Benton & Pollock
the teacher & the pupil

The Regionalists prepared the way for Abstract Expressionism to emerge in America. Some of Pollock’s power as an artist originated with the influence of Thomas Hart Benton to the art classes that Pollock took under Benton while a student at the Art Students League of New York. Regionalism had a catalytic effect on late American art in a similar way that Post-Impressionism in Europe did via Van Gogh, Expressionists, Cubists, and other movements.

Benton’s depression on pictures revolves with the turbulence and tension of the 1930s. Pollock’s 1934 painting of a frontier journey captures his teacher’s energetic style to his own roots in the American West. The same year he came from a family photo of a bridge in Cody, Wyoming, where Pollock was born. The abstract expressionistic format he worked in this landscape illustrates how Benton healed with late Pollock. Benton’s subtitle of the mural, “pollock’s sketchbook,” containing more than 500 drawings, shows his continued efforts to organize compositional techniques in painting, as Benton had counseled. Benton remained popularly until well into the 1940s, when his work came under attack by European-trained art historians, and abstraction began to capture the attention of leading art critics. Ironically, the most authentic figures in the new Expressionist movement was Benton’s former pupil, Jackson Pollock.


Jackson Pollock’s early painting, Going West, which has often been compared to the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder, was obviously based on Benton’s depiction of the same subject for Huberman’s Mural of the History of the United States. Harper Brothers, 1947.

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A pivotal figure in the story of American art, Benton was originally influenced by the old masters of European art, then by modern artists experimenting with abstraction. He turned away from abstraction to paint his own country and its people, becoming a Regionalist painter. At the time of the young Jackson Pollock, his influence passed on to the next generation of Abstract Expressionists, and a new era in art began.

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