

**Title:** Independence and the Opening of the West

**Course:** U.S. History

**Subjects:**

Historic Art, Primary Source Analysis

**Grade Levels:**

9, 10, 11, 12

**Classroom/Homework Activity to be performed:**

Thomas Hart Benton, an American Regionalist artist, was born in Neosho, Missouri in 1889. At an early age, Benton looked beyond his storied political familial roots to a career as an artist. Benton was treated to an extensive education that involved many travels. He studied at the Chicago Art Institute and the Academie Julien in Paris where he developed his new style. His prominence in the world of art began to take shape in the early 1920's and 30's. Sidney Larson, an artist and friend, recalled, "He took on the high and mighty of politics, art education, criticism, or, simply, privilege." Evident in his early works was a leftist political philosophy much like his fathers, a member of the House of Representatives from 1894 to 1904. They shared an opposition of eastern bankers, railroad magnates, and industrial capitalists. At one point, Benton was even a card carrying communist, allowing secret meetings to be held in his home. Benton's great love, however, was the common man and his plight. His paintings delight in glorifying this backbone of the American consciousness. 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 storied 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 1830's, 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, excepting 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 bantering 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.

Upon completion of "Independence and the Opening of the West" Benton described the action of the work as follows:

In the area about and above the door are the chief opposing elements of the drama. Here are the Plains Indians, against the hunter and trapper, and the French "voyageur" and the permanent settler who finally dispossessed the Indians. The prospective settler represented is placed in the important position directly above the door because it

was he, and she, who set the seal of accomplished fact on our continental destiny. Traders, explorers, hunters, and adventurers marked the paths over which destiny took its course but it was the settler who, in the end, was most consequential in establishing the United States we now know. All settlers, hunters, trappers, and traders of the West sooner or later came in direct contact with the Indians whose hunting lands they invaded.

The Indians adjacent to the door are Pawnees. The Pawnees ranged from what is now Nebraska to the borders of present day Oklahoma country. Their chief wealth was in horses and they were celebrated for their ability to steal them, from other Indians as well as whites....

Travelers of the Plains trails might well meet them first. They would be likely to appear friendly in the hope of picking up a little coffee or tobacco, and this is indicated by the offer of the pipe to the leader of the settlers' train which is coming to a halt for supper. The whites are suspicious as they usually were with Indians whose unpredictable behaviours, volative temperments, and ways of thinking they did not understand. Some justification of the suspicion is indicated by the Pawnee warrior, in the foreground to the left of the door, who though probably aware of the peaceful pipe offering has ideas of his own. The Indians were individualistic and acted more frequently on purely personal initiative than the whites who traversed the prairies. The whites knew the value of disciplined cooperative action. That is one reason why they dispossessed the Indians even though obstreperous whites frequently enough forgot their group responsibilities. It was these latter who caused most of the Indian troubles, according to Josiah Gregg, the first historian of the Plains, and aside from President Truman the most distinguished citizen of Independence.

The Pawnee in the fore plane of the picture is equipped, and painted, for marauding action with ready bow and arrow and the famous Pawnee lasso entwined about his waist. Opposite to him on the right side of the door is the Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, Jim Beckwourth type of hunter, trapper, and mountain man, who first scouted the pathways of the West. He would not make trouble with the Indians. Normally he gets along with them, but he would be ready, as the dropping of his traps and the charging of his gun suggests, for any troubles which might arise. He is a dead shot and, like the Indians, inured to physical hardships. he is not merely an adventurer but is as we say "in business." He works at his beaver hunting and trapping for a profit, but he usually expends this in a few wild days of "hoopla" with the whiskey kegs, gambling rings, and acquiescent young Indian squaws assembled by more calculating fur seekers from Independence, St. Louis, and eastward, who buy his hard earned pelts at a fraction of their world market value. He it is who made possible the beaver fortunes of the Astors and other great and respectable notables of the 19th century. He himself is not notably respectable but is nevertheless one of the stalwarts of our westward destiny.

Above him is that other omnipresent actor on our western trails, the French "voyageur"--boatman, axman, mule skinner, and ox driver. Everywhere on the frontier from Louisiana to Canada he was the man of hard work, gay song, and perpetual good humor. His name is rarely known to record but we owe more to him, perhaps, than to his celebrated countryman Lafayette.

In the foreground to the right of the door are shown the indispensable workers of an outfitting town such as was Independence. The boy pulling the bellows rope in the blacksmith shop is not paid for his trouble. He is doing what all country town kids have always liked to do, in cluding the artist. Beyond these, again to the right, indicating the direction of the trade which first built up the town is a Mexican gentleman with his, at the moment, refractory riding mule.

The oxen led in back of the wheelwright may be for sale or be simply on their way to the owner's wagon. In the rear, wagons form a train, the loaded ones moving out toward the prairie. Way back in the distance, showing that the wagons are headed for Oregon are the famous landmarks of the Oregon Trail, Chimney and Courthouse Rocks in western Nebraska. To the left of the door, back of the Pawnee warrior a trader displays his wares to a Cheyenne chief who has red fox furs to barter. Near the chief's hand is the rifle, a French flintlock which has likely come West from New Orleans, its journey furthered perhaps by the introduction of an arrow to the body of its original owner. Back of the trader is the persuasive whiskey keg, likely full of watered alcohol, pepper, and tobacco juice, and back of that a young Cheyenne squaw bringing in more fur to trade. Near her, pack mules are being reloaded for a further westward journey. They are tardy members of the mule train going over the hill.

Above and to the left of the Cheyenne chief a number of his young warriors show off their horsemanship, no doubt stimulated by trader's beverages. Back of them is Fort Bent, a formidable adobe fortress set far out on the Santa Fe Trail along the banks of the Arkansas River, in southern Colorado. Back of the Fort are the Spanish Peaks, landmarks of the way to Taos and Santa Fe.

The lower panels, right and left of the door, show Independence in the late 1840's and the Missouri River landing where arrived most of the goods and peoples which changed Independence from quiet backwoods settlement to a gateway of destiny.

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."

### **Rationale:**

### **District, state, or national performance and knowledge standards/goals/skills met:**

Missouri Standards

2. Continuity and change in the history of Missouri, the United States and the world
7. The use of tools of social science inquiry (such as surveys, statistics, maps, documents)

### **KANSAS STANDARDS**

Benchmark 5: The student engages in historical thinking skills.

1. (A) analyzes a theme in United States history to explain patterns of continuity and change over time.
2. (A) develops historical questions on a specific topic in United States history and analyzes the evidence in primary source documents to speculate on the answers.

### **Secondary materials (book, article, video documentary, etc.) needed:**

[Further Reading](#)

Adams, Henry. 1989. Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Benton, Thomas Hart. "American Regionalism: A Personal History of the Movement." University of Kansas City Review 18 (Autumn 1951): 41-75.

Benton, Thomas Hart. 1983. An Artist in America. 4th edition. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press.

Benton, Thomas Hart. "The President and Me: The Intimate Story." Gateway Heritage 16 (Winter 1995): 5-17.

Braun, Emily. 1985. Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals. (Catalog of an exhibition presented by the Williams College Museum of Art, February 2-25, 1985). New York: The Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States.

Doss, Erika Lee. 1991. Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Marling, Karal Ann. 1985. Tom Benton and His Drawings: A Biographical Essay and a Collection of His Sketches, Studies and Mural Cartoons. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press.

Priddy, Bob. 1989. Only the Rivers are Peaceful: Thomas Hart Benton's Missouri Mural. Independence, Missouri: Independence Press/Herald Publishing House.

Thomas Hart Benton: A Personal Commemorative. (A Retrospective Exhibition of His Works, 1907-1972, Spiva Art Center, Missouri Southern State College, Joplin, Missouri, March 24 through April 27, 1973. In Honor of the Joplin Centennial). Kansas City, Missouri: Burd and Fletcher, 1973.

### [Internet Resources](#)

Back to the [Student Activity Files](#)

[Truman Library](#)-This web page for the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum includes a number of resources, activities, and links about Harry S. Truman.

[Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art](#)-This is the web page for the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. The museum houses a number of Thomas Hart Benton works of art.

**Full description of activity or assignment:**

[Vocabulary](#)

American Regionalism An art movement originating in the 1920's and 30's 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.

voyageur a man employed by the fur companies in transporting goods and men by the streams and across the land between streams, to and from the remote stations in the Northwest

[Source Analysis](#)

1. What medium was used to complete this mural? What other artists have used this medium?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Artists use colors to influence the viewer's feelings. For example, pale pastels evoke different emotions than strong, bright colors. What color scheme did Benton use to portray the "Opening of the West"? What feelings do the colors evoke?



historically accurate manner?

10. What are some of the different jobs being completed in the mural? Which of these jobs (if any) are still performed today?

11. 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"?

12. Why was this subject chosen for the mural? Why wasn't an aggrandizement of Truman chosen since the location of the mural is at his Presidential library?

**Full explanation of the assessment method and/or scoring guide:**

[Follow-Up Questions](#)

1. What art movement did Thomas Hart Benton belong to? What aspects of the movement does "Independence and the Opening of the West" follow? Which aspects of the movement does the mural stray from?

2. 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.

3. In what ways does this painting fit your stereotype of the American frontier? How is it different?

4. 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?
5. Who was Thomas Hart Benton's famous student? What art movement did he belong to?
6. 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?
7. Chose 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?
8. Read the quote and answer the following questions.

[I] did assume that some kind of representation of the President [Truman] would have to be put in any mural for his library....A public picture of a living politician is an almost impossible task because you have to face too many people with it. If it isn't flattering you make the man's constituency mad, if it is you make everybody else mad."

-Thomas Hart Benton  
The President and Me: The Intimate Story

- o Why would everybody else be mad if the portrait of the President was too flattering?
- o Why was Thomas Hart Benton concerned with painting current political figures? (Examine what happened when he painted Tom Pendergast in the Missouri capital murals.)

9. Chief Justice Earl Warren said of the mural in a speech at its unveiling, "[It] captures the full drama of the epic western movement of our nation. It cannot fail to reach the hearts of all who see it. It will help to stir the imagination and the vision of our young people with whom the future of our nation rests, and turn their

thoughts to our heroic history and to the values which made this country great." Do you agree or disagree? Why?

10. Why has Benton chosen to not glorify any of the noteworthy men and women of the American West in favor of depicting generalizations of the "common man"?
  
11. Tell the story of "America and the Millenium" in pictures. Use whatever medium you desire. What kinds of people are depicted? How does your art work compare to Thomas Hart Benton's?