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Freedom: The Price of Advancement

Thomas Hart Benton, *Running Horses*, 1955

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Thomas Hart Benton created the piece, *Running Horses*, in 1955 using lithograph on paper. This piece simplistically and straightforwardly showcases both the natural and the industrial side-by-side. The horses, which run free and wild, are the complete embodiment of natural power and beauty. Whereas the train, though powerful and beautiful in its own right, is a man-made mechanism confined to parameters determined by its creators. In the realm of technology and transportation the train was a huge advancement. But there is this untamable beauty and wildness to the horses that leave the viewer in awe and feeling nostalgic for the days when such mechanical and industrial devices did not plague the country.

Part of what is especially appreciated is how Benton creates this sense of awe in such a simplistic way. The piece, which is conveyed in a monochromatic black and white color scheme, contains very little subject matter. The lack of any other colors, in fact, allows the viewer to appreciate the subjects for their simple shapes and essence. The subject matter primarily consists of the three running horses, the train, and a barely perceptible power line. Aside from those pivotal forms, the only other presence is the rolling and tumultuous landscape and the looming, ominous sky which just adds to the tension felt between the horses and the train. The horses are portrayed with no clear detail of musculature or skeletal structure. Rather, they are more of a silhouette of grace and movement. The train, having just barely emerged into view from behind the hills, shows just the basic form of the engine and what appears to be a coal car.

Amongst the few elements portrayed, the general focal point would appear to be the horses in the middle ground. In addition to being centrally located, their size also dominates the scene in comparison to the train, which is significantly smaller scaled in the background. The foreground is filled with tall, rough grass that one could imagine standing in as a witness to this racing of two worlds. There is the strong, graceful elegance of the horses in all of their freedom to move about as they wish across the land, with no master to manipulate their way. The train on the other hand is a prisoner to the confines of its tracks. It is an inanimate, externally controlled thing that has no will of its own. It works and goes as it is directed. Though it has a power and beauty of its own, it can never have the freedom to go beyond the track that is laid out in front of it.

With the horses having free reign over the land and the train confined to its prison, it is easy to imagine that in this race between mammal and machine that the horses will surely be triumphant. There is almost a sort of superiority that Benton has imbued into the horses in the way in which he portrays them with such clear movement. They almost appear to be dancing across the land with such ease and grace as though this man-made machine in the distance is laughably inferior and an unworthy challenger. The dust churns at their feet as the spirit of the land encourages them onward as the champion of wild freedom. The train also appears to be moving rapidly as one can see the plume of smoke billowing from the nose of the engine and mingling with the sky above. Interestingly enough, this train, which was designed for powerfully moving people and objects across the land at a faster rate than previously used methods of transportation, is also displayed directly next to a power line. And yet, all the while, still seems to have less true power than that which the horses themselves get to actively experience.

Though the subjects themselves are contextually in a fierce competition to determine dominance, the overall visual aspect of the piece has an elegantly balanced use of light and dark areas that draw the viewer across the page. There are hints of light that flow across the

back of the horse closest to the foreground and a large patch of land in the middle-ground that has little to no shading creating a sense of light that draws the eye to that area. The grassy area in the far left of the foreground is a darker shade. This leads the eye to the dark horse in the center, which is in stark contrast to the bright white middle ground behind it. This dark figured horse is the main focal point of the piece and has his head raised high, exerting a wild freedom as the dust beneath him shows the most turmoil amongst the group. Continuing through the piece the eye is then drawn to the next darkest figure, which is the train. The viewer then has the opportunity to compare the two competing elements of the piece. The sky, which is mostly illuminated, has a darkness crowning the atmosphere drawing the eye to the far right corner of the piece. As the eye follows the fading darkness across the top, one cannot help but circle back around the piece to the grass again in the far left corner. Thus, the balance of dark and light not only allow the viewer to observe the piece and all of its individual elements circuitously, but also appreciate it as a whole.

There are many other balancing elements in this piece. In addition to the balance between light and dark, there is an almost perfectly even, horizontal split between land and sky. And then there is the content matter itself which weighs the intrinsic values of the natural world of freedom against that of the man-made, industrial elements. No doubt mankind has greatly benefited from technological advancements, but at what point does advancement turn into destruction? How much of the natural world has been destroyed for the convenience of mankind? At what point was it decided that bigger and better and more was in fact better? When did the beauty of simple, untamable freedom become outsourced for this man-made prison of technology and industry? It is easy to forget the past while looking to the future. But sometimes it is good to take a step back and see when enough is enough and enjoy what is so as to maintain a balance of creating enough advancement to benefit life while still leaving enough wildness in the world to enjoy the freedom and beauty it brings.

In *Running Horses*, Benton is able to achieve creating a piece that showcases the world with a sense of pure wonder and awe for creatures that are the undeniable epitome of raw beauty and freedom. He truly makes the viewer wish for simpler days when one could themselves run free and wild among the same land as these simple yet majestic horses. There is a strong desire to be able to be in control of one's own life and not be confined to the tracks that mankind himself has seemingly laid out, creating a virtual prison. And the more mankind begins to rely on technological and industrial advancements, the more fortified this prison becomes and slowly strangle everyone's freedoms. Standing in front of Benton's piece, feeling nostalgic for days that are so far back in time, one cannot help but to wonder if mankind has strayed too far away from our roots to the point that true freedom will no longer be able to be achieved. At some point, a choice has to be made. There is the choice to be like the train, ruled by the confines of a world manipulated by man, tethered down and incapable of ever winning in life or experiencing true freedom. Or, one can be as free, beautifully wild, and untamable as the horses who are indeed the masters of their own destiny.