

Before you is *Boomtown*, by Thomas Hart Benton. Completed around 1928, *Boomtown* is roughly 46 inches high by 54 inches wide. This complex, oil on canvas painting captures a snapshot of an active oil town, set in a panoramic landscape of the rolling hills of the Texas Panhandle. The foreground of the painting depicts a mid-day, bustling street scene in Borger, a town that grew up almost overnight in the mid-1920s. In a busy intersection we see lively, one-dimensional caricatures of men and women, parked Model T cars, and hastily erected buildings lining a newly-created dirt road. The turquoise hills in the background are dotted with oil rigs and dominated by a dramatic plume of dark gray smoke.

You are looking at the painting as though you are peering down at a vibrant intersection of a town that suggests a temporary stage set from a 1920s Western. In the center, bottom edge of the painting on the main street of the intersection, two men are engaged in a fight. Three men have gathered to watch the brawl. A brunette in a dark brown, sleeveless dress walks away from the fight, toward us. From the right, a Texas Ranger in an olive-green uniform raises his billy club as he walks toward the fight along the main street. In front of him, a couple—the woman in a red dress and the man in black with a cowboy hat—cross the street away from the brawl.

We now move to the center foreground of the painting. Starting from your left across the street from the fight scene, situated on the corner of the intersection, is a light pink hotel building with two second-story windows. There are two signs on the building: the largest says, *Mother Holls Bed and Board, Baths .50¢* and a side panel reads, *Rooms*. A small, temporary poster by the door advertises, *Girls Wanted*. Two men in cowboy hats walk past the hotel. One of them steps off the curb toward two men shaking hands in the middle of the intersection. One man wears a cowboy hat and red bandana and the other man wears a black suit and white hat.

Outside the hotel on the main street, a green car and a red truck are parked on the diagonal. Across the side street from the hotel is a small, red house with a sign that reads

*lunch*. A network of telephone wires connecting three poles spans across the intersection and behind the side street.

In the center of the painting, in front and to the right of the small café, is a block of four buildings lining the main street. The first, a pastel orange structure, is a theater with a white awning and marquee. In front of the theater, one-dimensional caricatures of men in black suits and hats and women in brightly colored dresses and sun-hats hurry down the sidewalk. Next door to the theater, a white awning advertises the Midway Dance Hall, and the last business on the block is a gray hotel with a balcony. Four black Model Ts are parked on a diagonal along the block of buildings. A man, in a white hat, sits in the first car, closest to the intersection. Standing in the middle of the street not far away, a blonde woman in a white, long-sleeved dress faces the man as she opens a white parasol.

The background, which defines the setting for the story, encompasses half the painting. Located directly behind the theater is a gray watchtower. Next to this tower and behind the block of storefronts on the right five small gray shacks are lined up. In the distance, behind these buildings, a black train crosses the middle horizon, dividing the cream-colored middle ground from the more distant turquoise hills. Five oil rigs span the hills, becoming progressively smaller as they get farther away. Moving on a diagonal toward the right, there is a massive black cloud of smoke, dominating the distant horizon and expansive cream and light blue sky.

Thomas Hart Benton, who lived from 1889-1975, is an American painter. This painting was acquired through the Marion Stratton Gould Fund in 1951 as part of the Encyclopedia Britannica Collection.

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