

## A Dream Fulfilled

By Thomas Hart Benton

This mural painting of Indiana sees the realization of a project that I have had in mind for fifteen years. In 1919 I set about making a history of the United States which would unroll progressively the social and environmental changes of the country from the savage Indian to the present days of our machine culture. I visualized this history as realistic and factual. Realistic as to form, factual as to content.

Reacting against the wearisome repetitions of that modern world of art which cultivates the neurotic "purities" I sought for a grip on the life of men and for an art that would have meaning for men. I saw that for all the talk on the subject there could be no American Art unless its form was generated in the midst of meanings and values that were American. For, while art is international as an heritage of the human race it is local in its inception, tied to ways of living and thinking which are the result of environmental pressures that date from earliest childhood. To deny these pressures and attempt to escape from their effects, under the name of whatever idealism, is to cut it out from its roots in life and make of it either a dilettante's playing or a doctrinaire's tool.

Only knowledge which is deeply and profoundly a part of one can be communicated through the logical conventions of a form. Such knowledge is found, not on the intellectual fringe of life, or in the illusions of cloistered sensibilities, but in life itself where the drive of a people is felt and shared. The artist who would represent a civilization must be a part of it. We can give only that which is within ourselves.

History was not a scholarly study for me but a drama. I saw it not as a succession of events but as a continuous flow of action having its climax in my own immediate experience. The recorded parts of conventional history were, in my conception, subordinated to the more tremendous facts of common existence where man and his tools, under the constant pressure of every-day need, changed the face of a continent and became themselves something different in the process. And it was to this something different, the final involved and contradictory complex of American life, that I consecrated my history believing that in the new

meaning which lay therein, I would find the new form which the conventions of modern estheticism had made imperative.

After seven years of work, the history was abandoned. I could not carry the expenses myself, or find an architect willing to test the capacities of his structures with a type of painting which would have made senseless the pretty ornament of the architectural schools.

A few years ago I met Thomas Hibben, of Indiana, and found the first architect of my acquaintance who realized that painting had a function beyond that of draping walls. Naturally, I took a liking to him. Beyond that I found him one of my own kind, a middle westerner, somewhat lost in the nurtured estheticism of New York's artistic and intellectual circles. We became friends.

It was Tom Hibben who introduced my art to Colonel Richard Lieber when it was decided that Indiana should be represented at the Chicago Exposition with a mural painting. Colonel Lieber's quick understanding of my desire to represent a social progression made it possible for me to transfer my original historical plan from the United States as a whole to the State of Indiana, the context of whose history is symbolical of the entire country. Colonel Lieber's sympathy and encouragement, his recognition of the artist's need to have absolute control of his art, has done much to enable me to complete a work which the time limit of five months made especially difficult.

I want to thank Wallace Richards, Paul Brown, Miss Esther McNitt, and the many other Indianans who aided me in organizing my time and researches. I wish also to express my appreciation of the help given me by Reed Winsey, Reynolds Selfridge, Constance Forsyth, Richard Hausdorfe, Maurice Starkey and Bird Baldwin, all of whom undertook, in varying degrees, the task of preparing the painting surfaces and scaling up my working cartoons for the mural. Their work has been careful and accurate. To the mechanics on the job, Roy Totten, of Franklin, and Edward White, of Greenwood, much credit is also due. Lastly, I wish to thank H. K. Roberts, for taking me all over the state and seeing to it that I got everything I wanted in the way of representative data.