

Independence and the Opening of the West



The mural painting, "Independence and the Opening of the West" by Thomas Hart Benton.

Background

Thomas Hart Benton, an American Regionalist artist, was born in Neosho, Missouri in 1889. Known as a great mural painter, Benton created images for the Missouri Capitol Building, the New School for Social Research in New York City, the Power Authority of the State of New York, and the Indiana Capitol Building.

Independence, Missouri, home of the Truman Library, held a past that charmed Benton. Founded in the early nineteenth century, Independence found its way into American folklore by being known as the last city before the frontier. By the 1830s, it was a bustling center of trade for the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails. The 1849 Gold Rush in California only confirmed its place in history as an icon of the American West. Independence was no stranger to the blood, sweat, and tears that Benton often painted. When confronted with the idea of painting a mural in the Truman Library, Benton immediately began to conceptualize an idea for "Independence and the Opening of the West" that would focus on the history of Independence.

Benton hoped to generalize the history by depicting no particular events or people, except Truman. Truman, however, would have nothing to do with a project that would glorify him personally and requested that he not be put in the picture. After some discussion with President Truman over who should be depicted and other ideas, that included Jeffersonian Democracy, Benton's idea was accepted. Depicting three decades, 1817 to 1847, the mural successfully paints a conceptual view of the founding of Independence.

Benton began work on the mural in early 1960, three years after the founding of the Truman Library. Out of the mural, a deep and lasting friendship emerged between two of Missouri's most famous sons. In one account, Benton, high on the scaffolding, was listening to the comments of his chief critic and patron below, President Truman. Finally Benton called down, "If you want to help paint, come up here." "By golly, I will," Truman replied. He climbed up to the platform, seized a brush and began dabbing blue on the sky. Occasions like this, made the President and the artist lifelong friends. President Truman's love of history only confirmed his affinity for the new mural. He once said, "I picked him because he was the best and this is the finest work by the best."

Standards

SS.5.E (3,4,5) Describe, analyze and/or evaluate how changes in communication and transportation technologies affect people's lives.

4.TS.7.B.b Create products such as maps, graphs, timelines, charts, models, diagrams, etc. to communicate information and understanding.

Vocabulary

American Regionalism - An art movement originating in the 1920s and 30s sought to capture the sweat and grit of the 'real' America. It was fostered by the artists John Stuart Curry, Grant Wood, and Thomas Hart Benton.

Gold Rush - began on January 24, 1848, when [gold](#) was found by James W. Marshall at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California. The news of gold brought approximately 300,000 people to [California](#) from the rest of the United States and abroad.

Landmark - a recognizable natural or artificial feature used for navigation.

Mural - a painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall.

Oregon Trail - was a 2,170-mile east-west, large-wheeled wagon route and emigrant trail in the United States that connected the [Missouri River](#) to valleys in Oregon.

Santa Fe Trail - was a 19th-century route through central North America that connected Franklin, Missouri with [Santa Fe](#), New Mexico. This was a trading route compared to the Oregon Trail that was more a route for emigration.

Materials

Background essay on the mural online - [Independence and the Opening of the West](#)

Image of painting - larger version online - [Benton mural](#) (tip - click on magnify to increase size of image)

Activities

Younger students complete activity 1. Older students can complete activity 1 & 2 and students who want to explore further can complete activity 3.

Activity 1

a. Discussion questions to begin. Have the students examine the larger image of the mural online. [Benton mural](#) (tip - click on magnify to increase size of image)

Ask the following Visual Thinking questions:

- i. What do you notice?
- ii. What makes you say that?
- iii. What else do you notice?

This allows the students to explore the painting in its entirety and then do the second part of the activity

b. Using the Mural History Hunt graphic organizer and the image of the painting, have students identify where they can find each item on the sheet.

c. Have students sketch the item in each corresponding square and indicate where it is in the mural (top left, etc)

d. Which item on the sheet is not found in the painting? Why not?

e. In some cases there are more than one of an item, can students find all examples of each item?

Activity 1

Benton Mural History Hunt!

Dog	Wagon	Mule	Home
Job	Ship	Landmark	Plants
Trading	Fire	Children	Tools
Weapon	Building	Water	Harry Truman

Activity 2

Read the background information above, read the online essay ([Independence and the Opening of the West](#)) and study the painting, to answer these questions.

1. What feelings does Benton invoke with the frontier family in the center? What is their reaction to the Native Americans approaching them?
2. What kinds of goods are being bartered in the lower left portion of the canvas?
3. What two Nebraska landmarks are identifiable in the upper right corner of the painting? What is their significance to the American West?
4. What was the role of the African-American in westward expansion? How is Benton's depiction of the African-American in the lower right corner similar? different?
5. What do the two bottom panels of the painting portray? Why do you think they were painted separately from the rest of the painting?
6. Identify three different scenes in the mural and give a brief description of the action taking place. How do they contribute to the overall theme of "Independence and the Opening of the West"?
7. Why wasn't Truman chosen since the location of the mural is at his Presidential library?

Activity 3

Read the background information above, read the online essay ([Independence and the Opening of the West](#)) and study the painting, to answer these questions.

1. Choose one scene of the mural and tell the story of the people in that scene. Write the dialogue and describe the actions that are taking place.
2. How was Independence, Missouri important to the development of the west? What trails originated there? What river does the city lie on? What was the impact of the steamboat on Independence and the west?
3. Examine the works of another American regionalist artist (John Stuart Curry and Grant Wood are the most famous). How is their style similar to Benton? different?
4. Choose another Thomas Hart Benton painting and compare and contrast it to "Independence and the Opening of the West." How is it stylistically, compositionally, and spatially the same? different?

Answer key - Activity 1

Benton Mural History Hunt!

<p>Dog</p> <p>Middle - above door</p>	<p>Wagon</p> <p>Top above door and right side there is a wagon train</p>	<p>Mule</p> <p>Left, center and left in the distance</p>	<p>Home</p> <p>Building on the right, tipis on the left</p>
<p>Job</p> <p>Blacksmith on right, wheelwright on right, traders on left</p>	<p>Ship</p> <p>Bottom left, lower panel</p>	<p>Landmark</p> <p>Bent's Fort on left, Chimney Rock distant back right</p>	<p>Plants</p> <p>Various plants, particularly cacti can be found throughout</p>
<p>Trading</p> <p>Left side</p>	<p>Fire</p> <p>Center above the door, also blacksmith</p>	<p>Children</p> <p>Center above door, working with blacksmith (right)</p>	<p>Tools</p> <p>Ax, blacksmith tools, anvil, animal traps (mostly right side)</p>
<p>Weapon</p> <p>Variety of guns in various locations, bow and arrow on the left. Ax could be considered a weapon</p>	<p>Building</p> <p>House on the right, Bent's fort on the left. Tipi can be considered a building. Also some buildings on lower panels</p>	<p>Water</p> <p>Possibly water above fire, water next to blacksmith, ship is in the Missouri River</p>	<p>Harry Truman</p> <p>He is not in the painting!</p>

Answer key - Activity 2

1. What feelings does Benton invoke with the frontier family in the center? What is their reaction to the Native Americans approaching them?
According to Benton, they are the most important part of the story (front and center). They show fear (children), determination (father), willingness to fight (Father), also tiredness (Mother).
2. What kinds of goods are being bartered in the lower left portion of the canvas?
Possible answers include: Furs, beads (on mat), alcohol (see barrel), knife,
3. What two Nebraska landmarks are identifiable in the upper right corner of the painting? What is their significance to the American West?
Chimney and Courthouse Rock. They were significant landmarks on the Oregon Trail guiding pioneers west.
4. What was the role of the African-American in westward expansion? How is Benton's depiction of the African-American in the lower right corner similar? different?
African Americans also went westward as workers, both as slave laborers and free men and women laborers. Students should notice the African American workers in the mural and indicate they do not appear to be slaves in the painting.
5. What do the two bottom panels of the painting portray? Why do you think they were painted separately from the rest of the painting?
Benton described this section as "Independence in the late 1840s and the Missouri River landing where most of the goods and

people which changed Independence from a quiet backwoods settlement to a gateway of destiny”.

6. Identify three different scenes in the mural and give a brief description of the action taking place. How do they contribute to the overall theme of "Independence and the Opening of the West"?

Students can choose their own scenes for this answer. They should indicate how their scenes contribute to the overall theme.

7. Why wasn't Truman chosen since the location of the mural is at his Presidential library?

Benton and Truman discussed this at length and Truman told Benton he preferred not to be in the mural. Benton was relieved! Benton preferred to tell the story of the opening of the West and Independence's important role as a jumping off point. Truman, who understood the importance of history, agreed. Truman's grandfather, Solomon Young, was a trader on the Santa Fe Trail and heard his stories growing up.

Activity 3 - Answer Key

1. Choose one scene of the mural and tell the story of the people in that scene. Write the dialogue and describe the actions that are taking place.

Student scenes will vary. Dialog and actions should be realistic and represent the time period and be accurate.

2. How was Independence, Missouri important to the development of the west? What trails originated there? What river does the city lie on? What was the impact of the steamboat on Independence and the west?

Independence was a jumping off point - beginning point for the Oregon, California and Santa Fe Trails. Missouri River. The steamboat brought goods and supplies from the East along the Missouri River and were sold in Independence to pioneers and traders who took them west.

3. Examine the works of another American regionalist artist (John Stuart Curry and Grant Wood are the most famous). How is their style similar to Benton? different?

Student choice. Students will need to explore other sites and resources to explore answers. Resources might include <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/american-regionalism/>.

4. Choose another Thomas Hart Benton painting and compare and contrast it to "Independence and the Opening of the West." How is it stylistically, compositionally, and spatially the same? different?

Student choice.