



Thomas Hart Benton
American, 1889 - 1975

Trail Riders

1964-1965

oil on canvas

overall: 142.6 x 188 cm (56 1/8 x 74 in.)

framed: 171.5 x 216.9 x 5 cm (67 1/2 x 85 3/8 x 1 15/16 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Benton '64-65

Gift of the Artist 1975.42.1

ENTRY

Trail Riders was inspired by a trip that Benton and his good friend the Kansas City attorney Lyman Field took to the Canadian Rockies in 1964. The 75-year-old artist recollected that they had ridden from Banff to Mount Assiniboine in nine-and-a-half hours over the course of two days, his first horseback trip in more than 30 years. [1] Following his usual working process, Benton made a series of drawings of the mountain on site and in the autumn began the painting in his studio, completing it in 1965.

This sweeping panoramic vista is dominated by the snow-covered Mount Assiniboine, located on the Continental Divide on the border between Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park in British Columbia and Banff National Park in Alberta. The highest peak in the Southern Continental Ranges of the Canadian Rockies, it is known as “the Matterhorn of North America” because of its triangular shape. When Benton traveled to the mountain there were no roads in the area; it was accessible only on horseback or foot. Lake Magog appears at the left center of the composition. Sir James Outram, who climbed the mountain in 1901, described it much the way it appears in Benton’s painting:

Trail Riders

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The peak is grandest from its northern side. It rises, like a monster tooth, from an entourage of dark cliff and gleaming glacier, 5,000 feet above the valley of approach; the magnificent triangular face, barred with horizontal belts of perpendicular cliff and glistening expanses of the purest snow and ice, which constitutes the chief glory of the mountain, soaring more than 3,000 feet directly from the glacier that sweeps its base. On the eastern and the southern sides the walls and buttresses are practically sheer precipices 5,000 to 6,000 feet in vertical height, but the contour and character of the grand northern face more than compensate for the less sheer and lofty precipices. [2]

Benton represented himself and his traveling companion as miniscule figures on horseback at the bottom of the composition, dwarfed by the majestic landscape. He also made a lithograph of *Trail Riders* (1964/1965). [3]

Late in his career Thomas Hart Benton concentrated on landscapes, many of which were inspired by sketching trips to rural areas. Most of these represented farming activities, but by the 1960s Benton had largely abandoned his agrarian views of the Midwest and the South and had become attracted to spectacular mountain vistas such as *The Shepherd* (1958, private collection), which resulted from his travels to the Grand Teton Mountains in Wyoming. The artist's daughter, Jessie Benton, recollected:

You know, he took aside many, many years to paint the mountains. He said it was the damndest hardest things he ever did, the mountains are impossible to paint. And it took him years to finally paint a picture that he was satisfied with. But you know that's why I think he paid no attention to all those critics and stuff because he would get these things that he had to do. And while they were still quibbling over *Persephone*, he was off in Wyoming trying to paint the Tetons for three, four, five years. And really literally off, you know, in the woods in Jackson Hole driving around by himself for years. And he'd come home every now and then. . . . He was always going off on sketching trips and going off here and there. And then he'd come home. [4]

Matthew Baigell has noted that Benton “interpreted the great mountain ranges at times as formidable presences, at times as great rococo spectacles, as if he could caress each peak and ridge, or, for a moment, hold a mountain in his hand.” [5]

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

NOTES

- [1] Quoted in Creekmore Fath, *The Lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton* (Austin, TX, 1990), 218. Field became saddle-sore, but Benton avoided that predicament by having the foresight to add foam rubber padding to his saddle; Henry Adams to the author, Mar. 28, 2012, NGA curatorial files.
- [2] James Outram, *In the Heart of the Canadian Rockies* (New York, 1906), 41.
- [3] This lithograph is not listed in Creekmore Fath, ed., *The Lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton* (Austin, TX, 1990). Examples periodically appear on the art market; see *19th- and 20th-Century Contemporary Prints and Multiples* (Christie’s, New York East, Sept. 20, 2000), lot 2.
- [4] Quoted from *Thomas Hart Benton*, directed by Ken Burns, written by Geoffrey C. Ward, aired on Nov. 1, 1989, on PBS as part of Ken Burns’s America series.
- [5] Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton* (New York, 1974), 183, 187.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on a plain-weave, medium-weight canvas and was unlined. The ground appears to have been applied by the artist because it does not extend onto the tacking edges, which are original and intact. The reverse of the canvas was coated with a commercially prepared white ground. The canvas was stretched onto a six-member wooden stretcher with one crossbar in each direction; turnbuckles are in place to expand the corners, while the crossbars have internal joinery. Infrared reflectography has revealed an overall grid pattern applied to the canvas beneath the paint layer. [1] Some of the lines were doubled, with the artist having marked the correct grid line with a “V”. Also noticeable in the infrared examination are changes to the snow line and the shapes of the mountain peaks. The figure on the right in the red shirt also appears to have originally had a pack on

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his back. Underpainting is also visible in the limbs of the trees and in areas of shadow. The paint was applied in thin, dilute layers, with the final layers applied as glazes. An overall application of thick, glossy synthetic resin varnish exists on the surface.

Structurally the painting is in sound condition; the canvas is in plane and remains supple. The paint and ground layers are in excellent condition, with no cracking, losses, or signs of paint insecurity. The varnish is only mildly discolored but it is overly glossy. It is also crazed, causing some areas of the painting to appear unsaturated, and the work has a good amount of fibers stuck in it.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1889-1975]; his bequest to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1974 *Our Land, Our Sky, Our Water*, International Exposition, Spokane, Washington, 1974, no. 119.

1981 *American Painting, 1930-1980*, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 1981.

1981 *Benton's Bentons*, Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, 1981.

1984 Extended loan for use by Ambassador John Gavin, U.S. Embassy residence, Mexico City, Mexico, 1984-1987.

1984 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Malcolm R. Wilkey, U.S. Embassy residence, Montevideo, Uruguay, 1987-1989.

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1989 Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; The Detroit Institute of Arts; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Los Angeles Museum of Art, 1989-1990.

1991 Extended loan for use by Secretary Edward Madigan, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., 1991.

1993 Extended loan for use by Secretary Mike Espy, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., 1993-1995.

1998 American Light: Selections from the National Gallery of Art, Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, May-August 1998, no catalogue.

1998 Treasures of Light: Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis, March-April 1998, no catalogue.

2000 Unending Frontier: Art of the West, The Grand Rapids Art Museum, 2000, no. 43, repro.


2009 Extended loan for use by President Barack Obama, The White House, Washington, D.C., 2009.

2013 Vanishing Ice: Alpine and Polar Landscapes in Art, 1775-2012, Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, Washington; El Paso Museum of Art; Glenbow Museum, Calgary; McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, 2013-2015, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

2015 American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem; The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth; Milwaukee Art Museum, 2015-2016, pl. 30.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1969 Fath, Creekmore. *The Lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton*. Austin, 1969: 218.
- 1974 Baigell, Matthew. *Thomas Hart Benton*. New York, 1974: pl. 211.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 28, repro.
- 1980 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1980: no. 58, color repro.
- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of*

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Art. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 182, no. 68,
color repro.

1989 Adams, Henry. *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original*. Exh. cat.
The Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, 1989: 327, 330,
color repro.

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art,
Washington, 1992: 33, repro.

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