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## Eulogy to Tom Benton (1889-1975)

by Lyman Field, his friend  
January 22, 1975  
Kansas City, Missouri

"The poets say there is no occupation so good for your soul as the contemplation of nature. I agree. However, its benefits are heightened, intensified and expanded when you at the same time try to record your findings with images. The landscape painter who contemplates a natural scene and works at painting it has his soul doubly benefited. To the passive good of contemplation he adds the active good of creation. While under the spell of this two fold good, he is likely to be the happiest of men. This was my case during the late summer and autumn of 1910"

Thus, from the unpublished recent writings of our friend who continued to be the "happiest of men" even up to the very hour of his death last Sunday.

Not that he ever smugly proclaimed such happiness from the housetops. That was not his way. He took life as he found it. But he deeply believed: In the time of your life, live! And this he did in such full measure, that all things he touched, and the legions of persons who came within his sphere, were warmed and enriched by the way he lived his life.

Not that Tom Benton was any saint. That wonderful mane of hair, still framing the weathered leonine face up to the very end, was no halo.

He had a mantle of greatness, however, because fame came to him early and late, but he wore it simply, as a plain and sometimes prickly garment, which was never starchy.

His life span encompassed one tenth of the last century, three fourths of this one: 1889 to 1975--over 85 years.

He lived and worked with great vigor and purpose and amazing grace right up to the very end, with his hands, his mind and his heart.

There was a lot of Ulysses in Tom Benton, as a solitary wanderer and with companions; but for all his wonderful travels in Italy, France, far away islands, Mexico, most of the United States, the oceans, the rivers and streams, the great prairies and mountains of the American west, his home, his hearth, his table and his studio, both in Missouri and Martha's Vineyard, and his beloved Rita, held the deepest meanings for him.

He was as at home with the writings of St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and The Arabian Nights, as he was with the works, in the original French, of Hugo, Balzac and Baudelaire. He enjoyed the works of scientists, scholars, philosophers and poets. He was as remarkably informed and interested in his own times as he was in the history of the past. He was as at home in ancient Greece and the Italian Renaissance as he was in contemporary America.

He respected his elders, in his own fashion, quarreled with his contemporaries, and admired the young. Indeed, he venerated the young people of today, almost as much as they loved him, holding to the strong optimism, in a pessimistic world, that the youth of today would be our society's salvation.

He loved his work, his wife, his family, his friends, his fellowman, his state and his country.

A few years ago the distinguished Missouri editor, Robert M. White, wrote:

"They're honoring Tom Benton again.

They should.

Everybody should.

Tom, well, let's call him by all of it, Thomas Hart Benton is one of Missouri's great claims to fame.

He ranks along with people like Mark Twain and Harry Truman and General Pershing and General Bradley. He ranks along with Eugene Field and T. S. Eliot and Senator Thomas Hart Benton and George Washington Carver...

Tom Benton, who is now over 80, is right in there with those folks.

Nobody paints better.

And as long as art is appreciated--which is as long as man doesn't sink back into the swamp--Tom Benton's work will be honoring his state."

Yesterday that same editor wrote:

"Tom Benton died Sunday.

But he will live on.

Probably for generations.

He was that great.

Not that you would have noticed it if you passed him on the street.

You probably wouldn't have noticed him at all. He was short and always a little mussed -- comfortably so--and his bones stuck out and his face was lined. He walked a little bent. You probably wouldn't have noticed him. Not unless you looked at his eyes. You would have noticed them--dark, keen, almost afire with interest in everything around him.

Tom noticed everything around him (you instinctively called him Tom because he was so much himself. No airs, no phoney baloney).

Artists do that--they see more than the rest of us.

And Tom saw a lot.

He saw his America and his native Missouri, and in seeing it, he didn't just see the skin covering it. No sir, not Tom. He looked deep down into the guts of this land he loved. And its people.

And then he did his thing.

His thing was to capture what he saw on canvas.

And to do it honestly.

He painted like he talked. Straight--straight from the shoulder.

So now he's dead.

But just his body.

For his honesty, and his love for his fellow man, and for his country, will go on living on his canvasses, and in the minds and hearts of those who knew him, for generations."

Tom Benton was no eccentric. But he had some wonderfully human eccentricities --his very own particular and peculiar characteristics which in the composite so exemplified the salt and flavor of his humanness and so endeared him to all who knew him. His walk --the rolling, slightly unsteady gait of the sailor home from the sea trying to shake the sea legs of a long voyage. The accompanying cane, which he loved to call his stick. His beret which he wore as only a Basque could wear it. The way he cocked his little finger as he sipped his bourbon, or savored a glass of wine. His delight in cognac as "the moment of truth." His intense interest in the configuration of a flower, a sea shell, the fretted intricacies under a magnifying glass of moss growing on a stone wall, the shape of a Morel mushroom. The very spin of the huge planet earth intrigued him, in producing, as it does, the wonder of sunrise and sunset. He even marveled at the tilt of the earth on its mighty axis, producing, as it does, the seasons which he loved. His awe and wonder often traveled to the moon, and to the sun, and to the other planets and to the stars beyond.

He disdained, without malice, high society which he regarded as "froth on a glass of beer", but he deeply loved what he called "the solid underneath layer" of common folk and his fellowman. And, through his remarkable genius, he portrayed for all of us, these images on wondrous canvasses, and in figures of clay and bronze.

His poker playing proclivities were inevitably clothed with pitifully transparent protestations of an ignorance of the rules of the game with which he vainly sought to cover his avarice--and yet by the time this threadbare guile was discovered by his companions he was already raking in the pots. But, win or lose, the companionship meant far more than the cards.

His wit and humor was quick, sharp, salty but always friendly. If the word chuckle had not been invented, it certainly would have been, to describe Tom Benton's own, and so frequent, expressions of mirth and merriment. And though, among his intimates, he dearly loved to poke fun at others in friendly fashion, his greatest enjoyment here was in poking fun at himself.

He was a great caster of spells. He did this almost always unconsciously, though on a few occasions he seemed to have some recognition of his remarkable powers in the enchantment of others. Only a very, very few people that he ever met failed to come under his spell --and most everyone was always warmed and captured. And then on each subsequent meeting, in curious fashion, the enchantment only increased. The enchantment was no respecter of persons and it ranged from little children to his celebrated friend, the late President Harry S. Truman.

He had many, many blessings besides his great gifts of the artistic, of the mind, and of friendship. Perhaps his greatest blessing was his beloved wife Rita, who so faithfully fueled and tended the fires of his genius, and his life.

Tom Benton did not fear death. The prospect of death only filled him with sadness that life, which he loved so much to live, would for him, end.

In his Autobiography, "An Artist in America", Tom Benton wrote:

"These rivers of Missouri are often very beautiful. Many of them have their sources in immense hill springs which pour out of the limestone bluffs, at the rate of thousands of gallons a minute. The water runs cold and clear for a while but is eventually muddied by tributaries from the lowlands. Muddy or not, the rivers have charm. Great sycamores hang over their banks and in the summer when the current moves slowly these are duplicated in the stream below. On one side or another of the rivers, outcropping white bluffs hang, and break the monotony of tree branch and foliage. To get in a skiff and row out in the middle of one of these rivers on a summer night when the moon is full is to find all the spirit of Spenser and his 'faerie lands forlorn.' Missouri's summer moon is big and white and cuts out vivid and clear edges, but this only intensifies the somber interior depths of the tree shadows and adds an air of impenetrable and silent mystery to them. There is over these summer night waters and on the shadowed lands that border them an ineffable peace, an

immense quiet, which puts all ambitious effort back in its futile place and makes of a simple drift of sense and feeling an ultimate and proper end of life."

And at the end of the 3rd Revised Edition he wrote:

"There is a high rugged bluff above the Missouri River a few miles from Kansas City. I drive out when I get bored and sit on that bluff. The river makes a great curve in the valley below and you can see for miles up and down the running yellow water. Although I was born and raised in the hill country of southwest Missouri, the great river valley appeals to me. I feel very much at home looking down upon it. Either I am just a slobbery sentimentalist or there is something to this stuff about your native land, for when I sit above the waters of the Missouri, I feel they belong to me and I to them.

I feel I belong all over my state. There is about the Missouri landscape something intimate and known to me. When I drive around the curve of a country road, I seem to know what is going to be there, what the creek beds and the sycamores and walnuts lining them will look like, and what the color of the bluffs will be."

Another great American artist, the poet William Cullen Bryant, in an age long past, and in words that have now become part of the American language itself, suggested that "when thy summons comes" a man should ideally go as "one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."

Last Sunday evening, Tom Benton, in his 86th year, was seated before yet another wonderful mural, just completed by him, contemplating his creation when, according to the assurance of his trusted physician and long time friend, his great heart simply stopped beating and without pain.

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The late Lyman Field, a prominent attorney in Kansas City, was a member of the Missouri Humanities Council at the time of his death at the age of 84 on March 19, 1999. He gave permission for the Council to reprint this eulogy, which he had published in a small edition.