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Tom Benton and His Drawings: A Biographical Essay and a Collection of His Sketches, Studies, and Mural Cartoons

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Tom Benton and His Drawings: A Biographical Essay and a Collection of His Sketches, Studies, and Mural Cartoons. By Karal Ann Marling. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985. Illustrations, notes, index. 224 pp. \$48.00.

This volume, which reproduces about two hundred of Thomas Hart Benton's more than two thousand works, is a valuable scholarly study as well as a handsomely produced book about one of the modern West's most significant artists. As such, it avoids the major limitation of many recent works on western art in which academic excellence is sacrificed to the larger—and less notable—aim of producing a visually appealing book with sales potential.

Here, Karal Ann Marling, professor of art history at the University of Minnesota and author of previous books on American highway art and post office murals in the United States, provides a brief but very useful introduction surveying the major contours of Benton's career and pointing out the important features of his many drawings. Above all, Marling does a good job of showing how the artist repeatedly used his friends and experiences as models for his "down home" drawings and paintings. "Seeing" before drawing was nearly always uppermost in Benton's mind. In addition, the author demonstrates the manner in which Benton utilized and re-utilized his individual, tentative drawings and sketches as parts of his later, larger murals.

Marling then divides Benton's long and fruitful career into twenty chronological and thematic sections. In each of these parts she provides a few useful paragraphs of general discussion as well as specific comments on the half dozen or so drawings she employs to illustrate the period or technique she discusses. All of the drawings are reproduced in full color and thus catch the slightest nuance of color or pencil stroke. Particularly interesting are the sections that treat Benton's break with modernists and what he concluded was their excessive preoccupation with form and his conversion to regionalism in the late 1920s and

thereafter. Marling also produces revealing commentaries on the production of Benton's most important mural projects.

At the same time the author deals with the shortcomings of Benton that critics raised in the second half of his career—that his attempts to depict grassroots experiences were as much caricature and newspaper cartoon art as local realism, and that he tended to use the same character types and themes so often that they became stereotypes rather than fresh probings of his experiences and ideas. By discussing these criticisms Marling moves beyond the too-sympathetic and uncritical content and tone of much recent commentary on western American art.

In short, this is the right kind of work on western artistic topics. Scholarly, well-organized and written, and attractively packaged, *Tom Benton and His Drawings* is a credit to the author, her subject, and the publisher. One wishes more scholars and publishers dealing with western art would aim at—and achieve—the high goals of this volume.

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