

# THOMAS HART BENTON, SYNCHROMISM, AND ABSTRACT ART

GAIL LEVIN

An artist most popularly and appropriately associated with representational painting, Thomas Hart Benton was deeply and directly influenced by Synchronism and abstract art in the second decade of the century.

Thomas Hart Benton's popular reputation as a Regionalist and a representational muralist makes his earlier passage through abstraction of particular interest today when the issue of content in painting is being reexamined with such fervor by some contemporary "realist" painters. By 1924, in an article for *The Arts*, Benton insisted: "The connection between form and subject is far more vital than is commonly supposed," and he suggested: "A revival of interest in subject will get the artist out of his narrow Bohemianism. . . ." Benton's concerns in this article reflect the new direction he had taken with his own work, for in 1924, he completed his first set of five panels on the *American Historical Epic* which depict the "Discovery and Settlement" of America. Nonetheless, these panels demonstrate his continuing concern with late Renaissance forms, an interest first developed under the influence of Synchronism.

Benton, more than any other painter, was directly influenced by Synchronism, the abstract style of painting stressing color rhythms invented by American expatriates Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright in Paris in the years just before the first World War. Benton had been living in Paris for more than a year when, in the late autumn of 1909, he met Stanton Macdonald-Wright whom he later described as "the most gifted all-round fellow I ever knew."<sup>2</sup> By this time, Benton had become acquainted with fellow Americans George Carlock and John Thompson (who had the studio next to his), both pupils of the Canadian color theorist Percyval Tudor-Hart with whom Macdonald-Wright and Russell would study during 1911-13. During the early winter of 1908-09, Thompson taught Impressionist techniques to Benton and encouraged him to adopt a full-color palette. Carlock, "a disciple of Cézanne," first guided Benton in his study of Classical and Renaissance art in the Louvre, which Benton continued with Macdonald-Wright.<sup>3</sup> Benton went on to experiment with Neo-Impressionism, notably Signac's Pointillism, and then with Cézanne's style, which he found problematic.

Forced to return to his family home in Neosho, Missouri by his father who cut off his support, Benton left Paris in July 1911, still struggling to find himself aesthetically. After "a few depressed months at home in Missouri, restless and dissatisfied after the life of Paris," Benton moved to New York City in early June of 1912.<sup>4</sup> There he studied Cézanne's work again and developed a limited interest in the artist's design, beginning to break up "surfaces with gradated planes of color."<sup>5</sup> Benton's renewed interest in Cézanne was prompted by Samuel Halpert, who had become friendly with Orphist Robert Delaunay in Paris; he would be further encouraged in this direction by Macdonald-Wright when the latter came to New York from Paris in late 1913. As the result of returning home in the autumn of 1912 for seven months, Benton missed the New York Armory Show and what might have proved to be an important encounter with modern art. He later recalled the resulting attention paid to French art in subsequent magazines and books and his own response to some reproductions of work by Georges Braque which caused him to "paint a series of flat, decorative still lifes in muted color," abstracting flowers from a seed catalogue and "stylizing them in decorative patterns."<sup>6</sup>

Macdonald-Wright had returned to America shortly after the

Synchronism exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery (October 27-November 8, 1913) in Paris,<sup>7</sup> just after his father's death, expecting to inherit part of his estate. To his dismay, he and his brother Willard Huntington Wright were left out of the will and the estate went entirely to his mother. Financially stranded in New York City which he hated, Macdonald-Wright managed to stage the first exhibition of Synchronism in America at the Carroll Galleries at 9 East 44th Street.

Arranged on only four days' notice, the exhibition which opened on March 2, 1914 was later described by Macdonald-Wright as a complete fiasco.<sup>8</sup> He felt that his brother, then editor of *The Smart Set* magazine, had, by his attacks on other artists and movements, made Synchronism seem ridiculous in the press.<sup>9</sup> Macdonald-Wright recalled that Willard had arranged for Benton to dress as an Apache Indian and slink around the gallery, masquerading as an underworld character called "Kiki la Souris." This outlandish jest is documented by an article which appeared in the *New York Sun* telling a yarn of intrigue about collector Jean Dracopoli's threats and illegal attempts to recover a painting by Macdonald-Wright.<sup>10</sup> By his own account, Benton attended the Synchronism exhibition at the Carroll Galleries "nearly every day" and his recollections offer one of the best eyewitness reports:

The first impression I received, all the pictures being large and crowded together, was like an explosion of rainbows. . . . The Synchronists had extended and intensified Cézanne's color-form theories, in which form was seen as a derivative of the organization of color planes. They had intensified these planes by abandoning completely the usual colors of nature, replacing them with highly saturated spectral colors, and had extended them into an area of purely "abstract form."<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, Benton recognized the underlying forms of even the seemingly abstract Synchronist paintings:

What most captured my interest, however, was the Synchronists' use of Baroque rhythms, derived not from Cézanne's work as was the case with most of the Parisian painters who had experimented with such rhythms, but from the more basic source of Michelangelo's sculptures. Through its use of these rhythms, Synchronism seemed to offer a more logical connection between the orderly form of the past and the coloristic tendencies of the present than any other of the Parisian schools. . . . I could look more sympathetically at the Synchronist effort than most of the New York artists who came to see it. I could not accept the repudiation of all representational art, which was the core of Synchronist dogma, but its procedures were interesting enough to induce experimentation.<sup>12</sup>

Among Benton's earliest experiments with Synchronism is his abstract oil painting *Bubbles* (Fig. 1), probably painted in 1914 shortly after his intense study of the exhibition at the Carroll Galleries. Related stylistically with its overlapping discs and translucent color to Macdonald-Wright's *Abstraction on Spectrum* (*Organization No. 5*) of 1914, *Bubbles* by its very title indicates Benton's stated determination not to renounce representation. Nonetheless, this painting appears to be a



Fig. 7. Thomas Hart Benton, Constructivist Still Life, Synchronist Color, 1917. Oil on paper, 17½ x 13-5/8". Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, Gift of Carl A. Magnuson.



Fig. 1. Thomas Hart Benton, Bubbles, 1914. Oil on canvas, 21¾ x 16½". Baltimore Museum of Art, Gift of H.L. Mencken.

Fig. 3. Thomas Hart Benton, Untitled (After Michelangelo's Dying Slave), c. 1916.



▲ Fig. 2. Thomas Hart Benton, Figure Organization No. 3, 1916.





Synchronist abstraction, especially given the frequency of submerged yet more complex identifiable images in the Synchronist paintings of Russell and Macdonald-Wright. In later years, however, Benton felt that he had wavered in "the winds and isms of the time," and actually belittled his adaptation of the "enticing formulas" of Synchronism:

If one admitted, and we all then did, that the procedures of art were sufficient unto and for themselves and that the progress of art toward "purification" led away from representation toward the more abstract forms of music, then Synchronism was a persuasive conception. Arguing rebelliously because I still loved represented things, I set out to experiment with it. But I had neither the talent for good imitation nor the conviction to turn my friend's procedure to any ends of my own, and I got poor results.<sup>13</sup>

Benton admitted that he abandoned his first short-lived experiments with Synchronism soon after Macdonald-Wright returned to Paris because he had "neglected to inquire about the particular color system on which the Synchronist painting was based. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

During 1914-15, Benton also began a friendship with John Weichsel, the Socialist-oriented founder of the People's Art Guild, who encouraged him in quite a different direction—the use of representational form to express social content. Yet

when Macdonald-Wright and his brother returned to New York in the autumn of 1915, Benton became interested in Synchronism once again:

Willard and Stanton were hatching plans for another Synchronist exhibit, but they had concluded that this time it would be politic to have it in conjunction with a few other artists. Stanton, who was, as in our Paris days, disposed to forward my interests, indicated that if I could produce the pictures, I would be included in the exhibition.<sup>15</sup>

Benton was finally able to learn from Macdonald-Wright about "the Synchronist color system" which he believed had been "invented by Tudor-Hart." What Benton described as "a spectral wheel so divided that triads of harmoniously related colors could be automatically determined" undoubtedly owes to the theories of Ogden Rood.<sup>16</sup>

Benton did "produce the pictures" necessary to be included in what became The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters organized by a committee which included not only his friends Willard Huntington Wright and Dr. John Weichsel, but also Alfred Stieglitz, Dr. Christian Brinton (a critic), Robert Henri, and W.H. de B. Nelson (editor of *International Studio*). The exhibition, which opened on March 13, 1916 at the Anderson Galleries at 15 East 45th Street, was accompanied by a

**Fig. 4.** Thomas Hart Benton, *Untitled (Landscape)*, c. 1916. *Oil on paper, 6¼ x 7".*  
*Courtesy Salander-O'Reilly Gallery.*



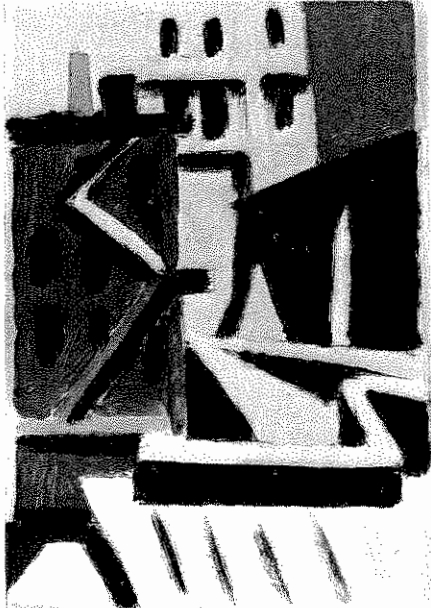
**Fig. 5.** Thomas Hart Benton, *Untitled (Landscape)*, c. 1916. *Oil on paper, 7½ x 8-3/8".*  
*Courtesy Salander-O'Reilly Gallery.*



**Fig. 6.** Thomas Hart Benton, *Untitled*, c. 1917-19. *Oil on canvas mounted on masonite, 9 x 6-1/8".*  
*Courtesy Salander-O'Reilly Gallery.*



**Fig. 8.** Thomas Hart Benton, *Untitled (Cityscape)*, c. 1920. *Oil on paper, 9-1/8 x 6½".*  
*Courtesy Salander-O'Reilly Gallery.*



catalogue containing short forewords by each of the committee members, a sizable essay entitled "What is Modern Painting?" by Willard Wright, and individual statements and one reproduction by each of the artists included.<sup>17</sup> There was also a separate checklist with prices.

Illustrated in the catalogue, Benton's now lost *Figure Organization No. 3* demonstrates his use of Michelangelo's figures as suggested to him by the Synchronists (Fig. 2). Benton later recalled his preparation for this exhibition:

In the autumn and winter of 1915-16, I produced a batch of pictures using Hart's color system, though in a somewhat arbitrary way. Following the Synchronist practice of the time, I based the compositions of these pictures on Michelangelo's sculpture. However, as the multiple-figure composition was again occupying my thoughts, I selected Michelangelo's early relief the "Battle of the Centaurs," rather than a single figure to serve as a model for my creations.

According to the Forum Exhibition checklist, Benton showed seven works, only three of which were described as figure paintings—*Figure Organization No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3*. Benton's only Michelangelesque figure painting of this time known to have survived (although much damaged) is adapted from the sculptor's *Dying Slave*, like so many compositions of Russell and Macdonald-Wright (Fig. 3). *Figure Organization No. 3* must have been a large composition, for Benton priced it at \$1,000, which, except for three paintings by Oscar Bluemner at \$1,050, was the highest price asked by any of the other artists.<sup>18</sup> Benton's other entries included two *Landscapes* modestly priced at \$50 each, a *Still Life* for \$75, and a work entitled *Upper Mountain* at \$300.

The recent recovery of a group of small early works by Benton, previously owned by his former student Charles Pollock, sheds new light on his experiments with Synchronism and abstract art.<sup>19</sup> Two diminutive *Landscapes* (possibly along the Palisades of the Hudson) which approach abstraction in their use of bright Synchronist-like colors might be the missing works from the Forum exhibition (Figs. 4 and 5). At the very least, these boldly conceived and executed compositions provide another clue about Benton's involvement with Synchronism. The weight of his forms, rendered with solid areas of color, seems closer to the work of Morgan Russell, or even the Synchronist rival Patrick Henry Bruce, than to work by his friend Macdonald-Wright.

An untitled work which seems to be a purely abstract composition of soft, organic shapes may, in fact, have been painted from some sort of a still life (Fig. 6). By 1917, Benton recalled that he set up temporary motifs for painting—experimenting "with 'abstract' constructions made of wire, strips of wood, brightly colored paper and cloth."<sup>20</sup> As Russell had represented sculptured planes with color, Benton constructed three-dimensional forms which he then depicted in his paintings. These experiments which Benton termed "constructivism" continued through the winter of 1919 and several examples have survived, all of them vertical compositions with a rhythmic flow of abstract shapes (Fig. 7).

The recently discovered figure of a *Woman* (Cover) is of particular interest for it is both figurative and rendered in a Synchronist-like palette of vivid contrasting colors, emphasizing the dominant triad of red-orange-yellow and the minor triad of yellow-green-blue. The figure appears flattened in space, however, and the application of color does not seem to be related to the projection and recession of forms in space, revealing that Benton's understanding of Synchronist principles remained superficial. Recalling his figurative works from the Forum Exhibition, Benton lamented the flattening effect color had on his pictures: "The highly saturated spectral colors, causing sensations of nearly equal intensity, put their forms all on the same level. What was conceived as projective or recessive ended on the same plane."<sup>21</sup>

In concluding his rather vague statement in the Forum Exhibition catalogue, Benton paid homage to the Synchronists when he wrote, probably with little conviction, "I believe that the representation of objective forms and the presentation of abstract ideas of form to be of equal artistic value."<sup>22</sup> Benton's interest in modernist styles other than Synchronism, however,

is revealed in a small cityscape showing skyscrapers, fire escapes, chimneys, and rooftops in a range of geometric shapes and soft colors reminiscent of the reductionist works by some of the Precisionists during the 1920s (Fig. 8). This composition also suggests a close-up view of the buildings he himself depicted from afar in New York during the early 1920s.

From the early summer of 1918 through the winter of 1919, Benton was in the Navy in Norfolk, Virginia. He chanced upon an illustrated four-volume history of the United States written by J.A. Spencer in the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> He was inspired to make his own pictures dealing with American history and began his panels on the *American Historical Epic*. Although even his later, more characteristic paintings owe a debt to his early discovery of Michelangelo's rhythms in Synchronist painting, he dropped his interest in the movement, claiming he ran into "impossible contradictions" and "just couldn't paint George Washington as a rainbow."<sup>24</sup>

It would be interesting to know how many of Benton's students at the Art Students League knew of their teacher's early association with modernism. From the summer of 1929, Charles Pollock had possession of a suitcase containing Benton's early experiments with abstraction. One wonders if he shared them with his brother Jackson who began to study with Benton in the fall of 1930. In 1950, Jackson Pollock recalled: "Tom Benton did a lot for me. He gave me the only formal instruction I ever had, he introduced me to Renaissance art. . . . I'm damn grateful to Tom. He drove his kind of realism at me so hard I bounced into non-objective painting."<sup>25</sup> This attests to Benton's passage from his early involvement with abstraction, indicating that by 1930, he could no longer tolerate what he had allowed to be published under his name in the Forum Exhibition catalogue of 1916—"that the representation of objective forms and the presentation of abstract ideas of form" are "of equal value."<sup>26</sup>

1. Thomas Hart Benton, "Form and the Subject," *The Arts*, V, June, 1924, pp. 303-308, reprinted in Matthew Baigell, ed., *A Thomas Hart Benton Miscellany* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1971), p. 13 and p. 16.

2. Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America* (New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1937), p. 36.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 37. In January 1912, Benton lived for three weeks in Kansas City, looking unsuccessfully for work there at the newly founded Art Institute.

5. Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1969), p. 30.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 31. As a result of these experiments, Benton was commissioned to paint five large floral panels for a Coney Island dancing pavilion. He also began to paint porcelain bowls and china plates with floral designs to earn money.

7. For a description of this exhibition and the genesis and influence of Synchronism, see Gail Levin, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925* (New York: George Braziller, 1978).

8. Stanton Macdonald-Wright to Lloyd Goodrich, then Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, July 16, 1963.

9. See, for example, Willard Huntington Wright, "Impressionism to Synchronism," *The Forum*, 50, December 1913, pp. 757-70.

10. "Artist Advertisements for Paris Apache," *New York Sun*, clipping found in Willard Huntington Wright's scrapbook, vol. 48, Rare Book and Manuscript Division of Firestone Library, Princeton University.

11. Benton, *An American in Art*, p. 33.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Benton, *Artist in America*, p. 39.

14. Benton, *An American in Art*, p. 34.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

16. Ogden N. Rood, *Modern Chromatics*, preface and commentary by Faber Birren (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1973), includes a facsimile of the first American edition of 1879.

17. *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters* (Anderson Galleries, New York, 1916; reprinted 1968, New York: Arno Press). Of the seventeen artists included, only Marguerite Zorach, the sole woman in the exhibition, was not represented with either an essay or a reproduction of her work; evidently she was considered represented by her husband William Zorach's essay and reproduction.

18. Only Man Ray and Abraham Walkowitz also had works priced at \$1,000. Other prices were much lower. For example, Macdonald-Wright only asked \$400 for his *Arm Organization in Blue Green* and Marsden Hartley priced his *One Portrait of One Woman* at \$350.

19. Until recently, these works were owned by Charles Pollock who studied with Benton at the Art Students League beginning in 1926. Pollock sublet Benton's apartment during the summer of 1929 and found these works in a suitcase which Benton evidently gave to him.

20. Benton, *An American in Art*, p. 42.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

22. Benton, "Explanatory Note," *Forum Exhibition*, n.p.

23. Jesse Ames Spencer, *The History of the United States from the Earliest Period to the Administration of James Buchanan* (New York: Martin, Johnson and Co., 1858-1866).

24. Thomas Hart Benton to William Agee, letter of December 21, 1965.

25. Jackson Pollock, quoted in Francis Valentine O'Connor and Eugene Victor Thaw, editors, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 248.

26. Benton claimed in a letter to Matthew Baigell of autumn 1971 that these words were "suggested by Willard Wright so that it would appear that I was 'in harmony' with the thinking of my fellow exhibitors even though my pictures didn't seem to be so." Quoted in Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1974), p. 35.