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A GLIMPSE AT THE FIVE MAJOR PANELS

Benton had a fascinating working method, and was a controversial figure in the world of mural art, often in public conflict with others. He was a pivotal figure in the story of art in America. He was originally influenced by the old masters of European art, then by modern artists experimenting with abstraction. He turned away from abstraction to paint his own country and its people, becoming a 'Regionalist' painter. As the tutor of the young Jackson Pollock, his influence passed on to the next generation of abstract expressionists and can be seen in pop art.

Today you can see five of the mural panels at the New Britain Museum of American Art. They were purchased in 1953, and Benton maintained a special relationship with the museum for the rest of his life.

In addition to the murals themselves, the museum holds 5 preliminary studies for the series and an almost complete set of Benton's lithographs.

Arts of the City

In 1929 the stock market crashed. The Arts of Life in America was painted at the height of the Great Depression. Roosevelt was campaigning for the White House. Prohibition was the law of the land. Bootlegging of illegal alcohol was big business, especially in the cities.

Arts of the West

Thomas Hart Benton was born in Neosho, Missouri, and as a small boy absorbed the life of the western frontier. Although he later spent much time in cities (Washington, D.C., Chicago, Paris, New York), he never forgot his rural roots.

Arts of the South

Thomas Hart Benton took sketching trips by car in the 1920s and 1930s through various sections of the country, but it was in 1928 that he discovered the South on a trip from Pittsburgh through Georgia and Louisiana to New Mexico.

Indian Arts

Benton's understanding of the Native American culture was fairly informed, if we evaluate the mural, Indian Arts. In this work, he chose to portray the Plains Indians and their way of life, which was by this time only a memory in history. An early lithograph, called Historical Composition, of 1929, clearly relates to this mural and may have been the artist's first treatment of a Native American subject.

Intellectual Business and Political Ballyhoo

Benton came from a political family. His father was elected to Congress in 1896, and the family alternated residences between Missouri and Washington, D.C. This early exposure to political life stayed with Benton the rest of his life. In the final panel of this series, Intellectual Business and Political Ballyhoo, he makes fun of all forms of politically-charged communication.