THOMAS HART BENTON: MECHANICS OF FORM











THOMAS HART BENTON: MECHANICS OF FORM Exhibiton: Winter/Spring 2019 Copyright ©2019 Surovek Gallery/ Lester-Thompson Fine Art Photography: Roz Akin Photography, New York and Aldo Cherres Photography, Palm Beach, FL Printer: Preferred Printing, West Palm Beach, FL

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Cover: *Rhythmic Construction*, 1919, Oil on board, 28 x 22 inches (Detail) Inside Cover: *Mechanics of Form*, c 1920, Crayon on paper, 20 x 25 inches (Detail) Inside Spread: *Going West*, 1926, Oil on canvas laid on board, 20 ½ x 41 ¼ inches (Detail) Back Inside Cover: *Mechanics of Form*, c 1920, Crayon on paper, 20 x 25 inches (Detail) Back Cover: *Going West*, 1926, Oil on canvas laid on board, 20 ½ x 41 ¼ inches (Detail)

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FOREWORD

Thomas Hart Benton: Mechanics of Form started as a discussion between two fine art dealers obsessed with Benton and it blossomed into a collaboration that includes over seventy Benton works coming from private collections across the country. Both Andrew and I have been immersed in the work and study of Thomas Hart Benton for many years and we shared a vision to present Benton's work in a new light. In assembling a diverse group of rarely seen paintings, the exhibition highlights the significance of his early Modern works and illuminates Benton's entire career and his important place within 20th century American art.

We are thrilled to have had the enthusiastic support of Jessie Benton and the rest of the Benton family, whose insight and encouragement have been vital to the organization of this exhibition. We are also grateful for the participation and support of the Thomas Hart and Rita Benton Trust, who have generously included a large group of early works that serve as the foundation of this exhibition. We want to thank Sara Kelly Harris at the Trust who diligently worked to make this exhibition a great success.

Andrew and I would also like to thank all our close friends who have generously loaned and included their Benton masterpieces. This exhibition would not be possible without their participation.

Of course, Dr. Henry Adams' excitement was a great inspiration in organizing the show and his accompanying essay offers insight and greater context to the entire exhibition. We would both like to thank Kate Lester Thompson for her time and energy in organizing the exhibition from the beginning stages to the final preparations.

Lastly, I want to thank my father, Mr. John Surovek for introducing me to one of the greatest American artists of the 20th Century. His stories of meeting Tom and enthusiastic passion inspired my great appreciation.

Enjoy,

-Clay Surovek



Mechanics of Form, c. 1920 Crayon on paper, 20 x 25 inches

THOMAS HART BENTON: MECHANICS OF FORM

Thomas Hart Benton: Mechanics of Form explores the modernist threads that remain intricately woven across the artist's seven decades of work. Most often we view Benton's work in a linear and chronological way, particularly as it relates to his work of the 'teens and 1920's. The early work is often viewed as a series of steps leading to Benton's signature Regionalist style and at that point his investigation of abstract form drops out of the picture. This exhibition presents an expansive view that sees Benton's investigation of abstract design as a continuous process, which he continued even in his later years. Abstract principles continue to inform the composition, structure and energy of his work for the rest of his career. Even late in his career he made abstract compositions that are not just studies for a representational painting, but works of art in their own right.

The title of the exhibition is taken from Benton's brilliant 1920's essay "The Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting." This essay articulates and visualizes Benton's notions of composition, form and aesthetic organization, and rather beautifully illuminates the links between his work and his famous student, Jackson Pollock in a series of simple drawings.

No other 20th century American artist had such an expansive and in-depth knowledge both of modern art and of old master painting. Benton's essay on 'The Mechanics of Form" can be read as a sort of prophecy of what Jackson Pollock would achieve. But it also enables us to see and understand the work of the old masters in new ways, and to see how the work of figures like Tintoretto, El Greco and Rubens connects in fundamental and exciting ways with the achievements of modern art. While Benton's modern work was influenced by a variety of sources including Cezanne, Japanese woodblock prints and Synchromism, among others, it was his deconstruction of Old Master compositions, demonstrated in the essay and as well other drawings from the period, that provides the Modernist framework of his entire career.

At the heart of Benton's method, and at the heart of his own creative process, lay an extraordinary ability to break down a painting to a fundamental building blocks. To do this he employed a number of inventive techniques, including drawings in which he reduced designs to rippling lines which reveal their surface structure, or cubic studies in which he revealed how they rhythmically organize forms in three-dimensional space. Remarkably, he designed his own paintings by making clay models of the design, and that's one of the secrets to the extraordinary rhythmic quality of his work, as well as to the creation of compositions in which every part fits with the precision of a well-tooled machine, an effect which many American artists have tried to emulate, and only a very few, such as Jackson Pollock, have successfully achieved.

The exhibition presents a group Benton's early modern work alongside some of his signature Regionalist pictures. It includes rarely seen abstract works from the 1920's, 1940's and 1960's, still life paintings from various periods and Regionalist masterworks representing the best of Benton's work of the "American Scene." Of particular note is the early masterpiece, *Going West-* a painting of pure energy and excitement, which blends modernist design with American subject matter to create a new style which would soon be known as Regionalism. Also included in the exhibition is a finished panel and preliminary studies from Benton's first mural commission, the Briggs "Phantasy" murals. These paintings are an important piece of Benton's work as a muralist and can be seen in new light juxtaposed amongst the other selections in the exhibition.

The catalogue is presented as a visual essay- a chance to discover and consider the influences and working methods that connect Benton's work across style, subject matter and time.

-Andrew Thompson



THOMAS HART BENTON: MASTER OF ABSTRACTION

Thomas Hart Benton, though best known as the leader of the Regionalist movement of the 1930s, and as the creator of great murals of American life, was a figure of unusually diverse interests and talents--surely the most versatile and multi-talented of all the great 20th-century American artists. Along with being a major painter, he was one of the most eloquent of American writers, whose autobiography, *An Artist and America*, has come increasingly to be recognized as a classic. He also was a significant figure in the history of American music, who played a major role in the revival of American folk music, and who invented a new form of musical notation for the harmonica which is still employed by commercial music publishers. Boldly progressive in his social views, he campaigned fearlessly for conservation of the environment and for civil rights. Not least, he was an extraordinary character, an odd mix of home-spun and impressively erudite, always ready to speak out boldly and with surprising insight, on almost every conceivable subject.

Even as a painter, Benton's work is complicated and rich in a way that goes beyond the usual clichés about his artistic place. We tend to forget that up until the early 1920s, Benton was viewed as a modernist, and that his work was purchased by the greatest modern art collector of the period, Dr. Albert Barnes of Philadelphia. Throughout his life, in every decade of his career, Benton produced abstract paintings, which have increasingly been recognized for their artistic significance, as well as their important influence on other artists, such as Jackson Pollock.

Remarkably, this is the first exhibition that gathers examples of Benton's abstract work from all phases of his career; and while Benton is surely one of the best-known artists of the 20th century, this exhibition makes us realize that in important ways his work is still largely undiscovered.

While some of these works have been discussed in scholarly writings on Benton, this has occurred in an episodic way, most often with regard to their role in his compositional process of designing representational paintings and murals. In fact, by no means, were all of Benton's abstract paintings studies for something else. Many of them were clearly artistic statements in their own right. In short, these abstract paintings reveal a Benton who is still largely unknown. Essentially, in fact, this exhibition brings to light the work of a great unknown American artist, whose achievements deserve wider recognition.

Fortunately, Benton not only made these fascinating abstract paintings, but also wrote about abstract design in a way which powerfully illuminates his work. In fact, it was Barnes who first encouraged Benton to write up his ideas about the abstract organization of form, a project which ultimately resulted in a five-part series of articles in *Arts Magazine* on "The Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting." This is surely one of the most lucid statements on abstract art ever written, and the only significant essay on the subject by any American painter. In this series, Benton systematically reviewed techniques for organization composition both on the surface and in depth, and set forward a technique for analyzing the compositions of old master paintings in cubic blocks, to grasp their essential principles of design. As is well known, Jackson Pollock, owned a copy of this article, and his famous drip paintings are organized according to the principles that Benton laid out. What's striking about Benton's methods is his interest in combining clear visual organization with a sense of energy and movement. His favorite technique was to organize forms in spiraling movement around a real or implied vertical pole, a technique he himself employed in his murals and which provided the basis for Jackson Pollock's famous painting *Blue Poles*, 1952.

Where did this approach come from? I think there are two key sources which at the deepest level established a foundation for Benton's abstract paintings and the ways in which he organized form. One is his passionate early love of trains. For a little boy in a small western town, trains epitomized everything that was exciting: speed, power, energy, travel, and the mystery of what lies over the horizon. He recalled that he "scrawled representations of them over everything." One of the things that was marvelous about the

steam trains of this period is that one could figure out how they worked by looking carefully at them. An early drawing by Benton of a locomotive, made when he was just nine years old, is impressive not only for its accuracy, but for the way it demonstrates his clear understanding of how the machine worked: how burning coal (with a funnel for its dark smoke) was converted into steam (which was eventually released through another funnel, and how this created the up/down motion of the piston, which was then converted to rotary motion, which was then transferred by rods and linkages to the wheels. Benton once commented that, "The Diesels have never had the same interest for me chiefly because their driving mechanisms are not visible. You don't get any emotional kick out of what you can't see." It's notable that the project that was Benton's breakthrough masterpiece, the mural *America Today* of 1930, contains a charging railroad train as its central image, and contains another eight trains scattered over the rest of the composition. In fact, Benton's compositions have a mechanics that resembles the mechanics of a locomotive. There's a similar sense of circular motion, and of the transfer of energy from one part to the next. Often forms rotate around a circular pole, and then this energy is ingeniously transferred to the wider arc of the design. It's striking that when Benton chose to describe his approach to abstract design, he used the word "mechanics," as if the design of a painting followed principles similar to the operation of a steam engine.

The other foundational influence was Benton's involvement with Synchromism, the modernist movement developed in Paris in 1916 by his friends Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright. Synchromism was the first modern art movement devised by Americans, and the first American art movement to issue a manifesto. It also produced the first fully abstract paintings exhibited in Paris. Eclectic in its sources, it was sort of synthesis of all the most exciting things happening in modern art up to that time, and pulled together ideas drawn from Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, and modern color theory.

Interestingly, a key aspect of Synchromism was an interest in spiraling movement. Morgan Russell, the key figure in developing the style, had studied sculpture under Matisse, who had drawn his attention to the spiraling rhythms of Michelangelo, particularly his *Dying Slave* in the Louvre. Essentially, Russell used cubist techniques to break up and energize these spiraling rhythms, and Benton assimilated this approach but extended it from the single figure to multi-figure compositions. The essence of the idea is that form can be organized in spiraling rhythm, around an expressed or invisible vertical pole. By this method one can produce a composition which is very flexible but clearly organized. In addition, unlike many schemes of compositional organization, which are visually harmonious but static, this produced designs of ever-present energy and movement. Russell and Macdonald-Wright always focused on the single figure, often very abstracted. Benton expanded on their ideas and worked out techniques to extend this dynamic, spiraling sense of energy into a multi-figured composition.

In recent years it's evident that many writers on abstract painting and abstract expressionism have run out of creative ideas, a point recently made in a review in the *New York Times* of a survey of abstract painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The critical straight-jackets of half a century ago are still holding us in, although by this time it's apparent that many of their strictures are not quite right. This exhibition, I hope, will encourage us to think about the history of abstract painting, as well as the nature of abstract painting, in new ways. While many of Benton's abstract paintings are small, their force and intelligence is impressive. Jackson Pollock clearly knew many of these abstractions by Benton, some of the very works on display here, and studied them with feverish attention. It's time that art historians and art lovers followed suit. Look at them closely and admire!

-Dr. Henry Adams



Going West, 1926

This is a painting that resonates at many levels. Essentially, it's a painting about speed—the speed of a physical thing, the 200ton locomotive, hurtling forward at a speed of about 85 to 100 miles per hour, dissolving all our usual concepts of boundaries and distance--and the even greater speed of the telegraph wires, which send messages at the almost unfathomable speed of 186,000 miles per second, the speed of thought. It's also a painting about technology, a subject which Benton surely discussed with Lewis Mumford, his summer neighbor on Martha's Vineyard--who was working on his magisterial book *Technics and Civilization* at the time the painting was made. Appropriately, in 1927 Mumford wrote of Benton's work, very likely inspired in good part by this specific painting: "Mr. Benton's mind has embraced the whole civilization, from the crudest humanity to the highest refinement of mechanism and beheld it as a vast picture moving rhythmically through space and time."

It's also a painting about connecting the two coasts of the American continent, which always formed a central theme and topic of discussion in the Benton family. Notably, Thomas Hart Benton's forbear, the senator of the same name, was the foremost advocate of the transcontinental railroad, and other members of the family were also actively involved with the settlement of the west. The Senator's daughter, Jessie Benton, married John C. Fremont, the western explorer and companion of Kit Carson; the painter himself was the son of a Missouri Congressman, and was born just fifteen miles from where the American frontier made the transition to Indian Territory.

Benton's earliest drawings were of railroad trains, and miraculously, one of these still survives, which is so accurate in its rendering that the specific locomotive he drew can be identified. As he wrote in his autobiography, *An Artist in America*:

My first pictures were of railroad trains. Engines were the most impressive things that came into my childhood. To go down to the depot and see them come in belching black smoke with their big headlights shining and their bells ringing and their pistons clanking gave me a feeling of stupendous drama, which I have not lost to this day. I scrawled crude representations of them over everything.

In the 1920s, Benton was deeply involved with European modernism, particularly with Synchromism, and the way he bends form in this painting reveals his familiarity with the work of the Italian Futurists, who were similarly preoccupied with speed. He portrayed somewhat similar forward-thrusting train in a drawing of 1925, which was was reproduced in *The Dial*, the most important modernist magazine of its period, in July of that year. A year afterwards, Benton reworked this drawing for *The Dial* into a design for a circular rug. Of course *Going West* also directly anticipates the locomotive that Benton represented in his mural *America Today*, 1930, in the central panel of the mural, *Instruments of Power*. It's a testament to Benton's fondness for locomotives that he pictured no fewer than nine locomotives in this mural.

Certainly, *Going West* is a work in which Benton surpassed himself, in much the same way that Edward Hopper surpassed himself in *Nighthawks*. This is surely one of Benton's greatest achievements as well as one of the greatest achievements of 20th century American art. In some magical way, Benton seems to become the train. In his hands it becomes a living thing, the embodiment of life, force, energy, and the American spirit.

-Dr. Henry Adams















Cubist Forms, c.1944 Oil on metal, 6 ¼ x 3 ¼ inches















South Beach, Chilmark, c. 1921 Oil on paper, 71/4 x 81/4 inches







Geometric Semi Abstract , 1960 Oil on metal, 9 x 5 ½ inches










New York Rooftops, c.1920-23 Oil on board, 9¾ x 6½ inches













The Beach- Study, c. 1920 Watercolor on paper, 8 x 11¹/₄ inches



Demonstration #3, 1973 Oil on board, 9 x 6 inches





Still Life Fantasy, 1971 Oil on board, 8 ½ x 6 ½ inches



Animalistic Phantasy- Study, c.1925-26 Oil on paper, 11 x 8 ¼ inches



Abstraction, 1920 Oil on metal, 6 x 3 ½ inches



Landscape, c. 1920 Oil on canvas, 20 x 12 inches



Abstraction, 1920 Oil on board, 6 ½ x 4 ¼ inches





Abstraction, 1920 Oil on metal, 4 ½ x 2 ¾ inches



Sea Phantasy II- Study, c.1925-26 Oil on paper, 11 x 8 ¼ inches





Still Life with Lilies and Ferns, c. 1941 Oil on masonite, 19 ¼ x 12 inches















Martha's Vineyard Seacoast, c. 1924 Watercolor on paper, 11 x 14 inches



Sea Phantasy I- Study, c.1925-26 Oil on paper, 11 x 8 ¼ inches





Still Life with Tulips, c.1920s Oil on board, 8 ½ x 3 inches *Cubed Still Life Study*, 1919 Sepia and pencil on paper







to Hokusai's iconic print, The Great Wave Off Kanagawa.

Phantasy Series, 1925-26

The Phantasy Series is a unique and expansive work done at a pivotal time in Benton's career. One of Benton's first commissions, the series holds great importance, not only for bringing together the various aesthetic notions of his early work, but in preparing Benton for the complexities of designing and executing the kind of large scale mural projects that would make him famous in the years ahead.

In the mid 1920's Benton joined a collective of artists, organized by Ralph Pearson, which designed decorative hooked rugs. Through his association with Pearson and this collective, Benton secured the commission - a large project consisting of a series of mural panels, a folding screen, hooked rugs and furniture for the den of Albert Briggs, an avid sportsmen and big game fisherman.

Benton designed the Phantasy Series to reflect Briggs' sporting interests. Two of the panels, Sea Phantasy I and Sea Phantasy II, as well as the folding screen, depict ocean scenes with dramatic wave motifs and fish that echoed the mounted trophies displayed alongside in the den. The other two panels, Animalistic Phantasy and Abstract Phantasy, continue the general theme with land-based subjects.

The elements of the commission reflect Benton's diverse influences. including the abstraction and color theories of Synchromism and the compositional dynamics of Japanese woodblock prints. The wave motif, which runs throughout the work in the series, is a beautiful nod

There are three known finished panels from the *Phantasy Series*, including Sea Phantasy I, (which is included in the exhibition) Sea Phantasy II and Animalistic Phantasy. The four studies for the Phantasy Series, which are being exhibited for the first time, offer a beautiful view of Benton's preliminary process and most excitedly, suggest that there could be a previously unknown panel, a large and finished version of the study, *Abstract Phantasy*.

ABOVE: Sea Phantasy I, 1925-26 RIGHT: Albert M. Briggs Sports Den, Garden City, Long Island, NY OPPOSITE PAGE: (Clockwise from Top Left) Sea Phantasy I- Study, 1925 Sea Phantasy II- Study, 1925 Animalistic Phantasy- Study, 1925 Abstract Phantasy, 1925

















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