



Achelous and Hercules (detail), 1947, Thomas Hart Benton, 62 7/8 x 264 1/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of Allied Stores Corporation, and museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program

WHAT IS A SYMBOL?

A symbol is anything that stands for, or *represents*, something else. In a story, a character, an action, an object, or an animal can be symbolic. Often these symbols stand for something abstract, like a force of nature, a condition of the world, or an idea.

This mural is Missouri artist Thomas Hart Benton's retelling of the ancient myth of Achelous and Hercules. He moved the setting from ancient Greece to the American Midwest and gave new meanings to the story's symbols.

First read the myth of Achelous and Hercules. Jot down anything that you think might be symbolic of something else. What do you think these things represent? For help, read "Meanings and Second Meanings."

Then explore areas on the mural to learn more about the painting. Did the artist show all of the details that you thought were symbolic? Did he change them? How? Did he include other details that might be symbols?

If you find your own meanings in the story, congratulations! You've done just what Thomas Hart Benton did. You've created a new story.

Note: This is a *synchronistic* painting. That means that the artist shows, in one scene, events that happen at different times in a story.