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**HUNTINGTON'S ART COLLECTORS' COUNCIL ACQUIRES
THOMAS HART BENTON PAINTING, ITALIAN TERRA-COTTAS**

SAN MARINO, Calif.—The Art Collectors' Council of The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens made two strategic purchases at its spring 2009 meeting, acquiring a painting by Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) for the new Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art, which open on May 30, and two 18th-century Italian terra-cotta figures for the European art collection, which is displayed in the Huntington Art Gallery.

The new works are *The Yankee Driver*, 1923 (oil on canvas, 26 × 23 ¾ in.) by Benton; and *Sibyl* and *Prophet*, 1768 (terra-cotta, about 17 × 20 in. each), by Antonio Schiassi (ca. 1712–1778).

“These are spectacular acquisitions,” said John Murdoch, Hannah and Russel Kully Director of Art Collections at The Huntington. “The Benton picture is something of an eye-opener—instantly recognizable as Benton at the height of his powers, but much earlier than his familiar images; and it is wonderfully lively—even funny—in its quality. The terra-cottas have similar vividness, and are art-historically important in documenting the work of one of the leading sculptors in central Italy in the 18th century. They will go beautifully with our Venetian paintings of the same period.”

The Huntington's Art Collectors' Council is a group of major donors who support the growth of the collections through active involvement in the acquisition process.

The Yankee Driver

Although Thomas Hart Benton is perhaps best associated with the agricultural Midwest, he created scores of paintings of New York City, where he lived for more than 20 years, and Martha's Vineyard, where he summered every year from 1920 until his death in 1975. According to Benton expert Henry Adams, the subject of *The Yankee Driver* is Billy Benson, a weathered native of Martha's Vineyard who did odd jobs around the property where Benton stayed. For Benton, residents of the area stood for traditional values. Benton claimed that it was through painting pictures of these plain American people and their environment that he rid himself of "the hand-overs of France and the isms of modern aesthetics."

Painted in 1923, at the start of the most significant developmental phase of his career, *The Yankee Driver* shows Benton finding his mature "voice" and style. The painting is characteristic of the artist's familiar work from the 1930s.

When the newly expanded American art galleries open, Benton's painting will be displayed with works by John Steuart Curry (1897–1946), Grant Wood (1891–1942), and Roger Medearis (1920–2001), one of Benton's most accomplished students.

Sibyl and Prophet

Signed and dated by the artist, *Sibyl* and *Prophet* display the highly refined and animated style of their maker—the Bolognese sculptor Antonio Schiassi. Schiassi has inventively combined Baroque and Neoclassical elements in these figures. Both sculptures adopt the Baroque use of drapery and gesture to animate their compositions. Particularly remarkable is the forceful handling of the prophet's beard and collar—a tour de force of clay modeling that is both vigorous and expressive. At the same time, the Neoclassicism of the mid-18th century also is evident in the elegance of pose and the refinement of *Sibyl's* profile.

After studying with the Bolognese sculptors Angelo Gabriello Piò (1690–1770) and Giuseppe Mazza (1653–1768), Schiassi won the grand prize of the Bolognese Accademia Clementina in 1728 and then again in 1730 and 1731. The school was one of the preeminent art academies in Italy, where studies from nature were combined with those of ancient exemplars. Schiassi was an important member of the post-Baroque artistic scene in Bologna and worked for the Este dukes.

The sculptures will be displayed in the Huntington Art Gallery with paintings by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770); Giovanni Antonio Canal, called “Canaletto” (1697–1768); and Francesco Guardi (1712–1793).

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[EDITOR’S NOTE: High-resolution digital images for publicity use are available on request.]

About The Huntington

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens is a collections-based research and educational institution serving scholars and the general public. More information about The Huntington can be found online at www.huntington.org.

Visitor information

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