ART AS A FORCE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: BEN SHAHN, 1898-1969

by

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ABSTRACT

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Ben Shahn emerged as an American painter of significance in 1932 with the exhibition of a series of gouache paintings, The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti. He was involved in the Social Realist movement in which artists painted the social ills of the common man. Many of Shahn's works of art became a weapon against these ills, to be used to exact a change. This change was to be political as well as social.

Shahn hated injustice of any kind against people, no matter what their color, political orientation, or religious affiliation. This hatred is evident in his work and writings throughout his thirty-four-year career. Although Shahn claimed to change his style of painting after World War II, he did not lose his concern for people and events.

Shahn represents a person from a period when political empathies leaned heavily from the left to the extreme right and these are reflected in his work. His career spans the Roosevelt New Deal era and McCarthy red-baiting era. He was important in that his art was used to sell the New Deal, and later reflected anti-war sentiments during the Vietnam

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conflict. Shahn responded to existing social phenomena with his work. His work related the search for humanity after the Second World War and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Shahn believed that the artist's role in society was to bring humanity back to people.

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LIST OF TERMS

Fresco- The technique of painting on moist lime plaster with water based pigments.

Gouache- A painting medium made of opaque pigments in a water base mixed with a preparation of gum.

Lithography- A process of printing from a flat surface either by directly or offset, that depends on the antipathy of grease to water. The design is drawn directly on a bed, traditionally of limestone, with a greasy crayon. The stone is wetted, then coated with an oily ink, which clings to the greasy design and is repelled by the wet areas.

Seriagraph- (also known as silk screen) A stencil process of color reproduction, often used commercially to reproduce posters, etc. The design is divided according to color areas. For each color, a stencil is prepared on silk stretched over a frame. Paint is then squeezed through the respective screens.

Tempera- A painting material in which the pigment (dissolved in water) is mixed, or tempered, with an albuminous, gelatinous, or colloidal medium. Egg yolk is the most common tempera vehicle.

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CHAPTER I

ART AS A FORCE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: BEN SHAHN, 1898-1969

INTRODUCTION

Ben Shahn emerged as an American painter of significance in 1932 with the exhibition of a series of twenty-three gouache paintings entitled The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti. This was the first show of many that would reveal Shahn to be a painter of social significance. This style of painting became known as social realism. In 1933 an important development in the art world was the formation of the Artist's Union, which was designed to unite artists against work restrictions, conditions, and general discontent of the total situation. Stuart Davis, the founder of the Artist's Union, claimed that the Union was necessary to prevent or fight against the suppression of works such as happened to Diego Rivera, Lou Block and Ben Shahn.[1] Indeed, Ben Shahn was one of the initial one hundred artists to join the Union. David Shapiro, author on the subject of Social Realism, claimed that the Federal Art Projects and the Artist's Union were essential

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[1] Stuart Davis, "The Artist Today," American Magazine of Art 28 (August, 1935): 477.

"ingredients in the emergence of Social Realism."[2] This was because both the Union and the Arts Projects claimed art was for the working man and designed to demonstrate the problems associated with the working man.

Ben Shahn will be remembered for his involvement in this artistic form of expression. Social realism was a popular art movement from the 1930s in which artists painted the so-called "common man", and more importantly, the social ills of the "common man". Social realists insisted that art belonged to the people, not only to the ruling class. Paintings, posters, much art work became a weapon against these ills, illustrating what the illnesses of society were and to attempt to exact a change, through visual imagery. This change was to be political as well as social. Shahn was the foremost artist of the social realist movement. Other artists involved were Jack Levine, Raphael Soyer, William Gropper, Joseph Hirsch and Jacob Lawrence. Jack Levine's social realism concentrated on biting satire of politicians and organized crime, which were not always distinguishable. William Gropper's favorite subjects were Congressmen, especially Southern politicians who were fond of using the filibuster. Joseph Hirsch was the painter of veterans and the unemployed. Jacob Lawrence was painting the Depression through the eyes of a black man, including race riots and racist oppression. Ben Shahn's social realism was somewhat different. His was not the biting satire of Levine, but rather the subtle story-telling of the way things were. His taste in authors at the time also reflected his concern for people and events. He read Sinclair Lewis, John DosPassos and Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls.[3]

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[2] David Shapiro, Ed. Social Realism: Art as a Weapon, (New York: Frederick Ungar Pub. Co., 1973), p. 12.

Social realism was a powerful force in the art of the 1930s, but lost its steam when the United States shifted all gears to build war machinery in 1942. Many of the artists involved in social realism shifted to other styles of painting, but not Shahn. He continued to paint for social causes, but in his own words, his painting moved "into a sort of personal realism." This personal realism was a personal "observation of the way of people, the mood of life and places" and included looking at and drawing what moved him. It involved selecting causes and then doing all he could to help illustrate those causes, whether labor, civil rights or antinuclear oriented.[4]

Ben Shahn hated injustices of any kind against people, no matter what their color, political organization, or religious affiliation. This is evident in both his work and his writings. He was also outspoken about his feelings. In an interview with John D. Morse for the Magazine of Art in 1944, Shahn emphatically stated, "I hate injustice. I guess that's about the only thing I really do hate. I've hated injustice ever since I read a story in school, and I hope I go on hating it all my life."[5] Perhaps it was his intense aversion to injustice that led him to some of the comflicts in his life. Conflicts with the New York Municipal Arts Commission over sketches for a mural at Riker's Island Penitentiary, disagreements with the Museum of Modern Art about his panel submission on Sacco and Vanzetti, battles with the Office of War Information over the content of propaganda posters, and probably unknown conflicts with those people who thought blacks and whites should not live, work, or eat near each other. Ben Shahn believed that man, whether an artist or not, must work from his heart in order to achieve equality, understanding and justice in this world. That is why he chose to paint or illustrate only those things that he felt most strongly about.

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[3] John D. Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," Magazine of Art 37 (April 1944): 136.

[4] Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content, (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), p. 48.

When he painted something, Shahn often did a lot of preliminary research into the subject. When he was doing the initial sketches for the ill-fated Riker's Island mural project, he investigated various aspects of prison life. He studied the history of prison reforms, talked to inmates and observed prison life. The concept was to learn something about which he was commissioned to paint. This was the same thing he did for the Sacco and Vanzetti, Tom Mooney, and Dreyfus case pictures. He did preliminary reading before he began to paint. This was essential to gain insight into the subject. With this insight, he felt he would be able to paint some of the feelings people had about their involvement with the case or subject.

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[5] Morse, "Interview," p. 136.

Although Shahn claimed to change his style of painting, he did not lose his concern for people and events. He continued to paint and illustrate topics which others may not have chosen. In the 1950s when it was no longer fashionable to paint injustices and social ills, Shahn illustrated booklets on equal hospital care for blacks. When other artists were exploring splashes and dashes of color, Shahn made political posters. When dehumanized canvases filled the galleries, Shahn drew likenesses of Gandhi, Einstein and Martin Luther King Jr. When artists became detached from the political environment, Shahn made anti-H-bomb posters.

Shahn remained a man of action as well as a painter. He retained his outspokeness on injustice, and his perceived role of art in the world. After his death in 1969, many obituaries and retrospective articles denied this continued involvement with socially important subject matters. His style and manner did change over the years, but not as drastically as has been claimed.

Not limited to paint, Shahn explored and did an enormous body of work in photography, printmaking, posters, commercial art and music as well as speeches and writing. Such diversity led to his reaching a wide-spread audience, a fact which he did not deny, but did not necessarily work for. He was not afraid to use his art to poke fun at politicians. Many political experiences motivated him, from war, to H-bomb testing, to phony campaign promises. All were grounds for Shahn to pass on what he felt. Shahn believed that it was the artist's responsibility to do that, and to use whatever slogans, catch phrases or facial expressions suited to the purpose as images to pass on messages. These visual messages were designed to create an instantaneous and lasting impression on viewers, rather than long-winded speeches or newspaper articles.

Perhaps the way most people know Ben Shahn is through his works on Sacco and Vanzetti, the immigrant Italian anarchists, who were executed in 1927 for a crime many believed they did not commit. Ben Shahn did not only paint the images of the two men throughout his thirty-eight-year career. He also painted images of labor leader Tom Mooney, Einstein, Gandhi, Dag Hammarskjold, and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as countless others of unknown children and adults.

Research and writing on Ben Shahn has been limited to two main areas, these being his involvement in either the Works Projects Administration or in social realism. Few scholarly works span his entire career, either because they were written in the forties or fifties, or because that was the period when his political and social motivations were more apparent in his work and writings. There has been no biography of Shahn since Selden Rodman's book, Portrait of the Artist as an American, Ben Shahn: A Biography With Pictures, appeared in 1951. There are still areas where further historical research is needed, in order to answer some important questions about Shahn.

Why should someone write about Ben Shahn? There are several apparent reasons. He was an important figure, for he represents a person from a period when political empathies leaned heavily from the left to the extreme right and these are reflected in his work. His career spans the Roosevelt New Deal era and the McCarthy red-baiting era. He was important in that his art was used to sell the New Deal, and later reflected anti-war sentiments during the Vietnam era. In an effort to bring some enlightenment to Shahn's time, and to show how one man responded to existing social phenomena, this these will answer some basic questions. Why did Shahn first choose social realsim as his style of painting? What did he feel the most important functions of art were? Shahn said that he moved from social realism to "personal" realism. When does this become apparent and how is this change reflected in his work? Or is it reflected in his work? Finally, are there any puzzling omissions of a historical nature in the body of his work?

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CHAPTER II

FROM SCHOOL TO THE WORKS PROJECTS ADMINISTRATION

Ben Shahn was born on September 12, 1898, in Kovno, Lithuania. He came from a family rich in handicrafts. His grandfather and father were woodcarvers, and as Shahn recalled, his father referred to himself as a "carpenter."[6] His mother's family were potters. As a result of his family background, Shahn had a deep respect for those who earned their living with their handwork. Coming from a Jewish family, of the Misnagdim sect, Shahn attended a Jewish school as soon as he was able. He went to school for nine hours a day. These hours were devoted to "learning the true history of things, which was the Bible" and to "lettering its words, to learning its prayer and its psalms."[7] It was at this school that Shahn first felt anger about injustice. This occurred when he first read the Old Testament story about the arc of the covenant. In an interview with John D. Morse in 1944, Shahn recalled:

> That story was about the ark being brought into the temple, hauled by six white oxen, and balanced on a single pole. The Lord knew that the people would worry about the ark's falling off the pole, so to test their faith He gave orders that no one was to touch it, no matter what happened. One man saw it beginning to totter, and

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[6] Morse, "Interview," p. 136.

[7] Ben Shahn, Love and Joy About Letters (New York: Grossman Press, 1963), p. 2.

> he rushed to help. He was struck dead. I refused to go to school for a week after we read that story. It seemed so damn unfair. It still does.8

It was also at this school that Shahn first experienced personal injustice, when a rabbi slapped his face for asking, as children often do, who made God? Selden Rodman asserted that these elements of injustice may have been what led Shahn's later "rejection of the supernatural and indifference to all organized religions."[9] Bernarda Shahn recalled in 1970 that her husband had "emphatically cast off his religious ties and traditions during his youth" because those ties and traditions came with a "sense of moral burden and entrapment."[10]

In 1906, an eight-year-old Ben Shahn and his family emigrated to the United States, and settled down in Brooklyn, New York. The neighborhood was run-down and the residents were primarily immigrants. This transition to American life was to him a "cataclysmic change." He had to learn a new language, a new alphabet and make new friends. He also learned that there was a history outside of the Bible--American and world history. Shahn had been drawing for most of his early years and so it was natural that, at the age of fourteen, he was apprenticed in a lithographer's shop. This

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[8] Morse, "Interview," p. 136.

[9] Selden Rodman, Portrait of the Artist as an American Ben Shahn: A Biography with Pictures (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishing, 1951), p. 171.

[10] Bernarda Bryson Shahn, "Ben and the Psalms," in Ben Shahn edited by John D. Morse (New York: Praeger Pub., 1972), p. 217.

was 1913 and the shop was Hessenberg's Lithography Shop in Manhattan. He had complicated elementary school and in his parents' view, he "knew everything there was to be known." Lithography was, according to his family, the "right and proper" craft to learn. But Shahn viewed this apprenticeship in two ways. First, to learn the craft was his "ostensible reason and purpose." Second, his private reason was to "learn to draw always better and better."[11]

Later, when Shahn attended night high school, he developed an interest in biology, so that when he entered New York University in 1919, he intended to major in that discipline. For three summers, Shahn went to Woods Hole, Massachusetts on scholarships at the Marine Biological Laboratory there. He switched to the City College of New York, but finally became dissatisfied with working in the daytime and attending classes in the evening. Besides that he "didn't see biology as an end in itself" like his friends did.[12] He attended the National Academy of Design but was frustrated by the teaching of competence in draftsmanship and in drawing and painting, possibly because he felt such competence stifled creativity. Then, in 1922, he dropped out of school altogether and worked full-time as a craftsman lithographer. In the same year, he married his first sife, Tillie Goldstein, with whom he had two children: Judith and

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[11] Shahn, Love and Joy, p. 2.

[12] Morse, "Interview," p. 137.

Ezra. He continued to work as a lithographer and also began to save money to go to Europe, "like everybody else."[13]

Shahn made the traditional pilgrimage to Europe to absorb the artistic aura that so many budding young artists seek. In some parts of Europe it was probably not unusual to find more foreign artists than native artists. This European journey was seen as a necessity since America had little to offer young artists in the way of training, skill and history. For decades France had been considered the place to go to find oneself as an artist. That is why Shahn found it necessary to make this pilgrimage with his wife, not once but twice, in 1924 to 1925 and then from 1927 to 1929. He believed in the conviction that "new soil" would surely provide him with a "new outlook."[14]

By the time Shahn returned to America after his prolonged trip to Europe and North Africa in 1929, he was dissatisfied. In his own words:

> Here I am, I said to myself, twenty-nine years old, the son of a carpenter. I like stories and people. The French school is wrong for me. If I am to be a painter I must show the world how it looks through my eyes, not theirs.15

Shahn's artistic vision was clearing; he was becoming a social realist.

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[13] Morse, "Interview," p. 137.

[14] Ben Shahn, "American Painting at Mid-Century: An Unorthodox View," in Ben Shahn: The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), p. 50.

[15] Morse, "Interview," p. 137.

When he had travelled to Europe, Shahn had picked up a small book on the Dreyfus affair. It was then that he underwent what he deemed the "artistic tug of war between idea and image." And he decided to paint the leading wrongdoers of the case, the defenders, and Dreyfus himself. Under each portrait he lettered a legend explaining the role each had played in the affair. It was within the Dreyfus pictures that Shahn saw a new avenue of expression for himself. He saw this as a means by which he could "unfold a great deal of [his[most personal thinking and feeling without a loss of simplicity." The value of those pictures was in their "directness of statement." This simplicity and directness he felt, and "perhaps hoped a little, that such simplicity would prove irritating to that artistic elite who had already-even at the end of the twenties-begun to hold forth 'disengagement' as the first law of creation."[16] This disengagement refers to the concept that the artist should be detached from society, in order to deny the human element. It was believed that they would then be free to pursue the uses of color and technique free of the concerns of human content.

Shahn expressed a wish to be alive at a great time, "when something big was going on, like the Crucifixion."[17] He came to the realization that he was. He began to think about the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Nicolo Sacco, a shoemaker, and Bartlomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler, were two Italian anarchists who were arrested, tried and convicted of murdering a paymaster and his guard in South Braintree, Massacusetts in 1921. The trial had many irregularities and included faulty evidence. From 1922 until their executions in 1927, widespread appeals and new trial motions were filed. The judge who had tried the case, Webster Thayer, had also sat on all of the appeal motions which he subsequently denied. His objectivity was in question; it was rumored that he had referred to Sacco and Vanzetti as "anarchist bastards."

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[16] Shahn, Shape of Content, p. 42-43.

[17] Morse, "Interview," p. 137.

Many also felt that the "Red Scare" of 1919 to 1920, the perceived threat of a communist uprising, may have had a part in the general hysteria. This also may have influenced the trial. Appeals to Massachusetts Governor Alvin Fuller led to the formation of the Lowell Committee. The three members of this committee were President A. Lawrence Lowell of Harvard University, President Samuel Stratton of M.I.T. and Judge Robert Grant. Based on the findings of the committee, who thought the trial was fair and impartial, Fuller denied clemency. Appeals to the United States Supreme Court were also denied. Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in August of 1927. Amid the legal battles, thousands of people--anarchists, communists, liberals, immigrants, and workers--demonstrated against their execution. The demonstrators were most violent and agitated in Europe. Many Europeans felt that the two were accused because they were immigrants, or because they were anarchists. Shahn was in Paris when the two were electrocuted in 1927. He witnessed the demonstrations and realized that the demonstrators were not just intellectuals but working-class men and women. He saw children who were named Sacco and Vanzetti and tugboats, hauling their wares up and down the Seine River, named after the duo.

This entire fiasco was an inspiration for Ben Shahn. He painted a series of twenty-three gouaches on the trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. He painted the series in seven months and these were exhibited at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery, in New York in 1932. The exhibition received mixed reviews. Walter Gutman of the liberal journal The Nation was disappointed in the show. He believed that though Shahn was ambitious in choosing Sacco and Vanzetti to paint, he was "not the artist to interpret" the two.[18] Gutman even suggested that Shahn should become more "passionate, more spontaneous, and more partisan" before he could create "those eloquent symbols" which were typical of an art "deeply concerned with affairs."[19] The New Republic, another liberal journal, contained a review by Matthew Josephson. Josephson believed that Shahn's twenty-three gouaches "added a quite remarkable and accurate contribution" to the body of work about Sacco and Vanzetti.[20] Josephson also felt that Shahn was by no means a "man of narrow gifts" and the series was properly named "The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti."[21] And indeed, Shahn was brave to paint Sacco and Vanzetti. He painted the series at a time when other artists were painting "safe" things such as landscapes or still-lifes or unrecognizable cubes, cones and swirls.

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[18] Walter Gutman, "The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti," The Nation 20 (April 1932): 475.

[19] Ibid.

The Sacco and Vanzetti show at the Downtown Gallery proved to be "highly rewarding" for Shahn.[22] It was the first time that his art work was becoming identified with his person. It was also rewarding from the sense that there was a new facet of the public to view the show. There was, beside the usual art public, an entirely new viewing audience, which Shahn described as a "great influx of people who do not ordinarily visit galleries-journalists and Italian immigrants and many other sorts of sympathizers."[23] In 1961 he described his intent when painting the Sacco-Vanzetti series to Selden Rodman. Shahn stated that he was "trying to take advantage of the spectator's existing feeling and set fire to that."[24] He felt that the influence of the series stemmed from his portrayal of the two anarchists as "the simple, gentle people they essentially were" and that only increased the conviction of "those who believed them innocent."[25] Socialist Diego Rivera, the Mexican muralist, admired Shahn for the Sacco-Vanzetti series.

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[20] Matthew Josephson, "Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti," The New Republic 20 (April 1932): 275.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Shahn, Shape of Content, p. 44.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Selden Rodman, Conversations with Artists (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), p. 224.

rivera was so impressed by the series that he asked Shahn to be his assistant. Rivera was working, at that time, on a mural for Rockefeller Center. This mural, Man at the Crossroads, was never completed because Rivera had incorporated into the piece a huge portrait of Lenin, which was not in the accepted preliminary sketches.[26] What was finished of the mural was later destroyed when Rivera refused to remove the portrait. Rivera, who was quite familiar with the mural genre, taught Shahn what he knew about fresco painting. That was how Shahn's almost career-long interest in murals began.

In 1932, Shahn was separated from his wife, Tille, and it was then that he met Bernarda Bryson, who was to become his second wife. Bernarda Bryson was an artist-journalist from Ohio who had favorably reviewed the Sacco-Vanzetti series.

Early in his career, Shahn met with controversy and problems. He submitted a large panel of The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti to the Museum of Modern Art in New York for some possible mural commissions. A few days later,

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Rodman, Portrait of the Artist, p. 101.

Shahn was invited to dinner at a prominent New Yorker's fashionable apartment. After the other guests had departed, this unidentified man offered Shahn the handsome price of $2,000 for his entry in the competition. This was quite a surprise for an artist who had just completed his first major exhibition. Of course, Shahn was thrilled at the offer until the would-be purchaser insisted upon delivery before the exhibition opened. This meant that the panel would not be in the show. Shahn refused the offer and walked home to Brooklyn incensed that someone would be so blatant. Shahn found himself in turn "threatened, cajoled, [and] persuaded" not to participate in the show by the Museum of Modern Art, who had not "warmly received" the panel in the first place.[27] This panel was a compilation of several of the smaller gouaches that had previously been exhibited in which the figures of Judge Thayer and the Lowell Committee were portrayed prominently next to Sacco and Vanzetti in their coffins.

It was from the offer and the Museum's reluctance that Shahn realized that there was power in the brush. Shahn was informed that the panel would not be exhibited and some supporters suggested that a "Hang Shahn" committe be formed in his defense. The exhibition was held up for two weeks and Shahn was not sure that his panel would be there when it finally opened. But he went to the opening, and his panel was there. This was his first skirmish against injustice via the paint brush and he recalled later that he was "happy about it artistically, elated about it in spirit."[28]

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[27] Shahn, "American Painting," p. 54.

The following year, Shahn exhibited a series of fifteen gouaches at the Downtown Gallery entitled The Mooney Case. These paintings told the story of the wrongly accused San Francisco labor leader, Tom Mooney. In 1916, San Francisco was like a battleground of labor and civil strife. There were great strikes, beatings, shootings, stink and some dynamite bombs used in the struggles. It was during 1916 that Tom Mooney emerged as a left-wing agitator in the American Federation of Labor. He tried to organize the United Railroad employees in San Francisco and as a result, clashed against this powerful corporation. On July 22, 1916, the Chamber of Commerce organized a military parade, deemed a "Preparedness Parade." A few minutes after the parade began, a bomb exploded, killing ten people and injuring forty more. Tom Mooney was tried and convicted for the bombing. He was sentenced to hang, and that led to court battles that lasted twenty-two years. He was eventually pardoned in 1939. Shahn's show of gouaches on Tom Mooney received mixed reviews. Art News contained a review in the May 13, 1933 issue that claimed Shahn's paintings did not advance the cause. The review also stated the paintings "do not, as they surely should, rouse the emotions and quicken the will to action in behalf of a man so abominable condemned to suffer."[29] Surprisingly, Jean Charlot, writing for the conservative Harvard journal Hound and Horn, believed that the works were "heavily loaded with moral values."[30] Charlot also stated that Shahn was a "most valuable witness to our epoch."[31]

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[28] Ibid.

The year 1934 was an eventful one for Ben Shahn. His divorce from Tillie was now final and he married Bernarda Bryson, who was to remain his wife until his death in 1969. It was also during this time that Shahn temporarily became involved with various left-wing organizations, such as the Artist's Union, and he edited five issues of Art Front, the Union's journal. Bernarda Shahn was also involved as an officer in the Union and was an active card-carrying member of the Communist Party. Selden Rodman, the first biographer of Shahn commented that "whether Shahn was or was not a card-carrying Communist for a brief time is beside the point."[32] Rodman goes on to point out that Shahn, much to the chagrin of staunch party members, refused to take orders and advice as to ideological directions in his work. As with many dissatisfied intellectuals and artists in the thirties,

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[29] "Review of a Ben Shahn Exhibition," Art News 32 (May 13, 1933): 5.

[30] Jean Charlot, "Ben Shahn," Hound and Horn 6 (October-December 1933): 634.

[31] Ibid., p. 633.

[32] Rodman, Portrait of the Artist, p. 99.

Shahn was perhaps attracted to the possibilities of Communism as an alternative form of government. Social justice was to be a mainstay of the government and the government would take care of its people. All the appeal was lost when factions within the party began to quarrel among themselves as to method and application of the tenets of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky or Stalin.

Although Shahn has been connected with the Communist party, it soon becomes apparent that he was too much of an individualist to be able to succumb to a strict party line. He instead, along with many others, firmly believed in the social welfare programs that Roosevelt initiated with the New Deal. He then became involved with the Works Projects Administration (WPA) and painted eight tempera panels on the theme of Prohibition for a projected mural decoration for the Central Park Casino. This project was, however, abandoned.

Also in 1934, Shahn, along with Lou Block, was commissioned to do a mural for a corridor in Riker's Island Penitentiary in New York City. This commisssion led to a year of studying the penal system, visiting prisons, and talking to inmates. The preliminary sketches were approved by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Commissioner of Correction, Austin H. McCormick, in 1935. The mural project was abandoned because the Municipal Art Commission rejected the designs on the grounds of a perceived "psychological unfitness" for viewing by inmates of the penitentiary.[33] The commission even took a poll among the inmates at Riker's Island in order to have the case reconsidered. Forty prisoners were selected and were given a test suggested by Dr. Schulman, a criminal psychologist. The prisoners were shown the sketches with a brief explanation that these were to be used in a mural in a new and modern prison and the artists wanted to know what some prisoners thought of them. Four questions were then asked of these forty men. The questions were:

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[33] Philippa Whiting, "Speaking About Art," American Magazine of Art 28 (March 1935): 493.

> 1. What do you think about these pictures?
> 2. How do you feel about having them on the walls of a new prison?
> 3. In your opinion what will other men here think about it?
> 4. Visitors will also be through the halls. Of what interest do you think these pictures will be to them?[34]

Out of a possible one hundred-sixty answers, ninety-seven were favorable, ten unfavorable, twenty-one indifferent, and thirty-one left blank. Philippa Whiting wrote an article about this test and believed that because of the favorable view of the prisoners and artists, the completion of the mural was inevitable and would be among the greatest mural achievements in the United States.[35]

The October issue of the American Magazine of Art contained a letter from I.N. Phelps Stokes, the president of the Art Commission. He claimed that the sketches, depicting and contrasting prison life in the past with that of the present, were "lugubrious and unpleasant to look upon."

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

He then went on to say that the sketches were "artistically and in other respects unsatisfactory and unsuitable" for the location which they were intended. The mural was to be painted on the main corridor leading to the chapel. The mural would have been seen by prisoners as well as by a constant stream of visitors. Stokes then further stated that the Commission was willing to consider using the sketches for "less public portions" of the penitentiary.[36] Stokes arguments were not backed by any other reasons of facts.

In the same issue of the American Magazine of Art, Whiting wrote a rebuttal of Stokes' letter. Whiting disclaimed Stokes assertion that the sketches were rejected for one and only one reason, by separating Stokes' sentence. The one reason becomes four: "artistically," "in other respects," "most of them," and the matter of location. Whiting found it hard to agree or disagree with the "other respects" because they were not defined. The same was true for "most of them."[37]

Whiting did not understand then why the test was given to forty inmates. The test was given without any mention as to what it was intended to prove. She asserted that if the prisoners had responded negatively, then perhaps the mural would have been painted. Since the prisoners responded favorably, she assumed that the Art Commission knew better than the prisoners what was suitable for them to look at. Whiting also disputed the suggestion to put the mural in a less public area of the penitentiary. It was suitable for a small number of the people to look at a mural, and Whiting foresaw a trend in classifying paintings by their numerical appeal. Even after this scathing rebuttal appeared, the Commission did not change its mind and the mural was never painted.

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[36] Ibid., p. 496.

[37] Philippa Whiting, "Rebuttal," American Magazine of Art 28 (October 1935): 636.

From 1935 to 1938 Shahn was employed by the Resettlement Administration, later renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA), as an artist, designer, and photographer. His interest in photography grew out of his friendship with Walker Evans, also a FSA photographer. Shahn and Evans had also shared a studio for a time. Shahn explained the goal that he, other FSA photographers and Roy Stryker, the official in charge of the group, had in mind when photographing the country. Their goal was to photograph the obvious. The photographer, according to Shahn, could do what the painter could not, he could arrest "the split second of action in a guy stepping onto a bus, or eating at a lunch counter," and that was what he, Evans, Dorothy Lange, and others associated with the FSA tried to do. He described this as a "special job of selling" to do to help the underprivileged and to promote the recovery efforts. Shahn claimed that they were "pretty austere" about their job. This austerity led to "no angle shots, no filters, no mattes" and "nothing but glossy" paper. Their photographs were immediately labeled as documentary in nature, but Shahn took exception to this. He did not like putting things into pigeonholes and explained that they "just took pictures that cried out to be taken."[38] And indeed, these photographs captured the mood of the Depression era, the sweat, the poverty, the hunger, and the recovery and relief efforts.

In a lter interview, Shahn discussed the circumstances surrounding his employment by the FSA. He was recommended by FSA official Ernestine Evans, who had earlier recommended Walker Evans (they were not related). Shahn was initially hired for "special skills," meaning that he was to execute posters, pamphlets, murals and other FSA promotional propaganda in general. He was asked to travel around the country before he began anything to see what was going on. This travel experience was a "revelation" to Shahn. Previously, Shahn had only travelled in Europe and the immediate area surrounding New York City. This three months provided Shahn with an opportunity to draw and photograph the country. He took a lot of photographs on the trip because they were quicker than drawings. The photographs and negatives were presented to Stryker on his return. This opportunity came in the middle of the depression and Shahn, at this point, could not "get as far as Hoboken." He was offered a salary in addition to the chance to travel and he claimed that he "nearly jumped out of [his] skin with joy!"

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[38] Morse, "Interview," p. 139.

He went on the trip and on that trip he found things "that were very surprising to him."[39]

The first place he visited, was a resettlement community and he followed that visit with one to Scotts Run, West Virginia, where the people were originally from. From West Virginia, Shahn went on to Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. He became excited and engrossed in what he was doing and set aside drawing and painting. This was because he was "sort of a single track guy" and he thought that photography would be his career.[40] In 1938, he traveled again for Stryker, this time to Ohio. For six weeks Shahn covered various events in Ohio; carnivals, fairs, harvests, auctions, and a lot of hand-lettered road signs. Some of thses photographs were contained in The Ohio Guide, one in a series of WPA guide books.

Archibald MacLeish of Fortune magazine, wrote a book based on Shahn and others' FSA photographic images entitled The Land of the Free. Shahn's association with the FSA led to the production of about 3,000 photographs. These photographs were either placed in storage at the Library of Congress or donated by Bernarda Shahn to the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Shahn took the photographs for the FSA not "so much as photographs as documents" for himself.[41] When viewing the photos, one becomes aware of how many paintings or parts of paintings were based on them. The best book that reveals this connection between the paintings and the photographs was edited by Davis Pratt. The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn, published in 1975, revealed the images of a vacant lot, handball, Willis Avenue Bridge, children reading comics, Seward Park, and various street musicians which appeared in paintings. His photographs documented one of the most memorable disasters in the history of the United States, the Great Depression. He photographed people who were living in poverty, being resettled, and on relief. His photographic images caught people unaware, being natural and therefore in various stages of emotion: happy, sad, thinking and resting. These images confronted viewers with the state of the country; they were stark black and white images of the way things were.

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[39] Richard Doud, Interview Archives of American Art, in Ben Shahn ed. by John D. Morse (New York: Praeger Publ., 1972), p. 136.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., p. 137.

Also during his tenure at the FSA, Shahn completed a large fresco mural for the Jersey Homesteads community center in New Jersey. Jersey Homesteads was a resettled community of garment workers, who were mostly immigrants. This assymetrical composition contained the important sequence of events for the garment workers. This included their immigration from Eastern Europe, led by Einstein, and also depicted textile workers in sweatshops, labor leaders protesting terrible conditions, and finally the reforms, schools, housing, a poster of Franklin Roosevelt who made it all possible, and plans for Jersey Homesteads itself are all illustrated. The mural showed the influence of Diego Rivera, where large figures intermingle with architectural elements.

This mural depicted the struggle of these workers and its political message was clear: organize into a labor union and through the union change will follow. Shahn moved with his wife, Bernarda, and children to Jersey Homesteads in 1939. He felt a kinship with the people in the community and became a leading citizen. Jersey Homesteads was renamed "Roosevelt" in 1945 due largely to Shahn's efforts.

Beginning in 1938 Shahn and his wife Bernarda began to work on thirteen large tempera panels for the Bronx Central Annex Post Office. This was commissioned by the Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration of the United States Treasury. The commission was received in June of 1938 and the panels were completed by August of 1939. These panels were called the "Resources of America," and contained unknown portraits of both agricultural and industrial workers who were great national resources. The work on the murals progressed until one day the assistant Chief Postmaster arrived with some other semi-official politicians to look at them. They were upset by the inclusion of part of a poem by Walt Whitman. The words from "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" were as follows:

> Brain of the New World, what a task is thine,
> To formulate the Modern--out of the peerless
> grandeur of the modern,
> Out of thyself, comprising science, to recast
> poems, church, art,
> (Recast, may-be discard them, end them--may-be
> their work is done, who knows?)
> By vision, hand conception, on the background

> of the mighty past, the dead,
> To limn with absolute faith the mighty living
> present.42

Reverend Ignatius Cox, S.J. of Fordham University, was upset by this choice of quotes and claimed that the wording was an "insult to all religious-minded men and to Christianity. It does indulge in propaganda for irreligion."[43] Shahn denied any intent to offend anyone by his choice of quotation but questioned whether it was the "right thing for a limited group of people to try to impose their particular index on the general public."[44] Shahn did, however, concede to demands to change the quote to something more innocuous from Whitman.

The murals also upset other residents of Brooklyn. In a letter to Forbes Watson, a Mr. Sulamith Sokolosky expressed disappointment in the murals. He claimed that they did not "belong to the architectural type of the interior."[45] Art-journalist Watson responded to Mr. Sokolosky by asserting Shahn's "distinguished" ability which could not fail to add "vitality" to the Bronx Post Office Building.[46]

Shahn explained that during this time period from 1939 to 1940 he executed what he called "Sunday paintings."

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[42] Walt Whitman, "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood," in Leaves of Grass (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1940), p. 267.

[43] "Whitman Censored," Art Digest 8 (1 January 1939):14.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Sulamith Sokolosky to Forbes Watson, 24 March 1939, Forbes Watson Papers, Archives of American Art, New York.

[46] Forbes Watson to Sulamith Sokolosky, 29 March 1939, Forbes Watson Papers.

These were paintings which he did in his off hours and week-ends while working on the Federal mural projects. Also in 1940, Shahn received one of the most important mural commissions of his career. He was chosen out of 375 applicants to do murals for the main corridor of the Social Security Building in Washington, D.C. This mural project took two years to complete, was Shahn's personal favorite and to him was "the most satisfying."[47] The main source of this satisfaction came from the many people who stopped to talk to Shahn while he was working.

He described some of the people, their remarks and reactions to John D. Morse in an interview. One man told Shahn, "good job, bud, good job. That stone carving out front of the building ain't nothing to do with anybody." Another man complimented him on the man with wheat running through his fingers by saying that was the first wheat he had seen since he left Washington state. A man from Iowa stopped Shahn to tell him that one of his carpenters was the "spit'n' image" of a friend of his. But perhaps Shahn's greatest compliment came upon completion of the mural in 1942, from an Army colonel who told him that the mural was "important to keep in front of us while...fighting this war."[48]

Shahn's themes for the Social Security Building included the insecurities of society, unemployment, child labor and old age, while counteracting this insecurity with work, the family and Social Security. Shahn was excited by the New Deal programs and felt in harmony with the times. His description of the epoch appeared in 1965 in Art in America. He felt strongly about what the Resettlement Administration was trying to do and he consequently felt in "complete harmony with the times" and was "totally involved" with this "total commitment." He went on to say that he had not felt that way "before or since."[49]

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[47] Morse, "Interview," p. 140.

[48] Ibid., p. 140-141.

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[49] Garnett McCoy, "Poverty, Politics and Artists, 1930-1945," Art in America 53 (August-September 1965): 96.

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CHAPTER III

FROM WORKING FOR THE OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION TO HIS DEATH

With the outbreak of the Second World War, all recovery efforts were halted to begin the construction of an effective war machine. It was at this time that Shahn joined the struggle by working for the Office of War Information (OWI). From 1942 to 1944 Shahn was involved with the OWI as a poster designer. And according to Shahn, they were going to "win the war with posters."[50] This job enabled Shahn to see a "constant stream of material, photographic and other kinds of documentation of the decimation within enemy territory. There were the secret confidential horrible facts of the cartloads of dead; Greece, India, Poland."[51] Shahn felt that the work of American artists was "effectively harnessed" toward war aims.[52] And in some cases, these posters, in Shahn's opinion, "rose above their immediate uses to achieve the universality and deep feeling of truly great art."[53]

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[50] Rodman, Portrait of the Artist, p. 63.

[51] Shahn, Shape of Content, p. 48.

[52] "The Future of the Creative Arts: A Symposium," with Shahn's "Comments," University of Buffalo Studies February, 1952, p. 125.

[53] Ibid.

Unfortunately, only two of Shahn's poster designs were used by the OWI. He came into conflicts with William Golden, of later CBS fame, over poster designs. One such struggle resulted in We French Workers Warn You, which Golden did not like. In the background of this powerful poster was the official Vichy Decree, with the caption "We French workers warn you...defeat means slavery, starvation, death." Shahn and Golden had previously discussed what a war poster should be. They had come to an agreement that a war poster should have "dignity, grimness, urgency" and they tried to work out an "image idea." Shahn then created We French Workers. In spite of Golden's objections the poster was later published by the War Production Headquarters. Shahn and Golden, despite this conflict, became life-long friends and collaborators. Shahn later stated that what he learned through this experience was a "hardened determination to put the integrity of an image first and above all other considerations; one must be prepared to retire from any job whatever...rather than abandon the clear vision." The French Workers poster was sought after "considerably by collectors."[54]

The only other poster designed by Shahn for the OWI was called This is Nazi Brutality. The source for this poster was the Nazi crime against the citizens of Lidice, Czechoslovakia. The official German announcement came out on

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[54] Ben Shahn, "Bill," in The Visual Craft of William Golden by Cipe Pineless Golden, Kurt Weihs, and Robert Strunsky, editors (New York: George Braziller, 1962), p. 126.

June 11, 1942, that all males in the town, as well as fifty-six women had been executed. The rest of the women and children had either been sent to concentration camps or to correction facilities. The village was destroyed because the Germans had suspected that some of the inhabitants had been involved in the killing of Reinhard Heydrich, the German Police General and Reichsprotektor for Bohemia and Moravia. This poster depicted a hooded and handcuffed man, with the message of the official announcement. A Czech-American organization ordered 40,000 copies of the poster but Shahn was shocked to discover that the order had been cancelled by a civilian morale expert "on the grounds that its message was too violent."[55] Shahn designed many more posters for the OWI but they were never used. Kenneth Prescott, author of The Complete Graphic Works of Ben Shahn, asserted that Shahn's war posters did not lend themselves to being used as "instruments for inspiring patriotism."[56] This was undoubtedly because Shahn depicted the suffering and loneliness of war as well as the desolation and brutality.

Those posters that were not used by the OWI were instead issued by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and their Political Action Committee. Welders was one such poster. The poster depicted two welders, one white man and one black man with the caption "for full employment after the war--Register Vote." The CIO's Political Action Committee used Welders as a poster for the 1944 presidential campaign. This poster was reproduced in Hearst's newspapers, in Time and Life, and was probably seen by about twenty-five million people.[57]

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[55] Rodman, Portrait of the Artist, p. 63.

[56] Kenneth W. Prescott, The Complete Graphic Works of Ben Shahn (New York: Quadrangle Press, 1973), p. xix.

Shahn, although remaining active in the Political Action Committee, was involved in several art shows during the war. In February, 1943, Shahn was represented in a show called "American Realists and Magic Realists" sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art. He also had a one-man show at the Downtown Gallery in New York at the end of 1944. These two shows continued to categorize Shahn as a social realist, even though at this time he was undergoing a change.

During his tenure at the CIO Shahn published many more posters. One of these was entitled "Register...The Ballot Is a Power in Your Hands," which implored workers to use their voting privilege; if they did not it was a score for the other side. "From Workers to Farmers...Thanks!" was a poignant message that from farmers' hands has flowed abundant food to win the war, from workers' hands: abundant tools. This poster was displayed in Farmers' Union headquarters and in CIO booths at county fairs. According to former Minnesota Governor, Elmer H. Benson, the poster was "one of the first, strongest, and most effective gestures in the direction of good will made by labor towards farmers."[58] The usage of words and images combined in both of these posters were strong examples of what a good poster should be. Because these posters were dispersed widely, there can really be no way of knowing whom they influenced. Other posters for the 1944 campaign included one which stated "Here there is no Poll Tax," and one called "Our Friend" which contained a large portrait of Franklin Roosevelt. The latter poster also contained a variety of symbols, black hands and white hands, AF of L and CIO buttons, hat bands with tickets from the Grand Lodge and the National Farm Bureau, and a soldier's hat. This poster was also used in billboards. In 1945, Shahn became the director of the Graphic Arts Section of the CIO.

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[57] Rodman, Portrait of the Artist, p. 63.

Even though he was the director, in 1946 Shahn published four posters for the Political Action Committee. Again, these posters were primarily calls to register and vote. The most moving of these posters, entitled We Want Peace, portrayed a hollow-eyed young man with an outstretched hand. This particular image was previously used in a painting called Hunger. Shahn originally submitted this image to the OWI but it was rejected.

Shahn maintained a busy schedule while he was director, and participated in a group exhibition at the Tate

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[58] Walter Abell, "Art and Labor," Magazine of Art 39 (October 1946): 236.

Gallery in London in 1946. This particular exhibition was reviewed by Cyril Conolly in the New Statesman and Nation; he claimed this show as "An American Tragedy." He, however, expressed satisfaction with Shahn's work, especially Handball and Liberation. The latter, Conolly dubbed as "original and classical."[59]

This year was typical of the busy nature of the remainder of Shahn's life. He continued to paint, to illustrate, to work on commercial and private commissions and to participate in either one-man shows or group exhibitions, in the United States and in many foreign countries. This constant stream of work, combined with teaching, saw Shahn employed full-time at his chosen profession. This also enabled him, by participation in various artistic ventures, to maintain a steady paycheck. This was possible since, by the end of World War II, Shahn was recognized as a mature artist. The remainder of the forties Shahn spent participating in shows, including an important one in 1947 at the Museum of Modern Art. The end of the decade also marked the beginning of Shahn's career as a writer. Two articles appeared in the College Art Journal and the Magazine of Art. Both of these articles were condensations of papers Shahn gave at two art conferences. Look magazine had conducted a poll in 1948 in which Shahn was selected as one of America's "Ten Best Painters."

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[59] Cyril Conolly, "An American Tragedy," New Statesman and Nation (29 June 1946): 468.

Harper's magazine and Shahn began a productive relationship in 1948 with Shahn illustrating a feature story by John Bartlow Martin, called "The Blast in Centralia No. 5--The Mine Disaster No One Stopped." This story depicted the March, 1947 disaster in Centralia, Illinois, in which over a hundred miners were trapped below ground during an explosion where they subsequently died. Shahn was familiar with mines because Bernarda was from mine country and he had himself been down mines. Even after he had sent drawings to the editor of Harper's, Shahn continued to draw the subject "because it intrigued" him a lot. Over the next two years Shahn made at "least six paintings based on this subject."[60]

One of the paintings based on the Centralia disaster was entitled Miner's Wives. Shahn did not expect the painting to communicate with miners, because, "in the present state of society, miners would probably never even see it."[61] His desire when painting was simply to "communicate with those who felt about mines" as he did, "or with those who might be made to feel, be responding to the picture" the way he felt.[62] This metaphorical usage of suffering may have become "set during the Depression" but it was the war that "certainly sharpened it."[63] It was during the post-war period "with its sense of aimlessness and lack of destination" that he began to feel that suffering "was innate in man."[64]

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[60] Nadya Aisenberg, "Interview for WJBH-FM radio" in Ben Shahn ed. by John D. Morse (New York: Praeger Pub., 1972), p. 55.

[61] Rodman, Conversations, p. 192.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ben Shahn, "Shahn in Amsterdam," Art in America 49 (1961): 62.

Later in 1948, Shahn again illustrated an article for Harper's by John Bartlow Martin. This one was entitled "The Hickman Story" which told the gripping story of how a black man moved with his family from the South to Chicago, to go where the opportunity was. There were nine members of the family living in one room in a run-down tenement building. One night the building suspiciously caught fire and four of Hickman's children died in the blaze. Despondent and desparate over the situation, Hickman shot and killed the black man who owned the building. Shahn illustrated the article with moving drawings of the dead bodies as well as the building on fire. Hickman was later acquitted on all charges.

The illustrations and the story itself revived in Shahn a "chain of personal memories." There were two fires in Shahn's childhood, one he remembered only as "colorful," the other was "disastrous and unforgettable." The first happened while Shahn was still in Lithuania, at his grandfather's village. He could only remember the excitement and the color. The second fire occurred when Shahn and his parents lived in Brooklyn. His father had to climb up a drainpipe in order to carry young Ben and his brothers and sisters down to safety and in the process his father had burned "himself painfully." The house and all of their belongings were lost to the fire and his parents were "stricken beyond their power to recover."[65] These memories and the narrative of the Hickman story prompted Shahn to paint several panels on the fire subject.

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[64] Ibid.

One such painting was entitled Allegory. This painting contained an image of a lion-like fire beast overlooking a pile of dead bodies. Allegory was an idea painting and one Shahn considered as "highly emotional." Henry McBride, of the New York Sun, reviewed this painting when it was displayed in 1948. Shahn had always counted McBride as "a friend and an admirer" of his work and was disconcerted over his review. McBride had "seen" in the painting some symbolism of "Red Moscow" and even went as far as to suggest Shahn be "deported." Shahn believed that contained within Allegory were several universalities, "dread of fire," "pity," "racial injustice," and "poverty." The fire lion-like beast was the symbol that imbued everything he "had ever felt about a fire."[66] Shahn described the painting in his book, The Shape of Content, in the chapter designated "The Biography of a Painting." This article was perhaps the most insightful of his many articles. Shahn not only provided the reasoning behind Allegory, but gave a brief outline of his career, his outlook and the changes he had undergone prior to the painting.

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[65] Shahn, Shape of Content, p. 35.

[66] Ibid., pp. 58, 30, 31, 32, 37.

The fiftes were a busy decade for Shahn. He continued painting and began to teach. He taught a ten-week course for a summer session at the University of Colorado, in Boulder in 1950. In 1951, he taught at the Brooklyn Museum of Art School, and was the visiting artist at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. But perhaps his most important teaching assignment came in 1956. Shahn was named the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University. This was important, for the lectures were published as The Shape of Content in 1957. The lectures were a formulation of Shahn's life and his opinions on art and the functions of art.

Shahn participated in several art shows during the fifties, one of which was handled by the United States State Department in 1952. This show was called for by a diplomatic corps, and was to be sent abroad. The purpose was to show the world a representation of American art. With advice from museum officials, the pictures were subsequently assembled and shipped. They were stopped in the mid-Atlantic and returned to the states because of their supposed left-wing sentiments. The New York Journal-American denounced the group of pictures and finally, coupled with the protests of several congressmen, put an end to the project. Hearst's newspapers also attacked them "in the course of which, more space must have been allotted to art than ever before."[67]

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[67] Shahn, "American Painting," p. 62.

Congressman George A. Dondero from Michigan was one politician who was outspoken on the alleged infiltration of communism in art. On the floor of the House, he "attributed to all modern art a plot to undermine Democracy and substitute Communism." Dondero, according to Shahn, described artists with such "tender terms" as "germ carrying art vermin", "human art termites", "international art thugs", and one term for Shahn, "art with political murder" as the intent. Dondero's remarks and names of artists were spread over the pages of the Congressional Record. Shahn believed that these remarks, "coupled with misinformed statements against which there was no redress", backed artists into a corner. There was no way to fight back. Dondero's crusade against modern art consisted of suggesting art organizations "adopt allegiance measures" and that newspapers should "exercise supervision" over their critics. Artists were then visited by "government agents, quizzed at length about their friends, their associations, their activities." Shahn believed that this atmosphere of suspicion, accusation and fear led to a stimulation toward abstraction. This was because abstract painting was "politically speaking, about the most non-committal statement" that could be made in art. Dondero tried his utmost to "attach subversiveness" to that as well.[68]

Shahn wrote an article about this instance and several more where art was deemed "communistic" without any chances of retribution or defense. The article appeared in the September 1953 issue of Art News. From the title "The Artist and the Politicians" and what followed, this was an angry account of what was happening in the art world. Shahn wrote against the attempts by politicians to black-ball artists because of alleged communist connections. Shahn was shocked, not by the fact that people were opposed to some works of art, but by the fact that "people of the basest ignorance [were] sitting in judgement upon art, upon the universities, upon the very meaning of thinking itself." He was appalled by the "tragic buffoonery" of the actions of the FBI's investigation, even among the best of them. These men were probing "into the meaning of art, into whether education is or is not subversive, or whether a poem, or a piece of music, or a novel is a Communist threat!" Shahn cautioned that beside the incalculable damage such suppression and investigation did to our own culture, the international implications should be considered. He believed that the victory or defeat in the struggle against communism would not be in our military prowess, but through ideas. Shahn went on to state that democracy was our idea, and he thought it to be the "most appealing" idea that the world has known. Those semi-official acts of suppression would "play the hypocrite toward our own beliefs" and would "strangle our own liberties" which would in turn undermine efforts to win the world's unqualified confidence."[69]

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[68] Ibid., pp. 66, 67.

Shahn listed several examples of European opinions which appeared in Fortune magazine. In this survey of attitudes toward America and American culture, Shahn quoted from three people: Francois Mauriac, a French Catholic leader, Jean Paul Sartre, French philosopher, and Martin Cooper from England. These three people were either frightened, or thought American influence would lead to a shattered cultural tradition or be harmful to aesthetic principles. These were good choices of quotes that supported Shahn's main idea that we should do something about the official political oppression of works of art or literature before the Europeans, particularly, would learn of the suppressions and lead to further misunderstanding, exaggeration and mistrust.[70]

He concluded the article with a call for the reassertion of democracy, and a reawakening of freedom. The formation of the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee was one way to invoke those laws and protect freedom when necessary. But Shahn believed that the individual should be involved in the process as well. Individuals should be "resolved to confront intimidation, and the half-legalized infringement of our liberties with some stubborn resistence. To take such a stand is not just a matter of self-interest. It transcends that; its a matter of much needed, and much wanting patriotism." Shahn's strict belief in justice and standing up for rights was apparent throughout the article. Perhaps the reason he chose to implicate the mistrust of the world was to play upon the belief that America was sort of a paternal figure who takes care of things when needed. He doubted whether even the most "intransigent national egoist" in Congress really believed that "we could live in a world alone", or could "ignore opinions" or could "buy or threaten our way into the confidence of free nations."[71] Even when writing about such an explosive issue as this, Shahn continued to maintain his belief that men could change the things that were wrong with the world.

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[69] Ben Shahn, "The Artist and the Politicians," Art News 52 (September 1953): 67.

[70] Ibid.

During the mid-fifties, Shahn participated in several important shows. The Museum of Sao Paolo in Brazil awarded Shahn an eight-hundred-dollar prize and he represented the United States, along with Willem de Kooning, an abstract expressionist, at the Venice Biennale in 1953 and 1954. In celebration of his twenty-five year association with the Downtown Gallery, he had a one-man show in 1955. He received several awards in 1956. The Pennsylvania Academy honored him with the Joseph E. Temple Award, and he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He was elected a member of the presitgious American Academy of Arts and

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[71] Ibid.

Letters in 1959. These honors and awards were bestowed at a time when he enjoyed extraordinary success. In addition to these awards, Shahn also enjoyed commercial success. He produced drawings and paintings for television documentaries, covers for albums and books, as well as advertising copy.

This does not mean that Shahn took every commercial job he was offered. He turned some down because he insisted on complete independence in his work. One such job was for the Chrysler Corporation. He was asked by Chrysler to paint a picture commenting on the automotive age. He turned down the job in no uncertain terms, "for an artist to make a painting which is without significance to himself is simply to commercialize his past achievements." Shahn illustrated several documentaries for CBS that included "The Eagle's Brood", a program that dealt with rising juvenile deliquency. Time commissioned Shahn to do eight covers for them from 1955 to 1968. These covers included portraits of Andre Malraus, Sigmund Freud, Adilai Stevenson, Lenin and Martin Luther King Jr. His choice of portraits reflected his concern for people and events. These were people who with their lives sought to bring about change. Shahn also did illustrations for Vogue, Charm, and Seventeen. One illustration he did for Seventeen, Inside Looking Out, was purchased by the Butler Institute of American Art, of Youngstown, Ohio for its permanent collection.[72]

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[72] Selden Rodman, "Ben Shahn" Portfolio (1951): 7.

Shahn illustrated the article "The Lucky Dragon" by Ralph E. Lapp for Harper's in 1957. The Lucky Dragon or Fukuryn Maru was a Japanese fishing boat that had sailed, in March of 1954, into a United States hydrogen-bomb-testing area at Midway Island. This accidental intrusion into the testing area resulted in the maiming of several members and the death of one crew member, Aikichi Kuboyama. By September 23rd, Kuboyama died from the radiation he recieved from the nuclear blast. The following day the American ambassador sent a check for a million yen and a condolence letter to Kuboyama's widow.

Shahn's illustrations also appeared in Richard Hudson's book, Kuboyama and the Saga of the Lucky Dragon, in 1965. It was here that Shahn first used the symbol of the fire-dragon as a symbol for the hydrogen bomb. Shahn called the fire-dragon the Beast. Richard Hudson's text ends with a series of questions about the significance of the Lucky Dragon. Questions about whether the world was on a collision course with death or whether the world could dismantle these weapons. He asked "are we helpless before them as was Kuboyama? If the answer is Yes, then the radiation will have claimed the first of many millions of victims of the thermonuclear age. But if the answer is No, then we may also be able to count him as the last victim."[73]

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[73] Richard Hudson Kuboyama and the Saga of the Lucky Dragon (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965), p. 50.

The story of Kuboyama and the Lucky Dragon became the theme for many of Shahn's paintings. In 1961, he exhibited eleven paintings called "The Saga of the Lucky Dragon" at the Downtown Gallery. Shahn claimed that the "incidents of the Lucky Dragon are the particular-the actual real agony which happened and which will happen."[74] The fire-dragon symbol was the "ineffable, the unspeakable tragedy toward which the world's people are moving."[75] Frank Getlein from the New Republic admired the series of paintings based on the Lucky Dragon. Getlein enjoyed the fact that even though there were outspoken critics of Shahn's social style of painting, he continued to paint and with artistic intelligence. Getlein ends his review with the description of the paint which Shahn used. Most of the paintings were gouache or tempera with a "dry, scraped quality" found in most of his past work, but "now ominously recalling a future memory of our own skin and the skin of the world at some possible point in our universal voyage of the Lucky Dragon."[76]

Shahn also illustrated many books and articles in the fifties. One such booklet, called "The Untouchables," was published by the Southern Educational Conference and demanded equal health care for blacks. Other illustrations were for books of poetry or stories. Shahn also did a poster for the

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[74] Shahn, "Shahn in Amsterdam", p. 62.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Frank Getlein "Ben Shahn on Fallout" New Republic 145 (November 27, 1961): 20-21.

Adlai E. Stevenson presidential campaign of 1952. This demonstrated Shahn's continued interest in political matters. The poster warned voters to "Watch out for the Man on a White Horse!" Eisenhower was riding the horse whose body was divided like a butcher's chart, with Nixon being the rump.

The end of the fifties brought success but also a surprise. In June of 1959, Shahn was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities to testify before them on the first of July. Even though the heyday of McCarthyism was over, it is perplexing as to why Shahn was not called in earlier. The New York Times reported the appearance and noted that some of Shahn's paintings were to be among those exhibited in Moscow at a United States fair that was to open later in July. The article also announced that the paintings were selected "by professional juries engaged by the United States Information Agency."[77] Perhaps the New York Times was trying to establish guilt by association. Shahn held his own at the House Committee hearing. He claimed that:

> Whatever this committee can succeed in dragging out of the remote past of any artist it interviews, I believe that its chief purpose is not to serve this democracy or the public welfare, but that its to vilify and humiliate a certain group of artists whose work is in the vanguard and whose thinking is fresh and experimental.[78]

Shahn commented that the Committee for Un-American Activities was ignoring the "world effect" of its actions and was in danger of becoming an "international laughing stock."[79] This was again a clash against injustice and the conformist sentiments.

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[77] "Ben Shahn Suppoenaed by House Committee" New York Times 27 JUne 1959, p. 7, col. 2.

[78] "Statement by Ben Shahn", 7-1-59, from Hearings of House Committee on Un-American Acitivities, Artists file, Whitney Museum of Art Collection, Archives of American Art, p. 2.

Shahn did not paint many portraits in his career. Those he did paint, however, attest to the fact that he chose those figures who had causes he believed in. He painted portraits of Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Einstein, and Dag Hammarskjold. Moved by their humanitarian efforts, Shahn painted those whose lives best reflected his own belief in human issues. The National Museum in Stockholm, Sweden, asked Shahn to paint a portrait of Dag Hammarskjold in 1959. Hammarskjold was Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961, and has been credited with keeping the world out of several conflicts. Shahn met Hammarskjold in 1960 and they were to begin work on the portrait, but the sittings were postponed until 1961. They were set to begin, but the Secretary General never returned from his final mission in the Congo. He was killed in a plane crash under questionable circumstances. The portrait was completed from photos and sketches Shahn had made from their previous meeting. He took the commission of the portrait because he had "a truly profound feeling for this man."[80]

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[79] Ibid.

[80] John D. Morse, ed. Ben Shahn, p. 88.

Shahn described to a museum official in Stockholm what he tried to depict in the portrait. He wanted to express Hammarskjold's "loneliness and isolation, his need, actually, for such remoteness in space that he might be able to carry through, as he did, the powerful resolution to be just."[81] In a subsequent article, "Concerning Likeness in Portraiture," Shahn asserted that he would not have painted the portrait if he had not "been so deeply moved by what he was."[82] Shahn believed that Hammarskjold's sense of justice and aloofness "condemned him to a personal loneliness that he accepted with some amusement as the burden of his position."[83] As a result, Shahn sought to make a portrait "about, rather than of, a man."[84]

The decade of the sixties continued to bring Shahn commercial and fine art success. During 1961 and 1962, a retrospective show of Shahn's works was sponsored by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition went to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels; the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome; and finally to Albetina in Vienna. He also exhibited the eleven paintings at the Downtown

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[81] Ibid.

[82] Ben Shahn, "Concerning 'Likeness' in Portraiture" in Ben Shahn edited by John D. Morse, p. 90.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid.

Gallery, based on the saga of the Lucky Dragon. The International Council of the Museum of Modern Art sponsored another show with Shahn's print work, that opened in Baden-Baden, Germany, at the Staatliche Kunsthalle in August of 1962 and ended in Japan the following year.

One booklet Shahn worked on was published by Braziller Press, and was entitled November Twenty-Six Nineteen Hundred Sixty-Three. This booklet expressed the sorrow, in poem and drawing, of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In a letter to Mrs. Barbara Fleischman, the poem by Wendell Berry that had appeared in The Nation, "November Twenty-Six Nineteen Hundred Sixty-Three" really "sent [him] off." The publishing of the poem with his illustrations, Shahn asserted, was "small, modest but a memorial as I feel it." Again his choice reflected his continued involvement with people and events.[85]

Many of Shahn's posters from the sixties continued to reflect his involvement in humanistic causes. These posters included quotations from various authors on such subjects as free-belief, anti-war, and civil rights. He quoted Mark Twain, Martin Luther King Jr., and John Viscount Morley. These demonstrated his involvement, not isolation, from society. One of the posters was produced for the

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[85] Ben Shahn to Mrs. Barbara Fleischman, undated, in Lawrence A. Fleischman Collection, Archives of American Art, New York.

National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy and advocated the banning of H-bomb testing.

It was in 1963 that Shahn commemorated the Warsaw Ghetto of 1943. In a seriagraph entitled Warsaw, 1943, Shahn depicted a man whose head was in his clenched hands. Underneath the figure in Hebrew appeared part of a prayer from the Musaf service of Yom Kippur. The prayer begins "these martyrs I will remember, and my soul is melting with secret sorrow. Evil men have devoured us and eagerly consume us. In the days of the tyrant there was no reprieve..." It is significant that Shahn chose not to depict the Ghetto of 1942, when the systematic liquidation began, but the Ghetto of 1943. In the Warsaw Ghetto of 1943, there was an uprising attempted by a small group of desparate Jews. Shahn commemorated the uprising and those who lost their lives fighting the Nazis, not Auschwitz or the ghetto itself. He recognized those who fought injustice just like he fought injustice with his paint brush. This in itself is significant, and points out an unusual omission (the Holocaust) on Shahn's part, a major historical injustice against a group of people, the Jews, a group with which Shahn at one time was an active member.

Lyndon B. Johnson was Shahn's choice for president in 1964. Shahn supported the campaign by executing two posters for Johnson. These posters show the Republican candidate, Senator Barry Goldwater, in a less than flattering manner. One poster shows Goldwater in a diaper, getting ready to put his foot in his mouth. In the background choice phrases from his speeches included such gems as "sometimes I think this country would be better off if we could just saw off the eastern seaboard and let it float out to sea"; and "the child has no right to education. In most cases, the children will get along very well without it." The other poster lists all of the things that Goldwater voted against in the Senate, including a nuclear test ban, medical care for the elderly and minimum wage legislation. The caption read "Say NO to the NO-SAYER."

The advent of the Vietnam War found Shahn enbroiled in the struggle. Shahn expressed his dislike for the Vietnam War in several ways. In 1964 Shahn spoke at the anniversary of the New Republic. His speech included a few scathing remarks about our involvement in Vietnam. "Any dunce," he claimed, "could see the folly of our tactics."[86] He also was disappointed that "the artists" would not be "consulted in time to prevent bloodshed."[87] His suggestion for Vietnam was to first feed the people, and then to market what Shahn thought was the principal export, art.

With the military build-up, Shahn mounted a campaign against Vietnam. He raised money from people who sympathized with his belief that the United States was wrong and in 1966, printed an almost full-page advertisement in the New York

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[86] Ben Shahn, "Remarks to the New Republic on the Occasion of Its 50th Anniversary" The New Republic 150 (March 21, 1964): 15.

[87] Ibid.

Times. This advertisement contained the words of Mark Twain's "War Prayer" and a drawing by Shahn of a crowd of faceless men, supported by crutches and canes. Shahn was working with a group of individuals who formed Messages for Peace, who used any contributions to publish and disseminate messages for peace. Another broadside which Shahn did for Messages for Peace was a figure of Gandhi with part of Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger" as the copy. This appeared in the New York Times on December 31, 1967, almost a full-page spread. The choices of the selections from Twain were intelligent ones on Shahn's part. "The War Prayer" was a satiric prayer for the patriots against the enemy. It called upon God to help "us" against the enemy, "help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded."[88] The other selection by Twain that Shahn used asserted that "there never has been a just one, never an honorable one-on the part of the instigator of the war."[89] These were judicious choices on his part, to tear apart any viewers' delusions on the righteousness of war. In 1968 Shahn told McCandlish Phillips that he was "very, very much upset about this endless war."[90] In keeping with his anti-war feelings, Shahn produced a poster for Senator Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign in 1968. The poster image, a red- white- and- blue dove simply said "McCarthy Peace." Considering Shahn's views on Vietnam, McCarthy was his logical choice, since McCarthy enetered the primaries as an opponent of the war.

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[88] Mark Twain, "The War Prayer" in The Portable Mark Twain, edited by Bernard DeVoto (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), p. 579-583.

[89] Mark Twain, "The Mysterious Stranger" in Portable, p. 726.

In 1965 Shahn completed the Nine Drawings portfolio. This portfolio was published and distributed by the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee of the American Civil Liberties Union. These drawings testify to Shahn's belief in civil rights and social justice. "Thou shalt not stand idly by..." was one of the drawings from the portfolio, the verse was taken from Leviticus 19:16. The drawing was of two hands clasped together, one black and one white. Another drawing also contained a Biblical reference, this one to Psalm 133 which begins "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity," this drawing was flanked by two doves, one black the other white. "We Shall Overcome" was a portrait of an anonymous black youth. The remaining drawings were portraits of Frederick Douglass, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman.

The images of Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman appeared earlier in another portfolio of drawings for the Human Relations Council of Greater New Haven, Connecticut.

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[90] McCandlish Phillips, "Candor Still in Shahn Palette" New York Times 11 September 1968, p. 49:6.

Shahn composed these drawings based on the events of the summer of 1964 when the three young civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi. All proceeds from the sale of this portfolio went to the Human Relations Council and furthered the cause that the three had died for. Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman disappeared somewhere in Mississippi in 1964. They were returning from a conference for Northern college students held in Oxford, Mississippi when they were stopped by police. Chaney was booked for speeding and Schwerner and Goodman were detained for investigation. They were eventually released and fined a small amount. It was after this that the trio disappeared. Their bodies were discovered, badly beaten, buried beneath an earthen dam at a construction site. The FBI investigated the crime and arrested twenty-one white Mississippians in connection with the murders. The white juries refused to convict the whites for the crime. The deaths of Chaney, who was black, and Goodman and Schwerner, who were white (and Jewish), went unpunished. The portfolio Shahn produced consisted of their stark portraits and was consistent with Shahn's backing feelings with action.

Shahn continued his book illustrations and speaking engagements, but he also had a few mural commisssions during these years. Two mosaic murals were for Jewish synagogues, one in Nashville, Tennessee, the other in New Haven, Connecticut. Two mosaic murals were produced for the S.S. Shalom, a ship owned by the American-Israeli Shipping Company.

This ship was sold, but the murals were saved when the New Jersey State Museum purchased them for its permanent collection.

One of his most significant murals of this period was commissioned by Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York in 1965. This was an unusual mural, for Shahn was able to choose the subject, the location and the medium without being encumbered with "committees, boards of review, or restrictions of any kind."[91] This mural, The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti, was put on an exterior wall of the Huntington Beard Crouse Building. Martin Bush, on behalf of Syracuse University, asked Shahn to do the mural. During the subsequent discussions when the subject matter of Sacco and Vanzetti came up, Shahn was surprised that the theme would be suitable but that money was the problem. Shahn himself contacted friends but was turned down. The University funds were limited in the project so outside funding was necessary. As it turned out, Jacob Schulman, a collector of Shahn's work, and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Evans II pledged their help.[92] Shahn even went as far as to make a gift to the University of his time and work in the project. The mosaic mural was completed in 1967, due to the efforts of Gabriel Loire and Anonio DiValentin. Loire assembled the mural in France, using glass and marble pieces affixed to epoxy fibre boards and shipped to Syracuse. Once in Syracuse, DiValentin put the panels on the wall and secured them. The final image was in three parts. The central panel shows Sacco and Vanzetti handcuffed together, on the left are protesters, on the right the Lowell Committee and Judge Thayer. The Vanzetti quote ending "...that agony is our triumph" flanks either side of the mural.[93]

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[91] Martin H. Bush, Ben Shahn: The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti with an essay and commentary by Ben Shahn (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), p. 80.

[92] Ibid., p. 28.

The remaining year of his life was spent completing lithographs for a limited edition portfolio "For the sake of a single verse..." which was from The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge by Rainer Maria Rilke. He also completed another limited edition folio entitled Hallelujah.

Shahn died on March 14, 1969, at the age of seventy. The last two years of his life seem to suggest a completed circle of events. His early paintings were Jewish images, his last was the Hallelujah series, which was based on the Psalms. He first read Rainer Maria Rilke in Paris in 1927, and one of his final projects was illustrating a passage from Rilke. His initial artistic acclaim came with Sacco and Vanzetti, and his ultimate mural was of the two martyred anarchists. An artistic journey that ended where it began.

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[93] Ibid., p. 36, 38.

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CHAPTER IV

SHAHN'S CHANGES, PHILOSOPHY, AND PURPOSE

Even though Shahn adopted the term "personal realism" to describe his work, he did not lose his concern for people and events. This was apparent in his art work as well as in his writings and speeches. In some ways, this change of terms may reflect his desire to keep up with the times, because social realism lost its popularity during and after the Second World War.

Shahn's various interviews, writings, speeches, as well as his work, testified to his dedication to people and events. He was also frank about the changes he had undergone and what he felt the purposes and functions of art were. Many times he expressed his views on which direction art should go in the future. This examination of changes and purposes in Shahn's art work and life will be utilized to examine the transition he underwent from his early beliefs to his later beliefs, and to prove that even though critics claimed a downward trend in his works, he did not lose his concern for people and events. He remained outspoken on various social injustices or ills throughout his career.

After his initial success with series paintings, Sacco and Vanzetti and Tom Mooney, Shahn became dissatisfied. He began a period of questioning the degree of belief in the views he held. Why did he begin questioning when the paintings were working? Because to him it became "uncomfortably apparent" that whatever he thought or painted must be "constantly reexamined, torn apart, if that seems to be indicated, and reassembled in the light of new attitudes or new discovery." The audience of art was made up of individuals, and Shahn realized this even though for years he had believed exclusively in the social view of man. Shahn rankled at "broad injustices" and hoped and worked for mass improvements. This was only because "whatever mass there may be" was made up of individuals with each one of them "able to feel and have hopes and dreams."[94]

Shahn's change in art was, according to him, "accomplished during World War II." It began during the thirties with his work for the Resettlement Administration. He had "crossed and recrossed" many parts of the country at that time and was exposed to many people of varying beliefs and temperaments who, he claimed, maintained their beliefs "with a transcendent indifference to their lot in life." Any ideas Shahn had about the purpose of art "melted before such experience." His work changed into a "sort of personal realism." In the qualities of people Shahn found a constant source of inspiration. He was amazed that the talented individuals he saw in the thirties were thriving "in the same human shell with hopeless prejudices, bigotry and ignorance." Shahn moved from purely political subject matter to find a universal message in human behavior by observing details. He knew that an important ingredient in any work was a complete belief "in what one is doing." He was challenged to unite the subjective and the objective "into a single impression, an image of which meaning is an inalienable part."[95]

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[94] Shahn, Shape, p. 44-45.

It was during the war that, instead of painting particular atrocities or battles, Shahn chose to depict the rubble of unknown bombed cities with people going on about life amidst the debris. There was also a sense of the destruction of property and lives expressed by men carrying coffins in the background. There war paintings explored the combination of the subjective and objective elements. The feeling remained that the idea of war was terrible, it cost countless lives and many beautiful buildings were destroyed in the process. War generally was indiscriminate in the lives it took; the picture that best exemplifies this feeling was Father and Child from 1946. This depicted a father carrying his shrouded child with the mother in the background carrying a framed protrait.

These wartime paintings became more personal and inward-looking. Shahn described them as "a symbolism which I might have considered cryptic now became the only means by which I could formulate the sense of emptiness and waste that the war gave me, and the sense of the littleness of people trying to live on through the enormity of war."[96] The war was very disturbing emotionally to Shahn. At that time, Shahn asserted that he only painted one theme, the war in "Europa" primarily depicting where he had travelled, as he "lamented it and feared what it might have become."[97] He was shocked by the destructiveness of war and he thought perhaps it was then that "those almost allegorical treatments of real situations began to creep" into his work, as well as the "more general" idea.[98]

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[95] Shahn, Shape, p. 47, 48, 52.

He reiterated his change in 1961 with the article "Shahn in Amsterdam." Shahn believed that "if the style of his work has changed over the years, I think that I can honestly say that my underlying intentions have not changed."[99] He became absorbed in "Man's State," not "Man's Fate". He was aware that whatever his "basic promptings and urges" were, he maintained the "concern, the compassion for human suffering-feeling it, formulating it-has been the constant intention" of his work since he "first picked up a paint brush."[100] This closely indentifies Shahn-the-man with Shahn-the-painter.

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[96] Shahn, Shape, p. 55.

[97] Ibid., p. 48.

[98] Aisenberg, "Interview", p. 53.

[99] Shahn, "Amsterdam", p. 62.

[100] Ibid.

He was most interested in the "relations of man to man," and made no "conscious effort" to express tragedies even though it appeared so.[101]

Shahn firmly believed that because society was growing more and more mechanized, art needed to be more humanistic. Society was gradually "melting away our human values."[102] He considered himself one among a few artists who had dedicated themselves to the reaffirming of man. He stated:

> We are living in a time when civilization has become higly expert in the art of destroying human beings and increasingly weak in its power to give meaning to their lives. I don't know anyone on either side of the water or on either side of the political fence who has the slightest degree of optimism about the direction in which civilization is moving.103

He believed the function of art was to "broaden and enrich the human spirit."[104] He called for students at a symposium at Smith College to bring more of "compassion and a little less of mechanical operations" to their work and lives.[105] In his final remarks at the symposium, he declared "let's try to discover new truths and values pertaining to man himself rather than to the performance of his Buick or the surpassing excellence of the new bomb."[106] Shahn asserted that while "man gained the sleeve valve, he has lost his soul."[107] Scientific skepticism provided a "healthy antidote to fanaticism" but as a way of life, was only "negative," and "suspicious of belief" and could only negate "positive values."[108]

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[101] Aisenberg, "Interview", p. 42.

[102] Ben Shahn, "If I Had to Begin My Art Career Today" in Ben Shahn edited by John D. Morse, p. 100.

[103] Ben Shahn and Balcomb Greene, "The Artist's Point of View" Magazine of Art 42 (November 1949): 266.

[104] Ben Shahn, "Some Questions" in Ben Shahn edited by John D. Morse, p. 203.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

Shahn continued to write and talk about a resurgence of humanism from the late 1940s on. He firmly believed that this would and should be the next trend in art. With the emergence of humanism, artists would again have the freedom to emphasize the full human being. Included in this full human would be "his capacities to think well, to believe, to have compassion for his fellows, and to express freely whatever truth he finds."[109]

He himself was a believer in man as the source of all value. Thus any institution or activities that had the avowed purpose of "broadening man's life, enriching his experience and his self-awareness" were particularly dear to him.[110] In his era of almost "total mechanization and H-bombs," the objective of humanism was of "first importance."[111] Shahn believed that our society was "beginning to believe that technology will solve all the problems that we are faced with."[112] Shahn did not believe that technology had the answer, indeed he thought that "technology without an awareness of the humanities will lead to endless Hiroshimas."[113] Shahn thought that this process of reducing human beings from their status as ultimate value would bring artists, as a "natural reaction" toward "bringing man beck into focus as the center of importance."[114]

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[107] "A Symposium on how to cmbine architecture, painting, sculpture" Interiors CX (May 1951): 102.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ben Shahn, "New Horizons in Painting," in R.M. MacIvers, editor, New Horizons in Creative Thinking: A Survey and Forecast (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975) reprint of (New York: the Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1954), p. 102.

[110] Ben Shahn, "How an Artist Looks at Aesthetics" The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 8 (September 1954: 50.

"I believe that the artist should look upon his work not as a commodity, but as an expression of his feelings about the world." When Shahn made this statement in 1949, he had already almost twenty years behind him as an artist of injustices, both political and social. Shahn believed that the artist, while striving to keep his integrity in a society that tries to cheapen his expression, must supply "some of the moral stamina our country needs." Good art to Shahn was directly a product "of the spirit." How unlike many artists who went through their careers believing in "art for art's sake" or those who worked only for popularity and recognition! A good thing to Shahn was art that could contribute "even a little" to the enrichment and awakening of the country. Again, one believed that Shahn, even though he had already fought some tough battles over his work, continued to have faith in art's power to persuade and teach. Why else would he continue to paint and print works for labor organizations, political campaigns and social causes?[115]

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[111] Ben Shahn, Paragraphs on Art (New York: Sprial Press, 1952), p. 2.

[112] Aisenberg, "Interview," p. 47.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Rodman, Conversations, p. 192.

Shahn felt a pressing desire as a communicative artist to produce readable images. But readability did not present too great a problem because the "most compelling desire" was to make himself clear.[116] He always "wanted to communicate (that dirty word) and to use any means" he could.[117]

Shahn asserted that the increased interest and activity in art was "in essence a rebellion against the absolutism of science and mechanics."[118] This was because so much of what we experience and live with was devoid of personality. We have all observed "the growing mechanization of our contemporary society, the gradual submergence of the individual into mass processes."[119] Everything from clothing to everyday objects such as cups was mass-produced. Shahn disliked this mass-production. Entertainment needed to be reduced "to common denomiators and cliches."[120] Even mass-communication was involved in this process by stereotyping public information, and by editorializing prior to public exposure. Essentially, this process of mass-production and mass-communication had deemed society at a loss for original thinking. When someone wrote or painted something that was non-conformist, it upset the so-called balance of things. Man needed to be reminded that he "is in himself, ultimate value."[121]

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[115] Ben Shahn, "An Artists Credo," College Art Journal 9 (Autumn 1949): 43, 45.

[116] Shahn, "If I Had to Begin," p. 96.

[117] Grace Glueck, "Ben Shahn Shines On," New York Times 13 October 1968, sec. D, 39 col. 2.

[118] Shahn, Paragraphs on Art, p. 5.

Shahn's goal in his later paintings was to remind man that he was ultimate value. He did not lose his concern for people and events, but maintained that interest while adding something simpler and more human. He painted them at work, at play, sleeping, eating and reading. This everyday portrayal of human beings was his effort to preserve humanity. He felt an immeasurable responsibility to paint humanity. It was something concrete that he could do to enlighten and enrich the public. Granted, many of his paintings contained messages, hidden and apparent, to bring about change. And for Shahn, there was no other medium that he could have used "more effectively to express" what he wanted to say, or what he felt "in the world" around him.[122] But he still remained concerned about people. He used the images of empty shopping carts and television antennae to remind the viewers that we were too concerned with unimportant things, or to remind one of the lack of humanity in various things.

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[119] Shahn, "If I Had to Begin," p. 99.

[120] Shahn, Paragraphs on Art, p. 6.

[121] Ibid.

He asserted at Barnard College's American Arts Festival that like the painter, "the viewer of art must find something of himself, or at least his kin, in the art he looks at."[123] He believed that the public "has been so much impressed by what it ought to like, that it has almost lost touch with what it really does like."[124] Shahn asserted that "in the realm of painting," many people were "afraid to express their views-the techniques are a professional secret, so to speak; so for a time a lot of people may pretend to understand and like non-objective art."[125]

The public also had "quite as much right to its individuality, its ignorance, its vagaries and its oddments of taste as has the artist," in Shahn's opinion.[126] This idea still reflected that art was for people, not for its own sake. Shahn carried this idea one step further with the idea that art was a social act. Whenever an artist showed his painting to "one person" it was a social act.[127] Shahn made a basic assumption "that most people are interested in the hopes, fears, dreams and tragedies of other people, for those are the things that life is made up of."[128] He added that "perhaps that assumption sets me apart from the dominant trend of today."[129]

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[122] Aisenberg, "Interview," p. 58.

[123] Ben Shahn, "The Search for New Standards in Modern American Painting," 29 April 1955, Stuart Davis Papers, Archives of American Art, New York, p. 4.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Rodman, Conversations, p. 192.

[126] Ibid.

Shahn felt that art's ancient and honorable prerogative was to "challenge just that which is most complaisantly accepted."[130] He therefore, did not really admire the work of non-objectivists such as Jackson Pollock and Piet Mondrian. Non-objective art to him was

> about the most non-committal statement that can be made in art. It rests its faith in the machinery with which a painting is put together-material plus organization. Its basic precept is that art is simply experience, an experience that lies solely within the physical properties of the painting

and as a result, denies the "validity of any moral intention in art."[131] To Shahn, the world did not need any more things which denied the human being. Business and television had

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[127] Aisenberg, "Interview," p. 43.

[128] Rodman, Conversations, p. 192.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Shahn, Paragraphs on Art, p. 4.

[131] Ibid.

had already denied individualism for some ideal American, "an effigy" who had the "common qualities" of all Americans, but who had the "eccentricities, peculiarities, and unique qualities" of no American.[132] Art was therefore one of the few "remaining outposts of free-speech-unprocessed speech."[133] He also believed that there was a connection and interaction between public attitude and the status of the arts. It was a two-way street, an enlightened public led to full art expression and art in its turn led to public enlightenment. He felt that art's search for truth was a "highly worthy enterprise."[134]

Shahn maintained a solid belief that artists should be involved in politics. In a symposium at Smith College in 1949, he cited this Greek distinction: "to the Greeks the word "idiot" was opposite in its connotation to the word "politic." The idiot was one without understanding of politics and unable to participate in political matters. I believe that helps clarify my position!"[135] The artist whose interest was in political subjects "must have some burning reason for his interest."[136] The reason was probably not materialistic, "for it is quite unlikely that his pictures will bring him much material gain."[137] Therefore the artist must have a "mission of some sort" when he undertook a political subject.[138]

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[132] Shahn, Paragraphs on Art, p. 4.

[133] Ben Shahn, "What is Realism in Art?" Look 17 (13 January 1953): 44.

[134] Shahn, "Some Questions," p. 204.

[135] Shahn, "Realism Reconsidered," Perspecta (February 1956): 170.

[136] Ibid.

Furthermore he believed that if we were living in a stable and secure society, the artist would not be obligated to emphasize any phase of life around him. But, since

> we now live in a time of turmoil, too susceptible to drastic and deplorable changes. I feel that the individual who can, under such circumstances, concern himself with a bowl of pansies is dodging issues and is a fraud to participate in the life around him.

To Shahn, the artist should not be disengaged. He felt that the individual was obligated and needed to do something about the evils of his time, in cooperation with others. Shahn asserted that he did his "utmost to function as effectively" in modern society as his "powers permit." He believed it to be "incumbent upon the artist not to be disengaged" from society. Shahn best emulated this idea with his work. His work was used by labor organizations, black civil rights groups, and peace organizations. From the beginning of his career he believed that art was controversial. And what could be more controversial than Sacco and Vanzetti or Kuboyama?[139]

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[137] Ibid.

[138] Shahn, "Some Questions," p. 205.

[139] Shahn, Shape, p. 10, 11, 91.

For Shahn any situation "in which the artist finds himself pertinent to his own temper" was a "proper" situation for art. He was mistrustful of contrived situations for painting, "situations peculiarly set up to favor the blossoming of art." Shahn believed that artists occupied a unique position in the society in which they lived. Even though the artist was dependent on society for his livelihood, he was still somewhat removed from immediate struggles "for social status or for economic supremacy." Shahn maintained that because of these "parallel habits of detachment and of emotional involvement," artists so often became "critics of society, and so often become partisans in its burning causes." A good example was Shahn's involvement, as well as other fine artists and writers such as Edna St. Vincent-Millay, John Dos Passos, and Upton Sinclair, in the Sacco and Vanzetti case. These figures became embroiled in the situation and some even went to prison.[140]

To Shahn, art was always visionary. One of art's functions was to disturb "present realities, however satisfactory they may seem to the rest of the world."[141] This function also saw art as a "sensitive needle" in the society in which it existed, and will continue long after society has vanished "an unerring record of how people lived, what they looked like and how they behaved."[142] Therefore, Shahn did not feel that painting was a limited medium. Painting, for him, was able to contain "whatever one thinks and all that he is."[143] There were those moments when the artist could "cut in on" all the money that was floating around by "cheapening himself just a little."[144] It was up to the integrity of the artist to protect himself, and in Shahn's eyes, he "ought to choose nonrecognition in preference to cheapening his form of expression."[145] This battle continued and continues today. Shahn was constantly aware of the struggle between integrity and monetary gain. He would turn down a commission or a commercial job if he did not agree with the subject or the reason behind the request. Shahn again insisted that artists should look upon their work "not as a commodity, but as an expression" of their feelings about the world.[146]

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[140] Rodman, Conversations, p. 205.

[141] "Future of the Creative Arts, U. of Buffalo, p. 125.

Shahn believed it was "ridiculous" when artists imitated other artists "in the hope of sharing their popularity." He cautioned that artists who did so were sacrificing their one "greatest gift and...greatest pleasure" of unique personality and saying what they wanted to say, not what someone else had to say. Shahn maintained his artistic integrity and did not compromise his work or his beliefs. Even though his style changed somewhat, he did not change it for popularity or money, but for personal, methodical reasons.[147]

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[142] Shahn, Shape, p. 59.

[143] Shahn, "An Artist's Credo," p. 44.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Shahn, "An Artist's Credo," p. 44.

[146] Ibid.

With works such as Miner's Wives, Allegory, and The Death of a Miner, the messages were clear. Mining disasters such as happened in Centralia, Illinois, should not happen again because of uncaring, greedy mining companies. Tenement fires showed that there was something wrong with the social system. Liberation, Pacific Landscape, and Hunger, all stemming from the end and immediate post-World War II, communicate the utter waste, destruction, and inhumanity of war. With the Lucky Dragon series of works, one is left with the empty feeling of nuclear war. With his works "Thou Shalt not Stand Idly by" and "We Shall Overcome" the message was for action in the civil rights struggle. The changes these works sought to bring about are easy-to-read messages: no more preventable disasters, no more war and an end to racial injustices. All of these works were completed after the war. It becomes apparent that Shahn did not lose his desire to exact change through his paintings. Art could be used as a forum for social change. Art work educated the public on the ills of society so society could change what was wrong.

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[147] Henry Brandon, "A Conversation with Ben Shahn," The New Republic 139 (7 July 1958): 17.

Ben Shahn best exemplified that type of artist whose basic humanity drove him to use his art work to influence those around him. His work well illustrates the power of art as a force for social awareness and change.

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CHAPTER V

SHAHN'S LEGACY

Ben Shahn represented an artist who harnessed his talents for the purpose of exacting a scoail change. Throughout his thirty-eight-year career he maintained a constant belief that he was compelled to paint for humanity. He used his talents in posters, murals, drawings, paintings--as well as teaching and writing--to support his intention. His work illustrated and illuminated social injustices. His belief was that by demonstrating and recognizing these injustices changes could be evoked in the soical system.

Shahn was inspired to paint by the life that went on around him. He once told a student that there were just two things to paint:"the things you are very strongly for and the things you are very strongly against." He admitted to Henry Brandon in an interview that he felt "pretty strongly about a lot of things." This becomes apparent when looking at the body of his work or reading his many writings. His work reflected a wide variety of social and philosophical concerns. These works included man's relation with the world around him, the depths of despair, the vulnerability of children, the fear of fire, the evils of war and the threat of nuclear holocaust.[148]

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[148] Ibid.

Ben Shahn emerged as an American painter of significance in 1932 with the exhibition of twenty-three gouaches on Sacco and Vanzetti. This was when he first became recognized as a social realist. This recognition extended to other artists in the thirties who, like Shahn, painted the common man, the worker or social ills. With his subsequent involvement in New Deal agencies like the FSA, he received a first-hand view of Roosevelt's recovery efforts. His art work from this period reflected the power behind the brush and commitment to the changes taking place.

With the outbreak of World War II, Shahn became involved with the Office of War Information and later the CIO's Political Action Committee. This enabled Shahn to see the atrocities of the war through restricted photographs and other documents. The posters and paintings he executed during and immediately following the war were his response to the senseless destruction, suffering, pain, loneliness, and atomic nightmare that the war brought about. His style changed slightly after the war. He no longer was absorbed in "Man's Fate" rather in "Man's State."

Shahn responded to the growing mechanization of society and growth of non-objective art by the continued use of social content in his works. He maintained a belief that art needed to be more humanistic, and its function was to "broaden and enrich the human spirit."[149] He considered himself one among a few artists who had dedicated themselves to the reaffirming of man. This reaffirmation appeared in his paintings, posters and later murals. He did not lose his power to persuade in this reaffirming process. He continued to produce political posters, pamphlets and portfolios for those causes he supported. Shahn held his own during the fifties with its suspicion and restrictions of so-called communist infiltrated art. In a politically polarized period, Shahn was awarded with many positions of honor and prestige. The same year he was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, he was elected as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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[149] Shahn, "Some Questions," p. 203.

He enjoyed continued success in the last decade of his life, while preserving his interest in various social causes. These last years were used to support civil rights, to aid anti-nuclear groups and to promote anti-Vietnam sentiments. Truly he was a man who supported his causes to the best of his ability, donating time, and better yet, his talents.

Shahn's death evoked responses from a variety of sources. The New York Times, in announcing his death on March 15, 1969, claimed that Shahn was a "painter-polemicist" and that he "made his art serve the liberal, social and political causes in which he believed."[150] The March 23rd

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[150] "Ben Shahn Dies, 70" New York Times, 15 March 1969, p. 1, col. 2.

Times contained an obituary written by John Canady, who lauded Shahn by stating that he "did not confuse thoughtful protest toward a constructive end with protest as a form of personal indulgence."[151] How true! Many times Shahn could have painted pictures based on the fights and problems that he had experienced over the years. Canady then goes on to state that the "consensus of critical opinion no doubt would be that Ben Shahn deteriorated as an artist during the last 20 years of his career, although (perhaps because) he was increasingly successful with a wider and wider public."[152] Canady classified Shahn as a "disseminating force" during the Great Depression. Canady also believed that his early work "should be a rebuke to a generation of habitual protesters young enough to be his grandchildren."[153] Jack Levine, who was also a social realist, had this to say about Shahn in the March 31st issue of The Nation. Levine claimed that Shahn was a "blend of poet and political thinker, and the two were inseparable in him."[154] Levine also listed Shahn's poetic legacy:

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[151] John Canady, "Tribute," New York Times, 23 March 1969, Sec. D, p. 20.

[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Jack Levine, "Ben Shahn Painter," The Nation 208 (31 March 1969): 390.

> The epic expression of his hatred of social injustice embodied in his Sacco-Vanzetti and Tom Mooney series. The love of peace he expressed in his joyful painting "Liberation" with its whirling children. His concern about atomic holocaust expressed in the series on the Japanese fisherman, victims of atomic radiation. His epic "Mine Disaster." Then the lonely lyrics...the whimsicalities.155

This may have been one of the most moving tributes to Shahn by a fellow artist.

Progressive Architecture also contained a short obituary in May of 1969. This claimed that Shahn continued to focus his style whether on canvas, in murals, or in commercial work "on a social-surrealistic portrayal of movements and events in his time."[156] Connoisseur deemed Shahn a "kindly man" who "could not turn his eyes from the suffering, the oppressed, the victims of injustice, of the tragedies of great men in the service of humanity."[157] Dugald Stermer of Ramparts, believed that Shahn's work survived "due solely to its intrinsic power of communication and the strength and validity of his own commitment."[158] Shahn's death also affected New Jersey State Senator Harrison A. Williams, Jr. to make a statement asserting that the

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[155] Ibid.

[156] "Obituary," Progressive Architecture 50 (May 1969): 61.

[157] Kenneth W. Prescott, "Ben Shahn (1898-1969), Artist of the Exalted and the Common," The Connoisseur 174 (August 1970): 310.

[158] Dugald Stermer, "In Memorium: Ben Shahn," Ramparts 7 (May 1969): 16.

"world has suffered a deep loss" in his death.[159] The Senator believed that Shahn had been committed to "arresting man's inhumanity to man through violence and injustice" as well as to the "ideals which centered attention on the social and humanitarian issues of our day."[160] Senator Williams also included in his statements an article by Peggy Lewis, "Shalom, Ben Shahn" which appeared in the Trenton Times. Peggy Lewis called Shahn a "giant" and expressed the shock that one always feels when a giant dies.[161] Lewis also felt Shahn's intense concern for justice and humanity among all peoples was expressed in his "strikingly personal and unforgettable images."[162]

Shahn's legacy includes hundreds of paintings, drawings, posters, murals and books that reflect the social and political climate of almost four decades. His influence cannot be measured by the numbers of people who have seen his work, or in the number of exhibitions in which he participated. As long as there are art galleries that display his work, there will be those who are interested in it and want to know more. This thesis strengthens the belief that Shahn was a brave man, who through his convictions, painted what he thought was wrong with the world.

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[159] Senator Harrison A. Williams, Jr., "Death of Ben Shahn," Congressional Record (1 April 1969): 8334.

[160] Ibid., p. 8335.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Ibid.

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