



Thomas Hart Benton
American, 1889 - 1975

Corn and Winter Wheat

1948

oil on canvas

overall: 52.1 x 74.9 cm (20 1/2 x 29 1/2 in.)

framed: 71.1 x 94 x 4.8 cm (28 x 37 x 1 7/8 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Benton 48

Gift (Partial and Promised) of Helen Lee Henderson in memory of Helen Ruth Henderson, Founder, HRH Foundation
2001.122.1

ENTRY

Corn and Winter Wheat is probably based on sketches that Benton made while traveling in rural Missouri in 1945. Dwarfed by the rolling Missouri farmland, two farmers in the center foreground plant winter wheat with the aid of a horse-drawn wagon. A farmhouse with a red barn and windmill, standard ingredients of the American regionalist landscape, appear in the left background. Six shocks of corn occupy the foreground.

Since the late 1930s Benton had been painting landscapes such as *Cradling Wheat* (1938, St. Louis Art Museum, MO) that represent farming in the rural areas where he often traveled in search of suitable subjects. These works had been successful for Benton, and an early example, *July Hay* (1943), was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art the same year it was executed. Benton's small-scale easel paintings were derived from motifs found in the monumental public murals that had helped to establish his reputation in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, farming scenes have a prominent role in his *Social History of Missouri* (1936) in the House Lounge of the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City. After the war Benton avoided

controversial social commentary in his paintings and even experimented with a mythological subject—*Achelous and Hercules* (1947, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC)—for a mural commissioned by a women’s clothing store in St. Louis.

In an earlier and very similar painting also titled *Corn and Winter Wheat* [fig. 1], Benton has represented a farmer seated on the ground gathering corn into shocks. The corn shocks are also a prominent feature of the equally similar 1945 lithograph *Loading Corn* [fig. 2] that was based on sketches Benton had made in autumn in Missouri. He explained that such scenes were “to be seen on most hill farms. The problem with these subjects is not to find them but to find them in a pictorially workable setting.” [1]

In his harvest scenes Benton has depicted a labor-intensive, traditional method of farming wheat and corn that was in the process of being rendered obsolete by mechanization. [2] The first mechanical corn harvester, for instance, had been developed in 1930 by Gleaner Harvester Combine Corporation in Independence, Missouri, and after World War II modern, efficient mechanical harvesters for various crops were fast becoming a ubiquitous part of rural life. [3] Benton was extremely knowledgeable about farming, and on his travels—even while summering on Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts—he deliberately sought unusual, antiquated planting and harvesting techniques as subjects for his landscapes. [4] In his explanatory notes to the 1939 lithographs *Cradling Wheat* and *Planting*, Benton noted that their subjects were based on his earlier observations of traditional methods of farming in east Tennessee and southern Arkansas, commenting that “old ways don’t die easily.” [5]

J. Richard Gruber has noted that Benton’s carefully observed and researched agricultural subjects show that the artist “viewed these scenes as reflective of a larger order at work, a traditional American agrarian order that was based on the importance of man working in harmony with the world of nature. The abundance of the harvest in these works serves as evidence of the fruits of man’s labor when he respected those natural systems and worked in accordance with the laws of the natural world.” [6] *Corn and Winter Wheat*, like other landscapes by Benton during this period, is a nostalgic look back in time to the country’s agrarian, pre-industrial past that extols the virtues of the rural midwestern lifestyle.

In the years following World War II, American regionalism fell out of fashion, its popularity superseded by the growing attention paid to modernist abstraction in

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS American Paintings, 1900–1945

America. Grant Wood had died in 1942, John Steuart Curry in 1946, and the reputation of Thomas Hart Benton, the sole survivor of the movement's three leading artists, was in decline. In May 1946 the well-known art historian Horst W. Janson wrote an article for the *Magazine of Art* in which he attacked regionalism, stating that the movement was “essentially anti-artistic in its aims and character” and “nourished by some of the fundamental ills of our society” before directing some personal aspersions at Benton. [7] In 1947 Benton broke with his dealer Reeves Lewenthal ostensibly because he did not use enough Missouri artists to execute a commission for a St. Louis department store. In 1948, when *Look* magazine published a list of the 10 best American artists based on the recommendations of museum professionals and critics, Benton's name was not mentioned. [8] Henry Adams has noted that the indistinct, painterly quality of *Corn and Winter Wheat* can be related to the artist's “slightly depressed mood at the time, when he's being pushed off stage and the America he knew is changing, and he's trying to figure out who he is as an artist and what he should do next.” [9]

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Thomas Hart Benton, *Corn and Winter Wheat*, c. 1945, oil and varnish glazes on fabric, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester. Gift from the Chapin and Mary Alexander Riley Collection, 1970.156. © Worcester Art Museum



fig. 2 Thomas Hart Benton, *Loading Corn*, 1945, lithograph, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of W. J. Cole. © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

NOTES

- [1] Creekmore Fath, *The Lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton* (Austin, TX, 1990), no. 65, 150.
- [2] Introduced to Kansas by Mennonite immigrants in the 19th century, winter wheat is planted from September to December. Crops sprout before freezing occurs, become dormant until the soil warms in the spring, and are ready for harvesting by early July. The widespread cultivation of winter wheat began in Kansas at the turn of the 20th century, largely through the efforts of the agriculturalist Bernard Warkentin and the botanist Mark Carleton, and quickly spread throughout the Great Plains. Regarding corn, late in the harvest season, after picking the ears by hand, farmers bundled the remaining corn stalks together and tied them into teepee-shaped shocks that they set upright in the field. This process facilitated drying so that the remnants of the corn plants could be used as fodder for farm animals. See Thomas D. Isern, “Wheat Explorer the World Over: Mark Carleton of Kansas,” *Kansas History* 23 (Spring–Summer, 2000): 12–25, and “Bernard Warkentin,” Kansas Historical Society, last modified January 2016, <http://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/bernard-warkentin/15595>.

- [3] “Harvester Cuts Corn, Shells Cleans and Bins It,” *Popular Mechanics*, Nov. 1930, 762.
- [4] Benton did occasionally represent modern mechanized farming; see, for example, *Rice Threshing* (1945, private collection) and *Wyoming Hay* (1963–1964, Winston Churchill Memorial and Library, Fulton, MO).
- [5] See, respectively, Creekmore Fath, *The Lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton* (Austin, TX, 1990), nos. 27 and 28, 74–76. In the commentary to *Island Hay*, no. 68, 156, Benton drew attention to the traditional scythe cutting method still being used on Martha’s Vineyard.
- [6] J. Richard Gruber, *Thomas Hart Benton and the American South* (Athens, GA, 1998), 46.
- [7] H. W. Janson, “Benton and Wood, Champions of Regionalism,” *Magazine of Art*, May 1946, quoted in Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* (New York, 1989), 320.
- [8] “Are These Men the Best Painters in America Today?” *Look*, Feb. 3, 1948, 44–48, discussed in Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* (New York, 1989), 320.
- [9] Henry Adams to Robert Torchia, Mar. 28, 2012, NGA curatorial files.
-

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a medium-weight plain-weave fabric that has been lined with a nap-bond, heat-set adhesive onto a nonoriginal, keyed wooden stretcher. The tacking margins are intact. The canvas was commercially prepared with an off-white priming. [1] Infrared reflectography has revealed traces of brushed underdrawing in the foreground greenery, the basket held by the men in the barn, and the contours of several haystacks. [2] The oil paint has been applied in a thick, opaque paste, with vigorous brushmarking and high impasto in many areas. There is a thick layer of synthetic resin varnish coating the paint layer that imparts an evenly glossy surface. A series of long vertical cracks in the sky are covered with inpainting. There is an area in the tan-orange foreground paint where the top layer has flaked away, revealing green paint beneath. The impasto has generally been flattened by the lining process.

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] The priming covers all of the tacking margins, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting. This usually indicates that the priming was commercially prepared rather than applied by the artist.
- [2] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with a K astronomy filter.
-

PROVENANCE

Sadie Miller, McPherson, Kansas, by 1950.[1] (Kodner Gallery, St. Louis); acquired jointly May 2000 by (Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe) and (John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco); sold January 2001 to (Owen Gallery, New York);[2] purchased January 2001 by Helen L. Henderson, Washington, D.C.; gift 2001 to NGA.

[1] This Information is on the appraisal report, copy in NGA curatorial files.

[2] This Information was kindly provided by the Gerald Peters Gallery.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

2000 Thomas Hart Benton, Owen Gallery, New York, 2000.

To cite: Robert Torchia, “Thomas Hart Benton/*Corn and Winter Wheat*/1948,” *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/119613/2018-08-09> (accessed August 09, 2018).