Part 1—Reading/Language

Directions **This passage is about a painter. Read the passage.**

History on the Walls

by Neil Raines

After painting for more than 20 years, Thomas Hart Benton began one of his most important commissions. He was given the job of painting murals for the legislators' lounge at the Missouri State Capitol. Benton was part of a famous Missouri family. His father was a Neosho lawyer and former U.S. Congressman. His great uncle, whom he was named after, was one of Missouri's first two U.S. Senators. Benton himself was a nationally known painter. He had studied in Chicago and Paris and became famous during his years working in New York City. In 1935, Benton moved back to Missouri to teach at the Kansas City Art Institute. His statehouse murals were to be his first works painted back in his home state. His plan was to show Missouri's history on the statehouse walls.

Preparation

Benton was a student of American history and culture. During Benton's New York days, he would travel during his summers, touring the country and sketching the people, places, and things that made America unique. Many of these sketches would later be used in his murals and canvas paintings once he returned to New York. He used this same approach for his Missouri murals.

After reading histories of his home state, he traveled around Missouri, sketching people and places he could put into his work. Some of the people were well known, such as his father and the Kansas City political boss Tom Pendergast. Others were just ordinary folks whose faces looked interesting to the artist. Benton sketched scenes from different areas of the state: the farm and lumber regions, the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, and parts of St. Louis and Kansas City.

Once his fieldwork was completed, he returned to Kansas City and his job at the Art Institute. There he had to put his sketches into a master plan. As he told an interviewer, "Every inch of [the mural] must be planned beforehand. You can't change your mind up on the scaffold."

Go On ▶

Painting

Benton began the murals during the hot summer of 1936, at a time when the building had no air conditioning. An assistant first drew outlines to show where everything would go. Then Benton climbed up onto scaffolding (platforms) to begin the painting. He allowed regular people to watch him work, often listening to their suggestions. (This happened when a visiting farmer questioned the look of an old plow. Benton changed the painting according to the farmer's suggestions.)

One wall was dedicated to pioneer days. He put frontiersmen trading with Indians, people tilling the soil, building log cabins, cutting down trees, and hunting. He had slaves working in the fields. And, central to the wall, he painted Mark Twain's famous characters, Huck Finn and Jim, riding down the Mississippi River on a raft with a riverboat behind them. Everything was in action, with people moving, the landscape in motion, one scene blending into another.

Another wall covered politics, farming, and law. Benton painted his father giving a speech in a small Missouri town. He depicted his brother, a lawyer, arguing a case in court. He painted the Civil War, with its smoke and battles. He showed a locomotive rushing over the land, farming through the generations, lumbermen mining the forests, and the beginnings of city life. He even showed Jesse James and his gang robbing a bank.

A third wall was dedicated to Missouri's cities, particularly St. Louis and Kansas City. He put in St. Louis's brewery and its Union Station. For Kansas City, he had the stockyards and the art museum. He showed people in restaurants and bars. Perhaps the most dramatic scene showed a woman shooting a man. It was based on the folk song "Frankie and Johnny," in which a woman, Frankie, shoots Johnny for "doin' her wrong."

Benton finished the painting in December after six months of painstaking work. The walls pulsed with life, showing Missouri's good moments (hard work, industry, and solid working people) and its bad moments (slavery, robberies, and violence.) His previous mural work in New York and Indiana had also shown aspects of life's good and bad points. The Missouri murals were Benton's most ambitious work yet, and he waited for the public's judgment.

Reaction

Reaction to the paintings was swift. Legislators complained they couldn't relax in the lounge anymore because of all the busy images. Religious groups complained about the violence, the scene of a woman in a tight dress singing to a roomful of politicians, and the scene at the courthouse where a woman changes a baby's diaper in the back of the room.

They found the images offensive. Other people loved the work and thought it captured Missouri's history in all its complexity. Benton toured the state defending the murals.

The publicity caused people from different parts of the state to travel to Jefferson City to see the work. (The legislators, meanwhile, moved their lounge to another room.) Everybody seemed to have an opinion, which was just what Benton wanted. He believed his paintings should make people stop and think, and that they did. Today, people still travel from far and wide to see Huck and Jim, the James Gang, Frankie and Johnny, and all the other images that make up Thomas Hart Benton's vision of Missouri.