



THOMAS HART BENTON (1889-1975)

Mine Strike, Pittsburgh PA

Signed lower left "Benton"

oil on tin

15 5/8 x 13 1/4 in. (18 3/4 x 21 1/8 x 3 in.)

39.69 x 33.66 cm (47.63 x 53.66 x 7.62 cm)

1933

46341

PROVENANCE:

Thomas Hart Benton Testamentary Trust, United Missouri Bank
Private Collection, acquired from the above

LITERATURE:

Garret Keizer, "Labor's Last Stand," Harper's Magazine, September 2018, vol. 337, no. 2020, illus. cover and index

Deeply influenced by his populist views and commitment to social realism, Thomas Hart Benton became an advocate for the common man, often depicting the struggles and resilience of ordinary Americans in his work. Coal strikes were frequent occurrences in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and "*Mine Strike*" is a visually compelling account of such an uprising, rich with social commentary. At the time, Benton traveled the nation seeking inspiration for a mural project and was particularly interested in social issues. In 1933, he illustrated the modern social history of the United States for "*We the People*", published by Harper & Brothers, New York. "*Mine Strike*" is carefully constructed to highlight the chaos and human drama.

The figures are robust and grounded, reflecting Benton's signature style of muscular forms. The scene, though aggressive and violent, displays commitment and sacrifice. Two officers fire on the strikers, one of whom has fallen to the ground, shot. Set against the backdrop of an imposing mining complex, a towering black structure known as a 'tippie' looms ominously over the strikers. Its darkly sinister anthropomorphic shape contrasts sharply with the lighter, more organic human figures — an appearance intensified by its coal chutes resembling mechanical arms. This visual metaphor of industrial oppression underscores the pervasive threat posed by the coal mining industry and those paid to protect its interests.

Through "*Mine Strike*," Benton not only documents a specific historical moment but also critiques the broader socio-economic conditions of his time. His depiction of the workers' plight is a powerful statement on the exploitation and struggles the working-class faces. Benton's political leanings towards advocating for social justice and his commitment to portraying the reality of American life are vividly encapsulated in this painting, making it a poignant and enduring piece of art.

Benton made two compositions about strike activities during this time: this painting and another, "*Strikebreakers*", painted in 1931. Of the two, Benton used "*Mine Strike*" as the basis for a well-known lithograph issued in 1933. Benton described the scene as a "Strike battle" in the coal country. This is an imaginary reconstruction of a situation only too common in the late twenties and early thirties."

Thomas Hart Benton was an American-born painter best known for his depictions of the everyday life of the average, working-class American. Benton's early travels and studies allowed him to meet and study with artists such as Diego Rivera, whose influence can be seen in Benton's murals, and Stanton MacDonald-Wright, whose influence is evident in Benton's Synchronist style. During WWI, Benton served in the Navy, and was instructed to give accurate representations of the warship's camouflage markings, and of the activity on the docks. The need for accuracy in that work, which he felt was crucial to him as an American and as an artist, influenced his style in his later murals. He declared himself an enemy of Modernism and adopted his naturalistic and representational style, which is now known as Regionalism. Some of his works sparked controversy because he painted historical events or political undercurrents that some did not want publicized. Later in life, he taught at the Kansas City Art Institute, and mentored artists such as Jackson Pollock, until he was dismissed for his controversial political views.

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