Thomas Hart Benton, "Weighing Cotton"
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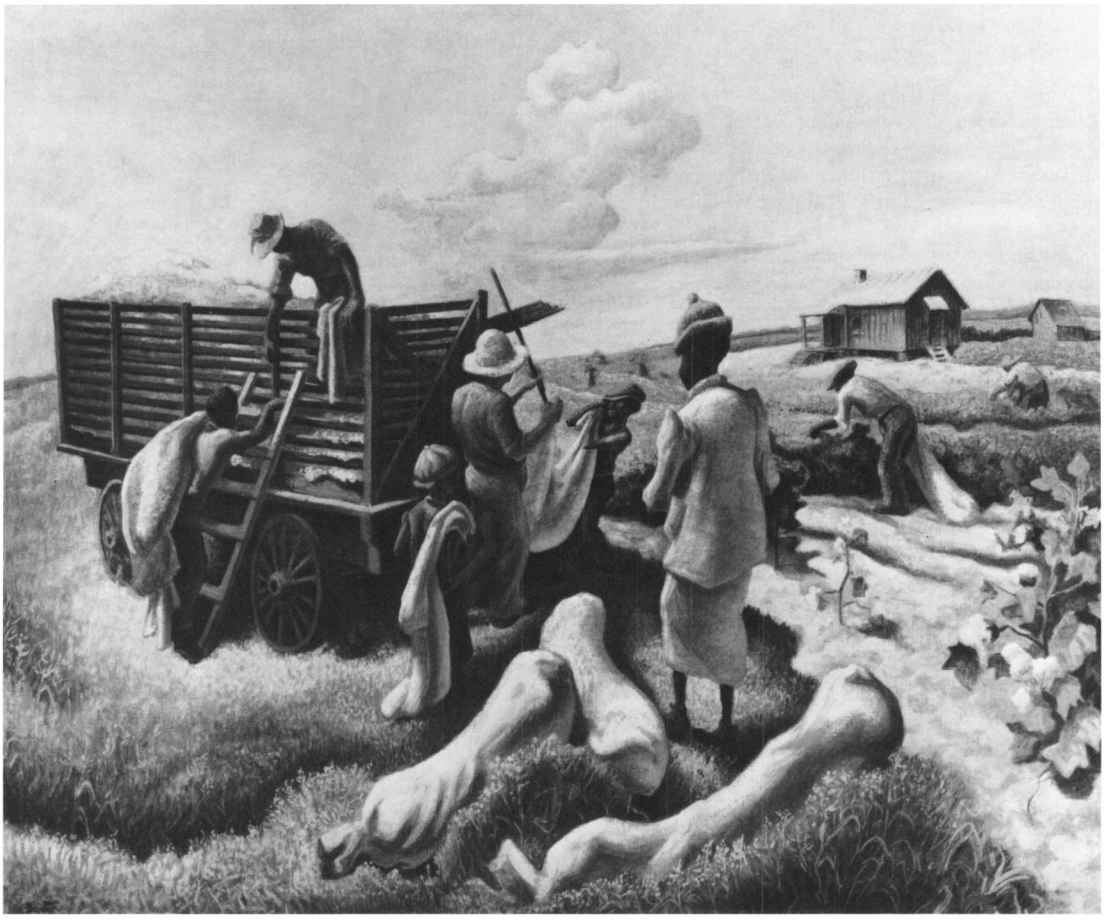
Fig. 1
Thomas Hart Benton, *Weighing Cotton,* 1939. Egg tempera with oil glaze on canvas mounted on wood panel, 81.3 x 100.3 cm. Yale University Art Gallery. Purchased with Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, and John Hill Morgan, B.A. 1893, Funds; Collection of Mary C. and James W. Fosburgh, B.A. 1933, M.A. 1935, by exchange; and Gifts from George Hopper Fitch, B.A. 1932, by exchange, William S. Kilroy, B.S. 1949, and Stanley Stone, B.S. 1916. 1989.68.1



Thomas Hart Benton, *Weighing Cotton*

HELEN A. COOPER

As the first major Regionalist painting to enter the permanent collection, Thomas Hart Benton's *Weighing Cotton,* 1939 (Fig. 1) significantly enhances the Art Gallery's ability to present a balanced view of American art in the years between the Depression and World War II.[1] A premier example of Benton's Regionalist style, it is one in a series of three agricultural scenes—the others are *Cradling Wheat* and *Roasting Ears* (Figs. 2, 3)—in which the artist articulated a personal vision of the American heartland. It was a region that would preoccupy him for the rest of his life. "[I am] fairly obsessed with America," he told a reporter when the three paintings were first exhibited in 1939:

'—the Mississippi region, the Ozarks, and the places where I can see lonely plowmen, cotton pickers, river boatmen, and ramshackle houses that never were much good. I like to get out in my car and drive. Just drive anywhere so long as I go through the Ozarks and down around Oklahoma and that territory. I like to make drawings. Sometimes I make a hundred a week; sometimes only one.'[2]

Weighing Cotton is most likely based on sketches Benton made during the summer of 1938, when he traveled through Louisiana, Oklahoma, Southern Missouri, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Later, in his studio in Kansas City, he worked out his compositions in clay, a practice he had begun in 1919. Recalling a method used by Tintoretto, Benton made sculptural models of his figures, setting up multiple-figure groups in three-dimensional arrangements and placing them in an illusory picture space in order to study the composition from all sides. In his clay study for the Yale picture, each element of the design seems painstakingly researched, as he focuses on the spatial and rhythmic relationships among the six men and one woman and on the placement of the bags of cotton in the foreground (Fig. 4). In the painting, he adds a figure in the right distance and sets the scene under a wide summer sky, against a background of wooden shacks and cotton fields stretching to the horizon.

In the 1930s, cotton was still harvested almost entirely by hand by black workers; mechanical pickers, used by some farmers where labor was at a premium, resulted in a poorer grade of cotton. After removing the cotton fibers and seeds from the burrs, pickers put the cotton in long canvas sacks that they dragged along the ground from plant to plant. A picker's wage was determined by the amount of cotton he or she picked. The cotton was weighed in the field with a simple pole and counterweight (see Fig. 5), and then emptied into wagons that took it to one of the large public cotton gins where the process of separating the seed from the fiber began.[3]

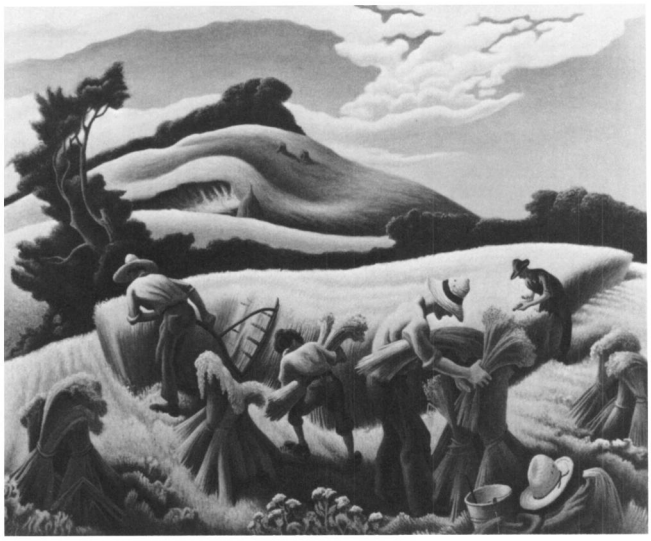


Fig. 2
Thomas Hart Benton, *Cradling Wheat,* 1938. Egg tempera with oil glaze on canvas mounted on panel, 78.7 x 96.5 cm. The Saint Louis Art Museum.

Weighing Cotton is a narrative of routine, a history of repeated activities—the doings of an ordinary day in a cotton field. It is also a tale of solitary labor directed toward a common purpose: the wagon must be filled. But as Benton's composition and palette subtly emphasize, this is not a community of equals. Where the black men are dressed in muted grays and tans that blend readily into the landscape, the white man is dressed in eye-catching red; where the black men drag heavy bags of soft cotton, the white man wields the hard, long-handled weighing pole; and where black men bending over the cotton pods populate the scene throughout, the white man stands comfortably erect at almost the exact center of the image. Without belaboring the obvious symbols of power and oppression embedded in these distinctions, the white man's authority is undeniable.[4] What is less certain is the role of the black woman prominently placed in the foreground. We know that women were commonly employed as pickers, yet she is the only woman in the scene, and indeed the only person not working. Larger than any of the other figures, she is shown from the rear, dressed in a white suit that is clearly not the garb of a picker. Although she appears to be moving toward the central group, no one acknowledges her presence, and there is nothing in the immediate situation to explain it. Yet she is the dominant figure in the composition. In translating her form from the clay study to the canvas, Benton straightened her slightly stooped, maternal stance and made her a slenderer and somewhat younger type. Perhaps she is related to the two boys and has stopped in the cotton fields to see them on her way to or from some special event. Benton, who believed that each viewer experienced a work differently, never felt it necessary to resolve such ambiguities in his paintings.[5]

Characteristic of Benton's work is a generalized energy that animates the whole composition. In *Weighing Cotton,* as in many of his paintings, this energy is conveyed by the directional movement that starts along the edges of one form and is carried across the picture's surface through other forms: for example, the curve of the bag slung over the shoulder of the man at the far left is repeated in the dipping curve of the bag held by the man and boy, the bent backs of the pickers, and the bags on the ground. The white clouds reiterate in form and color the bags and the rows of cotton bolls at the right. These repeating and echoing curves underscore the nature of Benton's subject, conveying a sense of the timelessness of the tasks and the unchanging routine of the pickers'

Fig. 3
Thomas Hart Benton, *Roasting Ears,* 1938–39. Egg tempera with oil glaze on canvas, 81.3 x 99.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur H. Hearn Fund, 1939. (39.101.2)

Fig. 4
Thomas Hart Benton, Maquette for *Weighing Cotton,* ca. 1939. Painted modeling clay, cardboard, and wood, 27.6 x 43.18 x 30.48 cm. Milwaukee Art Museum. Gift of Mrs. Malcom K. Whyte.

lives. At the same time, such strong linear rhythms create an independent network of two-dimensional patterns. Countering this underlying abstraction is Benton's use of color to reinforce the solidity and spatial position of his forms and figures.

Like *Weighing Cotton,* the other two paintings in Benton's agricultural series combine visual narrative, social observation, and enthusiasm for the local scene. In its multifigured compositional structure, *Cradling Wheat* (Fig. 2) bears the closest resemblance to the Yale picture. Three men and a boy—here the figures are white—are engaged in cutting and bundling wheat, their bodies bent in harmony with the contours of the land. Benton creates an intricate pattern of interlaced lines and rhythms through the forms of the men, the sheaves of wheat, the curvilinear branches of the tree, and the undulating landscape. In *Roasting Ears* (Fig. 3), the artist's growing interest in naturalistic detail is evident in his treatment of the corn stalks, which take up more than half the picture. Like the carefully rendered cotton plant in the right foreground of *Weighing Cotton,* these stalks and the background trees have an almost electric energy; they seem to symbolize the life force itself as they push upward, every leaf bristling with vigor. Here as elsewhere, figure and landscape are integrated through repeated and contrasted forms: the black boy's bent leg is restated countless times in the shape of the leaves on the stalks; the curved lines of the basket are reiterations of the curved road and of the drooping tree branch that seems to encircle him. Young, energetic, standing straight, the boy is as much a part of the land as are the corn and the trees. Relying primarily on the power of line, Benton evokes a sense of the enduring character and richness of America's farmland.

The graphic clarity of Benton's pictorial style came from his study of the old masters, in particular, the fundamentals of compositional structure and the expressive power of line found in the work of such artists as Tintoretto and El Greco. Indebted to the latter are his sinuous drawing, serpentine patterns, lengthened forms, and decorative outlines.[6] Benton was also a master of textures. The surface of *Weighing Cotton* exhibits subtle nuances of color and touch, built up of innumerable tiny strokes. Like *Cradling Wheat* and *Roasting Ears,* it is painted with egg tempera mixed with oil glazes on canvas mounted on a wood panel, and then lightly varnished. Stimulated by Renaissance art, Benton had begun working in tempera in the mid-1920s when he took up mural painting. It was a painstaking technique that required not only a knowledge of materials but also great certainty of purpose. For an artist in search of traditional artistic values, it was perhaps the perfect medium.

Benton was first identified as a "regional" painter in 1933, when the art dealer Maynard Walker organized a small exhibition of American paintings at the Kansas City Art Institute and brought together for the first time the work of Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood, the three artists who would ultimately dominate the movement. He praised their work as representative of a new and vigorous Midwestern movement, untainted by what he believed were the aesthetic affectations of French modernism. Walker's cry for an art based on the concept of artistic nationalism was not new—it began with Thomas Cole in the early nineteenth century. What distinguished Walker's campaign was his belief that this art would arise in the Midwest.[7] Shortly afterward, *Time* magazine took up the banner. In 1934, they published an article triumphantly stating that the assault of French modernism had been put to rout by a vigorous American movement beginning in the Midwest. Identifying Benton, Curry, and Wood as the leading painters of the "U.S. Scene," it singled out Benton for particular praise, putting his self-portrait on the cover and proclaiming: "Of these earthy Midwesterners, none represents the objectivity and purpose of their school

Fig. 5
Arthur Rothstein, *Plantation Owner's Daughter Checks Weight of Cotton.* Kaufman County, Texas, 1936. Reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress.

more clearly than Missouri's Thomas Hart Benton."[8] Overnight, Benton became the most famous artist in America and what was soon to become known as "Regionalism" was born.[9]

"The term was, so to speak, wished upon us," wrote Benton later in his autobiography:

We [Curry, Wood, and Benton] were different in our temperaments and many of our ideas, but we were alike in that we were all in revolt against the unhappy effects which the Armory show of 1913 had had on American painting. We objected to the new Parisian aesthetics which was more and more turning art away from the living world of active men and women into an academic world of empty pattern. We wanted an American art which was not empty, and we believed that only by turning the formative processes of art back again to meaningful subject matter, in our cases specifically American subject matter, could we expect to get one.[10]

To Benton, modern art, especially in its American derivations, represented an intellectual detachment and self-conscious aestheticism that he felt were foreign to the American temperament. Earlier in his life, however, he had been one of its most vigorous proponents. Born in Neosho, Missouri, Benton (1889–1975) rebelled against the narrowness of his Midwestern upbringing and in 1908 moved to Paris, where he embraced such avant-garde movements as Synchromism. In 1916, he was introduced in New York at the important "Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painting" as a coming, young modern. Beginning about 1920, however, Benton grew increasingly interested in figurative art and in American historical themes.[11] By 1930, when he was commissioned to do a set of murals for the New School for Social Research in New York, his rejection of modernism was complete. Creating a series of panels on the history, folklore, and daily life of common American experience, he declared himself a painter of and for Americans, and called for an American art as distinct from an art based on European standards. At a time when an isolationist mood in art as in politics was widespread, Benton came to be the artistic voice of large numbers of Americans.

The years after the stock market crash of 1929 resulted in a period of national doubt and self-questioning. As the country moved from a rural to an increasingly urban and technological society, many people felt a growing powerlessness as long-held traditional American values seemed to be disappearing. Some artists, like Stuart Davis and Charles Sheeler, embraced the challenges of the new age; but others, like Benton, Wood, and Curry turned to themes that evoked ear-

lier, simpler times. Landscape and genre painting based on consciously American subject matter rose to prominence.[12]

Benton prided himself on the objectivity of his vision, and of the three most prominent Regionalists, his is the least *overtly* nostalgic view of the country. "My American image is made up of what I have come across," he said, "of what was 'there' in the time of my experience—no more, no less."[13] But we know that what was "there" in the cotton fields—tedious, painstaking, backbreaking work—was a far harsher, more bitter reality than anything Benton showed. One has only to look at the Farm Security Administration photographs of the 1930s of cotton pickers and other farm laborers by Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, and others to see how mediated by idealism was Benton's portrayal of America. Late in life he came to realize that his view had been a retrospective one, and that the kind of rural America he had sought and depicted had disappeared long before. Perhaps it had never really existed. As had so many American painters from Cole onward, Benton sought to define in visual terms the nation's cultural identity. And like them, he ultimately represented enduring American mythologies.

Notes

1 *Weighing Cotton* was not Benton's first or last painting of cotton pickers. Among other versions are *Cotton Pickers,* 1928–29, tempera with oil on canvas mounted on panel, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; and *Cotton Pickers,* 1943–61, tempera and oil on canvas mounted on panel, Collection of the artist in 1974.

2 "Wood, Benton Work Exhibited Here," Des Moines *Register* (17 September 1939), quoted in Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton. An American Original* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1989), 295. This biography/catalogue was published on the occasion of the major Benton exhibition, which opened at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in 1989.

3 *Encyclopaedia Brittanica,* "Cotton;" and David P. Peeler, *Hope Among Us Yet. Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America* (Athens, Ga. and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 84.

4 Although Benton was personally opposed to racism, he took no clear moral position in his depictions of blacks. For a discussion, see Adams, 248–51.

5 See Adams, 270–71.

6 For Benton's acknowledgment of El Greco's influence, see Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1969), 77–78.

7 Adams, 216-17. It was in a statement to *Art Digest* (1 September 1933; quoted in its entirety in Adams, 217–18), that Walker fully articulated this belief.

8 "U.S. Scene," *Time* (24 December 1934): 24–27, quoted in Adams, 219. Adams, 220, points out that the notion of "Midwestern" painters was somewhat strained: in 1934, only Wood lived in the Midwest, in Iowa; Curry lived in Westport, Connecticut, and Benton lived in New York. Less than a year later, however, Benton resettled permanently in Kansas City.

9 Adams points out that this was the first time an artist was shown on *Time*'s cover. For a discussion of the events surrounding the publication of the article, see Adams, 219–21. "Regionalism" was not a new term; it was first used in the 1920s to describe a group of Southern writers.

10 Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America* (New York, 1937; 4th rev. ed., Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 314. Benton was a prolific writer who spoke out often on American art. In addition to this early autobiography and the volume cited in note 6, he was at work on a third autobiography, *The Intimate Story,* at the time of his death. For complete bibliography on Benton, see Adams, 344–51.

11 Benton was only one of many American artists who abandoned abstraction to return to figurative art. For a discussion, see Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900* (New York, 1967; rev. ed., New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 116–37.

12 For a cogent description of the period, see Rose, 114ff.

13 From Benton's statement on America, quoted in Thomas Craven, *Thomas Hart Benton* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1939), 24, requoted in Adams, 343. See also Thomas Hart Benton, "Letter to Matthew Baigell" (22 November 1967), in Matthew Baigell, ed., *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1971), 33–34.

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