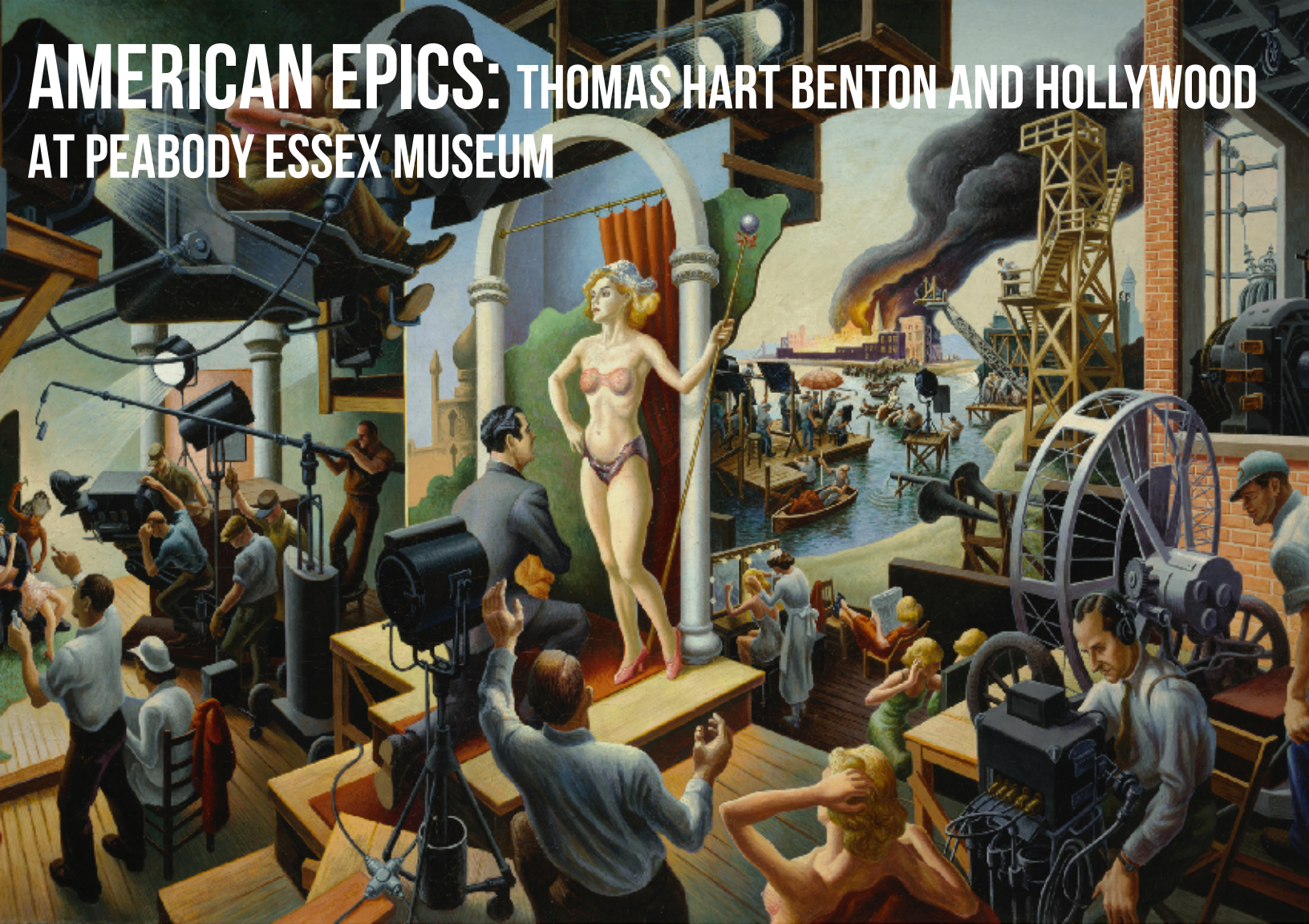


AMERICAN EPICS: THOMAS HART BENTON AND HOLLYWOOD AT PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM



(Previous Page) In 1937, Benton was commissioned by Life magazine to paint a "movie mural" documenting how feature films were made in Hollywood. He filled a dynamic painting, "Hollywood," 1937–38, with stars, supporting actors, directors, technicians and equipment. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Mo., bequest of the artist. —Jamison Miller photo

"The Kentuckian," 1954, shows Burt Lancaster in the title role of a 1955 film. Former President Harry Truman, a fellow Missourian, criticized the painting on the grounds that Lancaster looked too handsome. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Burt Lancaster.

By Stephen May

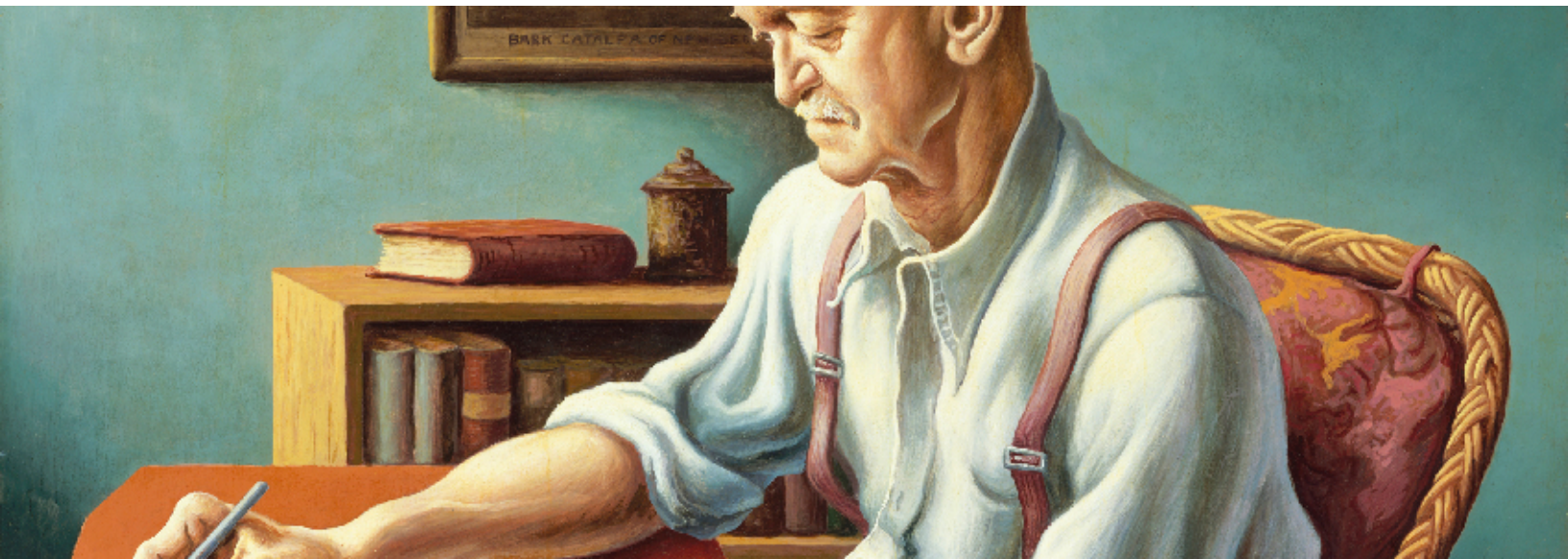
SALEM, MASS. — The American art world had never seen anybody like Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) — macho, outspoken, boisterous, bombastic, intense and



After World War II, Benton painted a series of portraits of old friends who were exemplars of specifically American types, like George A. Hough, the subject of "New England Editor," 1946. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Hayden Collection, Charles Henry Hayden Fund. (Click image to see full size)

convinced that the best art could be created in the heartland of the Midwest in the 1920s and 1930s.

Turning his back on his contemporaries and their enthusiasm for all-American themes and European techniques, Benton returned to the Midwest where, with John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood, he led the Regionalist movement that remains best known for its identifiably





The model for "Portrait of a Musician," 1949, was an African American jazz bassist who played in a Kansas City nightclub Benton frequented in the 1940s. The musician gave the artist the opportunity to paint a jazz player in his characteristic sculptural form and undulating lines. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbus, anonymous gift.

American themes painted in a representational style. For a time, Benton became the most famous artist in the country, a reputation he coveted. He painted pictures and murals full of highly delineated, sinuous, rubbery, often heroic figures, frequently in the South or the Midwest. As art professor Leo G. Mazow puts it, "Benton used his murals, paintings and prints to



▲ Benton was intrigued by the Lewis and Clark expedition into the West. He chose the site depicted in "Lewis and Clark at Eagle Creek," 1967, because the explorers had camped there. Here, he presented the beauty of untamed wilderness no white man had seen prior to their journey, reducing the arriving expedition party to a tiny scale, dwarfed by the pristine nature around it. Measuring 30½ by 38 inches, it is courtesy of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis, Ind.

▼ Benton biographer Justin Wolff calls "People of Chilmark (Figure Composition)," 1920, the artist's "first masterpiece." In this large, ambitious canvas — measuring about 5½ by 6½ feet — the artist painted slim, swim-suited friends on Cape Cod as they frolic in the surf. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation. —Cathy Carver photo



document, celebrate and critique the folkways of ordinary Americans, which, for the artist, increasingly meant those individuals living outside the Northeast seaboard.” His art offered Benson an outlet for his penchant for exaggeration, caricature and the grotesque.

As well known for his bombast as his art, Benton pretended that

“Self Portrait with Rita,” circa 1924, shows the couple on South Beach, Martha’s Vineyard, an area where they spent many happy summers. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.





his public role was thrust upon him, when in fact he reveled in seeing his name in headlines. He quarreled with a broad range of people, spouting off to newspapers, as one friend said, whenever he had a tumbler of bourbon in his hand and a reporter nearby. Among those who felt his wrath were academicians, abstract artists, clergymen, Communists, critics, collectors and homosexuals. In spite of all his outbursts, Benton built a large following

In "Shipping Out," 1942, Benton depicted a GI boarding a ship that will take him to war. Mixing realism and sentimentality, it especially reflects the artist's exposure to the latter in Hollywood. Property of the Westervelt Collection and displayed in the Tuscaloosa Museum of Art in Tuscaloosa, Ala. —Chip Cooper photo

and continues to be the subject of major museum exhibitions. Case in point is “American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood,” on view at the Peabody Essex Museum through September 7 and traveling to

three other sites. This is the first major exhibition to examine significant links between Benton’s art and the movies. ...

[\(Continued on page 6C inside the E-edition\)](#)

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