

Thomas Hart Benton's *America Today* Murals

Painted for the New School of Social Research in New York, unveiled on January 15, 1930



Excerpts from Justin Wolff's *Thomas Hart Benton: A Life*, published in New York by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2013. Wolff is an assistant professor of art history at the University of Maine.

"The New School founders insisted on exposing the moral and political ideologies that shaped social science on its opening ..., the New School invited 'intelligent men and women' to study the 'grave social, political, economic, and educational problems of the day' and to prepare for careers in journalism, labor organization, and teaching. Alvin Johnson, who'd become director in 1922, initiated a capital campaign in 1927 with the aim of finding a new location. Insisting on a modern edifice in the International Style, Johnson hired the Austrian architect Joseph Urban to construct the school's main building on Twelfth St. in Greenwich Village" (p. 200).



"Many aspects of the New School appealed to [Thomas Hart] Benton. Most obvious was the association that intellectuals whom he admired -- [Charles] Beard, [John] Dewey, and [Lewis] Mumford, for instance -- developed with the institution. Like Benton, these men were critical of capitalism -- Beard, for instance, saw much of U.S. history as determined by conflicts between northern industrialists and southern and midwestern agrarians -- but also skeptical of the cynicism of American communists. Benton agreed with all three that industrialism and technology had taken over the national economy but that social progress was still feasible within a republican system. By 1930, Benton had an abandoned Marxism, disillusioned, as many others were, by Stalin's totalitarian society" (pp. 200-201).

The well-known Mexican muralist Orozco agreed to paint murals for the fifth-floor cafeteria "for the cost of the materials and in return for such a meager benefit [Johnson] would grant the artist almost total freedom" (p. 201). [It] was agreed that Benton would paint the murals for the boardroom in return for the price of the eggs (used in egg tempera) and modest recompense for a few lectures at the New School" (p. 202). All ten of Benton's *America Today* murals are now permanently installed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.



"Johnson rented a loft to serve as Benton's studio. It was just a few blocks from Urban's building, and Johnson visited the studio every day to check on the progress of the murals. Benton painted his scenes on the wallboard coated with heavy linen, and though his process was labor-intensive -- he covered the panels and gesso, sketched on them with **distemper** [paint made of pigment, water, and binder] and finished them with egg tempera (Johnson claims that Benton 'bankrupted' him by purchasing 'dozens and dozens of eggs') -- he worked quickly, completing the *America Today* murals in nine months. Most

