

Copy of Thomas Hart Benton papers

Description

Copy of a page from the Thomas Hart Benton papers on the proposed mural for the Harry S. Truman Library.

Date(s)

November 5, 1958

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The above scheme should permit the active engagement of all personages and facilitate the integration of these in the form of the mural, as well as in its overall historical meaning. This is a matter of first importance for the unity of the work.

(2) It was suggested in early discussions of the mural theme that certain historically prominent individuals whose performances and ideas were related to it should be represented. I agreed to this because it was appropriate and appeared perfectly plausible. However as the relations of these individuals to the actions of the theme were indirect it proved impossible to engage them except as static spectators. Were they so engaged, other historic individuals it appeared, more directly involved in the theme's actions, should also be included. But difficulties arose in the matter of selection. Unless the mural was to be made up of rows of people standing in their portraits, some selection was essential. Here again as with events no individuals stood out as pre-eminently significant in the total of the theme's meaning.

Daniel Boone alone can perhaps symbolize the opening of Kentucky. He has no counterpart in the opening of the West. It took hundreds of Boones for that spreading job. Were a few of these finally and arbitrarily selected they could be actively engaged in the mural only by representing some of the recorded actions which helped distinguish them. This would turn the mural into a series of separate episodes the relations of which could only be ascertained by some kind of accompanying text, a contingency obviously to be avoided.

Returning to those greater individuals whose relations to the theme were more in terms of thought and vision than direct participation—the men of ideas, of business and especially of political enterprise, chief among the latter, of course, is Thomas Jefferson. The Louisiana Purchase, without which there might never have been a West to open for the people of the United States, was wholly the outcome of Jefferson's insight—and foresight. Thomas Jefferson could most properly stand as the theme's major figure, maybe as a symbol of its whole meaning. But behind Jefferson, creating the situations which forced his political action in the Louisiana case, were those pressures of interests and events which followed the transfer of Louisiana from Spain to France. How much was Jefferson impelled to act by what he calls "the fever in which the western mind is thrown by the affair at New Orleans" which "threatens to overbear our peace". (Letter to Monroe?) Besides these pressures on our own frontier stemming from the warlike determination of the western settlers to keep the port of New Orleans open to their trade, which operated on Jefferson, there were also those, stemming from British sea power which operated on Napoleon, and made him not only amenable to Jefferson's original offer, (purchase of New Orleans and Florida) but made him release, to Jefferson's emissaries in Paris the whole of Louisiana. All of these factors, plus many others precedent to them are necessary to explain the Louisiana Purchase. To depict these factors in the limits of the mural space would be impossible. It is doubtful whether they could be depicted at

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Accession Number 59-394-3

8x10 inches (21x26 cm) Black & White

Keywords Artists Mural painting and decoration

HST Keywords Benton, Thomas Hart - Mural - Ref. to; Document

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