

Picture This: Thomas Hart Benton's Hoosier Connection

By Amy Walker

(The original version of this article appeared in the March/April 2008 edition of *Outdoor Indiana*)

Some readers may know that Col. Richard Lieber was the first director of Indiana's Department of Conservation, which eventually became the DNR. He also started our state parks system.

Fewer may realize that Lieber was also a driving force behind another treasure, the Indiana murals painted by Thomas Hart Benton for the state's exhibit at the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago.

Although the murals are a historical fixture today, by late 1932, with the World's Fair just six months away, Indiana's commission for the project still had not agreed on an exhibit. With time running out, Gov. Harry G. Leslie appointed Lieber to head the committee because he was known as someone who could get things done.

Lieber proposed a radically different plan from “the usual state fair display of threshing machines and farm produce.” Instead, he suggested a 250-foot series of murals showcasing state history. He even knew who should paint it: New York artist Thomas Hart Benton.

The commission quickly voted to accept the proposal, knowing that Benton needed sufficient time to research, create and paint the murals by the fair's opening in May. Three days later, a contract was signed giving Benton “complete freedom” for the murals, including “the composition of the overall narrative and the ‘realistic’ treatment of social facts.”

Lieber learned of Benton's previous work through a mutual acquaintance, Indianapolis-born architect Thomas Hibben, who designed Indiana's Lincoln Memorial for the Dept. of Conservation. The two had talked about possible exhibit ideas for the fair. Hibben suggested the New York muralist. Lieber, who had painting experience himself and had also been a newspaper art critic, researched Benton's work before making his pitch.

The choice caused controversy, first because Benton was not a Hoosier. He was born in Missouri, trained in Chicago and Paris, and lived in The Big Apple. People worried that he would “make Indiana look like a boob,” and cater to the various stereotypes of Midwesterners. Many said that such a high-profile project should have gone to one of Indiana's own respected artists, especially considering the use of State funds. Others said there should at least have been a competition to select the artist, even though the tight deadline would have made that problematic.



Figure 1: Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889-1975) **Coal, Gas, Oil, Brick** [Industrial Panel 9] from the *Indiana Murals*, 1933. Image courtesy of the IU Art Museum

Objectors said they had never heard of Benton, whom they contended was not sufficiently established to be hired for such a large work. Others criticized Benton's radical and controversial artistic style, which they feared would improperly represent the state at the international event.

As proof, they cited Benton's earlier murals, which were criticized for not appealing to mainstream audiences, who preferred the “stately and allegorical, with classically draped maidens representing ‘justice’ or ‘the arts’ seated in thrones.” By contrast, Benton painted “sweaty steelworkers and tawdry nightclub dancers, crammed into theatre and subway spaces, their poses made even more frenetic by contorted outlines and bright colors.”

All of the murals that Benton painted before the Indiana murals were indeed controversial and got people talking, yet his reputation as a highly skilled muralist grew.

To balance outcry against him, Benton had the support of Hoosier Salon artists Lawrence McConaha and John King, the latter saying that “Indiana’s taxpayers deserved the best.” That was quite the endorsement considering that the Hoosier Salon was known for its traditional and conservative art. The head of the Herron School of Art, Wilbur Peat, called Benton the “foremost mural painter in America,” but added, “One thing is certain—his murals are going to make a lot of people mad.”

Perhaps Benton's most important backing came from retired Herron professor William Forsyth, the last surviving member of the Hoosier School, who allowed his daughter Constance to work for Benton.



Figure 2: Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889-1975); **Leisure and Literature** [Cultural Panel 8] from the *Indiana Murals*, 1933. Photo courtesy of IU Art Museum

In addition to the voiced confirmation within the Indiana art community, several other timely events smoothed the way for Benton. Between December 1932 and February 1933, the muralist received three separate honors. First, the New York Architecture League awarded him a gold medal for his paintings at the New School for Social Research. Then *The Nation* honored him for the murals he painted for the Whitney Museum of American Art. Finally, *Vanity Fair* added him to its "Hall of Fame" as a muralist.

The project

The trio of Benton, Hibben and Lieber worked together to create the initial vision of the Indiana exhibit but only Hibben and Benton designed the space and the exhibit. As an architect and the link between Benton and Lieber, Hibben was the logical choice to design the layout of the 4,000-square-foot Indiana exhibit at the fair's Court of States, a building that was V-shaped.

Indiana’s space was at the base of that “V” and included an outdoor garden. Hibben designed two rooms. The first was a larger room at the front with 28-foot ceilings so the 12-foot-

tall murals could be hung approximately 10 feet off the floor and to allow for special lighting to showcase Benton's murals. The smaller room highlighted various Indiana artists.

Knowing the exhibit's setting, Benton started by learning as much as he could about the history, landscape and people of Indiana at the Indiana State Library, then he traveled 3,000 miles with Department of Conservation staff, visiting state parks and historic sites.

He completed sketches everywhere he went and many of the sites and people he met along the way at Fort Vincennes, Spring Mill, Corydon and Paoli can be identified in the murals.

Benton divided the murals into two themes: industrial and cultural, with each theme running chronologically along opposite sides of the room. The subject matter for the Industrial Panels ranges from early Native American potters, through the pioneer age, the evolution of river transportation to the railroads, and life on the farm up through the gas and steel booms in central and northwest Indiana.

The Cultural Panels begin with the Mound-builders, follow the development of small farm communities into larger cities, the evolution of early schools into large universities and the various social issues facing Indiana and the nation at large. These included the Civil War, women's rights, entertainment, labor unrest and racial tension. Cultural panels 8, 10 and 11 show a variety of entertainment: the saloon; the state fair, complete with snake charmer; William Forsyth, artist and teacher, painting at an easel; the circus; Lieber planting trees in a state park; auto racing; and Indiana's favorite pastime, basketball.

The murals had to be loaded onto a special truck to make the trip to Chicago because of their size. Troubles arose during the journey, including a 106-mile detour because of a low bridge and the dismantling of one of Northwestern University's gates to get the truck through.

Benton was on site to supervise the installation of the murals. He actually painted the one free-standing panel at the fair. That image of the Indiana Dunes is the only panel of the entire series that is missing.

Reactions

Visitors' reactions to the murals varied as much as the response to the selection of Benton. Some disliked the concept of the open space and the art of the exhibit as a whole. Others objected to the abstract, distorted figures and Benton's painting style. Still others did not understand why the native Hoosier artists were given the smaller space at the back of the Indiana hall.

Some images garnered more specific opposition. Cultural Panel 10 contained a view of the Ku Klux Klan in the upper right corner, causing concern that fairgoers would assume that all Hoosiers were racist. Industrial Panel 9 was also controversial, depicting strikers with a placard



Figure 3: **Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought** [Cultural Panel 11] from the *Indiana Murals*, 1933; By Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889-1975). Mural before conservation. Image courtesy of the IU Art Museum

stating “Workers-Why vote the rich man’s ticket?” Benton’s explanation was that he wanted to portray a complete history of Indiana, both good and bad.

Overall, visitors enjoyed the murals. Indiana received accolades for its new, artistic approach. Benton was most pleased by the fact that working-class people seemed to enjoy and understand the murals. He liked that the “plain people of the Middle West’ liked his work and recognized themselves in it.” The artistic elite from large cities also liked the murals, complimenting their “quintessential Americanness.” An associate curator for the Art Institute of Chicago called Indiana’s exhibit “by far the most dignified and exciting of all the state representations.”

Aftermath

The murals were moved to the Indiana state fairgrounds for storage after the conclusion of the fair in October 1934. They remained in storage until 1937, when IU president Herman Wells approached Gov. Cliff Townsend about giving them to the university for its new auditorium. Townsend agreed. Benton arrived in the fall 1940 to help install them.



Figure 4: Conservation of **Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought** [Cultural Panel 11] from the *Indiana Murals*, 1933; By Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889-1975). Mural will be displayed in the IU Cinema. Image courtesy of the IU Art Museum

The 16 central panels were placed in the auditorium lobby while the remaining six went to the Little Theater and Woodburn Hall. Lieber not only approved of the new home for the murals, he donated a series of 88 preparatory drawings he had collected during the course of their creation.

Benton’s murals remain in their respective locations on campus. Visitors are able to view those in the auditorium any time the building is open. An effort to restore the murals in the IU Auditorium began in 1998 with funding from IU, the IU Foundation, private donors and grants from the Getty Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. The four murals in the former Little Theater have been restored in 2009-2010 and will be unveiled in their newly renovated space, now known as the IU Cinema, in late 2010. The conservation of murals in Woodburn Hall began summer 2010.

For more information, on the murals, read “Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals,” which was reprinted by Indiana University Press in 2008 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the murals.

To see historic photos of the murals in place at the World’s Fair: http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/online_modules/benton/teachlearn.html

To see color images of the murals: http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/online_modules/benton/

Website of the new IU Cinema: <http://www.indiana.edu/~iucinema/index.shtml>