FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 10, 2013

MEDIA CONTACTS:
Erin Hogan  
(312) 443-3664  
ehogan@artic.edu

Carl Krause  
(312) 443-3363  
ckrause@artic.edu

ART INSTITUTE ADDS SIGNIFICANT PAINTING BY THOMAS HART BENTON TO COLLECTION OF AMERICAN ART

Cotton Pickers Further Strengthens Museum’s World-Renowned Holdings of Regionalist Painting

The Art Institute is pleased to announce the recent acquisition of Thomas Hart Benton’s Cotton Pickers. This 1945 monument of American Regionalism further enhances the Art Institute’s world-renowned collection of important paintings of the period, which includes the iconic American Gothic (1930) by Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry’s Hogs and Rattlesnakes of the same year. Cotton Pickers, a rare example of Benton’s large-scale paintings, complements the museum’s holdings of his works on paper and is the first oil painting by the artist to enter the museum’s collection. The acquisition was spearheaded at the Art Institute by Judith Barter, the Field-McCormick Chair and Curator in the Department of American Arts.

“The Art Institute’s collection of early 20th-century American art—which includes landmark works by Arthur Dove, Edward Hopper, Georgia O’Keeffe, and many others—contains particularly strong holdings of Regionalist works,” said Barter, “but we were unable to tell the full story of the Regionalist movement without an oil painting by Thomas Hart Benton. Like his contemporaries Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry, Benton is one of the leading artists of the 20th century whose style and subjects are uniquely American. Cotton Pickers is a major addition to the
collection and perhaps one of the most important works acquired by the museum in the last several decades.”

Best known for his sinuous lines and frank treatment of rural subjects, the Missouri-born Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) is considered a critical figure in the history of American art for his mediating role between American Regionalism and the emerging forces of abstraction and modernism. His career as an artist began at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the School of the Art Institute, where he studied for two years before decamping to Paris and the Académie Julian. In Paris, he was deeply influenced by the work of the Old Masters in the Louvre but also energized by modern art, including that by Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, and Paul Signac. He became acquainted with American modernists working in the city at the time, including Stanton MacDonald-Wright, one of the leaders of the Synchronism movement. The Synchronist belief in bright colors, strong borders, and bold rhythms would prove to be a foundational element of Benton’s style. Returning to the United States, Benton settled in New York City and continued to engage in formal exploration—though distancing himself from “modernism”—while also committing to bringing to light poverty, injustice, and inequitable social relations in American society. In a very rare combination for the time, his work was both formally and politically progressive, as can be seen in Cotton Pickers, which brought into focus the bleak social and economic landscape of the South in the early 20th century in an inventive visual idiom.

Benton became a chief figure of Regionalism—an American realist modern art movement that portrayed life outside of major urban areas—and was even featured in 1934 as one of the first color covers of Time magazine for an article on the new American art. A year later, Benton left the New York art world to return to Missouri and immerse himself in murals and smaller studies inspired by his travels through the South and the Midwest; Cotton Pickers is based on notes of a trip he made through the South more than 20 years earlier. Rendered on a relatively large scale, the painting shows the dignity of African American cotton pickers enduring backbreaking labor and southern summer heat. As the workers pick the cotton by hand, to be collected by the horse-drawn wagon in the background, one woman offers another a drink of water from a pail. A makeshift lean-to protects a sleeping child from the relentless sun. Benton renders the unforgiving Georgia clay, the dry fields, and the contorted bodies of the workers in a unified composition, the delicacy of which almost belies the progressive agenda of the work. Cotton Pickers, one of a limited number of large paintings created by Benton, will be shown alongside Grant Wood’s American Gothic and John Steuart Curry’s Hogs and Rattlesnakes at the Art
Institute and will complete an important chapter in the museum’s representation of American Regionalism.

**IMAGE:** Thomas Hart Benton. *Cotton Pickers*, 1945. Prior bequest of Alexander Stewart; Centennial Major Acquisitions Income and Wesley M. Dixon Jr. funds; Roger and J. Peter McCormick Endowments; prior acquisition of the George F. Harding Collection and Cyrus H. McCormick Fund; Quinn E. Delaney, American Art Sales Proceeds, Alyce and Edwin DeCosta and Walter E. Heller Foundation, and Goodman funds; prior bequest of Arthur Rubloff; Estate of Walter Aitken; Ada Turnbull Hertle and Mary and Leigh Block Endowment funds; prior acquisition of Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize; Marian and Samuel Klasstorner and Laura T. Magnuson Acquisition funds; prior acquisition of Friends of American Art Collection; Wirt D. Walker Trust; Jay W. McGreevy Endowment; Cyrus Hall McCormick Fund; Samuel A. Marx Purchase Fund for Major Acquisitions; Maurice D. Galleher Endowment; Alfred and May Tiefenbrunner Memorial, Dr. Julian Archie, Gladys N. Anderson, and Simeon B. Williams funds; Capital Campaign General Acquisitions Endowment, and Benjamin Argile Memorial Fund.

# # # #

Web: [http://www.artic.edu](http://www.artic.edu)
Twitter: [@artinstitutechi](http://twitter.com/artinstitutechi)
Like us on Facebook

**MUSEUM HOURS**
Daily: 10:30–5:00
Thursdays until 8:00
Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's days.

Children under 14 always free
Members always free

City of Chicago residents with Chicago Public Library cards can borrow a "Museum Passport" card from any library branch for free general admission to the nine members of Museums in the Park, including the Art Institute of Chicago.