



1. Thomas Hart Benton, *Indiana Murals: Coal, Gas, Oil, Brick*, Panel No. 9, 1933, egg-tempera on canvas, Indiana University. Photo: M. Cavanagh, K. Montague, Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University

The Indiana Murals

A study of the work in sociological terms*

Barbara Lewicka

University of Silesia

In May 1933, the World Fair in Chicago opened under the banner of the “Century of Progress”. Just over two months earlier, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn in as the President of the United States. America entered the path of recovery after the Great Depression. Although its impacts lasted many years, and their extent (not only economic) went far beyond the territory of the United States, the American World’s Fair expositions were to show that the country survived. The exhibition had already been planned in the Roaring Twenties and its implementation was carried out during the Crisis. It referred to the 1920s prosperity, giving hope for its imminent return.

The mission of the Fair is to demonstrate the significance of scientific and technological discoveries to industry and modern society and how those discoveries were being made. The Fair also showcases modern advancements in art, literature, and architecture from across the globe¹.

In addition to technical advances, the Americans presented individual states and cities of the USA. One of the most exciting exhibitions was the Indiana Pavilion, about which it was already said at the time “It was a more nearly intellectual exhibit than any other state had”². The main display of the state was *A Social History of the State of Indiana* known as *The Indiana Murals* (1933), prepared specifically for this occasion, by Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) – a recognized realist and representative of the American Scene painting.

Benton was not from Indiana, but from another Midwest state – Missouri. He grew up mainly in DC, studied in Chicago and Paris. In the early 1930s, he lived in New York, where he lectured at the Art Students League – a prestigious art school. Around the



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¹ R. C. Dawes, *A Century of Progress: Chicago World’s Fair Centennial Celebration*, Chicago 1929, p. 11.

² K. A. Foster, *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals*, [in:] *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals*, Ed. eadem, N. E. Brewer, M. Contompasis, Bloomington [Indiana] 2000, p. 12.



³ See **Th. H. Benton**, *The Arts of Life in America: A Series of Murals by Thomas Benton*, New York 1932.

⁴ **W. Spiegelman**, *Thomas Hart Benton's "The Arts of Life in America": Creative Impulses*, "Wall Street Journal" 26 March 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-arts-of-life-in-america-thomas-hart-benton-new-britain-museum-of-american-art-murals-regionalism-depression-el-greco-rubens-mannerists-jackson-pollock-11648246351> (access date: 11.08.2022).

⁵ **E. Doss**, *Action, Agency, Affect: Thomas Hart Benton's Hoosier History*, "Indiana Magazine of History" 2009, No. 2, p. 132.

⁶ "Indiana Puts Her Trust in Work" (*Industry*) and "Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought" (*Culture*) were supplemented by two small panels that were lost. Currently, only their photos are available.

mid-1920s, Benton, previously inspired by the European avant-garde, turned to a notion of regional art. As set out in its assumptions, it was supposed to be (in opposition to foreign-born art) realistic, based on the artist's own experience, showing the spectrum of social phenomena³. Benton

did so by also rendering a homage to the Old Masters, especially to the colors of Rubens, the serpentine figures of El Greco, and the elongations of the Italian Mannerists, all of whom he had studied in 1909 during his European travels as a young man; and another homage to his near contemporary Diego Rivera [...], whose murals influenced him upon his return to the States⁴.

Although Benton's work was thoroughly modern, he was against calling it modernist, let alone avant-garde. His two murals depicting the everyday life of Americans *America Today* (1931) and *The Arts of Life in America* (1932) captured critics' attention and became so famous that members of the Indiana Commission for the Century of Progress Exposition decided to entrust work on the interior of the state's pavilion right to their author. The progressive dignitaries of Indiana had two goals – to prepare an exhibition that escapes the trivial, agro-industrial image of the state and its implementation in a short time. Benton began this work six months before the mural was presented. He started his visit to Indiana with library research – getting acquainted with the state's history and art, then he traveled for over a month to see the everyday life of its inhabitants, the Hoosiers. He collected notes, sketched landscapes, and built character studies. Finally, together with local assistants, he went on to create a mural – over 75 m long, over 3.5 m high, with egg-tempera paint. The innovativeness of Benton's work for the very exhibition consisted, among others, in presenting the history of everyday experiences of ordinary people, and not, as was the case at the time, the fate of the heroes and significant events related to them. Consequently, "Indiana's mural was clearly intended as a 'people's history,' a history of the ordinary folk who conquered, settled, and built up the territory and the state"⁵. The work, consisting of twenty panels placed symmetrically on opposite walls of the pavilion, showed the social history of Indiana from two perspectives: *Industry* (left side) and *Culture* (right one). The vision is summarized by the panels focused on the future "*Indiana Puts Her Trust in Work*" (*Industry*) and "*Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought*" (*Culture*) – located on the back wall of the pavilion⁶.

Benton looked at Indiana's development (and future) from the early 1930s perspective when the US was still in an economic crisis, though Roosevelt's candidacy for president gave rise to hope for a better future. Society was characterized by a modern way of life and a loosening of moral norms – at one extreme; and emerging in the 1920s echoes of calls for a return to the old values – at the



2. Thomas Hart Benton, *Indiana Murals: Electric Power, Motor-Cars, Steel*, Panel No. 10, 1933, egg-tempera on canvas, Indiana University. Photo: M. Cavanagh, K. Montague, Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University

other. This specific social tension was reflected in Benton's *Indiana Murals*, on the one hand, supporting the romantic vision of the past, and on the other, criticizing it. Furthermore, in the 1930s the artist turned to the democratic New Deal program, for which he was publicly criticized by conservatives, while his interest in the "normalcy" of the small-town world stirred up the left-wing resentment against him, with which he sympathized in the 1920s⁷. Benton's views and works constitute an interesting response to the complex historical and social processes which he diligently illustrated. New York social scientists, Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd showed a similar conscientiousness in describing the American transition. Their book *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (1929) is considered one of the most significant portraits of American social life in the first half of the 20th century⁸. Middletown is the code name given to the town of Muncie in Indiana, a town of 38,000, which the Lynds considered to be of average American and decided to conduct a comprehensive study of the small-town way of life and its possible change (between 1890 and 1925). Like Benton, they searched for American "normalcy" in a backwater place – in opposition to the "decadent" forms of existence in the modern city; equated with traditional norms and values in the unspecified past. They conducted



⁷ See E. K. Grogan, *Thomas Hart Benton's Indiana Mural in History And Memory*, MA thesis written under the supervision of G. Silk, PhD, Temple University, Philadelphia 2016, p. 43.

⁸ See J. Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej*, New Ed., Warszawa 2002, pp. 619-620.

3. Thomas Hart Benton, *Indiana Murals: Indiana Puts Her Trust in Work*, Panel No. 11, 1933, egg-tempera on canvas, Indiana University, Photo: M. Cavanagh, K. Montague, Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University



their several-month field research (1924–1925) in Middletown by crossing different research methods; as a result, their findings went far beyond the statistics often associated with sociology. The descriptive report was filled with comments from Middletown residents, excerpts from local press and official documents, or observations from participation in the local life supplemented only with figures from questionnaires. The resulting monograph reported on the impact of industrialization on the life of the small-town community⁹.

It is not certain whether Benton saw the *Middletown* book in preparation for the Indiana History Murals. Although it was prevalent, neither he nor his biographers mention it. Regardless, the images of the transformation of small-town America proposed by the painter and social researchers complement each other perfectly. Moreover, their method of capturing reality, criticized at several levels today, such as identifying the American society with White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestants (to which I will return a little later), is a testimony to the perception of the social world in the 1930s. Historical sociology suggests that “In every intellectual age someone style of reflection tends to become a common denominator of cultural life”¹⁰ and that:

The image of any society is an historically specific image. [...] any given society is to be understood in terms of the specific period in which it exists. However “period” may be defined, the institutions, the ideologies, the types of men and women prevailing in any given period constitute something of a unique pattern¹¹.

This does not mean that old social types should not be read anew, described in contemporary categories, or criticized. However, to do so, it is worth starting from the perspective appropriate to the times we are interested in, looking for common denominators in their intellectual output and interpreting them by one another. Such an attempt was made, for example, by art historian Nanette Esseck Brewer, looking for analogies between the texts of John Dewey (1859–1952) – an influential American philosopher, psychologist, educator, and the issues depicted in *Indiana Murals*¹². I intend to apply a similar procedure to Benton’s mural, juxtaposing its fragments with the classic work of Robert and Helen Lynd (which has never been done before). By confronting an artistic work with a sociological description, I will try to capture “the unique pattern of the period”. At the same time, by pointing to the similarities and differences between the positions of Benton and the Lynds, I will reconstruct the past, and I will treat the work of sociologists as a reference point for the interpretation of the image of Indiana proposed by the artist. I will limit my analysis almost exclusively to what can be called the Long 1920s, the essence of which was the Roaring Twenties. Following the historian Hugh Brogan, I assume that in the history of the USA: “It is impossible



⁹ The Lynds were not sociologists by training, but their research into the Middletown community is considered sociological. Robert Lynd renewed his studies after the Great Depression, publishing the results in his book *Middletown in Transition* (1937). In later years, the Lynds’ research found numerous followers. In this paper, I will only refer to the first Middletown publication

¹⁰ Ch. W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, New York 1959, p. 13.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

¹² See N. E. Brewer, *Benton as Hoosier Historian: Constructing a Visual Narrative in the Indiana Murals*, [in:] *Thomas Hart Benton and the Indiana Murals...*



¹³ H. Brogan, *The Longman History of The United States of America*, 2nd Ed., London 1999, p. 506.

¹⁴ See Gillard-Estrada, Anne Besnault-Levita (red.) 2018. *Beyond the Victorian/Modernist Divide: Remapping the Turn-of-the-Century Break in Literature, Culture and the Visual Arts*, Ed. A.-F. Gillard-Estrada, A. Besnault-Levita, New York 2018.

¹⁵ See e.g. Sh. M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States*, Chicago 1994; A. L. Miller [et al.], *American Encounters: Art, History and Cultural Identity*, Upper Saddle River [New Jersey] 2008; F. Polh, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art*, 3rd Ed., New York 2012.

¹⁶ See A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, Vol. 1-4, London 1999.

¹⁷ See R. Caccamo, *Back to Middletown: Three Generations of Sociological Reflections*, Stanford [California] 2000, p. xviii.

¹⁸ R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, Forew. C. Wissler, New York 1929, p. 3.

¹⁹ They assumed that the attitudes of the inhabitants of a small town would contrast with the approach to life of the inhabitants of the metropolis.

²⁰ T. H. Benton, *A Dream Fulfilled*, [in:] D. L. Chambers, *Indiana, A Hoosier History: Based on the Mural Paintings of Thomas Hart Benton*, Indianapolis 1933, p. 49.

to pinpoint the moment at which ‘the twenties’ began: legendary epochs elude the tidy historian”¹³. Therefore, I conclude that their origins in the context of industrialization should be sought in the period of dynamic economic development at the end of the 19th c.; in the context of culture, on the other hand, in the slow reverberation of traditional values in American society and replacing them with new customs from the beginning of the 20th century¹⁴. The Black Thursday of 1929 is usually considered the symbolic end of the 1920s, but in this work, I will also refer to its consequences, which were visible in the early 1930s. The analysis of the artwork presented here, set in a historical context, and enriched with a sociological description created in the same period, is a slightly different approach than the search for connections between changes in art and social processes offered by researchers, in a contemporary theoretical framework¹⁵. However, it is part of a long tradition of research on the social history of art initiated by the art historian and sociologist Arnold Hauser. For this reason, this article may interest representatives of both disciplines¹⁶.

Midwest as the entire United States

The Lynds chose Muncie (Middletown) as their study site because, as Hellen M. Lynd recalled, there was nothing unusual about it – either historically, socially, or geographically. It was inhabited by the typical White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant community¹⁷, so:

The aim of the field investigation [...] was to study synchronously the interwoven trends that are the life of a small American city. A typical city, strictly speaking, does not exist, but the city studied was selected as having many features common to a wide group of communities¹⁸.

The Lynds, using the example of Middletown, showed the process of social change related to industrialization, which could be generalized to the entire American society, though their original aim was to indicate the cultural similarities of small-town America¹⁹. Thomas H. Benton, in his essay *A Dream Fulfilled* devoted to *Indiana Murals*, emphasized that for many years he had planned to make:

a history of the United States which would unroll progressively the social and environmental changes of the country [...]. I visualized this history as realistic and factual. Realistic as to form and factual as to the content²⁰.

And a little farther, the decisions of the members of the Exhibition Committee “made it possible for me to transfer my original historical plan from the United States as a whole to the State of Indiana, a context of whose history is symbolical to the entire coun-



4. Thomas Hart Benton, *Indiana Murals: Leisure and Literature*, Panel No. 8, 1933, egg-tempera on canvas, Indiana University. Photo: M. Cavanagh, K. Montague, Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University

try”²¹. Both the Lynds and Benton assumed that Indiana’s situation was representative of the United States. This premise alone reflects the WASP-centric perception of reality by American intellectuals of the period under review. Until the beginning of the 20th c., Indiana was almost homogeneous in ethnic and racial terms, despite some diversification of the social structure due to the influx of immigrants and workers from the southern states, even in the 1920s “Hoosiers claimed to be the most American of Americans [...]” – 95% of the state’s residents were born in the USA, 97% were White, and 75% belonged to Protestant churches²². It would be an exaggeration to say that both the Lynds and Benton narrowed the representation of “entire America” to the WASP image, but it should be emphasized that not all residents of the state were viewed with equal interest by the authors. Despite the presence of the black American community in Middletown (5%), researchers chose to omit it from their study entirely, assuming that due to its small size it has no impact on



²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² J. H. Madison, L. A. Sandweiss, J. Hedeen, *Hoosiers and the American Story*, Indianapolis 2014, p. 141.



²³ See R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-10.

²⁴ See N. E. Brewer, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

²⁵ The Lynds were among the first to introduce a division into two opposing social groups in their description of the social structure. Later sociological works led to its expansion, and finally to the introduction of the categories of upper, middle, and lower classes that are still in force today.

²⁶ See R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, p. 511.

²⁷ *The Indiana Murals*, Indiana University Bloomington, <https://murals.sitehost.iu.edu/history/index.html> (access date: 11.08.2022).

the functioning of the community. This is now the main objection to their diligent and reliable work in other respects²³. In the enormous Benton mural, filled with over 270 figures, Blacks constitute 1% of people; the Native Americans only appear in the context of the early state's development; other minorities are not portrayed at all²⁴. The most underrepresented group, however, is women, with fewer than 40 visible throughout the cycle. At the same time, neither Benton's mural nor the Lynds' report are a praise for the White-Anglo-Protestant history of Indiana.

Industry

Benton, presenting Indiana's history of industrialization and culture, used a style to which New York audiences had become accustomed. The mural is expressive, dynamic, and filled with a multitude of objects. The artist consciously played with light and color, juggled space, and did not keep proportions, thus arousing curiosity, but also surprise and uncertainty in the viewer. Although the panels lack a clear center, the impression of chaos is eliminated by a linear historical narrative showing, in the case of *Industry*, the evolution of Indiana from the wild state, through settlement, first industrialization development of transport and technology, displacement of agriculture, to the dominance of the heavy industry. In the last *Industry* panels, Benton showed the light and shadow of the dynamic industrial development of Indiana. This state has been at the forefront of the manufacturing states of the US since the late 19th century. The image of industrialization is reduced here to several symbolic dimensions: the mining industry; production based on raw materials – iron and oil; generating energy from coal or gas. The main characters of this part of the series are workers – men who are busy with hard work. The working class, in general, constituted the majority of the state's inhabitants in the 1920s, mostly living in cities. The Lynds said, for example, that more than two-thirds of Middletown's inhabitants were working class, and the rest (according to their proposed dichotomous stratification²⁵) were business class²⁶. Interestingly, in the *Industry* part, Benton did not visualize the latter group, although the opposition to the predatory-capitalist attitude of some of its representatives is expressed by the strike motif visible on the *Coal, Gas, Oil, Brick* panel (No. 9) [Fig. 1]. The strike poster shows the slogan "Workers, Why Vote the Rich Man's Ticket? You've Got a Choice". And the protest is led by Eugene V. Debs, leader of the socialist union. And though only men are presented in the scene, it is worth remembering that Debs actively fought for women's rights as workers. In another part of the panel, one can see a worker throwing a rock at a factory guard, which is a reference to "the physical violence that took place during union strikes and rallies"²⁷. Although these scenes

refer to the turn of the 19th and 20th c., and in the 1920s the situation of workers significantly improved (job security and wages increased, social security was introduced, and employee representation was expanded²⁸), the Lynds noticed that the class position of lower strata was assessed by members of the business class. In Middletown, they banned the trade unions, and one of the mighty remarked:

Working men don't need unions nowadays. There are no great evils or problems now as there were fifty years ago. We are much more in danger of coddling the working men than abusing them. Working people are just as well off now as they can possibly be except for things which are in the nature of industry and cannot be helped²⁹.

This example is typical of that period – pushing the problems of ordinary people into the background³⁰. End yet, in the 1920s, class affiliation determined the lives of the inhabitants (not just Middletown), and:

division into the working class and business class that constitutes the outstanding cleavage in Middletown. The mere fact of being born upon one or the other side of the watershed roughly formed by these two groups is the most significant single cultural factor tending to influence what one does all day long throughout one's life³¹.

This is illustrated with the tired faces of blue-collar workers, their darkened skin, and deformed bodies depicted in Benton's mural – still up-to-date both at the end of the 19th and in the third decade of the 20th century.

The panels *Coal, Gas, Oil, Brick, and Electric Power, Motor-Cars, Steel* (No. 10) [Fig. 2] are an apotheosis of Indiana's working-class history and they remain relevant for the 1930s, when, according to the New Deal popular views, discipline and hard work were to overcome the economic crisis. Benton expressed this, in particular, in the “progressive-nostalgic” panel *Indiana Puts Her Trust in Work* (No. 11) [Fig. 3] summarizing the series. It shows steam locomotives – the former pride of Indiana, but also modern trucks; hand-hewn rock blocks and a modern factory; and a worker in charge of the entire scene. In the booklet distributed to the public in the Indiana pavilion, the guests could read the commentary to panel 11:

if the farmer worries over the price of corn, he does not starve. Nobody starves in Indiana. If industry limps, it goes on, Spirits rise to the slogan: “Modernize now and give some fellow a job!”. Where shall the state put her trust if not in work, faithful, intelligent, kindly, determined? The struggle will avail³².



²⁸ See Z. Lewicki, *Historia cywilizacji amerykańskiej. Era konsolidacji 1861–1945*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 201–235.

²⁹ R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

³⁰ See H. Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present*, London 2015, p. 383.

³¹ R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23.

³² D. L. Chambers, *op. cit.*, p. 44.



5. Thomas Hart Benton, *Indiana Murals: Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought*, Panel No. 11, 1933, egg-tempera on canvas, Indiana University. Photo: M. Cavanagh, K. Montague, Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University

Both the image and the accompanying comments are in line with the vision of glorifying technology, work, and progress behind the post-crisis World Fair – a trademark of the beginning of the Roosevelt era.

The Great Depression was preceded by years of welfare in Indiana and the country as a whole. The years 1921–1929 were undoubtedly a period of a general increase in prosperity. However, it was a time of contrast. The popular portrayal of the reckless 1920s, often associated with the lavish life of the heroes of Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, overshadows the problems affecting the multitudes of Americans. The Lynds found that during their research period³³:

Throughout three-quarters of the geographical city there is a fairly even sprinkling of people who are at any given time unable to secure the necessary food, shelter, and care of health under the economic system by which people live in Middletown. Their numbers tend to increase when “times are bad” and diminish when “times are good”. Throughout a fourteen-month period, an average of nearly 200 appeals for help each month [...]³⁴.

The poverty in Benton’s work is hardly evident. He approves of work rather than complains about social problems, which is otherwise a hallmark of the mindset of Americans who believe in action and success, not passivity and failure³⁵. For example, the active desire to improve the financial situation was one of the reasons for the previously unprecedented increase in employment in the 1920s. The path to it was opened by WW I, but after its conclusion, many women decided to keep their jobs, like the nurse visible in Benton’s work (panel 11 from the *Culture* series). The Lynds cited a characteristic statement from a Middletown female resident:

I’d rather keep on working so my boys can play football and basketball and have spending money their father can’t give them. We’ve built our own home, [...], by a building and loan like everyone else does [...]. No, I don’t lose out with my neighbors because I work; some of them have jobs and those who don’t envy us who do. I have felt better since I worked than ever before in my life. [...] We have an electric washing machine, electric iron, and vacuum sweeper. I don’t even have to ask my husband anymore because I buy these things with my own money [...]. Last summer we all spent our vacation going back to Pennsylvania – taking in Niagara Falls on the way³⁶.

This voice seems to be the very soul of the prevailing way of thinking in the 1920s about work as a source of income serving the immediate satisfaction of growing needs. The middle-class Americans had never spent so much before, and at the same time, they had never borrowed so much; they had never acquired such an abundance of goods and never needed them immediately. The sense of industrialization was the mass production of merchandise, and in

the mid-1920s, production in almost all industries hardly satisfied the market needs³⁷. It was then that the idea of short-term prosperity for good replaced the vision of continuous progress on which America was founded. In the 1923–1924 campaign, future US president Calvin Coolidge encouraged economy-fueling consumption, and the Indiana press assured: “A vote for Coolidge is a vote for prosperity and your job”³⁸, which earned him the votes of the working class. The Lynds noted:

The attitude of the business men, as fairly reflected by the editorial pages of the press which today echo the sentiments heard at Rotary and the Chamber of Commerce, is more confident but confusing. Within a year the leading paper offered the following prescriptions for local prosperity: “The first duty of a citizen is to produce”; and later, “The American citizen’s first importance to his country is no longer that of citizen but that of consumer. Consumption is a new necessity”. “The way to make business boom is to buy”³⁹.

Benton, however, in the *Industry* part, consistently focused not on consumption, but on manufacturing. As sociologist Daniel Bell emphasized, the “new capitalism” of the 1920s stimulated the need for the pleasure of acquiring but still required labor and production⁴⁰.

Indiana’s most important manufacturing goods were steam locomotives, and later cars. At the beginning of the 1920s, along with Ohio and Michigan, Indiana was the largest car manufacturer in the United States, with nearly two hundred companies producing cars and their parts, including those located in Middletown. As a result of the automotive boom, about two-thirds of Middletown households had a car that not only determined prestige (though it was no longer a luxury good and often bought on credit) but became the engine of social change in the 1920s. In a famous sentence from the Lynds’ book we read:

“Why on earth do you need to study what’s changing this country?”, said a lifelong resident and shrewd observer of the Middle West. “I can tell you what’s happening in just four letters; a-u-t-o!”⁴¹

Cars appear in several scenes of *Indiana Murals*, stressing their importance not only in manufacturing but also in everyday life. The presence of cars reminds us that they connected cities with the US provinces, made Americans keen on traveling, and also changed customs. The Lynds, for example, describe the anxiety of teenagers’ parents in Middletown provoked by breaking norms that limit the time spent together by boys and girls and the shortening of the physical distance between them:

Here again new inventions of the last thirty-five years have played a part; in 1890 a “well-brought-up” boy and girl were commonly forbidden to sit



³³ The research came in halfway through Indiana’s economic growth and downturn of the 1920s.

³⁴ R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, p. 458.

³⁵ See M. A. Jones, *The Limits of Liberty: American History, 1607–1992*, 2nd Ed., Oxford 1995.

³⁶ R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–29.

³⁷ See Z. Lewicki, *op. cit.* p. 517.

³⁸ R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, New York 1996, p. 51.

⁴¹ R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, p. 251.



⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 137–138.

⁴³ R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

⁴⁴ See *ibidem*, p. 414.

together in the dark; but motion pictures and the automobile have lifted this taboo, and, once lifted, it is easy for the practice to become widely extended⁴².

One has to remember that what the Lynds and their respondents – more concerned about the change in morals than social inequalities – failed to mention was that the freedom brought about by the automotive industry regarded, above all, the White inhabitants of the USA. It is in this context crucial that most of the *Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought* (No. 11) [Fig. 5] panel deals with the topic of car racing in which the Blacks could not participate.

Culture

One of the most important observations of Robert and Hellen Lynd was that, contrary to the assumptions made, the town of Middletown did not turn out to be a mainstay of conservative norms and values. The lifestyle of Middletown's young people was no different from that of their big-city peers as much as previously thought. This was manifested in such fundamental issues as replacing old family models with modern ones (e.g., large families – nuclear ones), unifying male and female roles, as well as weakening ties with the church, fascination with immediate consumerism, or finally changing culinary practices or searching for idols among movie stars. The researchers noted, “widen gap between the generations in standards of living and habits of thought [...]”⁴³. And though at the threshold of the 1920s, Warren G. Harding used the slogan “Return to normalcy” in his presidential campaign, which was supposed to symbolize, among others, traditional, small-town life, Lynds' research indicated that then such defined “normalcy” did not exist anymore. However, this was what Benton intended to show in *Culture* panels related to Indiana's social history. Subsequent fragments show the evolution of the state's community initially inhabited by Native Americans, later settled by the French, and with time increasingly urbanized. *Culture* panels are filled with dynamic, collective scenes, set against the backdrop of the typical architectural features of Indiana's cities and towns. Panels *Leisure and Literature* (No. 8) [Fig. 4], and *Colleges and City Life* (No. 9) connect the history of the turn of the 19th and 20th c., showing the everyday good life of Hoosiers in the typical Benton's aesthetics. The painter brought about, for example, the power of political participation, the value of education, and the importance of artistic culture, especially literature. However, the Lynds, comparing the ways of life in 1890 and 1924–1925, noticed that the nostalgic (mythologized) attitudes and customs of the end of the century had become obsolete. For example, in the 1920s, trust in politics and politicians decreased⁴⁴. Education, although much more common than thirty years earlier, was to serve more utilitarian purposes – to gain a higher social posi-



6. Thomas Hart Benton, *Indiana Murals: A Woman's Place*, Panel No. 7, 1933, egg-tempera on canvas, Indiana University, Photo: M. Cavanagh, K. Montague, Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University

tion than the idea of science⁴⁵. There was also a noticeable decline in interest in literature and higher culture in general.

Although, according to the city librarian, increased interest in business and technical journals has been marked, as in its reading of books Middletown appears to read magazines primarily for the vicarious living in fictional form they contain. Such reading centers about the idea of romance underlying the institution of marriage; since 1890 there has been a trend toward franker "sex adventure" fiction⁴⁶.

The most popular forms of spending free time became passive enjoyment: listening to radio broadcasts, driving a car, and watching adventure movies and romances⁴⁷. Naturally, the people of Indiana had mere leisure activities before. Benton featured them in both panels 8 and 9, including the saloon scene:



⁴⁵ See *ibidem*, pp. 181-187.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 241. This last piece of information is surprising because the topic of sexuality was both a religious and secular taboo until recently.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 284-285.

7. Thomas Hart Benton, *Indiana Murals: Parks, the Circus, the Klan, the Press*, Panel No. 10, 1933, egg-tempera on canvas, Indiana University. Photo: M. Cavanagh, K. Montague, Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University



⁴⁸ K. A. Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁴⁹ Basketball was the most important sport in Indiana – the state in which it was invented and in which it was cultivated/worshiped.

⁵⁰ E. Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*, Chicago 1995, p. 107.

where the cares of the workplace or the household could be set aside. Flanked by spittoons, a customer chats with a bartender, perhaps concerning the champion boxer whose poster appears on the wall nearby. More likely, they talk politics, for saloons were notorious centers of partisan campaigning, where booze bought voter loyalty. The social and civic menace of the corrupt saloon reinforced the fervor for temperance that led to the outlawing of all liquor trafficking in 1919. In 1933, Benton's barroom scene held both nostalgia and promise for all who celebrated the repeal of Prohibition that spring⁴⁸.

The promise theme of 1933 resonates primarily in the final panel – *Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought* (No. 11) [Fig. 5]. On the one hand, it shows the symbols of strength aimed at future victory: the athletic bodies of basketball players⁴⁹ and energetic racing cars, and on the other, local heroes – new politicians and scientists. These fragments of the Mural, full of sublime faith in the future, reveal, according to Ericky Doss, Benton's belief that:

a combination of racial equality, progressive politics, and scientific engineering (in part, the “story” of the New Deal) could help end the crisis of the Depression, but only if Indiana renewed its faith in republicanism⁵⁰.

Many problems were to be solved at that time – they were expressed in the blared newspaper headlines presented by the artist: unemployment, social reorganization, taxes, etc.; but also the men standing in the line for the unemployment benefit, in front of whom a box of beer bottles is drawn. Had they not been reaching out for them for a long time, despite prohibition? – Benton seems to be asking, pointing to the idleness of the law (still in force). The composition of the panel is complemented by the image of a woman putting on lipstick near the “No Help Wanted” sign. The calmness of this motion suggests that somehow better times are already ahead. As she is not the main character, Benton entrusted this solitary woman with the role of a harbinger of a stable future. It is worth adding that individual images of women appear rarely in respective parts of *Indiana Murals*. Though Benton outlined their history in a separate panel, *Women’s Place*, set in the 19th c. (No. 7) [Fig. 6]. In its two parts, he referred to family traditional models and roles, showing a couple riding a horse-drawn carriage into a common future and numerous, carefree children playing. The third part was to remind us about the movement for education and women’s rights, who received voting rights in Indiana in 1917, three years before the 19th Amendment to the Constitution guaranteed them to all American women. The independence of the woman putting on makeup in panel 11 can be read as a symbol of the trends of the 1920s bringing the real emancipation of women and a change in classic family patterns: lower fertility or more widespread divorce⁵¹. Still, as the Lynds stressed:

Child-bearing and child-rearing are regarded by Middletown as essential functions of the family. [...] child-bearing is nevertheless to Middletown a moral obligation. [...] But with increasing regulation of the size of the family, emphasis has shifted somewhat from child-bearing to child-rearing⁵².

In 2000, Nanette Essek Brewer drew attention to the fact that there was surprisingly little research into *Indiana History Murals*⁵³, and that the increase in the number of publications later was linked to the controversy surrounding the work rather than to its scientific discussion⁵⁴. The most frequently mentioned mural panel is *Parks, The Circus, the Klan, the Press* (No. 10) [Fig. 7], referring to the 1920s, a period that was ambiguous in the opinion of historians. In addition to economic freedom and upswing and growing moral freedom, it brought about a renewal of conservative positions (often in the extreme, nativist version) throughout the United States. The interwar period was characterized by a legislative shift toward traditional rules, such as the introduction of prohibition (1919–1933), the tightening of immigration law (1924), and the establishment of the Hays Code (1930–1955) sanctioning the form of film scenes. Nevertheless, legal regulations only partially slowed down the changes taking place in American society, as evidenced by the results of the Lynds’ research.



⁵¹ See Z. Lewicki, *op. cit.*, pp. 612–619.

⁵² R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

⁵³ N. E. Brewer, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

⁵⁴ In one of the mural panels, Benton placed an image of the members of the Ku Klux Klan. This decision was controversial because it referred to the inglorious history of the state. Later, some members of the Indiana University community, where the mural is stored, claimed that Benton glorified the Klan which is contested by art historians. I do not elaborate on this topic here, I refer those interested to the article by H. Adams *In Defense of Keeping the Indiana University Mural that Depicts (But Doesn’t Glorify) the KKK*, “Smithsonian Magazine”, 3 November 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/misguided-campaign-remove-thomas-hart-benton-mural-180967080> (access date: 13.01.2023).



⁵⁵ See D. Bell, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–61.

⁵⁶ R. S. Lynd, H. M. Lynd, *op. cit.*, p. 483.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁹ *The Indiana Murals...*

The 1920s society was therefore in a peculiar situation – on the one hand, it was subject to rapid modernization, which was determined by the lifestyle of young people, and on the other, there was acceptance to block it formally⁵⁵. In Indiana, the situation became specific – the elderly Hoosiers, concerned about the growing immorality of young people – their weakness for illegal alcohol, gambling, loud jazz music, and frivolous Hollywood movies – opted for traditional values, the revival of which the Ku-Klux-Klan had promised. Indiana became the largest arena for its operations in the United States, and members of the Klan infiltrated the state authorities. Even assuming that most of the Klan’s actions during this period were non-violent, Jews and Catholics (mostly immigrants) and non-whites (of whom there were fewer than Catholics in Indiana) became victims of open stigma. The Lynds described rumors spread by the Klan:

Negroes have a powder which they put on their arms which turns their bodies white, and that the Jews have all the money, but when the Klan gets into power, it will make a new kind of money, so that the Jews’ money will be no good⁵⁶.

A bit further, they recalled scenes from one of the KKK rallie: “We are charged with being against the Jew”, thundered a lawyer from the state capital at a Klan rally⁵⁷.

We are against no man. Jesus Christ is the leader of the Ku Klux Klan, and we are for Him. The Jew is not for Him, and therefore the Jew has shut himself out of the Klan. We are not against the Negro. Rome fell because she mixed her blood. God Almighty has commanded us, “Thou shalt not mix thy blood”. [...] I’m sorry to say it was white women marrying black men. We must protect American womanhood⁵⁸.

Benton captures this gloomy period in panel 10 of the *Culture* series. Although the figures in distinctive white hoods, with a burning cross, occupy a small part of the panel, the remaining scenes refer to the development of the State (improvement of fire safety, care for the natural environment, and development of the press). They do not remain indifferent to the viewer. Neither the circus performers (who were also opposed by the Klan) nor modern airplanes, evoking the old customs of the State, distract from the burning cross in front of the Catholic church. Only the hospital scene adjusts the accents:

Directly below the Klan is a larger central scene depicting a white nurse administering to a black and a white child. This deliberately staged scene of racial integration – unusual for the period’s health care system – was intended as a “strong statement for tolerance and against bigotry” and a counter-balance to the Klan’s presence. Likewise, the nurse’s white uniform and starched pointed cap serves as a visual analogue to the Klansmen’s robes⁵⁹.

Benton repeatedly emphasized that the inclusion of the Klan in the mural was not intended to glorify the organization, but merely to show the true history of Indiana. A small, though significant, the scene was meant to be a reminder of the existence of evil, so that it would never happen again. “I didn’t give them anymore importance than they deserved in the total state’s history [...]”⁶⁰, the artist wrote in his memoirs, and in the foreground of the mural, he placed three figures – a reporter, a photographer, and a printer. Thanks to the involvement of the press, the irregularities in the activities of the Klan and the rape committed by one of its leaders were made public⁶¹.

The importance of the Klan in Indiana’s history remains disturbing to these days; more significant is Benton’s foreground message of “unmasking” and tolerance⁶².

* * *

In the dynamic scenes of Benton’s mural and the scientific description of the life of the small Midwest community, the tension of the American Long 1920s is revealed. The proposed description presented here was aimed at showing (a sliver of) the reality of those times unveiled in double – artistic and social terms. Although many topics (such as World War I or crises in agriculture) are not discussed, and others (such as a matter of changing morality) are briefly presented, this analysis shows the possibility of using an interdisciplinary approach in recreating the past. The discussed *The Indiana Murals* and *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* were created in a similar period, and reflect a similar perception of reality. On the one hand, their authors focus on the progress and development of the USA, on the other, they limit it to the White-Anglo-Protestant world, perceiving Indiana as America in a nutshell. For all that, the current central issue of diversity is virtually absent in both works but they should not be dismissed as historical evidence. They turn out to be a valuable source of knowledge not only about the period of collision of economic, technological, and cultural development with the no less renowned idea of maintaining tradition; but also about the collective mentality of that period.

American artists, just as American sociologists, tried to respond to the dynamic social processes of the early 20th century. This was done by both (usually) modernization-friendly avant-garde painters and (more) skeptical realists of the provincial American scene. Furthermore, for the social researchers of that period, a dispersion of interests is noticeable – between the analysis of a modern city and its pathology, and the search for American “normalcy” in a small-town world. The imagined province no longer existed; however, it was only a mythologized story about the past, which was attempted to be re-



⁶⁰ Th. H. Benton, *An Artist in America*, Columbia [Missouri] 1983, p. 253.

⁶¹ The “Indianapolis Times” won a 1928 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for its reporting on the story.

⁶² K. A. Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

captured in various ways from time to time. The Lynds' observation that industrialization changed the system of norms and values not only in big cities but also in small towns whose inhabitants were deviating from traditional, Puritan attitudes turned out to be crucial to understanding American society. It may be worth reflecting on social changes in Middletown in the future, taking into account subsequent reports on research conducted there and later artistic works showing the everyday life of the Midwest. Such a backdrop can provide better insights into the durability and change of collective attitudes and practices, like the narrative toward minorities or the discourse toward social classes. Just like Reading Benton's mural supplemented with observations of a couple of sociologists they might open up new fields of interpretation of American art, at the same time bringing closer the less-known history of the small-town United States.

Słowa kluczowe

socjologia sztuki, amerykańskie społeczeństwo, Robert i Helen Lyndowie, American scene painting, Thomas H. Benton, *The Indiana Murals*

Keywords

sociology of art, American society, Middletown, Robert and Helen Lynd, American scene painting, Thomas H. Benton, *The Indiana Murals*

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Barbara Lewicka, PhD, barbara.lewicka@us.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-7692-5008

Barbara Lewicka is a sociologist and an assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland). Her research interests lie in the fields of the sociology of art and the theory of social change. She specialises in 19th and 20th centuries' American art worlds. Recently, she has published papers *Między Akademią a awangardą. Studium amerykańskiego pola sztuki przelomu XIX i XX wieku (Between the Academy and the Avant-Garde. Study of the American Field of Art at the Turn of 19th and 20th Century, 2021)*, *Zróżnicowanie kulturowe a świat artystyczny: przypadek Nowego Jorku przelomu XIX i XX wieku (Cultural Diversity and the Artistic World. The Case of New York City at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Century, 2021)* as well as co-authored (with Marek S. Szczeptański) a book *Obraz i społeczeństwo. Społeczne ramy kultury artystycznej (Image and society. The social framework of artistic culture, 2020)*. She is a scholarship holder of Polish-American Fulbright Commission and The Kosciuszko Foundation.

Summary

BARBARA LEWICKA (University of Silesia, Katowice) / The Indiana Murals. A study of the work in sociological terms

The article aims to juxtapose the aspects of Thomas H. Benton's murals *A Social History of the State of Indiana*, known as *The Indiana Murals*, with the classic sociological monograph of *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* by Robert and Hellen Lynds. Benton's murals were created for the Chicago World Fair in 1933; the Lynds published their mid-1920 research report in 1929. Both works show the Midwest social world, recognized by those authors as exemplary of the entire United States. The classics constitute an important socio-historical testimony and a valuable source of knowledge – among others, about the 1920s. Moreover, they should be treated as a representation of the collective mentality characteristic of the period of their creation. In this analysis, the work of sociologists is a reference point for the rendition of Indiana's vision proposed by the artist. By indicating the similarities and differences between the positions of Benton and the Lynds, the past is reconstructed and the social nature of the "Long 1920s", with a focus on the Roaring Twenties, is discussed.