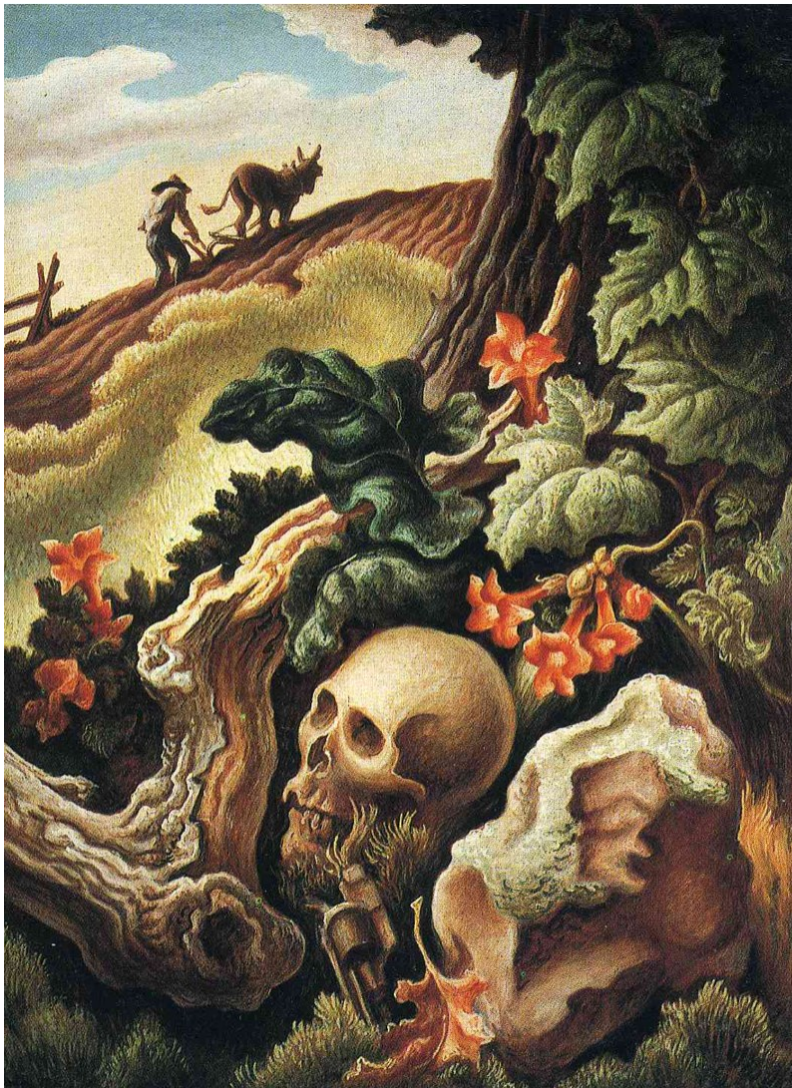


Vivid Description

by

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September 16, 2015



Thomas Hart Benton

American

*After Many Springs*

1945

egg tempera and oil on masonite

30" X 22 1/4"

Collection of the

Thomas Hart Benton Estate

Kansas City, Missouri

In the background near a split rail wooden fence, a farmer with a broad-brimmed hat hunches over the handles of a plow pulled by a harnessed mule wearing blinders. Row after row of turned-over soil mark the hilly field under a partly cloudy sky. The foreground is dominated by the trunk and broken branch of a gnarled tree. The dead leaf at the bottom center of the painting suggests the tree with its deeply grooved bark may be an oak. Other large and small leaves, flowering vines, grass, and foliage crowd around the tree. The long, red flowers may be trumpet vine flowers. Nestled among the leaves and branch is a human skull and an apparently discarded revolver with its barrel in the grass. Nearest the viewer is a large, irregular rock with cavities like those in limestone. Between the foreground and background is an area of lighter green vegetation, perhaps a pasture encroaching on the plowed field. One might describe *After Many Springs* as a combination landscape and outdoor still life.

Writhing lines animate most of the surface of the painting from the clouds, to the furrowed field, to the edge of the light green vegetation, to the grooved bark, to the veins in the leaves, to the curling vine, to the temple of the skull, to the contours of the foreground rock. Benton dramatically shaded shapes from light to dark to create a strong illusion of three-dimensional form creating leaves that curl in space and deeply furrowed tree bark. These forms wriggle and twist everywhere enlivening the surface of the painting.

Benton chose browns and greens for most of his painting. Carefully placed reds, in flowers and the dead leaf, complement the many shades of green.

*After Many Springs* has a diagonal composition most evident in the edge where the dark tree and leaves of the foreground meet the light green of the middle ground grass and white clouds. This undulating diagonal is echoed in the slope of the plowed field, the face and forehead of the skull, and the lit, left edge of the rock in the foreground.

Benton painted *After Many Springs* on masonite with egg tempera and oil. Egg tempera is made by mixing dried ground pigments with egg yolk and a little water. Tempera can only be used on a rigid surface, like Benton's masonite, which is first covered with a ground, such as gesso. Tempera will crack when dried if the painting surface bends, for example, as a canvas does if it is not stretched over panel. Egg tempera dries quickly, which allowed Benton to add brushstrokes to already-dried sections of his painting creating rich textures like those visible in the grass in the foreground and throughout *After Many Springs*. Although I have not found documentation of Benton's specific use of oil in *After Many Springs*, it seems likely that he added an oil glaze to the matte tempera painting thus increasing the shimmer of the surface as he did in others of his works (Adams, 1989, p. 135).

I imagine that if one were viewing the original *After Many Springs* in the collection of the Thomas Hart Benton Estate in Kansas City, Missouri, one could see the texture of the tempera-painted surface as well as the shininess of the oil-glazed surface. These characteristics are indeed visible in another Thomas Hart Benton painting of similar size also painted with tempera and oil at the Phoenix Art Museum.

## References

Adams, H. (1989). *Thomas Hart Benton: An American original*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

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