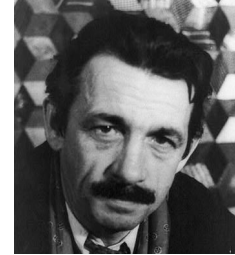


Thomas Hart Benton's *America Today* murals

Painted for the New School of Social Research in New York, unveiled on January 15, 1930

Excerpts from Justin Wolff's *Thomas Hart Benton: A Life*, published in New York by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2013. Wolff is an assistant professor of art history at the University of Maine.



"The New School founders insisted on exposing the moral and political ideologies that shaped social science on its opening ..., the New School invited "intelligent men and women" to study the "grave social, political, economic, and educational problems of the day" and to prepare for careers in journalism, labor organization, and teaching. Alvin Johnson, who'd become director in 1922, initiated a capital campaign in 1927 with the aim of finding a new location. Insisting on a modern edifice in the International Style, Johnson hired the Austrian architect Joseph Urban to construct the school's main building on Twelfth St. in Greenwich Village" (p. 200).



"Many aspects of the New School appealed to [Thomas Hart] Benton. Most obvious was the association that developed with the institution. Like Benton, these men were critical of capitalism – Beard, for instance, saw much of U.S. history as determined by conflicts between northern industrialists and Southern and Midwestern agrarian – but also skeptical of the cynicism of American communists. Benton agreed with all three that industrialism and technology had taken over the national economy but that social progress was still feasible within a republican system. Benton had an abandoned Marxism, delusion as intellectuals who he admired – [Charles] Beard, [John] Dewey, and [Lewis] Mumford, for instance – many others were, by Stalin's totalitarian society" (p. 200-201).

The well-known Mexican muralist Orozco agreed to paint murals for the fifth-floor cafeteria "for the cost of the materials and in return for such a meager benefit [Johnson] would grant the artist almost total freedom" (p. 201). [It] was agreed that Benton would paint the murals for the boardroom in return for the price of the eggs (used in egg tempera) and modest recompense for a few lectures at the New School" (p. 202). All ten of Benton's *America Today* murals are now permanently installed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.



"Johnson rented a loft to serve as Benton's studio. It was just a few blocks from Urban's building, and Johnson visited the studio every day to check on the progress of the murals. Benton painted his scenes on the wallboard coated with heavy linen, and though his process was less labor-intensive – he covered the panels and gesso, sketched on them with **distemper** [paint made of pigment, water, and binder] and finished them with egg tempera (Johnson claims that Benton 'bankrupted' him by purchasing 'dozens and dozens of eggs') – he worked quickly, completing the *America Today* murals in nine months. Most



of the drawings that he used for inspiration were from his earlier tours of the South and the Midwest, but he also made some new drawings especially for the murals. For instance, Johnson asked a Wall Street friend to arrange for Benton access to the Bethlehem steel plant in Sparrows Point, Maryland, and in his studies of the facility were the sources for the panel steel, which shows strong, determined man laboring with vats of molten metal. As he was working on the murals, the painter Reginald Marsh visited Benton in his studio, where Benton held forth on the benefits of egg tempera, gleaned from an early-fifteenth-century handbook of Cennino Cennini. Benton's use of historical techniques was another way that he rejected modernism as decadent and un-American, and egg tempera (egg yolk mixed with dry pigment and water) was a medium that connected him to the old masters. Tempera has been described as a 'draftsman's medium' because it 'encourages precise lines and sculptural modeling'; in addition, it is easier to control than oil because it dries faster and is more durable" (p. 202-203).

"The lectures that Benton gave at the New School or titled 'Craftsman and Art' and likely emphasized the **artisanal** methods [skilled craft worker's methods] of art production rather than its more romantic myths. One reason that favored working with the egg tempera, for instance, was its association with the Italian Renaissance, a period he admired as much for its system of training, apprenticeship, and craftsmanship as for its grand manner. Painting, Benton believed, was a manual labor as much as it was an intellectual exercise. This, as well as his various attitudes regarding industrial life, explains the murals vision of modern America.

"In places Benton found it impossible to connect scenes in one panel with those in another, and in these instances Urban was able to help by designing art-deco aluminum-leaf moldings to frame the scenes. All in all, though, Benton's great accomplishment in *America Today* was to integrate each discrete narrative into an overall dynamic scene; he managed to weave together seemingly incongruous aspects of American life – popular entertainment, for instance with representations of agricultural and urban labor" (p. 203-204).

