Missouri’s Favorite Son: A Thomas Hart Benton Story

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The graphic novel, “Missouri’s Favorite Son: A Thomas Hart Benton Story,” depicts a brief, imaginary episode in which a woman and her son encounter the artist Thomas Hart Benton while he paints his murals in the Missouri capital building. He shows them the sections that relate to Kansas City, educating them (as well as the reader) about the seedy, enterprising, and ever-resourceful midwest town during the Depression.

This project serves a three-fold purpose; firstly, it provides an historical sketch of this multi-faceted city in a new -- and hopefully, more engaging -- manner than the typical text book. But the graphic novel is more than a simple historical retelling: it serves as a brief look into Benton’s conceptualization of what art can and should do. In the story, he says, “Art serves a function, just like a hammer or wrench. It records the history of the people.” Later critics consider Benton as much an important social historian as a famous Regionalist artist. He reveals the mundane and the sordid, not only the majestic; in doing so, he “shows us Missourians as we really are,” as Mrs. Collins says in the story.

The third aim of this graphic novel is to juxtapose two artistic styles -- that of comic art and mural art -- in order to compare the two. Comics and murals are essentially populist and accessible; both are deeply entrenched in the American art scene. These art forms also share the same downside -- they tend to lack vitality and sag toward the lowest common denominator: in an attempt to speak to everyone, they speak to no one. “Missouri’s Favorite Son” is a subtle but pointed critique: the most effective art challenges us to expand, to grow, and to better understand ourselves as humans.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


I just hope they don't ask any questions.

It's too damn hot.
I shouldn't have to put up with this.

Maybe I should put up another notice. Say: no talking allowed.

Notice
To the visitors:

The mural cannot be changed at this save your suggestions for another day. I am glad to have them. cannot incorporate them Send to Room 100 for your consideration.

Thank...
Mama! Why is the room all covered up?

Because he's still working on it, honey. The curtains keep the walls from getting dirty.

I guess that makes sense...

Look! That lady's putting a diaper on her baby. Ew.

Mr. Benton chooses to paint us Missourians as we really are. And lots of ladies have to change diapers.

He's a very good artist, and famous all over the country.

He can't be all that good. Everything is all wobbly.
"All wobbly," eh? That's pretty good...

That's just his style. Makes everything look terribly alive and real, don't it?

Guess so. Hey!

Jasper! Don't you run indoors!!

Look, Mama! Indians!!

WAUGH!!!

Ouch! Hey!!
Ouchhh.

You ok, kid?
Jasper!

It's alright, Mama. I don't need help.

You sure made a helluva mess here, boy.
Sorry. But you're tough too. I'll give ya that.

We're very sorry about the disturbance, Mr. Benton.

Hmph. I reckon I lost a good couple hours of daylight here... Still, nothin' to apologize for. I like this kid. He's a real scrapper, just like I was.

Your name's Jasper?

Now, where all are you folks from?
Yep Jasper Collins.

Kansas City, this side. We're here in Jefferson City to visit my sister.
Oh? Kansas City is an old haunt of mine. Some of the best Jazz in the country.

Which part are ya from?

Westport. My husband used to own a bookstore there, before he passed away...

They sell my favorite kind of Whiskey in Westport.

Ahh, what the heck. I've lost a couple hours anyway. What's the rush? You folks come on up here, see what I'm workin' on.

Oh, I'd better not. I can't abide heights.

Wowee!
This one in front of us is the story of Frankie and Johnny. Frankie caught her husband, Johnny, cheating. She shot him in a bar.

But here's what I wanted to show you. The Kansas City part of the mural.

First, you see the slaughterhouses that made KC a boom town.

... back around 1880s or so.

The town was built on the sweat and blood of the men who worked in the stockyards.

The neighborhood is called the West Bottoms. They ship cattle in from Abilene, Leavenworth, even as far as Texas.

If it weren't for the meat-packing industry, Kansas City wouldn't be here today. But some folks wanted it to be known for more than cows.

To combat the idea that Kansas City was nothing more than easy liquor and easier women during the Prohibition, they built the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in 1933.

While some people were building museums and corporate empires, many in Kansas City were jobless and homeless. Just as it is today, in 1936. So I painted them next to the museum.
There you see one of the many dancing girls that keeps the jazz district going. She also keeps the businessmen happy...

I tell you, I put her in more clothing than I usually saw.

In a few years, when you're a bit older, head to the Blue Room, around 18th and Vine. Listen to the jazz there, maybe some Bennie Moten. Meet the ladies. That's the real Kansas City.

Now, this whole mural I'm doing here in the capitol building...

I'm calling it *A Social History of the State of Missouri*. Missouri is made up of a lot of regular folks, hard-working folks, and that's what I'm trying to show. I'm trying to get at the truth of it, how Missouri really is. But that means it's got to have women diapering babies and slaughterhouses and showgirls. And that's going to make some folks pretty mad, I reckon.

But what I think will make them the maddest will be this character right here. Tom Pendergast.

No, I don't mean that guy standing up reading the paper. That's just the mayor - a powerless man in the grand scheme of things. I'm talking about the one sitting down there in front.

They call him "Boss" because that's what he is. He's in charge of the entire city - the businesses, the housing developments, the gambling and liquor and the politics. He's even in charge of the police. Tom's Town, they call it.

Hehheh... Pen is mightier than the sword, eh?
Wow. I had no idea it all meant something...

Of course it does. Art has a function, just like a hammer or wrench.

It records the history of the people. Our ancestors could uncover this mural in 500 years and would know just how we had lived. Remember that.

Anyway, it's getting late, and your mama's probably wanting to head home.

Thank you, Mr. Benton. Good luck with the rest of the paintings.

Yeah...

That was very kind of him, wasn't it, dear?

I want to be an artist when I grow up, just like that guy.

Missouri's Favorite Son

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