
AXA Equitable donates famous mural to the Met

By Editor Test *Thu, Dec 13, 2012*

America Today, Thomas Hart Benton's 10-panel mural celebrating national progress in the 1920s, had been on display in the lobby of AXA Equitable's New York City headquarters from 1996 until this year.

American artist Thomas Hart Benton's epic mural ([detail](#)) *America Today*—a panoramic celebration of American life in the booming 1920s—has been donated by AXA Equitable Life Insurance Company to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Thomas P. Campbell, the Museum's Director and CEO, and Mark Pearson, AXA Equitable chairman and CEO, announced the gift this week.

Over the past 80 years, the mural has travelled from the New School for Social Research at 66 W. 12th St. in New York City, to AXA Equitable headquarters at 787 Seventh Ave., and to the insurer's subsequent headquarters at 1290 Avenue of the Americas. A year ago, when renovations forced the mural to be moved, AXA Equitable decided to gift it to the Met.

The 10-panel mural spent decades in relative obscurity. Benton (1889–1975) created it in 1930–31 as a commission for the third-floor boardroom of the New School. The panels were unveiled when the International-style building at 66 West 12th St. opened on January 1, 1931. The artist completed the tenth panel later.

Filled with figures of farmers, coal miners, steelworkers, architects and builders, doctors and teachers, the panels covered the four walls of the 30-by-22-foot boardroom. They established Benton, who received no fee for it, as his era's leading American muralist and it helped inspire the Works Progress Administration (WPA) mural program of the Great Depression—including murals in WPA-built post offices throughout the U.S.

In 1982, the New School sold the work to the Manhattan art dealer Maurice Segoura on the condition that he would not re-sell it outside the United States or as individual panels. It proved difficult to sell as a whole.

AXA Equitable (then Equitable Life) acquired *America Today* in 1984, helping then-Mayor Ed Koch and others keep it intact and in New York. Two years later, after a restoration, the mural was installed in AXA Equitable's new headquarters at 787 Seventh Avenue.

In 1996, the company and the giant mural moved to 1290 Avenue of the Americas, where it decorated the lobby until January 2012. Amid lobby renovations, AXA Equitable decided to send the mural to a permanent public home. Curators Pari Stave, for AXA Equitable, and H. Barbara Weinberg, for the Met, directed the transfer.