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The Mysterious Case of Benton and Gould: America Today and  
Dick Tracy as Documents of the Great Depression

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This paper explores the close connections that run between American Regionalist art and newspaper adventure comics during the 1930s using Thomas Hart Benton’s America Today mural (1930-31) and Chester Gould’s Dick Tracy strip (1931). These concurrent popular movements each represent a seismic shift in the tone of their medium when compared to that of the 1920s. Within these two works, repeated patterns of form and content attest to a shared purpose rooted in the national malaise of the early Depression. Granted parity as valuable historic documents, both America Today and Dick Tracy speak clearly to the desires, frustrations, and fears of a country in crisis. Further critical reading reveals how Benton and Gould achieved similar levels of popular acclaim by offering the public visual and narrative affirmations of American unity, ingenuity, and strength. The cultural insight gleaned in such an exercise argues for a more holistic approach to art history that eschews “high” and “low” artistic distinctions.



The world-weary Manhattanite brave enough to hazard a flip through the *New York Times* on the cold morning of January 15<sup>th</sup> 1931 could hardly be blamed for the impulse to dump his or her coffee down the sink and crawl right back under the covers. Even skipping over the financial section, he or she had little chance of evading the glut of bad news that had plagued the U.S. since the 1929 Stock Market crash. It was all there. In stories with titles like “Mrs. Eward On Stand Fights Bribe Charge,” “Census of Jobless Will Start Today,” and “Harlem Drive Asks \$100,000 for Relief,” New Yorkers could read in unsparing detail about the moral, social, and financial quagmire the country found itself stuck in.<sup>1</sup> Such revelations of the unscrupulous dealings of public officials, ominous reports on the unemployment boom, and descriptions of indiscriminate economic hardship were certainly enough to inspire a deep sense of despondency about the future.

The same day these stories ran also witnessed the unveiling of Thomas Hart Benton’s nine-panel *America Today* mural series at New York’s New School for Social Research. Benton’s six months of labor on the commission yielded a sequence of images that reflected Benton’s self-proclaimed desire to create “a picture of America in its entirety.”<sup>2</sup> Even more than his dedication to indigenous subject matter, the Paris-trained populist’s deep faith in America’s people permeated every aspect of *America Today*. The mural showed a country populated by hearty, hard-working individuals unbowed by the demands of physical toil and unfazed by the burgeoning economic and social problems lurking only a newsstand away from canvas’ edge. At a time when national confidence and sense of identity had plummeted from the giddy highs of the Roaring ‘20s into a deep trough of disillusionment and despair, Benton presented a decidedly affirmative view. Artistic circles were quick to trumpet the mural’s merits, and the coming days would see rotogravure images of *America Today* insistently wedge themselves within those same anxiety-producing pages of the *New York Times*.<sup>3</sup> This critical success at the dawn on the ‘30s prefigured the rise of what would become the most dominant and popularly-acclaimed art of the Depression era: Regionalism.

Benton’s boldly optimistic outlook notwithstanding, the national situation remained dire and a source of ever-present stress. Just over six months after *America Today*’s unveiling, the *Chicago Tribune* for October 4<sup>th</sup> could not offer much in the way of a rebuttal to the *New York Times* doom and gloom. The pope himself echoed the worries of many Americans when he released a statement from Rome urging charity for the growing numbers of jobless, saying, “The want of so many families and their children, if not provided for, threatens to push them...to the point of exasperation.”<sup>4</sup> This oh-so-gingerly phrased concern about violent popular unrest joined fears provoked by the city’s ongoing crime epidemic, as the police and judicial system appeared increasingly impotent, if not outright corrupt. Criminals of even the highest, most visible stature not only regularly got away with their crimes scot-free, but also seemed to be living the high life while the rest of the law-abiding population suffered. With mob bosses free to play golf and root for the “home town boys” at football games while children fainted from hunger in the classroom, justice seemed nowhere to be found.<sup>5</sup>

Mercifully, sweet relief was making its dogged way onto the pages and into the public at the same time. October 4<sup>th</sup> saw the first *Dick Tracy* comic strip appear in the *Detroit Mirror* and *New York Daily News* courtesy of newspaper titan the Chicago Tribune Syndicate.<sup>6</sup> As *Tracy*’s first full storyline played out through the remainder of October and into November, readers immersed themselves in an urban landscape not unlike many across the country. Looming large among these imperiled cities was Gould’s adopted Chicago, a shadowy world of gangsters and goons in which no one was safe and the police were all too quick to throw up their hands. Now tucked among the tallies of the day’s criminal exploits, however, New Yorkers and the people of Detroit could find a handsome, wholesome, all-American man of action and intellect dealing out vigilante justice with single-minded determination. The public’s rapid embrace of the strip spawned a wave of imitators and helped to usher in the reign of a new model of newspaper comics that defined the medium in the ‘30s. For the next ten years, ongoing narratives and

adventure were the order of the day.

At first glance, *America Today* and the inaugural narrative arc of *Dick Tracy* seem to share little else besides the year they both entered public consciousness. One was writ large upon the walls of a prestigious boardroom in a medium dating back to antiquity and drew stylistic inspiration from Classical friezes, the rhythm of the Baroque, the sensational color of the Neo-Impressionists, and Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera<sup>7</sup>. The other was printed in ink within small, black-rimmed squares on flimsy newsprint made for use and disposal and found its most immediate source in the tawdry pulp magazines of the past decade.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Benton's mural and Gould's comic are linked in meaningful ways that make them a valuable tool for insight into the collective mind of a nation in crisis. While it is true that the Regionalist movement that Benton helped spearhead and the flood of adventure comics Gould helped lead the charge for were in significant ways distinct and addressed to largely divergent audiences, when taken together these art forms form a comprehensive map of the troubled Depression-era American psyche. Examined in the context of the social and historical landscape that precipitated their birth, one can see that these works flourished in the 1930s by serving the common cause of feeding the American public's hunger for release from the bleak realities and anxieties of the day. Mutually drawing on the ills especially plaguing the nation's urban populace, Benton and Gould employ similar means of expressive visual language and storytelling to provide comfort to America's beset city-dwellers.

The *America Today* mural displays Benton's desire to encapsulate the nation in its full breadth and scope. Its energetic vistas range from *Deep South* to *Changing West* and everywhere in between. Dominated by scenes of a United States transformed and transforming through the forward march of modernity, its industrious male citizens pepper the landscape as farmers, miners, welders, and lumberjacks to form a formidable mosaic of masculinity. Each of the nine distinct panels, inventively demarcated by the pictorial intrusions of a white Art Deco molding, courses with an overwhelming sense of dynamism, movement, and explosive upward growth. This dizzying, unrelenting intensity and restless activity offers no compositional oases for the viewer's eye to rest and linger on. Instead, it captures their attention and holds them fast as they are swept from place to place across ultimately irrelevant spatial and temporal boundaries that the single unifying narrative of a powerful nation on the rise serves to tie together.

The mural's saturated and vibrant color palette allows one to almost feel the scorching heat radiating off the forge in *Steel* and smell the rich, loamy forest soil in the lumber-hauling portion of *Midwest*. Colors woven together from opposing sides of the color wheel create optic tableaux that seem to vibrate with life, as in the swirling interaction of orange fire and blue water visible in the cross-section of a steam engine or a purple nighttime city street lit up by luminous shades of lemon yellow. The overall unity of Benton's color scheme also serves the practical purpose of promoting a holistic reading of the mural as opposed to one concentrated on its individual parts. Dramatic visual contrast manifests in the pairing of occasional bursts of bright, pure white with swaths of deep black, as well as the juxtaposition of hard-edged geometric forms with curvilinear, flowing shapes. In multiple instances, a plume of smoke or puff of steam cuts a sinuous path across a sharply defined industrial backdrop. The balance achieved between these two types of elements imbues the mural with a pulsating rhythm. *America Today's* internal formal engine further generates energy by being built on a framework made of ascendant diagonal and vertical lines, with static, anchoring horizontal planes relegated to minor roles. In *Instruments of Power*, a grey blimp angles diagonally skyward, while in *Midwest* a tractor rolls diagonally inward towards the foreground and the toppling trees of the woodsmen stand frozen diagonally in mid-fall. The inky black smokestacks in *Coal*, oil derricks and windmill in *Changing West*, and charismatic street preacher in *City Activities with Subway* all thrust vertically toward the top of their respective compositions, penetrating into the sky or jutting through other planes and scenes to create an illusion of upward growth.

Beneath it all, the character of the white male laborer appears omnipresent, absent only in the two leisure-centric urban panels. The pickaxe wielding coal miner hulking in the

foreground of *Coal* epitomizes the type of exaggerated hyper-masculinity embodied in these men: Although stooped, he exudes no sense of fatigue, his prominent muscles visibly flexed and engaged beneath his red shirt. His jaw is lean, his cheekbones sharply chiseled, and his neck thick, with the shadow cast over his face by the cap he wears making his Herculean body the sole focus of our attention and awe. The fact that the ridges of his powerful back and arms and the color of his shirt echo in the craggy form of the mountain behind him seems to equate his body with this sort of elemental permanence and strength. In *Steel*, the man standing above the nearest forge adds to this ideal manly character profile the quality of heedlessness to danger, staring undaunted into the inferno below. A modern Hephaestus, he boldly wears no protective gear like gloves or goggles. Despite being hemmed in on all sides by imposing landscapes conquered by the structures, buildings, and machines of industry, Benton's choice to scale up and always position his men at the forefront of the labor scenes argues for their primacy and control over the nation-building at hand. Indeed, only one panel of the ten, *Instruments of Power*, glorifies technology without first making a visual bow to the importance of the working man, and the kaleidoscopic, fragmented fever dreams that make up the two lone cityscapes feel unreal and claustrophobic compared to the more expansive, easily absorbed labor scenes. All of this works to ground Benton's America outside of the urban jungle, whose populace he shows passively consuming everything from beautiful women to tabloids or living vicariously through film and human spectacle. Instead, he decisively locates the nation's identity and well being within the active bodies of its working men.

Echoing Benton, Gould constructs a funny-page fable of American manliness, his focused on dormant masculine heroism awakened by crisis. Day one of the daily strip features a panel in which Mrs. Trueheart, mother of Dick's fiancée Tess, hears her husband's announcement that their dinner guests have arrived and happily tosses aside a newspaper. Wearing a kindly smile, she declares herself thankful for an excuse to "get away from these tales about gangsters."<sup>9</sup> The bitter irony of this statement is soon revealed, as in short order a pair of gang hitmen break into the Trueheart home to steal the savings Mr. Trueheart has been dutifully squirreling away for years to pay off his one outstanding debt. When the incensed deli man lunges at the two, Gould renders in plain, unapologetic visual terms a bullet striking him squarely in the chest as in the background his daughter reels, his wife faints, and his future son-in-law shouts a futile warning. This brutally honest approach to crime, as well as art characterized by an ostensibly realistic style and economy of detail, persists throughout *Dick Tracy's* first case and lends the detective's origin story much of its power.

Dick, all steely resolve and grim determination, proceeds to embark on a one-man quest for vengeance. As he dives bravely into the belly of the gangland beast, a visual pattern emerges wherein characters' bodies are defined largely by either angular or curving lines. This results in strong, iconic silhouettes, from the hawk-nosed, square-jawed shape of Tracy himself, a man constructed of sharp right angles and crisp geometric forms, to the slim-hipped, nipped-waist hourglass of Tess Trueheart, all gentle curves from her stylishly bobbed hair to the ruffled bodice of her red dress. The plump, non-threatening kidney-bean shapes of the Trueheart parents grant them a charming, friendly-folks-next-door air. This concise but generative body language extends to the way Gould's figures move and carry themselves, which clearly conveys their mood and attests more broadly to their overall moral state. The menacing deviousness and disregard for authority of the gang boss and his goons manifests in a myriad of slouching postures with hands suspiciously obscured in pockets or behind backs. Seeming so literally loaded down with evil that it requires too great an effort to stand erect, they endlessly lean on and drape themselves over nearby furniture. This contrasts starkly with the upright, trustworthy nature articulated through Dick's perpetually straight back and near-constant gesticulation.

Not limiting itself to interior spaces, Gould's story spills out onto the mean streets of his nameless metropolis. Here, vague, sketchy suggestions of dark alleys, near-naked storefronts, and abstracted, building block skylines swim out of an apparently atemporal dusky light. Gould's

minimalist rendering of this locale effectively universalizes the setting so that it stands in as a sort of “Everycity,” a skeletal framework that the reader can drape his own urban locale on top of. This immediacy of the narrative to the reader’s own lived experience increases through the few references Gould does consistently make that ground the story, if not geographically, then at least within a narrow window of distinctly American time. These references reoccur throughout the strips in the form of the characters’ clothing, the cars they drive, and their manners of speech. From Tess’ Flapperesque dress to the slang and grammatical butchery of the gangsters, stereotyped, period-specific elements like these situate the characters and environs of Gould’s tale within the readers’ own United States of the 1920s and ‘30s. The sense of plausibility strategies like this generate gives the reader an impression of the pen-and-ink world they look upon as more lifelike. By the time one reaches the story’s conclusion after breathlessly watching Dick beat the gangsters at their own dirty game, this self-made savior born out of tragedy feels as real as any of the flesh-and-blood folk profiled in the pages around him. Like Benton, Gould puts the pre-existing cultural vocabulary of his audience to the service of his message, using common visual tropes to effectively communicate ideas across the broadest possible swath of society.

The successes of *America Today* and *Dick Tracy* during the 1930s place them among a scant few benefactors of the disaster that ushered out the ‘20s. It is the very cataclysmic, unforeseen nature of the transition from one decade to the next, however, that provided each work fertile ground. Characterizing the ‘20s in his book *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the American Comic Book*, author Gerard Jones states:

“The horrors of nineteenth century industrialism and the technological hell of the World War were fading from memory. Radios, cars, and planes were connecting people to one another as never before and giving industrial development a humane face. A production economy valuing thrift and the accumulation of capital was being replaced by a consumption economy based on spending and credit, self-gratification and the marketing of the new...Politicians, advertisers, and popular storytellers sang the praises of business, invention, America, the self-indulgent individual, and the future”<sup>10</sup>

The Roaring ‘20s, in other words, had been decade of unprecedented prosperity and confidence in the United States. Within the infectious, feel-good fever pitch of high spirits and sense of national invincibility that pervaded them, however, omens of trouble to come went largely unheeded.

Contemporary funny pages nationwide spoke to this wanton obliviousness. The boons of the boom time appeared in vaudevillian knee-slappers and domestic dramas alike, while any warning signs of its unsustainability remained conspicuously absent. Reflecting the thriving automobile industry’s new accessibility to an ascendant middle class, *Gasoline Alley* featured conversations about money and the acquisition of goods as a consistent through-line, but failed to reference ballooning rates of household debt.<sup>11</sup> *Bringing Up Father* centered on the parvenu social climbing of formerly working-class couple Jiggs and Maggie, ignoring how the reckless economic brinksmanship practiced by resident “Bulls” and “Bears” on Wall Street regularly threatened to dash their luxurious new lifestyle.<sup>12</sup> The fashionably attired working-girl lead of *Winnie Winkle* elicited laughs on one occasion by being shown “so distracted by shopping that she neglects a friend’s baby she is minding and even mistakes a rubbish cart for its pram;” meanwhile, actual large cities like Ms. Winkle’s stomping ground experienced alarming escalations in organized crime and influxes of job-seekers that exacerbated already tense, overcrowded conditions.<sup>13</sup> On October 29<sup>th</sup> 1929, the events of Black Tuesday finally forced a woefully ill-prepared nation to confront in dramatic fashion the consequences of its own blind eye. Representing as it did an abrupt and sobering death for the Jazz Age dream, the Great Crash inflicted on the average American a deep wound of disillusionment, shattered pride and sense of identity that they would still be ruefully nursing come 1931.

*America Today* and *Dick Tracy* share a fundamental genesis in this tipping point from '20s to '30s, optimism to pessimism, self-assurance to uncertainty, and hubris to doubt. As documents of this historic liminal moment and the accompanying polar shift in public mood, both works conspire to tell a story specifically counteracting the pall of gloom that had settled over the country. In the vigorous, active bodies of his monumental laborers, Benton negates the harsh reality of alarming levels of unemployment while simultaneously placing agency back in the hands of a male population emasculated by their lack of control over the situation. Not a one anything less than fully absorbed in his task, these men have no energy or time to spare on riots or flirtations with the radical political movements of the day that often recruited from amongst the ranks of the idle and disenfranchised.<sup>14</sup> The uncomfortable fact of an increasingly fractious, volatile work force, the result of heightened anxiety over tenuous job security and dwindling opportunities for new work, is nowhere to be found in the mural. Outside the New School boardroom, new battle lines developed between skilled and unskilled labor and old racial and gender prejudices reasserted themselves as a way to shore up a social structure upended by the unsparing nature of the Depression. Upon its walls, however, all work in tandem to achieve American greatness.<sup>15</sup> The nation's ongoing downward slide toward some indeterminate lowest of lows and the stagnation of forward progress meet their visual antithesis in *America Today's* growing, reaching vitality and thrum of barely contained energy. In a *New York Times* article comparing the national malaise of the early '30s to the depressive phase of a bipolar episode, author Elisha M. Friedman stated that "the skillful physician attempts a cure by recalling and strengthening the old ego...it is important to stress the healthy aspects, namely, that the country still has all its natural resources, all its plants, its working population, its skill and its technique."<sup>16</sup> By this measure, in *America Today* we see Benton playing doctor a year in advance of Friedman's prescription, invoking the swagger that America felt in the 1920s but with a different emphasis allowing for the post-Crash reassessment of values.

Gould, for his part, does not deny the problem of crime nor shy away from spotlighting it in all its bald-faced senselessness and cruelty. Instead, he provides a people bereft of heroes with a man who would redeem their festering cities by sheer force of will, bureaucracy and red tape be damned. Equally capable as a bare-fisted brawler as he was developing and executing complex plans or making deductions, Dick offered no quarter to the criminals that real-world cops and judges allowed to weasel their way back onto the streets. His unique brand of vigilante justice provided a much-needed cathartic release for frightened, frustrated readers experiencing the enfeebling effects of a crisis forcing more Americans than ever to put faith in large, impersonal agencies to see them through. Where the dumbstruck paralysis of the United States government in the immediate wake of the Crash had coupled with later revelations of political and corporate malfeasance to reveal these institutions as untrustworthy, *Dick Tracy* demonstrated the same unwaveringly noble character seven days a week, offering some small measure of certainty in an incredibly uncertain time. Gould's comic served as "an exercise in black and white both graphically and philosophically."<sup>17</sup> That is to say, the world of *Dick Tracy* did not deal in moral grey areas and made distinguishing between the good guys and the bad guys a matter of the utmost visual clarity. As Asa Berger explains, criminals who wear their wickedness on their face and in their form "facilitate a kind of 'guilt-free aggression' on the part of readers. They are so repulsive and so easily identifiable that we can release our hostile antipathies against them with little feelings of remorse."<sup>18</sup> By visually exaggerating his gangsters beyond the point of recognizable, everyday humanity into the realm of gross caricature, Gould necessarily sets them as a breed apart. This stark differentiation generates a reassuring "Us" versus "Them" dichotomy for the reader; all one needed to do to pick out the good guys was locate the individuals that looked the most like you.

In both *America Today* and *Dick Tracy*, obvious, pinpoint allusions to modern issues and popular culture function in tandem with inclusive ambiguity to strengthen the viewer's personal

connection with the art as pertinent to their world. In the early '30s, Gould ripped straight from the headlines for his tales of gangsters. Gang boss "Big Boy," for instance, performed a thinly veiled facsimile of Al Capone "pointedly deglamorized into a contemptible fat slug with a cigar and a sneer and a mouthful of gold teeth."<sup>19</sup> Benton's nods to pop culture display themselves most visibly in the two *City Activities* panels of *America Today*, where the debauched days of the 1920s live again in the form of burlesque shows, packed movie palaces, and illegal alcohol production.<sup>20</sup>

This generative interaction between elements specific and vague in *America Today* and *Dick Tracy* complements the balance achieved between segmenting and unifying visual strategies. In *Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals*, author Emily Braun describes the paintings as "a rapid sequence of disparate scenes, both bound together and divided by the interior molding"; not a far cry from how Mila Bongco explains the device of paneling in comics as creating "a rhythm of...unfolding events and a recognizable space and time dimension."<sup>21</sup> As in a comic strip, each panel of *America Today* has its own weight and significance when taken individually, but their fullest meaning can only be grasped in the context of the whole. To this end, Benton uses the repetition of certain objects and elements to subtly link under a single American umbrella a large number of different, visually distinct locales. Perhaps the best illustration of this can be found in Benton's ubiquitous black locomotives. Some placed front and center in a scene's action and others just barely visible chugging along the horizon line, these machines of industry stitch together the various pieces of the narrative puzzle with their tracks. Fitting his uncluttered style, in *Dick Tracy* Gould typically relies on only one or two repeated elements (such as the red lamp and pink armchair in the Truehearts' den or patches of exposed brick in the gangsters' makeshift prison) to indicate a single space across multiple panel breaks.

The fact of Benton and Gould's achievement in striking head-on some critical nerve of their time reveals itself in the widespread acclaim each man went on to experience throughout the remainder of the 30s; that the fledgling art genres each represented would go on to dominate the decade attests to this as well. Upon its debut *America Today* received vocal praise and international publicity, establishing Benton as America's leading muralist of the day.<sup>22</sup> As Benton abandoned the largely urbane mode of *America Today* to work more with agrarian themes, East Coast critics began to group him, Iowan Grant Wood, and Kansan John Steuart Curry as a central "triumvirate" of what was dubbed "Regionalism."<sup>23</sup> Idyllic Regionalist tableaux of bucolic farm life or grandly mythologized national history embodied a symbolic renunciation of the vices of the '20s to return to what stood as popularly imagined bedrock national values. Images steeped in themes of family, community, and hard-working, self-reliant, "salt of the earth" American men enabled this pictorial penance while simultaneously granting an art-buying urban audience access to a world free from the crowding, harsh angles, and smog-belching smokestacks of the city. Discussing what Americans in the 1930s found so seductive about the movement, historian Erika Doss states both poetically and simply: "Regionalism provided a panacea to Depression anxiety...it told a story of American progress and potential."<sup>24</sup>

*Dick Tracy*, too, rocketed out of the gates as an immediate sensation, with publishers noting how quickly the public became invested in it and the impressive degree of increased sales they received through its inclusion.<sup>25</sup> The strip's popularity spawned a slew of child-directed merchandising, but solely "kid stuff" or trashy fodder for the lower classes *Tracy* was not. Polls conducted by George Gallup in 1930 had shown the only parts of a metropolitan newspaper consistently read by over 40% of both men and women to be "pictures and comics," and that "ankers, professors, doctors, farmers, and lawyers read comic strips as avidly as truck drivers, waiters, and day laborers."<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, adults expressed that they took *Dick Tracy* seriously through the patronage of their paper-purchasing dollars. Promising similarly engrossing tales of action and heroics miles, and, in some cases, light-years away

from dreary Depression mundanity, Dick's new illustrated neighbors in the dailies equally usurped the old standards of yesteryear to ascend atop the comics heap. Suddenly ubiquitous adventure strips overflowed with spacemen, pirates, cowboys, and mercenary "soldier-of-fortune" aviators. Echoing the independent frontier folk then populating many Regionalist works, these robust men presented an opportunity to trade the concerns of everyday life for a romp by proxy in take-charge, unfettered personal mobility and self-determination. Proving the public's appetite for these comics, a *Fortune* magazine follow-up to Gallup's 1930 polling five years later discovered that, while only 30.4 % of U.S. adults regularly read a newspaper columnist, a whopping 51.4% reported having a favorite comic strip.<sup>27</sup>

Just as a change in historical conditions and social attitudes marked the beginning of the glory days of Regionalism and newspaper adventure strips, so did such a shift signal the onset of their decline. The same new reality bore inescapably down on both Benton and Gould: there was a war on, and it had supplanted the Depression in its grip on the American consciousness. For Benton, the ultra-nationalistic roots of World War II rendered the promotion of American unity observed in *America Today's* patchwork quilt of productive bodies seem disconcerting, if not outright dangerous.<sup>28</sup> Because it had ultimately taken the necessity of a ramped-up wartime production economy to achieve pre-Depression levels of employment, Benton's laboring men sweating at the forge or toiling in the mines no longer sang of an internally spurred end to idleness and renewal of male power.<sup>29</sup> Now, their sinewy forms spoke to impressment and imperilment through menacing outside forces. The insistence on home-grown subject matter and indigenous forms of expression, cornerstones of the Regionalist credo, lost a great deal of their magnetism as pressing international concerns pushed American particularisms to the background and made the movement's inherent isolationist mindset impractical if not impossible. Accordingly, critics who at one time helped Benton become the first artist on the cover of *Time* magazine now homed in on a fresh style imported from European centers of culture.<sup>30</sup> Abstract Expressionism eliminated fear over possibly manipulative representative art by forsaking recognizable reality altogether. The uninhibited explorations of color and form carried out by artists like Jackson Pollock, with his brazenly ugly distortions of common subjects and canvases ravaged by violent slashes, spiraling loops, and manic daubs of paint, quickly took on a political character. Their radical freedom of expression rendered such works as the perfect art to adopt as a symbol of democracy and bold statement of American anti-fascism.<sup>31</sup>

The transfer of public preoccupation to beyond national borders and attendant growth in awareness of the looming menaces there prompted a similar renaissance in the field of comic art. This transformation came in the muscle-bound, spandex-clad form of the superhero. These impossibly powerful titans, as far removed from run-of-the-mill reality as Dick Tracy seemed a player within it, made a perfect fit for the 1940s. Hyper-patriotic characters like Superman mirrored America's fixation with the war and provided just the extraordinary means to contend with its unheralded degree of deadly conflict. Whereas Tracy had emerged from and risen above the besmirched substance of our native soil to address localized American problems, the externally-focused wartime world of monstrous, outsourced fears demanded a new, equally over-the-top model of people's champion; in response, Superman very literally descended from the heavens, now seemingly the only hope for a solution to an entire planet gone mad. Through no fault but their own humanity, the detective and his '30s cohort found themselves out of step with public tastes, and their artists scrambled with varying levels of success to adapt.

Benton himself seems to have incurred a genuinely crushing blow to personal morale with the onset of the war, which to him "represented the complete breakdown of all that he had championed in the '30s."<sup>32</sup> His paintings in the following decade reflect a man embittered by seeing the future he so vibrantly pictured in *America Today* debunked by the forces of cruel history. Rebuking the idealism that fueled such inspired imaginings, Benton's response to Pearl Harbor, the 1942 *Year of Peril* series, graphically illustrates the end of his tenure as part

of “a package of heartland cultural uplift.”<sup>33</sup> The grim fatalism of these scenes, depicting in a gruesome, pseudo-Surrealist style the horrors of war, make a butchery of the male bodies Benton once glorified. The artist shows them in a state of literal dismemberment, bug-eyed and fearful in futile attempts to escape a watery grave or the business end of an Axis gun, dashed on a barren landscape beside the wreckage of a downed plane, or blithely boarding en masse the ship that will carry them to their death. In his second autobiography, penned in 1969, Benton summarized and eulogized the Regionalist phenomenon as one both benefactor and victim of the vicissitudes of time, writing that while the “triumvirate” “were psychologically in tune with our times...as the ‘20s turned into the ‘30s,” when “the world situation began in 1938 and 1939 to inject itself into American politics...what was left of (Regionalism) turned to a swift and superficial representation of combat and production scenes, to a business of sensational reporting for popular magazines.”<sup>34</sup>

As for Chester Gould, adventure strips were clearly on the outs as the superhero contingent continued in their conquest of public hearts, minds, and wallets. He refused, however, to let *Dick Tracy* go down without a fight, and the roster of villains in the comic’s second decade saw war criminals such as spies, saboteurs, and fifth columnists thrown into the mix.<sup>35</sup> World War II shifted the biggest sources of American antagonism from internal avatars of moral decay like gangsters and crooked cops to enemies lurking beyond our borders, near enough to be a real source of fear but distant enough to be comfortably envisioned as inhuman caricatures of evil; in response, their doppelgangers in the strip became ever more ghoulish in their appearance and depraved in their criminal activities.<sup>36</sup> What had theretofore been the unspoken fact of Dick’s love for the United States, made abundantly plain in his embodiment of American values, began to be broadcast in a blatant manner that took a page from the rah-rah boosterism and odes to the troops so common amongst Superman and company. Strategies like this, allowed for by the essential mutability of Gould’s medium, kept *Dick Tracy* a popular and well-read property throughout the ‘40s and even into the ‘50s. It would not again, though, ever experience such a perfect synchronicity with public desires as it had in the thick of the early Depression.

For all that differentiates them in size, format, medium, subject, and primary audience, the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between Benton’s early Pan-American epic and Gould’s hard-boiled newsprint sleuth is in truth more a matter of minutiae. A closer study of the form and content of these works and a broader survey of what surrounded their creation reveals that they are intimately connected in what types of messages they convey, how they communicate these, and why such messages resonated in the brief window when the two art forms held their firmest footing. Today, the newspaper comic strip and the Regionalist mural rarely, if ever, comeingle in discussions of significant early 20<sup>th</sup>-century art by sheer merit of the disparate amounts of cultural prestige each has been afforded. If, however, one considers the important metric of art as a historically situated, socially bound cultural barometer, such arbitrary distinctions disappear, and a fuller, richer understanding of the American story can be achieved.

## Endnotes

- 1 *The New York Times*, vol. LXXX, no. 26,654: Thursday, January 15, 1931 (hereafter cited as *Times*, Jan. 15, 1931)
- 2 Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 68-69, 93
- 3 Emily Braun, *Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals* (Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art, 1985), 26-27.
- 4 *The Chicago Tribune*, vol. LXXXX, no. 40: Sunday, October 4, 1931 (hereafter cited as *Tribune*, Oct. 4, 1931).
- 5 *Tribune*, Oct. 4, 1931.
- 6 Jay Maeder, *Dick Tracy: The Official Biography* (New York: Plume, 1990), 11.
- 7 Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art: A professional and technical autobiography* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1969).
- 8 Ellery Queen, introduction to *The Celebrated Cases of Dick Tracy: 1931-1951*, by Chester Gould (New York: Chelsea House, 1970), xxii.
- 9 Maeder, *Dick Tracy*, 1.
- 10 Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 33.
- 11 Ian Gordan, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture: 1890-1945* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 110-114, 116-117.
- 12 Harvey, *Art of the Funnies*, 35-59; "Bear Beset Stocks Crash On Exchange," *Washington Post*, September 6, 1929, 1.
- 13 Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 121.
- 14 Henry J. Pratt, *Churches and Urban Government in Detroit and New York, 1895-1994* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 12; Ella Howard, *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 52-53.
- 15 Pratt, *Churches and Urban Government in Detroit and New York, 1895-1994*, 37; Hapke, "Before WPA: From Iron to Steel, From Anschutz to Stella," in *Labor's Canvas*, 22; Howard, *Homeless*, 38-41.
- 16 Elisha M. Friedman, "Business Psychosis: We Are, It Appears, Suffering From It, but Our Case Is Not Hopeless," *New York Times*, May 15, 1932, E2.
- 17 Harvey, *Art of the Funnies*, 108.
- 18 Asa Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell Us About Ourselves* (New York: Walker & Company, 1973), 127.
- 19 Maeder, *Dick Tracy*, 13; O'Connell, *Chester Gould*, 8.
- 20 Braun, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 60-62.
- 21 Ibid., 19; Mila Bongco, "On the Language of Comics and the Reading Process," in *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 46.
- 22 Braun, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 11, 16; Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 87-88.
- 23 Benton, *An Artist in America*, 147; Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists*, 5.
- 24 Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 162-164.
- 25 O'Connell, *Chester Gould*, 85.
- 26 Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 86.
- 27 Ibid., 88.
- 28 Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 247-264.
- 29 Ibid., 279; David W. Jones, *Mass Motorization and Mass Transit: An American History and*

*Policy Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 58.

30 Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 98.

31 Ibid., 275.

32 Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 293.

33 Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists*, 93; Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 127, 282-283, 300.

34 Ibid., 164-192.

35 Maeder, *Dick Tracy*, 74-81; O'Connell, *Chester Gould*, 8.

36 Ibid., 262.

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