

Basic Detail Report



Title: The Arts of Life in America: Arts of the West

Date: 1932

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3dd9e

Medium: Egg tempera and oil glaze on linen

Description: Benton traveled extensively throughout the nation in the 1920s and 30s, recording the faces of people he encountered. He drew upon a varied cast of characters when composing this large-scale mural commission. For example, in 1930, while attending a Fourth of July rodeo in Saratoga, Wyoming, he sketched the tempestuous competition to lasso horses. This image was later incorporated as the right hand section of Arts of the West. In the same year, he picked up a child's harmonica and immediately became obsessed with the instrument, devoting weeks to mastering intricate folk tunes and children's songs. Thus, it was understandable that Benton included the trio on the left, playing a fiddle, guitar and harmonica. Invariably, Benton enlisted friends and relatives to pose as models. Wilbur Leverett, of Galena, Missouri, is portrayed as the guitar player on the left and Dudley Vance, of Bluff City, Tennessee, sits at the right playing the fiddle. Benton's new student, Jackson Pollock, who became the famous pioneer of Abstract Expressionism, plays the harmonica. In terms of scale and hierarchy, the dominant group within this complex system of vignettes is the card players in the foreground and the two ancillary gunmen directly behind which occupy the center section of the mural. Benton stressed the rough and tumble, masculine environment of the West- a region of fiercely independent cowboys and general lawlessness. There are only three

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women in this section and all three are peripheral figures, whose faces are barely visible. By exaggerating the size of their limbs and muscles, Benton has created a land of giants, men more than able to tame the wilderness. On closer examination, it is revealing that none of these characters make eye contact with anyone else. Each person exists as a separate unit, though in close proximity to others. Music, dancing, horseshoes, guns, poker, and taming horses were as popular with westerners then as they are today. Benton's painting conveys raw passion, expressed in his preference for red as a color and by his distortion, enlargement, and exaggeration of hands, feet, arms, and legs. In this respect, he was a worthy successor to both Michelangelo and El Greco who maximized the expressiveness of their figures through attenuation and enlargement. By placing the pair of hands of the unseen third card player by the edge of the canvas, the artist invites us to take a place at the table. Benton's goal was to engage his audience as much as possible and stimulate us to think of ways in which we too are creative.

Dimensions: 93 3/4 x 159 1/2 in. (238.1 x 405.1 cm)