Who was Thomas Hart Benton?

- 1889 – Born in Neosho, MO to a famous political family.

- Started drawing at a young age – his created his first mural with crayons.

- Educated as an artist at the Art Institute of Chicago and Academie Julian in Paris.

Thomas Hart Benton in his studio, 1936. Photo courtesy of *The Kansas City Star.*
Who was Thomas Hart Benton?

- Originally influenced by European art, then experimented with abstraction
- Considered outspoken, opinionated and often abrasive and surrounded by controversy
- One of the principal Regionalists
- Through painting, Benton was able to support himself

Benton’s Techniques

- Early on attempted Modernism, Abstraction, Synchromism, Master Works

- Benton denounced the contemporary art of his time, but never fully broke from his Modernist roots

- Mural and canvas paintings focused on American history and sometimes “less savory” subjects of American life through varied subjects

- Early 1930s vs late 1930s

- Compare Benton and Michelangelo’s artworks

*New York Rooftops, c. 1920-23*
Thomas Hart Benton, *The Bather*, 1917

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Figure from the Sistine Chapel, Rome*, 1508-1512
Benton’s Techniques

- “Sold out” in a sense by creating artworks for the tobacco industry and the military.
- His canvas - dramatic action, loud colors, sculptural volumes
- He intended to create distinctly American art
- Landscapes in his later years have a “feeling of harmony between man and nature”
Benton and Pollock

The Teacher and The Pupil

- Benton taught Pollock at the Art Students League of New York
- Regionalists influenced Abstract Expressionists
- Compare Benton and Pollock’s works

Thomas Hart Benton, Going West, 1930
Illustration for Leo Hubermans’s We The People

Jackson Pollock, Going West, c. 1934-1935
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Benton’s Rhythm

- Benton’s three fundamental principles of successful composition:
  - Equilibrium, Sequence or Connection and Rhythm
  - Curves and their counterpoint around vertical poles

“Thomas Hart Benton, illustrations from “The Mechanics of Form Organization,” redrawn from Benton’s pencil sketches by Lloyd Goodrich, published in Arts magazine, 1926-27. In his essay, Benton laid out the fundamental principles of abstract composition. His diagrams directly looked forward to the work of his pupil Jackson Pollock. The compositional structure of Pollock’s early works is given in diagrams 22 and 23; that of his later work in diagram 24.”

1
Benton’s *The Hailstorm*

- Represents a return to his roots in Missouri
- Paint what you know rather than imagined
- Agrarian subject – drama of man in nature
- Distorted figures, soft and blurred edges, Baroque contrast and diagonals/dramatic lines, agitation.
- Watercolor study

Detail *The Hailstorm*, 1940

Detail *Running Before the Storm*, 1940
Thomas Hart Benton, *The Hailstorm*, 1940
The Regionalists

- **Grant Wood**
  - Lived his entire life in Iowa
  - Subject matter of choice – country life and American folklore
  - The Stone City Colony and Art School
  - 1935 – Published the *Revolt Against the City*

- **John Steuart Curry**
  - Kansas farm boy who moved east
  - Respect for animals – noted how weather conditions affected farm life
  - Subject matter of choice – melodramatic depictions of his regions he called home
  - Taught at Art Students League of New York
Power of Nature

Grant Wood  *Stone City, Iowa*, 1930. Joslyn Art Museum