

Thomas Hart Benton's Drawings and Studies for his "America Today" Mural Reunited at The Met

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by Hamptons Art Hub Staff

The [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) received a donation of 29 drawings and studies relating to [Thomas Hart Benton](#)'s mural *America Today* from global insurance company [AXA](#), announced the museum yesterday. The donation follows AXA's gift of the mural itself in 2012, enhancing The Met's collection of American modernism.

The drawings and studies are now on view in a special installation exhibition at The Met Fifth Avenue in Gallery 909. Installed alongside the mural cycle, the exhibition is on view from September 29, 2016 to January 16, 2017 at the New York City art museum.

"The gift of these rich and revelatory works enhances our understanding of this important American artist and his contribution to 20th-century art," stated Thomas P. Campbell, Director and CEO of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in the art donation announcement.



“City Activities with Dancehall from America Today” by Thomas Hart Benton, 1930-31. Mural cycle consisting of ten panels. Egg tempera with oil glazing over Permalba on a gesso ground on linen mounted to wood panels with a honeycomb interior. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of AXA Equitable, 2012.

Benton was a prolific and curious draftsman who recorded the world around him in drawings and sketches from an early age. After the death of his father in 1924, Benton was inspired to explore the United States and created hundreds of drawings of the people and places he saw in the South, the Midwest, and the West. These drawings became the basis for *America Today*.

In addition to the drawings, AXA’s gift includes Benton’s painted compositional studies for five of the mural’s 10 panels: *Instruments of Power*, *Deep South*, *City Building*, *City Activities with Dance Hall*, and *City Activities with Subway*.

Notably, the painted studies for *Instruments of Power* and *Deep South*, which appear on opposite sides of the same Masonite support, were previously owned by Jackson Pollock, who was Benton’s student at the time at the Art Students League. Pollock assisted his teacher with *America Today* by modeling for male figures in the mural and mixing pigments, according to The Met.

America Today was Benton’s first commission for a mural and launched his career as one of the defining figures in American art of his generation. He received the opportunity in 1930 from [The New School for Social Research](#) with the mural set to adorn the boardroom in a new building at 66th West 12th Street, designed by renowned architect [Joseph Urban](#). Rejecting allegorical and historical subjects traditionally reserved for public murals, Benton instead filled the walls of the New School’s boardroom with images of modern life and industry.

After more than 50 years at the New School, *America Today* was proving difficult for the school to

maintain in perpetuity, according to The Met. In 1982, the school sold the mural cycle to New York art dealer Maurice Segoura with the condition that it would not be re-sold outside the United States or as individual panels. *America Today* was then acquired by AXA (then Equitable Life) in 1984, in support of efforts on the part of then-Mayor Edward I. Koch and others to keep it intact and in New York City.

Two years later, after extensive cleaning and restoration, *America Today* was unveiled in AXA's new headquarters at 787 Seventh Avenue in New York. In 1996, AXA moved its corporate headquarters to 1290 Avenue of the Americas where *America Today* was installed in the lobby. In 2012, the company was asked to remove the piece in preparation for a renovation.

The removal triggered AXA's decision to place the historic work in a museum collection and donated the mural to The Metropolitan in December 2012.

"AXA is proud to partner with the MET as we continue to honor Benton's legacy by sharing his drawings and studies related to his celebrated work, *America Today*," said Mark Pearson, President and CEO of AXA Financial. "We are happy to contribute to the global community that we serve and uphold our promise to preserve his works for future generations."

Thomas Hart Benton's mural cycle *America Today* as well as drawings and studies for the work are on view at The Met Fifth Avenue in Gallery 909 from September 29, 2016 to January 16, 2017. The Met Fifth Avenue is located at 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028. www.metmuseum.org.

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