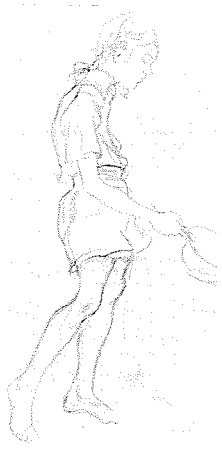
TOM BENTON AND HIS DRAWINGS: A Biographical Essay and a Collection of His Sketches, Studies, and Mural Cartoons
by Karal Ann Marling
Univ. of Mo., 1985
224 pp. $48



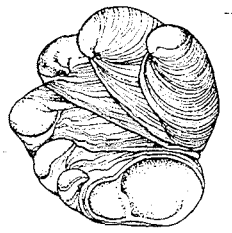
Marling's sympathetic study of selected drawings by Thomas Hart Benton, a Midwestern American muralist active from the 1920s until his death in 1975, defies several art-historical conventions. Marling, an art historian at the University of Minnesota, shows us Benton's drawings but not the murals in which they appear. She analyzes his work in relation to popular culture rather than in terms of artistic style. She identifies Benton's vision as American rather than as Midwestern. And she presents her ideas in a springy vernacular. While most people think of Benton's life work as the murals painted for places such as the New School for Social Research, the Missouri State Capitol, and the Truman Library, Marling argues that the heart of his work can be found in the more lively drawings and studies, almost all of them made on the road. Following a biographical essay that cuts back and forth across time (starting with the day of the artist's death), Marling writes with affectionate detail about 20 groups of thematically related sketches, their subjects ranging from farmers to churchgoers to city gangsters to Midwestern businessmen. Indeed, she makes clear that Benton had no restricted regionalist vision, that his topics are more properly understood as, in his own words, "a conglomerate of things experienced in America."

Science & Technology

THE WOODS HOLE CANTATA: Essays on Science and Society
by Gerald Weismann
Dodd, 1985
256 pp. $14.95

THE FLAMINGO'S SMILE: Reflections in Natural History
by Stephen Jay Gould
Norton, 1985
476 pp. $17.95

What accounts for the growing popularity of science writing—of books by, among other scientist-authors, John Gribbin, E. O. Wilson, Lewis Thomas, Peter Medawar, and the two under present consideration? Perhaps it is because the best of such prose, by depicting the play of reason, offers intellectual solace in a world much beleagured by conflicting, irrational "isms." Weismann, a physician at Bellevue Hospital in New York City, works in the same essayistic vein as Thomas, his more widely known colleague. Often opening with an anecdote (a visit to the criminal ward of the hospital, a medical conference in Berlin, the treatment of a "bag lady"), he proceeds to some larger point about medi-



cine, or biology, or the relationship between science and society. The bag lady essay, for instance, ends up as a spirited defense of mental asylums against "trendy" intellectual critics (e.g., historian Michel Foucault) who typically portray them, says Weismann, as "elements of a police state designed to censor the self-expression of the mad." Weismann's target is, quite often, the extremist; indeed, his essays are a sustained hymn to the Archimedean ideal—measure in all things.

Likewise the essays of Harvard paleontologist Gould. Writing about the work of the biologist Ernest Everett Just, Gould explains how the best scientists work between the extremes of "mechanism" (the belief that life is reducible to its physical-chemical properties) and "vitalism" (the somewhat mystical notion that some vital principle endows matter with life). Science, Gould repeatedly shows, is the search for testable hypotheses; faulty science, such as that practiced by creationists, is marked by the unverifiability of its premises. Sorting out the uses and abuses of science, Gould recalls the careers of some of its lesser known yet fascinating practitioners: the Reverend William Buckland of Oxford (1784–1856) proposed and then, after fieldwork, rejected the theory that Noah's flood formed the earth's uppermost layers of loam and gravel; the naturalist Philip Henry Gosse (1810–88) argued that God had given the original types of all species the "appearance of pre-existence" (e.g., Adam was given a navel). Gould often brings the scientist's methods to nonscientific matters. To account for the disappearance of the .400 hitter in baseball, for example, he points to a tendency observable in the history of biological species: Trends in extremes result from systematic changes in amounts of variation. In the case of baseball, a decrease in the variation of batting averages has resulted in the demise of the extreme, the Ty Cobb slugger. Gould tells about the extinction of another creature, the dinosaur—the outcome, most likely, of a comet shower some 65 million years ago. The author's eclecticism and clarity have long attracted readers to his column in *Natural History*, where most of these pieces first appeared.