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Kathleen A. Foster, Nanette Esseck Brewer, Margaret Contompasis. *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. 200 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-33760-3.

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Parallel Histories

Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals, like the murals themselves, is comprised of several parallel stories. In addition to providing an account of how an Indiana governor's commission created one of the most uniquely intellectual state pavilions in the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, the publication supplies detailed insight into the working methods and philosophy of artist Thomas Hart Benton, describes the physical history and recent art conservation treatment of the murals, and imparts a succinct history of the state of Indiana based upon the mural's 22 image panels.

The most significant art history elements of the book lie in the analysis and restructuring of Benton's work progression, using Indiana University Art Museum's extant preparatory sketches as well as information about the artist's materials, discovered during painting restoration efforts in 1998. The fact that Benton had only 63 painting days to create 232 feet of completed canvas speaks to his feverish intensity, mastery of the medium and spatial organizational skills. From a list of the artist's reading materials assembled in the Indiana State Library, to accounts of the slap dash tours to significant Indiana places, to careful study of the preparatory drawings and clay models, the authors concoct an absorbing story of Benton's methods.

Although several publications discuss Thomas Hart Benton's artwork and opinions, according to author Nanette Brewer, "the Indiana mural cycle is the only one of Benton's major early mural cycles not to have a monographic study" (p. 166). Since at least one art critic, Francis V. O'Connor, claims that these murals "set the style for the rest of Benton's career as a wall painter" (p. 166), their significance in the artist's development is considerable.

Brewer's essay, "Benton as a Hoosier Historian: Constructing a Visual Narrative in the Indiana Murals," explores the artist's intellectual and artistic development. Discussions of the affinities between the political and ethical ideas of philosopher and educator John Dewey and Benton's evolving muse, of the existence of two parallel histories (industrial and cultural) in the Indiana

murals, and of the artist's distinctive painting style are accompanied by small but detailed black and white illustrations. Brewer concludes that "despite the occasional borrowing of details and concepts from earlier works, Benton's Indiana murals were essentially new, in terms both of their overall form and their content. Benton's quest for a 'usable past' emerged as a unique blend of historic fact and personal vision" (p. 145).

Not only were the Indiana murals a turning point in Benton's own methods and intellectual growth, his work influenced the content and composition of murals for artists nationwide in subsequent WPA and Treasury Department projects. Categorized as a "regionalist," Benton popularized, along with John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood in the 1920s and the 1930s, the idea of the individuality of sociological/political/geographical regions such as the Midwest, New England, or the South.

The federally funded murals that were created for post office buildings nationwide in the late 1930s showed regionalist influence through the Section of Painting and Sculpture, Department of the Treasury's insistence that mural artists visit the locale of their commissions to seek appropriate local content for sketches, and by mandating that the works have "American Scene" content. In his study of the Indiana post office murals, John C. Carlisle quotes muralist Raymond L. Morris (who created the post office mural in Knightstown, Indiana) as having been "captivated by the Thomas Hart Benton murals in the Indiana pavilion." Unfortunately, the artistic and compositional freedom enjoyed by Benton was not to be bestowed upon those artists who participated in the subsequent post office mural projects. As the Section of Painting and Sculpture tried to offend no one in the local communities, a "troubling kind of mediocrity" dominated the murals. The strict and unbending mandates described in Carlisle's book serve to emphasize the relatively uncensored subjects included in Benton's Indiana murals.[1]

Art critic Thomas Craven wrote in 1937 that "Thomas Hart Benton is more than a painter: he is a social historian, anthropologist, cultural irritant, and a vivid exponent of the American civilization" (p. 155). As such, Benton felt that the Indiana murals should necessarily include controversial elements alongside the positive symbols of civic pride. He successfully convinced members of the Indiana World's Fair Commission that less flattering elements were a valid part of the state's history. The Indiana murals accordingly include the Ku Klux Klan, a labor riot, the removal of Native Americans, unemployment lines, and illustration of the waste of natural resources through overfarming, strip mining, and the release of natural gas.

The courage of Benton's convictions made the Indiana murals all the more remarkable as a public commission in the early 1930s from the conservative state of Indiana. It has taken almost seventy years for the Hoosier state to recognize and admit to its own discomforting social history, as substantiated in the recent book by James H. Madison.[2]

According to New York art critic Louis Kalonyme, Thomas Hart Benton was a "vital and significant artist" and the country's "best mural decorator" in 1933 (p. 9). Despite Benton's growing reputation, some Indiana artists protested loudly to the commission that an outside artist was allowed to paint a mural of the social, cultural, industrial and agricultural development of the state. A fascinating aspect of Benton's character was his savvy in handling other Indiana artists as well as prominent politicians. He included local artists in the project, used important Hoosiers as models, and initiated a practice of hosting a regular social hour in his hotel suite, using Brown County whiskey to ease strained relationships.

The remarkable support provided by individuals who instigated and facilitated the Indiana mural project demonstrates a special time in the social consciousness of the Hoosier state. Richard

Lieber, the director of Indiana's Department of Conservation who proposed the idea of the murals as well as the artist to paint them, was decidedly unapologetic about the state of Indiana and simultaneously open-minded enough to allow Benton's inclusion of controversial subjects. Benton extolled Lieber's "recognition of the artist's need to have absolute control of his art" (front of foldout). When compared with today's political climate, the state's leadership in the 1930s was admirable. The issue of censorship of government funded art projects rages on, perhaps more vehemently than ever.

The story of the Indiana murals after the Chicago World's Fair is an especially poignant one. Anyone familiar with the amazingly varied and far-reaching projects initiated by Herman B Wells will gain new appreciation of the foresight of the late Indiana University Chancellor, who tracked down and rescued the artwork from a horse barn at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in 1938.

It is fitting that *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals* is dedicated to the memory of Herman B Wells. The logically organized content, primary source research, clear and accurate writing, and the impeccable design and color reproductions combine to create a work of art in itself. The progression of essays from the general to the specific, and back to the general, creates a flowing symmetry that emulates the murals. The "user-friendly" fold-out of the complete murals and the historical essays to accompany each of the 22 color panel reproductions could easily provide the curriculum for fourth grade classes to learn their Indiana history in a graphic and compelling way. Even the choices of panels from the parallel histories (cultural/rural for the back cover and industrial/city for the front cover) remain consistent with the careful attention to aesthetic detail and symmetry revealed in the Indiana murals. The book itself is a quality product that would have made Wells proud.

Although *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals* does not clearly state a purpose, recently retired Chancellor Kenneth Gros Louis may have said it best in his foreword remarks. "Everything about the murals," he wrote, "--their acquisition, their history, their historic content and artistic style, the controversies that have swirled around them since even before they were unveiled in 1933, Benton's life and his association with Indiana, and now the process and results of the restoration of the past two years--suggests research and teaching opportunities for students at all levels, as well as for faculty and visiting scholars," (p. 2).

The publication has something for everyone. It is history, art history, philosophy, politics and a down-to-earth story of an amazing project. It will no doubt bring renewed interest to a national treasure in our Hoosier state.

Notes

[1]. John C. Carlisle, *A Simple and Vital Design: The Story of the Indiana Post Office Murals*, (Indianapolis, 1995), 51, 12.

[2]. James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America*, (New York, 2001).

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