Suggested levels for Guided Reading, DRA™, Lexile® and Reading Recovery™ are provided in the Pearson Scott Foresman Leveling Guide.

### Genre Comprehension Skills and Strategy

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Scott Foresman Reading Street 3.6.3

by Peggy Bresnick Kendler

Thomas Hart Benton: Painter of Murals

ISBN-10: 0-328-51427-6
Vocabulary
ally
appreciated
encouraged
enlisted
expression
legacy
murals
native
social
support

Word count: 1,193
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Chapter 1

Thomas Hart Benton, Muralist

Do you have **murals** in your school? Every school should have one or more of these huge paintings that can cover entire walls or ceilings. One of the most famous American painters of murals was Thomas Hart Benton.

Thomas lived in the Midwest, but he traveled all over the country. He painted Midwest farmers working in the fields. He painted people going to church in the Southwest. He painted western rodeos. He made paintings of factory workers and navy men working in submarines!

Although he did many different kinds of paintings, Thomas is best known for his murals. He would paint each panel separately; then he would mount the painted panels on a wall or ceiling. This way it was easy to move the murals from one place to another.
Thomas Hart Benton grew up in Neosho, Missouri, near the Ozark Mountains. He often included those mountains in his landscapes.

Young Tom Benton spent his early childhood boating and fishing on the rivers near his home. Traveling with his family to help his father campaign for Congress, he visited many parts of the state, meeting a lot of people.

When young Tom was eight years old, his family moved to Washington, D.C., because his father had been elected to Congress. Tom spent the next few years traveling between Missouri and Washington, D.C.

Chapter 2

The Early Years

Thomas Hart Benton was born in Neosho, Missouri, in 1889. Politics was in his blood. His great uncle was the first U. S. senator from Missouri. Thomas’s father, Maecenas E. Benton, was also in politics, a lawyer and a congressman.
Thomas’s father wanted his son to go into politics, but Thomas had other ideas. He wanted to be an artist. Thomas’s mother was an ally to her son. She gave him her support and encouraged him to follow his dream.

Thomas’s father thought differently. In 1906, when Thomas was 17, his father sent him to military school. Thomas was very unhappy there.

Finally, when Thomas’s father saw how unhappy his son was, he allowed Thomas to go to the Art Institute of Chicago. There, Thomas could paint all day, and that made him very happy.

When World War I began, Thomas enlisted in the navy. He lived on a base in Norfolk, Virginia, where his job was to draw the ships, the people, and life on the base. The navy wanted the drawings to be as realistic as possible, and, of course, Thomas did his best.

Thomas Hart Benton made this drawing while he was in the navy.

When Thomas got out of the navy, artists were flocking to New York City, so Thomas moved there too.
In Thomas’s time, most artists didn’t make a lot of money and had to find other work besides painting. Thomas taught at the Art Students League in New York City.

In 1922, Thomas married one of his art students, Rita Piacenza. They had a son, Thomas Jr., and a daughter, Jessie.

Thomas painted things as he saw them. His art is very realistic and is called representational art because it “represents” what the artist sees.

Not all artists painted like Thomas. Many artists, such as Pablo Picasso, painted with angles and shapes. Abstract artists painted with unusual forms and colors. Thomas didn’t feel these styles were for everyday people and chose to express himself in his own way.
While in New York City, Thomas began painting huge murals. One series was called *American Historical Epic*. These paintings showed life in America from colonial days to Thomas’s time.

Thomas meant to include seventy-five paintings in the series, but he completed just seventeen murals before 1927. He grouped the artwork into three chapters of history, covering the first colonists, economic life in the early colonies, and westward expansion.

Thomas Hart Benton’s big break came in 1929 when he was hired to do nine murals. He called the series *America Today* because it showed what life was like in America at the time. These murals were hung in a big room at the New School for Social Research in New York City. These paintings made Thomas famous.

Many people loved the murals, but some people were upset. They appreciated Thomas’s great skill in painting hard-working Midwestern people. But they didn’t agree with some of Thomas’s views. They thought he was prejudiced.
Chapter 4
Fame and Friendship

In 1935, Thomas Hart Benton returned to his native state of Missouri, where he taught art at the Kansas City Art Institute. He also painted murals for the state capitol in Jefferson City.

These murals are called A Social History of the State of Missouri. They cover four walls and show the history of Missouri. Thomas didn’t paint just the people of Missouri. He also used characters from famous books, such as the characters Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer from Missouri writer Mark Twain’s novel Huckleberry Finn. Today, the murals still hang in the state capitol building.

Thomas left the Kansas City Art Institute in 1941 to paint eight paintings about World War II. This series was called The Year of Peril.
President Harry S Truman was a good friend of Thomas Hart Benton. He even helped to paint one of Thomas Hart Benton’s famous murals!

Many former U. S. Presidents build presidential libraries in their home states. People from all over the country come to visit these libraries. President Harry S Truman built his library in Independence, Missouri, in 1957. He hired Thomas to paint a mural for it.

Both men agreed that the mural would show the early days of Independence, Missouri. It would include Native Americans, settlers, and farmers.

One day while Thomas was painting, President Truman kept making suggestions. Thomas couldn’t concentrate, so he stopped painting, climbed down from his platform, and faced the President. “If you want to paint, come up here,” he told the President.

President Truman smiled and said, “By golly, I will.” He climbed up the ladder and began to paint. After that, Thomas and President Truman were great friends.
Thomas Hart Benton painted Missouri river and boat scenes.

Chapter 5
The Legacy of Thomas Hart Benton

You only have to look at Thomas Hart Benton’s murals to see how powerful they are.

What makes the work of Thomas Hart Benton so important? It is not just what he painted, it is how he painted it. His work is an expression of the way he felt about the history, events, and life in the United States. He loved his country and wanted to celebrate the good things about it. He also wanted to point out the bad things. He created an honest picture, hoping people would see the bad and do something about it.
Thomas Hart Benton didn’t let old age stop him from doing what he loved! Even at age eighty, he still painted.

Thomas continued to work on his murals. Sometimes he worked in his studio in Kansas City, Missouri, while at other times he worked at his summer home on Martha’s Vineyard, a small island off the coast of Massachusetts.

In January 1975, Thomas Hart Benton died while doing what he liked best—painting.

Today, Thomas Hart Benton’s home and studio in Kansas City are open to the public. We can see firsthand where he worked and lived. His paintings are in many museums and buildings, and many are reprinted in books.

Thomas Hart Benton is considered America’s most important muralist. We can see the history of the United States through the eyes of this remarkable artist.
Now Try This

Your Life Today

Thomas Hart Benton created realistic paintings of life around him. Today, you’re going to be an artist and a historian too.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity, Scene, or People</th>
<th>Description</th>
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Here’s How to Do It!

- Copy the chart on page 22 onto a sheet of paper.
- In the first column, list a part of your life that is important to you. It may be an activity, a group of people, or a place.
- In the second column, write some details about a part of your life. Describe the scene, the people, or the activity.
- For example, if one of the activities important to you is soccer, you would write the words “Soccer Game” in the left column. In the right column, you would describe a soccer game. You would write sentences that describe the activity.
- When you have completed the chart for five activities, scenes, or people, make a drawing of each one. You will have a series of five mini-murals that show your life today!
- Share your chart and your murals with a classmate.
Glossary

ally  n. friend or helper
appreciated  v. valued; enjoyed; was grateful for
encouraged  v. gave support to
enlisted  v. joined or signed on
expression  n. the act of putting into words or visual form
legacy  n. a gift left by someone
murals  n. large wall paintings
native  adj. belonging to someone because of birth
social  adj. relating to human society
support  n. aid; encouragement; help

Reader Response

1. Does seeing pictures of Benton’s paintings and murals help you better understand his work? Why or why not?

2. What important ideas did you learn from reading about Thomas Hart Benton’s life? How did these ideas help you understand the book?

3. Use a dictionary to look up the word social. How many definitions did you find? Choose one of the other definitions (not the one in this book) and write it in the chart below. Then use social in a sentence to show that meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition of Social:</th>
<th>Sentence:</th>
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