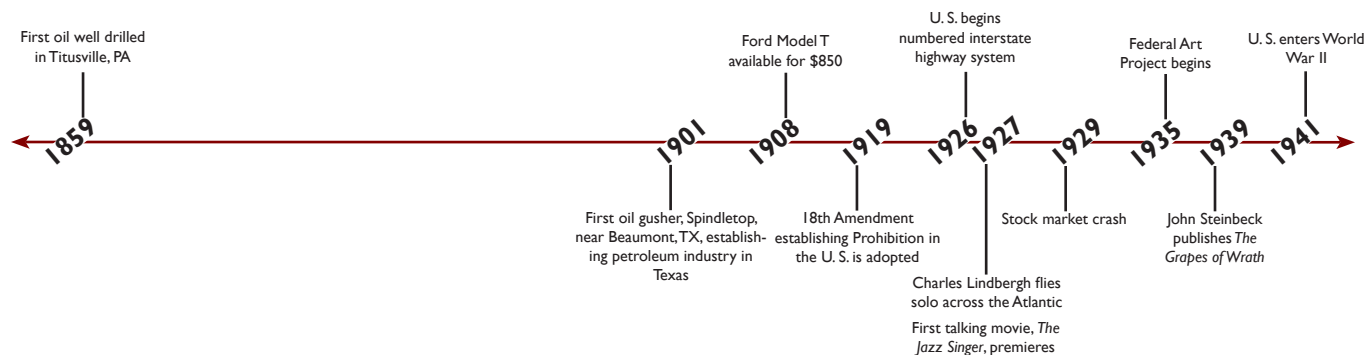
lithography: Method of printing image drawn on a prepared stone or metal surface.

American Scene Painting or Regionalism: 1930s American art movement focusing on the depiction of rural life in the heartland of America.

Abstract Expressionism: American art movement that emerged in post-World War II New York that stressed the expressive quality of the act of painting itself.

people rather than those 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.

America



“America, land of opportunity” is a theme beloved of artists, writers, and even economists through 350 years of American history. A good idea, a new invention, perseverance, and sheer luck have thrust individuals and even new cities into prominence. As a great example, the Erie Canal produced the first American “boomtown” in 1823 as Rochester took advantage of its location linking the agricultural communities along the Genesee River with the east-coast markets suddenly accessible by the new canal.

Benton’s *Boomtown* illustrates the boisterous economic expansion in Texas during the 1920s, when the petroleum industry rapidly replaced agriculture as the engine of growth. The artist has captured Borger, Texas, in 1928, its recent “boom” evident in the electric lines, the automobiles, and the oil rigs. The crowded streets and the looming signs of the oil industry in the background evoke a mood of vigorous new prosperity. The bustling activities on the street suggest the variety of occupations springing up in the new town. And though the town seems to exist isolated in space, a train in the distance links it to the rest of America. Indeed, by 1928 Texas had become the nation’s largest producer of crude oil. By 1930, its population having grown 24.9 percent in a decade, it had become the fifth largest state in the country.

The three major Regionalists—Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry—established a new direction in American painting during the 1920s with a genuinely American art that celebrated local themes and repudiated avant-garde European styles. They reflected a nostalgic desire to glorify, or at least to record, rural and small-town America. Regionalism flourished during the Great Depression as other artists followed their lead, often working under the auspices of **WPA/Federal Art Project**. At a time of profound national doubt, the Regionalists reasserted America’s faith in itself, giving the public pictures with which they could readily identify.

Glossary

boomtown: A town experiencing very rapid economic or population growth.

WPA/Federal Art Project: During the Great Depression of the 1930s, a government agency that employed artists in a variety of media and on a wide range of projects.



Borger Street Scene, 1926

Postcard

Courtesy Ken Sharpe Photography Collection

See also Henry Adams, “Thomas Hart Benton: Boomtown (1928),” in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 211–14.

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you where and when this is?

Do you think this is a real place? Explain your ideas.

How does knowing the title, *Boomtown*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you like to ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

Compare Benton's verbal description of Borger in *Seeing America* with his visual portrayal. How has he translated his specific word descriptions into the painting?

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. (Seeing America, 213)



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Finding and Analyzing Point of View

Compare Benton's painting *Boomtown* with photograph of Borger, Texas in the 1920s. Compare and contrast the details you see. What is the difference in purpose between the photographs and the painting?



Borger Street Scene, 1926
Postcard
Courtesy Ken Sharpe Photography Collection



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Identifying and Interpreting/Comparing and Contrasting

Of his 1950 *Tulsa Symphony*, composer Don Gillis wrote:

Tulsa is a symphonic poem in four sections, the first of which is a pastoral movement depicting the land before the settling of the white man. This moves without pause into a rather violent struggle for possession of the land. This struggle, filled with the energy and passion of frontier civilization, ends in victory for the white man as the land is transformed from wilderness to homestead and thence to a modern city. The third movement attempts to “bring in” an oil well, and is graphic in its portrayal of the violence of a “gusher”. The final section is a celebration in which the whole population joins in a shirt-tale parade and square dance in the street.¹

Compare Gillis's words and musical expression with Benton's visual imagery. How do the musician and the painter each express exuberance and optimism?

¹“*Tulsa - A Symphonic Portrait in Oil* by Don Gillis,” <http://www.okcband.org/Tulsa.pdf> (accessed 28 November 2009).

Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

Identifying and Interpreting Visual Language

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).

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