



Self portrait lithograph courtesy of The State Historical Society of Missouri.

Thomas Hart Benton

CRUSTY AND COLOSSAL

There was much about universities that Tom Benton didn't like. He believed that the academic world was overcrowded with a "sickly and diseased lot." Yet, he had an affection for the University of Missouri and was especially proud of two honors it had bestowed upon him. One was the honorary degree of doctor of fine arts in 1949 at Columbia. The other was last spring's selection as the Campus's first Thomas Jefferson Distinguished Visiting Professor. He was somewhat concerned about his voice giving out, but "just the same," he wrote Chancellor Herb Schooling, "I would still like to be the first man on the Jefferson project." He refused to accept the fee, journeyed to Mizzou and delighted the membership of the Jefferson Club, the University's most prestigious organization of donors.

Benton liked students best of all. Sid Larson, AB '49, MA '50, now head of Columbia College's art department, first met Benton as an undergraduate at Missouri. He later worked with him on many projects, living with the Bentons in Kansas City during the painting of the Truman Library mural. "Tom would frequently invite students to his studio," Larson says, "while refusing admittance to the 'important' people who might do him some good."

Thomas Hart Benton died January 19 at the age of 85. He had, as Larson observed, been called everything from "Peck's Bad Boy" to "chauvinistic SOB." Harry Truman called him "the best damned painter in America." The University and the State Historical Society of Missouri on Campus are fortunate to have several of Benton's paintings, drawings, and lithographs. □