

## RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

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"If we are to avoid spending increasing time and resources on futile searches for health effects from environmental exposures," Gough concludes, "we must realize when science cannot reveal all of the answers—and when the answer instead lies in the political sphere."

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## ARTS & LETTERS

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### *Benton's Politics*

"Thomas Hart Benton: A Politician in Art" by Elizabeth Broun, in *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* (Spring 1987), 16-00 Pollitt Dr., Fair Lawn, N.J. 07410.

Missouri-born Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) had a political heritage, being son of a congressman and grandnephew of one of the leading Democratic politicians of the 1850s. Broun, chief curator of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art, argues that Benton's many murals and illustrations were "the painterly equivalent of the country stump speeches that were a Benton family tradition."

Benton's interest in politics began after World War I, when he reacted against his art school training, which held that the only acceptable subjects to paint were "napkins and vegetables." *The American Historical Epic*



Palisades, one of 10 works in Benton's first important series, *The American Historical Epic*. Begun in 1919, it celebrated "people," not "great men."

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(1919–26) was a set of 10 murals, designed to be a “people’s history,” celebrating the deeds of ordinary men conquering nature.

Critics championed Benton’s first efforts, comparing him to Mexican Marxist muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. But Benton was no Marxist, as his next series of murals, *America Today* (1930), showed. These murals, Broun says, “appealed directly to the populace they portray rather than to those who sought to be the people’s saviors.” While Rivera’s murals from this period show heroic, larger-than-life laborers toiling over machinery, Benton’s murals portray a “patchwork of private interests”; burlesque queens, faith healers, and boxers jostle machines and stockbrokers.

In New York, where he taught painting, Benton’s radical friends (such as e. e. cummings and Lewis Mumford) accused him of being a vulgar fascist. Benton contended that Marxism was “a feudal hangover in the realm of thought which has no place” in the modern world. Disgusted by the bickering of New York intellectuals, he moved to Kansas City in 1935.

“I feel I belong all over my state,” Benton wrote in 1937. “There is about the Missouri landscape something intimate and known to me.” Perhaps that is why Benton’s later paintings are more personal and lyrical than his earlier works. Such works as *Persephone* (1938–39) and *Silver Stump* (1943) show an intimacy and faith in the fertility of the land lacking in his epic murals.

In his last years, Benton was “content to deal with history more often than politics.” Yet in his final paintings, such as *Wheat* (1967), Broun notes, Benton “at last merged his lifelong concern for social progress and his enduring faith in natural regeneration.”

### G. K. C. and The Stage

“Please, Sir, May I Go Mad? G. K. Chesterton, Self-Revelation, and the Stage” by P. J. Kavanagh, in *Grand Street* (Summer 1987), 50 Riverside Dr., New York, N.Y. 10024.

G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) used his wit to master the arts of journalism, literary and social criticism, fiction, and poetry. His works, written from the perspective of an Anglican who became a Catholic convert when he was 48, range from the Father Brown series of mysteries to such collections of essays as *All Things Considered* (1908). But Chesterton’s talents never translated well to the theater.

Although Chesterton’s three plays are forgotten today, says Kavanagh, a columnist for *The Spectator*, they yield dividends to the careful reader. “These dramatic works,” he says, throw “an unusually personal light on Chesterton, and on his thought.”

Chesterton began his intermittent efforts as a playwright at the urging of George Bernard Shaw. “I shall repeat my public challenge to you,” Shaw wrote in a 1908 letter, “vaunt my superiority, insult your corpulence . . . steal your wife’s affections with intellectual and athletic displays, until you contribute something to the British drama.”

Five years later, Chesterton completed *Magic*, which embodied his war against “modernity”—a kind of atheistic pessimism which drained life