52: Thomas Hart Benton *Boomtown* (1928)

Henry Adams

For a decade after his return to America from Paris, in 1908, Thomas Hart Benton was generally regarded as a modernist painter whose work reflected European influences of Cézanne, constructivism, futurism, and synchromism. In the early 1920s, however, a variety of factors pushed Benton towards an interest in the American scene. On Martha's Vineyard he began making portraits of his neighbors, which soon developed into studies of American character. At the same time, his readings of American history led him to make plans for a mural program, which would present a "people's history" of the United States, from the earliest settlers to the present.

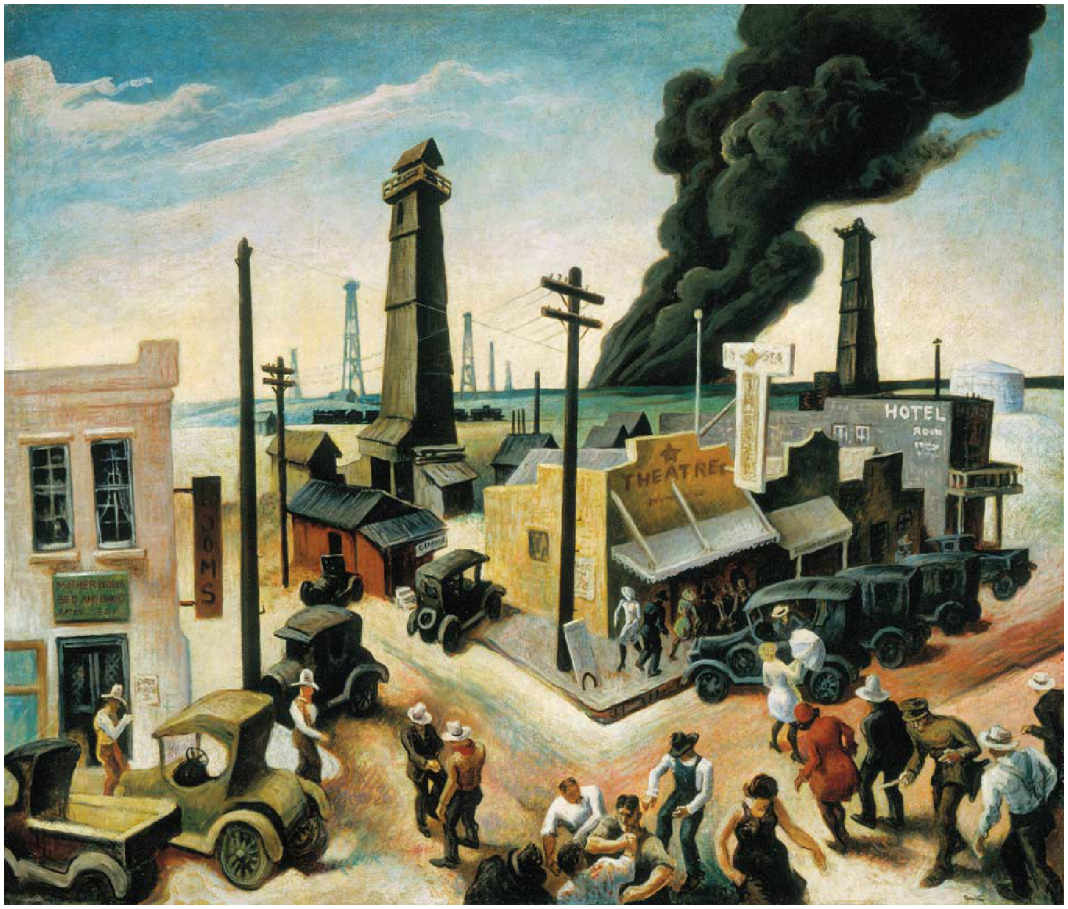
In emotional terms, however, the greatest factor in turning Benton's attention towards American life was the death of his father from throat cancer in 1924. Maecenas Benton, a Missouri lawyer and congressman, had never approved of his son's choice of an artistic career, and they had not seen each other for some fifteen years. But as the artist sat beside the dying man, these differences dissolved. Benton felt a new compassion for his father and for the midwestern culture he espoused.[1]

After his father's death, Benton felt an urge to pick up again the threads of his childhood. In 1926, with some money he had made from decorating a sportsman's den, he made a sketching trip through northwest Arkansas and southwest Missouri, the same area he had traveled through as a boy on political tours with his father. In 1928 he made a longer excursion, accompanied by a student, Bill Hayden. Traveling in an old Ford, he started in Pittsburgh, made his way through the coal fields and hardscrabble farms of the Smoky Mountains, down into the cotton belt of the Deep South. There he turned inland, first exploring the Delta of the Mississipi River and then pushing westward as far as the ranches and oil fields of New Mexico and Texas.

During these journeys Benton made hundreds of sketches—of steel mills, hillbilly shacks, cotton pickers, river boats, railroad trains, sleepy streets, cowboys, and oil towns—which he would draw upon for the remainder of his career. An exhibition of work based on his journeys—held at the Delphic Galleries in New York, just after his return in 1928—immediately established him as a leading chronicler of American life. In 1930 he created the work that made him famous—a sprawling mural for the New School for Social Research in New York entitled *America Today*.

The Memorial Art Gallery's painting, *Boomtown*, plays a prominent role in this saga, since it was the most important painting to result from Benton's 1928 sketching trip, and the highlight of his exhibition at the Delphic Galleries that year. Indeed, *Boomtown* was Benton's first regionalist masterpiece—the instance in which he distilled his distinctive, humorous, raucous vision of American life into a large-scale painting.

The canvas records the boomtown of Borger, Texas, a town that sprouted from empty ranchland with astonishing speed. On Monday, January 11, 1926, the Dixon Creek Oil and Refinery Company hit a gusher that produced five thousand barrels of oil a day. This set off a frantic search for more. Within days a real-estate promoter from Missouri, "Ace" Borger, purchased two hundred and forty acres of ranch land just west of this gusher and created a town, whose population, in just ninety days, zoomed from zero to thirty thousand. Borger went on to create four other boomtowns in Texas and Oklahoma, but his career ended abruptly in 1934 when a vengeful county clerk gunned him down in the Borger Post Office, in front of a crowd of spectators.[2] Benton devoted four colorful pages of description to Borger in his autobiography, *An Artist in America*. As he noted there:


HOTEL
ROOMS

I was in the Texas panhandle when Borger was on the boom. It was a town then of rough shacks, oil rigs, pungent stinks from gas pockets, and broad-faced, big-boned Texas oil speculators, cowmen, wheatmen, etc. The single street of the town was about a mile long, its buildings thrown together in a haphazard sort of way. Every imaginable human trickery for skinning money out of people was there. Devious-looking real-estate brokers were set up on the corners next to peep shows. Slot machines banged in drugstores which were hung with all the gaudy signs of medicinal chicanery and cosmetic tomfoolery. Shoddy preachers yowled and passed the hat in the street. Buxom, wide-faced, brightly painted Texas whores brought you plates of tough steak in the restaurants....The hotels that had bathtubs advertised the fact.... Out on the open plain beyond the town a great thick column of black smoke rose as in a volcanic eruption from the earth to the middle of the sky. There was a carbon mill out there that burnt thousands of cubic feet of gas every minute, a great, wasteful, extravagant burning of resources for monetary profit.... Borger on the boom was a big party—an exploitative whoopee party where capital, its guards down in exultant discovery, joined hands with everybody in a great democratic dance.[3]

Benton's painting records the view from the second-floor window of Don Dilley's apartment in Borger, which was located at 518 Jackson, just above Dilley's American Beauty Bakery. "I can still remember Benton standing at the window sketching," Mrs. Dilley told a journalist in 1976. "He was an interesting person but I didn't know that he was to become so famous. He dressed very casually and his cousin, Patty Oles, did not approve of his attire. Larry, Patty, and Thomas Hart Benton were our guests for lunch. Then Benton did his sketching while we talked about Kansas."[4]

Borger Street Scene, 1926
Postcard
Courtesy Ken Sharpe
Photography Collection

Benton's painting closely corresponds with his description of the place. Men and women stroll on the boardwalk in front of false-front buildings labeled "Theatre" and "Hotel." To the left two men in Stetsons stand in the center of the street, shaking hands over a deal; just in front of them a fistfight, probably caused by the girl leaving the vicinity, is about to be broken up by a Texas Ranger. Signs reading "Midway Dance" and "Mother Holl's, Bed and Board, Baths 50 cents, Girls Wanted," allude to the sleazy morality of the town. In the distance are telephone poles and a line of oil rigs, as well as a great plume of black smoke, which suggests the wasteful, exploitative spirit of the place.

(Facing page)
Thomas Hart Benton,
1889–1975
Boomtown, 1928
Oil on canvas, 46⅛ x 54¼ in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.1
Art ©T. H. Benton
and R. P. Benton Testamentary
Trusts/UMB Bank Trustee/
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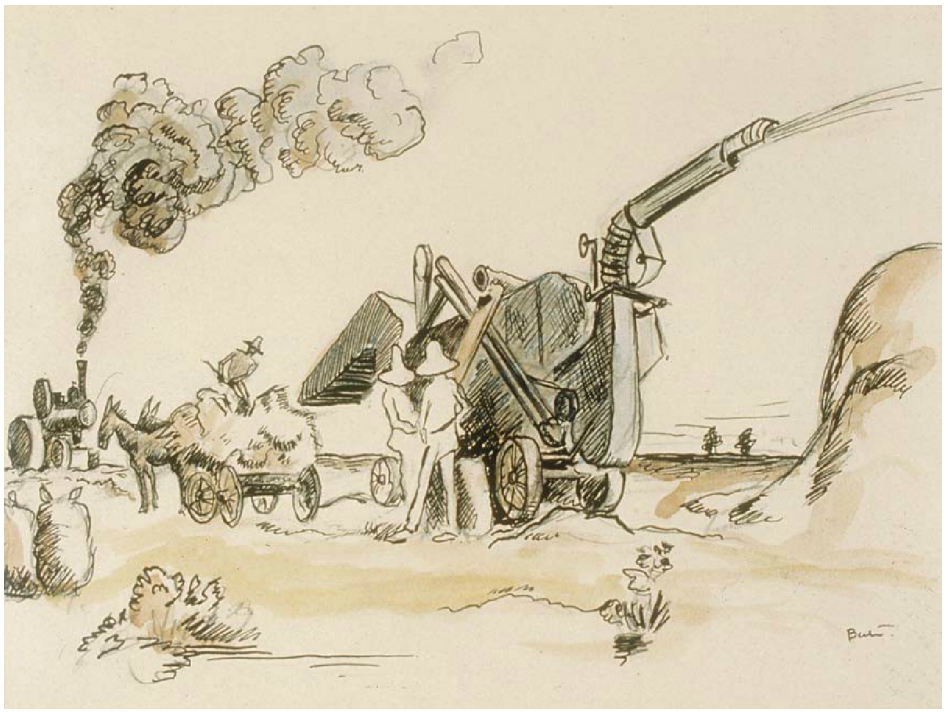
New York, New York

Photographs of Borger taken in the same year as Benton's painting confirm the general accuracy of his picture, with its swarms of cars and forest of advertising billboards. But they also show that he exaggerated the vertical elements of the composition, endowing the scene with an increased sense of energy and optimism.[5]

The artist's on-the-spot sketch, which happily survives, is remarkably close to the final design, but in developing it into a painting Benton enlivened the picture in several ways. He transformed an unidentified storefront into a theatre, added provocative signage on the hotel at the left, and introduced new figural groupings, such as the hand-shakers and fighters in



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:
Thomas Hart Benton,
1889–1975
Threshing, ca. 1926–1928
Graphite, ink and watercolor
on paper, 9 x 12 in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Solomon
K. Gross, 77.153
Art ©T. H. Benton
and R. P. Benton Testamentary
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the foreground. Perhaps most notably, he added the ominous funnel of black smoke in the background, which he had recorded in another drawing, taking some liberties with its actual location.[6]

Critics of Benton's work have often dismissed him as a "realist" and assumed that he had no interest in modern art. But in fact the tipped-up viewpoint, the angular shapes of the buildings, and the cacophony of signs and letters are all devices that Benton borrowed from cubism. With generous open-mindedness, however, Benton also seems to have been inspired by Hollywood films (appropriately, a movie palace sits in the center of the painting). Early movies often displayed high horizons like those of Benton's painting (in part because non-panchromatic film did not register clouds), and the figures on the street are characterized in a fashion reminiscent of John Ford features: a dark suit indicates a businessman, a Stetson and a red bandana a cowboy. The unusual high viewpoint of the painting has the feeling of an introductory tracking shot, which sweeps over the town, quickly introducing us to the main characters.

We can find many of the features that appear in *Boomtown* in an earlier painting by Benton, *The City* (1920, private collection), executed eight years earlier, which shows the juncture of Broadway and Fifth Avenue at Twenty-third street, overlooking Madison Square in New York.[7] This also has a tipped-up perspective, faceted buildings, clusters of cars, and deftly characterized figures. Compared to *Boomtown*, however, the painting lacks emotional impact. Just what differentiates the two raises fascinating questions, but essentially the New York painting feels like a well-observed vignette, the Texas painting like a mythic statement. Something about Borger resonates with our deepest fears and hopes about American life. In the frenzied energy, can-do-spirit, wastefulness, corruption, and sheer manic exuberance of Borger, Benton found a potent symbol for the dynamism and complexity of America as a whole.

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