



Thomas Hart Benton and the American Sound

Leo G. Mazow

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Alternately praised as “an American original” and lampooned as an arbiter of kitsch, the regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton has been the subject of myriad monographs and journal articles, remaining almost as controversial today as he was in his own time. Missing from this literature, however, is an understanding of the profound ways in which sound figures in the artist’s enterprises. Prolonged attention to the sonic realm yields rich insights into long-established narratives, corroborating some but challenging and complicating at least as many. A self-taught and frequently performing musician who invented a harmonica tablature notation system, Benton was also a collector, cataloguer, transcriber, and distributor of popular music. In *Thomas Hart Benton and the American Sound*, Leo Mazow shows that the artist’s musical imagery was part of a larger belief in the capacity of sound to register and convey meaning. In Benton’s pictorial universe, it is through sound that stories are told, opinions are voiced, experiences are preserved, and history is recorded.

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