Biography:

Thomas Duncan Benrimo was born in 1887 in San Francisco. His family, once well off, encountered financial difficulties while he was still very young. As a result, his formal education ended after the fourth grade. Following the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the Benrimo family relocated to New York.

In New York, Benrimo continued to work to support his family, taking jobs as a set designer for various plays and as an illustrator for magazines and advertisements. In 1911 he designed the sets and costumes for a play written by his brother, Harry Benrimo, titled “The Yellow Jacket.” New York living took its toll on Benrimo and his family: he and several other family members contracted tuberculosis as a result of tenement living. However, New York also offered unique opportunities. Among these was the chance to see major art exhibitions such as the 1913 Armory Show. Benrimo also briefly took art courses at the Art Students’ League.

In 1916, he served with the United States Marine Camouflage Service. During his service, he was called upon to create patterns and designs to camouflage ships. Author C.V. Donovan has proposed that this experience, coupled with Benrimo’s earlier exposure to the 1913 Armory Show, may have influenced Benrimo’s later art, possibly leading him to work in a more abstract style.

After the war ended, Benrimo continued to enjoy success as an illustrator, creating covers for Fortune, Scribner’s, and Harper’s, as well as for various advertising companies. In 1917 Benrimo married Helen Crozier and in 1926 they had a daughter named Rita.

In 1936 he accepted a position as an instructor in the Advertising and Design Department at Pratt Institute where he taught courses such as “Applied Surrealism.” At Pratt Institute, Benrimo met his second wife, Dorothy, a jewelry designer and photographer. In 1939, Benrimo won the Art Directors Club Medal (and accompanying $5,000 prize) for his illustration for the cover of
Fortune magazine. That same year, Benrimo and Dorothy relocated to Taos, New Mexico to pursue art full time.

During his years in Taos, Benrimo concentrated on his art rather than self-promotion. Nonetheless, his efforts were accompanied by quiet success. His work was shown in several exhibitions including the 1954 “Younger American Painters” exhibition at The Guggenheim Museum and solo shows of his work took place at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1954 and at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955. His work is held in the collections of several major institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art and the Denver Art Museum.

Thomas Benrimo died in Taos, New Mexico on May 20, 1958.

Scope and Content:

This collection includes 47 original illustrations by Thomas Benrimo and 57 reproductions of his work. In some cases the collection includes both the original artwork and the corresponding reproduction. Very few items in this collection are dated. Those few that bear dates are from the 1930s.

Of particular significance are Benrimo’s illustrations for Fortune magazine covers. This collection includes both original illustrations for these covers, as well as some of the corresponding covers.

The collection also contains the actual Art Directors’ Club Medal Certificate of Award of 1939 that Benrimo won for one of his illustrations for the cover of Fortune.

This collection also includes an original illustration and corresponding cover for the magazine Modern Packaging. Also represented in this collection is advertising work that Benrimo created for Trudi Schoop’s Comic Ballet, Sandeman Wine, and the Vienna Choir Boys. There is also a striking series of original illustrations depicting the signs of the Zodiac that appears to have been created for an article titled “What Your Birthday Tells About You,” in Country Home magazine.

Other pieces in this collection do not have any readily apparent commercial purpose. These pieces in particular reflect a strong Surrealist influence. One piece bears a notation that the image was used on the announcement for one of Benrimo’s solo exhibitions in New York.

Other Sources of Information about Thomas Benrimo

Tom and Dorothy Benrimo papers, 1898-1973. Available only on microfilm through the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
Container List:

Box 1. Folder 1a. 2 items total. Includes:

The original inventory from the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. The inventory lists a poster for Benrimo’s Marionettes (22” x 30”) that is no longer with the collection.

A business card from the Betty McLean Gallery in Dallas, TX. The card was removed from the portfolio that contained Benrimo’s work when it was donated to FIT.

Box 1. Folder 1. 27 items total. Includes:

12 original illustrations, predominantly in gouache and ink. Sizes vary. Includes three original illustrations for Fortune covers and one original illustration for the cover of Modern Packaging.

15 color reproductions of varying dimensions.

Box 1. Folder 2. 3 color reproductions of the signs of the Zodiac.

Box 1. n.f. 13 original color illustrations of the signs of the horoscope, pochoirs, mostly mounted on board, most are 17 ¼ x 20”. There are two illustrations for Virgo.

Box 2. Folder 1. 22 reproductions. Some in color, some in black and white. Sizes vary.

Box 2. Folder 2. Art Directors Club Medal Certificate of Award 1939. Presented to Thomas Benrimo for his illustration for Fortune.

Box 2. Folder 3. 15 reproductions. Some in black and white, some in color, of varying dimensions. Some are mounted.

Box 2. n.f. 18 original works of art, most on paper, some on board. Sizes and mediums vary.

Damage Noted: one image has been cut out of item 1.
Box 3. Folder 1. 5 items total. This folder contains miscellaneous sketches found with the Benrimo collection.

Box 3. n.f. 6 items total. Includes:
4 originals in gouache and ink on board of varying sizes. Three are original illustrations done for Fortune.

2 reproductions. 1 in color. 1 in black and white.