BACKGROUND READING FOR ART PRESENTERS
The Sources of Country Music
Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975)

The artist of *A Social History of the State of Missouri*, Thomas Hart Benton, was born in Neosho, Missouri in 1889, joining a family of lawyers and politicians. Due to the successful political career of his father, M.E. Benton, Thomas Hart Benton spent the majority of his childhood living in Washington, D.C., while his father served as a representative in the United States House of Representatives. During this time, Benton grew to realize that his personal interests did not match those of his family; visual art, rather than politics, appealed to him, so he took lessons at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington. At the age of seventeen, Benton received his first job in Joplin, Missouri, where he was a cartoonist for the small newspaper *The Joplin American*. This job was of great importance for Benton, as it was the first time he was allowed to pursue his artistic interests, while it also provided an outlet for his creative expressions.

In 1907, Benton enrolled in the Art Institute of Chicago in order to pursue his artistic studies. It was here where Benton learned to paint, a skill that would contribute to the murals he would create later in his life. Although he had only enrolled the year before, Benton dropped out of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1908 to move to France, the place that he believed to be the center of the art world. In France he attended the Academie Julian [1] in Paris, where he learned French and attended classes exploring classic composition, perspective, and anatomy.

In 1912, Thomas Hart Benton, growing tired of living in Europe, chose to move to New York City, where he remained until 1935, with the exception of his brief entry into the Navy. Between the years of 1918 and 1919, Benton created numerous sketches of draftees in the Navy; it was at this point that he finally realized what he was comfortable creating artistically—scenes of people at their jobs and going about the duties of daily life. These drawings launched his career, allowing him to first display them in small public art galleries around the city of New York. As his art received more attention, slowly but surely, Thomas Hart Benton was gaining more recognition as an artist in the art world.

Missourians became aware of the rising artist who had been born in their state, and many Missouri citizens wanted their own mural for the Missouri State Capitol building in Jefferson City. The chosen subject closely mirrored that of Benton's mural in Indiana and was entitled *A Social History of the State of Missouri*. The mural was completed in December of 1936. Although much criticism was received regarding the controversial mural, eventually people grew to like and respect it, and it remains in the House Lounge of the Missouri State Capitol.

Benton continued to create artistic works after the *Social History of the State of Missouri*, including illustrations for *Tom Sawyer* and *The Grapes of Wrath.* At the time of his death on January 19, 1975, at the age of 85, Thomas Hart Benton was working on a mural for the Country Music Hall of Fame Museum in Nashville, Tennessee, entitled *The Sources of Country Music*. The mural, which was close to being complete, is now in Nashville, Tennessee and remains unsigned.

About the artwork
The Sources of Country Music
Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975)

Thomas Hart Benton was eighty-four in 1973, when he came out of retirement to paint a mural for the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee. His assignment was to describe the regional sources of the musical style known as "country," and Benton couldn't resist the opportunity to paint one last celebration of homegrown American traditions.

The Sources of Country Music presents five distinct scenes to survey the music of ordinary Americans. The central subject of a barn dance, with a pair of fiddlers calling out sets to a group of square dancers, describes the dominant music of the frontier. A comparatively calm scene shows three women in their Sunday best with hymnals in their hands, suggesting the importance of church music in Protestant America. In the foreground, two barefoot mountain women sing to the sounds of a lap dulcimer, an old instrument associated with Appalachian ballads. In the opposite corner an armed cowboy, one foot on his saddle, accompanies himself with a guitar. An African American man, apparently a cotton picker in the Deep South, strums a tune on a banjo, an instrument slaves brought with them to the New World. Beyond him, on the other side of the railroad tracks, a group of black women dances on the distant riverbank. Despite the range of regional styles, instruments, and customs, the mural seems to pulsate to a single beat, as if Benton took care to ensure that all the musicians played the same note and sang their varied American songs in tune.

The mural preserves an image of American folkways that were rapidly disappearing. Benton's characteristically dynamic style expresses the powerful rhythms of music while suggesting the inevitability of change. Many of the robust, nearly life-size figures balance on uneven, shifting ground. The fiddlers look liable to fall into the mysteriously bowed floor, and the log on which the banjo player sits threatens to roll down the steep slope of the red-clay landscape. Even the telephone poles seem to sway in the background. The steam engine, an indication of change, represents the end of an agrarian life and the homogenization of American culture, which necessarily entailed the loss of regional customs.
The mural pays homage to the country music singer and movie star Tex Ritter, who had helped to persuade Benton to accept the Nashville commission but died before it was completed. Benton represents Ritter as the singing cowboy who turns to face the coal-black engine steaming along the horizon. The train itself was modeled on the Cannonball Special, driven and wrecked by Casey Jones, the hero of an American ballad; it also calls to mind "The Wabash Cannonball," a popular folk song about a mythical train that glides through the country, then rumbles off to heaven. The engine, which may signify the positive as well as the negative aspects of American progress is the only element of the complex composition that Benton felt he couldn't get quite right. Unfortunately, we will never know how he wanted the train to look. Benton is said to have died of a massive heart attack while standing before the mural in January 1975, trying to decide whether to research and repaint the train. Whether the story is true or not, his final work was never signed.

Suggested Questions for Discussion
The Sources of Country Music
Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975)

Encourage students to study this painting carefully, paying attention to the way the artist has grouped the elements in his work.

1. Have students find five scenes in this painting that show regional musicians. These represent the roots of American country music. Can students identify what type of music each of these represents?

- Church and choir music: Three women with a choir director (upper left) are representative of church and choir music.
- Appalachian singers: Two barefoot women playing the dulcimer (left) represent Appalachia.
- Barn dance: Two fiddlers and dancers (center) are representative of barn dancing.
- Singing cowboy: A man with a guitar (right) represents the "singing cowboy."
- African American music of the Deep South: The man with a banjo and a group of women on the distant riverbank
- (center right) represent African American music of the Deep South

2. How did Benton join these different scenes into one unified composition?

He overlapped forms, used the same painting style throughout, repeated colors, and made most of the figures face in toward the center of the painting. Just as all these musical influences came together in American country music, they hold together as a unified composition in this painting.

3. How did Benton create a sense of rhythm and movement throughout this composition?

Most of the vertical lines and bodies slant to the right, creating visual movement in that direction. The train leans forward as it speeds to the right. Even the telephone poles seem to sway.

4. What things and people are making music and sound in this scene? Do you think this painting seems like noisy confusion or are all the parts in harmony?

5. What does the steam engine represent? Before he died, Benton was trying to decide whether he should repaint the train. Why do you think he wanted to do this?

6. Why did Benton include in the painting a homage to Tex Ritter, the singing cowboy?

7. Why did Benton not sign this painting?

8. What do you think of this painting? How does it make you feel?

Suggested activities
The Sources of Country Music
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1. Students will "feel" the music and interpret it in a drawing

Supplies: paper, crayons, chalk, or other drawing medium.

Listen to some "old" country music. (check out Pandora – Tex Ritter, Gene Autrey, Roy Acuff, etc.) See if the classroom teacher will let you play some music while the students are working on their project. Let students draw pictures of how they feel, the people playing the music, etc. Have some of them share their drawings and explain.

2. Students will portray a favorite song

Supplies: paper, crayons, chalk, or other drawing medium.

Students will think about their favorite song and draw a picture portraying it, or how it makes them feel.