

18a The Sources of Country Music, 1975

Thomas Hart Benton was eighty-four in 1973, when he came out of retirement to paint a mural for the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee. His assignment was to describe the regional sources of the musical style known as “country,” and Benton couldn’t resist the opportunity to paint one last celebration of homegrown American traditions. Benton himself was a skilled harmonica player who had been raised on the old-time music of the Missouri Ozarks. It was during his lifetime that the multimillion-dollar country-music industry in Nashville had replaced the community-based music of rural America. As an artist, he had gained a popular following in the 1930s with works that spoke to ordinary people. Along with other Midwestern Regionalists such as Grant Wood (see 3-A), Benton rejected “Parisian aesthetics,” the European influence on American art, and scorned abstract art as “an academic world of empty pattern.” His ambition was to paint meaningful, intelligible subjects — “the living world of active men and women” — that would hold broad, popular appeal. By virtue of its subject and its setting, the Nashville mural was to be a painting, Benton said, “aimed at persons who do not ordinarily visit art museums.”

The Sources of Country Music presents five distinct scenes to survey the music of ordinary Americans. The central subject of a barn dance, with a pair of fiddlers calling out sets to a group of square dancers, describes the dominant music of the frontier. A comparatively calm scene shows three women in their Sunday best with hymnals in their hands, suggesting the importance of church music in Protestant America. In the foreground, two barefoot mountain women sing to the sounds of a lap dulcimer, an old instrument associated with Appalachian ballads. In the

opposite corner an armed cowboy, one foot on his saddle, accompanies himself with a guitar. An African American man, apparently a cotton picker in the Deep South, strums a tune on a banjo, an instrument slaves brought with them to the New World. Beyond him, on the other side of the railroad tracks, a group of black women dances on the distant riverbank. Despite the range of regional styles, instruments, and customs, the mural seems to pulsate to a single beat, as if Benton took care to ensure that all the musicians played the same note and sang their varied American songs in tune.

The mural preserves an image of American folkways that were rapidly disappearing. Benton’s characteristically dynamic style expresses the powerful rhythms of music while suggesting the inevitability of change. Many of the robust, nearly life-size figures balance on uneven, shifting ground. The fiddlers look liable to fall into the mysteriously bowed floor, and the log on which the banjo player sits threatens to roll down the steep slope of the red-clay landscape. Even the telephone poles seem to sway in the background. The steam engine, an indication of change, represents the end of an agrarian life and the homogenization of American culture, which necessarily entailed the loss of regional customs.

The mural pays homage to the country music singer and movie star Tex Ritter, who had helped to persuade Benton to accept the Nashville commission but died before it was completed. Benton represents Ritter as the singing cowboy who turns to face the coal-black engine steaming along the horizon. The train itself was modeled on the *Cannonball Special*, driven and wrecked by Casey Jones, the hero of an American ballad; it also calls to mind “The Wabash Cannonball,” a popular folk song about a mythical train that glides through the country, then rumbles off to heaven. The engine, which may signify the positive as well as the negative aspects of American progress (see Edward Hopper’s *House by the Railroad*, 16-A), is the only element of the complex composition that Benton felt he couldn’t get quite right. Unfortunately, we will never know how he wanted the train to look. Benton is said to have died of a massive heart attack while standing before the mural in January 1975, trying to decide whether to research and repaint the train. Whether the story is true or not, his final work was never signed.



18-A Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), *The Sources of Country Music*, 1975. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 120 in. (182.9 x 304.8 cm.). The Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum, Nashville, Tenn. The Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum is operated by the Country Music Foundation, Inc., a Section 501(c)(3) not-for-profit educational organization chartered by the State of Tennessee in 1964.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to study this painting carefully, paying attention to the way the artist has grouped the elements in his work.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

Have students find five scenes in this painting that show regional musicians. These represent the roots of American country music. Can students identify what type of music each of these represents?

Church and choir music: *Three women with a choir director (upper left) are representative of church and choir music.*

Appalachian singers: *Two barefoot women playing the dulcimer (left) represent Appalachia.*

Barn dance: *Two fiddlers and dancers (center) are representative of barn dancing.*

Singing cowboy: *A man with a guitar (right) represents the "singing cowboy."*

African American music of the Deep South: *The man with a banjo and a group of women on the distant riverbank (center right) represent African American music of the Deep South.*

M | S

How did Benton join these different scenes into one unified composition?

He overlapped forms, used the same painting style throughout, repeated colors, and made most of the figures face in toward the center of the painting. Just as all these musical influences came together in American country music, they hold together as a unified composition in this painting.

E | M | S

How did Benton create a sense of rhythm and movement throughout this composition?

Most of the vertical lines and bodies slant to the right, creating visual movement in that direction. The train leans forward as it speeds to the right. Even the telephone poles seem to sway.

INTERPRET E | M | S

What things and people are making music and sound in this scene?

The choir, Appalachian women, banjo player, and cowboy are singing. The train rumbles and whistles, the riverboat whistles, and dancers stamp their feet on a wooden floor. The dulcimer, fiddles, banjo, and guitar are all being played.

Benton wanted all the musicians to play the same note and sing their varied music in tune. Do you think this painting seems like noisy confusion or are all the parts in harmony?

M | S

What does the steam engine represent?

The steam engine represents change—the end of agrarian life as Americans left farms for cities and regional cultures blended together.

M | S

Why did Benton include in the painting a homage to Tex Ritter, the singing cowboy?

Ritter helped persuade Benton to paint this picture but died before it was completed.

Why did Benton not sign this painting?

He died before he completed it.

Before he died, Benton was trying to decide whether he should repaint the train. Why do you think he wanted to do this?

CONNECTIONS **Geography:** Midwest region; the South; the West; Ozarks; Appalachia

Music: bluegrass; country, gospel; historically American instruments

Arts: Regionalism