International Journal of History and Philosophical Research
Vol.7, No.2, pp.11-23, May 2019
Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

BEN SHAHN'S *SUNDAY PAINTINGS*: TRANSFORMATION OF A SOCIAL REALIST

James W. Ellis
Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University

ABSTRACT: *Ben Shahn's exhibition of Sunday Paintings (1940) evidenced the metamorphosis of one of America's foremost social realists. A variety of personal and professional factors compelled Shahn to reevaluate his artistic direction. This essay helps explain the artist's metamorphosis by exploring 1) a shift in American art criticism in favor of modernism, and 2) Shahn's involvement with the Resettlement/Farm Security Administration and his development of a photographic aesthetic. The aim is to elucidate primary reasons for the stylistic shift of a major twentieth-century American painter*.

KEYWORDS: Ben Shahn, Social Realism, New Deal, Photography, Sunday Paintings

INTRODUCTION

The early life of Ben Shahn (1898-1969) set the stage for his commitment to *social art*. Shahn was born on the western edge of the Russian empire (present-day Lithuania) in an area called the Pale of Settlement, one of the few places Russian authorities allowed Jews to build communities. *Pogroms*, government-organized persecutions of the Jews, were frequent occurrences in the Pale of Settlement. The police often targeted Shahn's father, Joshua Hessel Shahn, a socialist intellectual who organized resistance to the Czar. As the Shahn family's situation grew increasingly tenuous, in 1906 they made the decision to move overseas to Brooklyn, New York. Ben Shahn brought to his new home a hatred of injustice and a suspicion of authoritarian rule.

Shahn served an apprenticeship in a lithography shop, before going on to study art at New York's City College and the National Academy of Design. In 1925 and 1927, he travelled to Europe to study the *Old Masters* and the newer trends in modern art. In 1931, he began his first major series of work, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti.*

Ben Shahn's Early Social Realism

Nicola Sacco (1891-1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1888-1927) were Italian-American anarchists. They were convicted of murdering two men during an armed robbery in 1920 in Braintree, Massachusetts. The evidence was not entirely conclusive and many suspected their convictions resulted, in part, from anti-Italian and anti-immigrant sentiments, and political bias. The state of Massachusetts executed Sacco and Vanzetti in the electric chair in 1927. Shahn's social realist paintings championed Sacco and Vanzetti's cause and impeached the perceived injustice of the legal system, which brought the artist both praise and criticism.

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

Ben Shahn, *Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco*, 1931–32.

Shahn's next exhibition, *The Mooney Case* (1933), was held as at New York's Downtown Gallery and in most respects was a thematic and formal continuation of *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*. Both shows were controversial because Shahn addressed seemingly unfair murder trials. Tom Mooney (1882-1942) was a militant socialist labor leader accused of planting and detonating a homemade bomb at the (World War I) Preparedness Day parade held in San Francisco on July 22, 1916. Although there was abundant evidence he had not committed the crime, Mooney was convicted and served twenty-two years in prison before California Governor Culbert Olson finally pardoned him in 1939.

During the 1930s, Ben Shahn was a prototypical social realist. He favored forthright representations of the plight of *common people* (those lacking any significant social status) over artistic detachment and idealization. He used his art as a tool for social commentary rather than creating *art for art's sake*. As the Great Depression (1929-1939) wreaked havoc on American society, Shahn looked for answers in radical politics and engaged art. Like his friend Diego Rivera (1886-1957), Shahn believed that he should use his skills to raise awareness of wrongs and to encourage reform.[1] Social commitment determined both the subject matter and content of his art. The *Mooney Case* and *Sacco and Vanzetti* series fused straightforward reporting, critical editorializing, and visual manipulation.

Shahn's visual language combined realistic elements with individual expressiveness. He thought recognizable content was essential for conveying information to large numbers of people, but he also incorporated imaginative elements into his compositions. In the early 1930s, Shahn occasionally used his own photographs or newspaper images as visual sources, though he deliberately distorted forms reflecting his subjective attitudes and sense of humor. As the 1930s progressed, Shahn became more and more reliant on his photographic sources.

Changing Art Criticism

The Great Depression was an economic and social failure, which led to widespread, fiery political activism. Outrage and a sense of anger drove social realists to use their "art as a weapon."[2] The photographer Walker Evans (1903-1975), one of Shahn's closest friends, believed this trait distinguished American artists from their European counterparts:

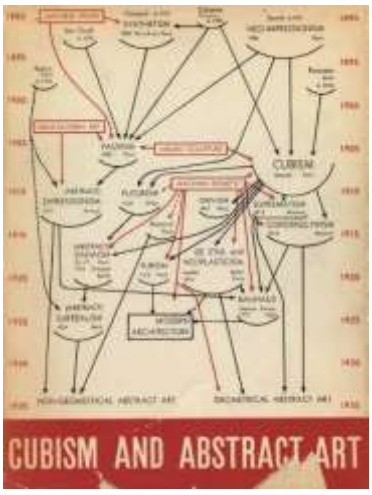
> When you stop to think about what an artist is doing one question is, what is the driving force, the motive? In this country, it is rather obvious; different, say, from European culture. The artist here is very angry and fighting. Everything makes him angry: the local style of living, and one's competitors. Even coworkers in the arts anger and stimulate him.[3]

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

Ben Shahn dabbled in radicalism during the early 1930s. Like other social realists, he held out little hope that America's conventional economic systems would put an end to the unprecedented downturn. In 1935, Shahn showed his work in John Reed Club exhibitions and was an instructor at the John Reed Club School of Art. The John Reed Clubs aimed to "extend the influence of the revolutionary working class movement" by creating and publishing art and literature of a "proletariat character."[4] Shahn also signed his name to a 1935 petition calling for an American Artists' Congress and worked for the Artists' Union publication *Art Front.* Shahn's liberal affiliations later led red-baiting Michigan Senator George Dondero and the House un-American Activities Committee to label Shahn as either a communist or communist sympathizer. Shahn, however, was probably never a *card-carrying* member of the Communist Party and during the late-1930s and 1940s, he moved steadily toward the ideological center. A strong commitment to President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal agenda replaced his interest in extreme leftist organizations.

Many modernist critics, such as Roger Fry (1866-1934) and Clement Greenberg (1909-1994),[5] asserted that if art served a propagandistic purpose it failed somehow aesthetically. The supposed dichotomy between political content and formal experimentation became a recurring theme in art criticism of the 1930s. A central question was whether social realism's prioritizing of contentious subject matter was compatible with progressive, modernist formalism.

The first Director of the Museum of Modem Art, New York (MoMA), Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (1902-1981), was an important advocate of *avant-garde* painting during the 1930s. MoMA and Barr helped introduce the American public to European modernism and its American offspring. Barr conceived of art history as a story. Modern art movements moved along in a linear progression of innovations, developments, and influences, which could be followed on the walls of MoMA's museum galleries. MoMA's grand modernist narrative had two great strengths: it was unencumbered by complex social and historical contexts and, as a result, ordinary museum visitors easily understood it.[6]



Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art*
(chart outlining evolution of modernism in visual arts), 1936.

Barr and MoMA did not include social realism in their art historical narrative, a serious indictment of the movement's importance. Academic naturalism, folk art, and other forms of *kitsch* were also excluded. Barr prioritized abstraction and modernist formal qualities over

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

social content and this had a major influence on public opinion, art criticism, and the outlook of artists. Barr's apathy toward social realism may have helped persuade Ben Shahn to reconsider his artistic direction. Interestingly, when James Thrall Soby assumed control over MoMA in the 1940s, the museum became one of Shahn's greatest advocates. Soby published three books about Shahn and organized the artist's first retrospective exhibition in 1947.

During the late-1930s, art writers devised an art historical construct in which realism and modernism sat at polemic extremes. In May 1940, the editor of *Art Digest*, Peyton Boswell called for a "return to the aesthetic." Boswell declared that the artistic activism of social realism and the patriotic nationalism of *Regionalism* had worn themselves out and they were "ready for the scrap heap."[7] Polemicists such as Alfred Barr, Jr., and Peyton Boswell, disparaged realism (in almost all its forms) as increasingly irrelevant, particularly in the age of photography. On the other hand, they praised modernism for its creative visual manipulations, including unexpected cropping and vantage points, emphasis of the flatness of the *picture plane*, and expressive use of color and tone—free of references to the material world. Modernist critics discounted subject matter and favored formal experimentation.

Diego Rivera, one of Ben Shahn's artistic and philosophical mentors, spent 1907 to 1912 in Europe experimenting with avant-gardism (primarily Cubism). Ultimately, Rivera concluded formal experimentation had its limits, after he saw artists in the Soviet Union frustrated in their attempts to persuade *the masses* to accept Cubism, Futurism, or Constructivism as the art of the proletariat. Although he decided the masses needed art featuring easy-to-read messages, Rivera remained convinced he could use the advanced techniques of *the isms* for propagandistic purposes if he sufficiently adapted them to the proletariat's conditioned tastes. Rivera's social realist disciples—including Ben Shahn, Jack Levine (1915-2010), and Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000)—also incorporated modernist qualities into their styles, believing they were compatible with meaningful, social content.

It was a factionalized era in which artists and their supporters wanted to be clear where they stood, both politically and aesthetically. Shahn held strong beliefs that he wished to express, but his images were not dogmatic or heavy-handed. Shahn's style was idiosyncratic; his figures were often humorous; his messages were at times inscrutable. Certain art critics saw these qualities as shortcomings. For example, Walter Gutman wrote an unfavorable review of *The Passion of Sacco and* Vanzetti, faulting Shahn's lack of intensity and his work's ambiguity:

> Why choose a subject like Sacco and Vanzetti if one is not prepared to become a propagandist? Callot, Goya, Daumier, Thomas Nast -- all had the ability to invent symbols expressive of their subjects. Shahn has not shown that ability. Until his feelings are more passionate, more spontaneous, and more partisan he cannot create those eloquent symbols, which are typical of an art deeply concerned with affairs.[8]

In an anonymous review of *The Mooney Case* a critic, who was more sympathetic toward Shahn than Gutman, still felt the artist's innate creative sensibilities interfered with the strength of his message:

> This show at the Downtown Gallery emphasizes an alive issue of the moment: the place of propaganda in art. And from the point of view of propaganda, Ben Shahn could not have a better case than that of Mooney. Yet I do not see how

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

> these paintings advance the cause. To me, they are purely illustrative in treatment. They do not, as they surely should, rouse the emotions and quicken the will to action in behalf of a man so abominably condemned to suffer. ... Looking at the works as paintings, however, one is struck with the fine feeling for color. Here one senses the artist in the man, expressing himself, as it were, subconsciously.[9]

Even during the height of Shahn's social realist phase, there were already signs that he was not completely committed to radicalism and strictly propagandistic messages. Shahn's main motivator was always the general human endeavor and the interior lives of individuals. Beginning in the late 1930s, as art critics questioned the continued relevance of social realism's naturalistic style and politicized subjects, a new generation of American artists emerged whose primary concern was European-inspired modernism and abstraction. It was at this time that Ben Shahn turned away from specific, topical, controversial themes (Tom Mooney, Sacco and Vanzetti) to more universal qualities found in anonymous, everyday people.

THE RESETTLEMENT/FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

In 1935, President Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration (RA) as part of his New Deal economic relief program. The RA was absorbed into the Department of Agriculture in 1937, and was renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The RA/FSA was one of many programs established by Roosevelt to help improve prosperity among Americans suffering during the Great Depression. The administration was responsible for alleviating the problems of displaced and disenfranchised small farmers who were afflicted by the miseries of the economic downturn, droughts, and dustbowls that were common during the 1920s and early 1930s. The RA/FSA provided low-interest loans to poor farmers that allowed them to become landowners, reforested over-harvested timberland, and established communal farms and well-ordered rural villages to provide jobs and homes for city workers who fell victim to urban unemployment.

Like other liberal artists, Ben Shahn believed the government's New Deal programs could resolve the problems caused by the nation's floundering capitalist system. Shahn admired President Roosevelt's positive outlook and populist agenda. According to Ben Shahn's wife, Bernarda Bryson Shahn, "Roosevelt's great task was to educate -- to educate the Congress, to educate the public, to make clear the dire crisis of the land, the poverty, the despair, the ground swell of unrest that were rising on every hand ."[10] Many people living the Northeastern cities were unaware of the deplorable conditions in the rural and agricultural sectors.

Ben Shahn moved from New York to Washington, D.C. in 1935 to work for the RA/FSA's Special Skills Unit. The Special Skills Unit produced paintings, posters, and graphic works for RA/FSA communities, providing for the cultural wellbeing of migrant farmers and rural workers. Shahn believed in the program's objectives. "I felt very strongly about the efforts that this Resettlement Administration was trying to accomplish, resettling people, helping them, and so on ... I don't think I ever felt that way before or since ... totally involved."[11] The New Deal programs attracted artists from a wide ideological spectrum, by promoting a "non-antagonistic sense of classless consensus about shared national goals."[12]

The social realist movement exposed pathos, tragedy, and injustice in the events of the day. The movement's purpose was to effect change, though the actual results of the artists' labors

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

were difficult to quantify. In the RA/FSA Shahn found a government project that rectified social wrongs in verifiable ways. The purpose of the RA/FSA was to identify individual cases of suffering and bring about relief and reform. The RA/FSA art project is easily conceptualized as a type of social realist movement with demonstrable results. In the New Deal art projects, social realists found constructive outlets for their creative impulses that benefitted society and did not compromise their commitment to meaningful subject matter.

In addition to its Special Skills Unit, the RA/FSA had an information and publicity division, called the Historical Section, tasked with informing Congress and the public about the need for the RA/FSA. Under the direction of Roy Stryker (1893-1975), the Historical Section sent out photographers to document the economic struggles of agricultural and rural communities. Stryker recruited Shahn for temporary stints on the Historical Section's photography staff between 1935 and 1938. Shahn took approximately six thousand photographs in the South and Midwest.

Stryker did not suggest books on photography to Shahn or give Shahn *photographic-scripts*, as he did with other RA/FSA photographers. Rather, Stryker encouraged Shahn's artistic nature. Both Shahn and Walker Evans exploited their relatively unregulated status to photograph what they pleased, how they pleased. This often resulted in extraordinarily fresh and spontaneous images. In 1944, Shahn described their goal and techniques: "[We] had only one purpose -- a moral one I suppose. So, we decided: no angle shots, no filters, no mats, nothing glossy but paper ... We tried to present the ordinary in an extraordinary manner. But that's a paradox because the only thing extra ordinary about it was that it was so ordinary. Nobody had ever done it before, deliberately. Now it's called documentary ... We just took pictures that cried out to be taken."[13]

Ben Shahn, *Children of Destitute Mountaineer, Arkansas*, 1935.

Stryker distributed RA/FSA photographs to government agencies, community organizations, and national periodicals. He wanted RA/FSA images to be informative and appeal to diverse tastes. Stryker's staff included experienced professional photojournalists, such as Carl Mydans (1907-2004) and *artistic types*, such as Shahn and Evans. Over the course of the Historical Section's project, an *FSA photographic style* emerged that synthesized straightforward documentation and a type of humanistic commentary that was born of social realism. RA/FSA photographers blurred supposed distinctions between documentation and engaged art. Photography historian, Naomi Rosenblum has written, "divisions between art and document are difficult to maintain when dealing with images of actuality. [RA/FSA] and other works made clear that, no matter what its purpose, any camera image may transcend the mundaneness of its immediate subject and transmute matter into thought and feeling—the essential goal of all visual art."[14]

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

In spite of their differences, RA/FSA photographers shared a vision and banded together for the common good. Cultural historians have often commented on the optimistic outlook of the New Deal art programs. "Despite the real suffering that Americans endured because of the Great Depression, the belief grew that an energetic and expanding government could work for the individual and the local community to alleviated misery, restore political faith, and improve the very structure of society.[15]

One of the first places the RA/FSA sent Ben Shahn was the coal mining country of northern West Virginia. During the early years of the Depression, the coal industry collapsed, causing severe unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. The RA/FSA relocated a number of redundant coalmining families to experimental resettlement communities in Arthurdale, West Virginia. Shahn recalled visiting the Arthurdale housing projects.

> I remember the first place I went on this trip where we were active, one of the resettlements that we built. I found that as far as I was concerned, they were impossible to photograph. Neat little rows of houses. This wasn't my idea of something to photograph at all. But I had the good luck to ask someone, "Where are you all from? Where did they bring you from? And when they told me, I went. on to a place called Scott's Run, and there it began.[16]

Shahn was far more interested in the activities of the unemployed miners than the monotonous RA/FSA architecture in which they lived.

Ben Shahn, *Sunday, Scotts Run, West Virginia*, 1935.

During his travels for the RA/FSA, Shahn rarely focused on government activities and projects. He preferred taking pictures of social gatherings and vernacular culture, such as country fairs, bluegrass concerts, and square dances. Interspersed among these homespun subjects were bleaker images of impoverished sharecroppers, migrant workers, and poor children living in tumbledown rural shacks. Humanity was the central theme of Shahn's pictures. Shahn wrote that as he "crossed and recrossed many sections of the country, [he] had come to know well so many of all kinds of belief and temperament, which they maintained with a transcendent indifference to their lot in life. Theories had melted before such experience. My own painting then had turned from what is called social realism into a sort of *personal realism*. I found the qualities of people a constant pleasure.[17]

While working for the RA/FSA, Shahn gradually left behind his former style of social realist painting and began focusing on photography and more diverse, humanistic subject matter. Shahn later admitted that, from the beginning, he intended to use his RA/FSA photographs as source material for his paintings: "The things that I photographed I did not take so much as

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

photographs [but] as documents for myself. A lot of paintings came out of them over the years."[18] A photographic-aesthetic increasingly dominated his work in other media. In his *Mooney* and *Sacco and Vanzetti* paintings, Shahn used photographs primarily as mere points of reference, but later on he relied upon photographs to a much greater extent—as complete compositional *sketches*. At the same time that he began focusing on his figure's subjective experiences, Shahn began allowing photographs to dictate the content of his paintings.

A Photographic Aesthetic

Since the dawn of the age of photography, important artists such as Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917) have relied on photographs as source material for paintings. This was a consistent part of Ben Shahn's creative process. When he was devising his *Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* series (1932), for example, Shahn visited the New York Public Library and found newspaper photographs published by the Sacco and Vanzetti defense committees. Shahn's paintings quoted verbatim from these sources. Throughout the 1930s, he kept a file that included newspaper images, pictures from pictorial magazines, and government photographs. His collection, sorted according to theme or motif, was a visual storehouse of references that dominated Shahn's iconography through the 1940s. Sometimes he borrowed entire compositions from photographs, treating the image as an *étude*, or preparatory study; at other times, he borrowed isolated elements from photographs, treating those elements as visual notes or memory aids.

Shahn's major influences as a photographer were Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) and Walker Evans. Cartier-Bresson was a French humanist and photographer who pioneered the *candid photograph*: a seemingly spontaneous image in which figures appear un-posed because they are not aware their picture is being taken. Evans, Shahn's close friend, rejected highly aestheticized, *pictorialist* photography in favor of poetic portraits of working-class people situated within vernacular culture and humble domestic dwellings.

Ben Shahn was a self-taught photographer; he did not receive formal professional training. The technique of the other RA/FSA photographers was far more polished. Referring to his time with the RA/FSA, Shahn said, "I thought of photography purely as a documentary thing, and I would argue rather violently with photographers who were interested only in print quality. All that bored me. I felt the function of a photograph was to be seen by as many people as possible. I felt that the image was more important than the quality of the image--you understand?"[19] Shahn's RA/FSA supervisor, Roy Stryker recalled,

> Shahn came back with pictures that were like his paintings--imaginative, beautiful things not restricted by technique. They were often out of focus and overexposed or underexposed. When Arthur [Rothstein (1915-1985)] or Walker Evans or Carl Mydans would get to worrying too much about technique I'd bring out Shahn's photographs and say, 'Look at what Shahn has done and he doesn't know one part of a camera from another.' I wanted them to know how small a part the mechanical tool--the camera--played in making a good picture.

Shahn rarely took photographs reflexively, the way a photojournalist might. On the contrary, he explored subjects with the probing curiosity of a sociologist or a psychologist. Indeed, Shahn's photographs often address far-reaching universal themes as embodied in distinctive personalities. James Thrall Soby asserted Shahn's "approach to photography was almost

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

certainly dictated by his vision as a painter. … [W]hile Shahn's painting often records a photographically arrested reality, its impact is quickened by the most exacting and imaginative painterly means."[20]

Sunday Paintings

Ben Shahn first exhibited his new *personal realist* style in 1940 at the Julien Levy Gallery. His government job kept him so busy Shahn could only work on easel paintings during the weekend. Therefore, he called his new works and the new exhibit "Sunday Paintings."

It was Shahn's first exhibition since *The Mooney Case*. In the interim, a host of changes had caused Shahn to pivot as an artist. Although he never surrendered his commitment to representative art, Shahn ceded some ground to modern formalism. While he did not turn to *art for art's sake*, Shahn eased up on his strict adherence to *subject for subject's sake*. The works displayed at the Levy Gallery expressed his growing interest in the interior worlds of the people he portrayed; he was no longer fixated on topical issues. The exhibition would act as a floodgate, opening up a completely new set of visual possibilities that Shahn successfully exploited thereafter.

He selected individuals or small groups of people from his RA/FSA photographs. Then, Shahn altered the scale or features of the figures and placed them in new, simplified or decontextualized, milieus. He often exaggerated physical features—such as the sizes of hands and faces—so observers could more easily comprehend their personalities and attitudes. Such manipulations transformed (relatively) objective photographic sources into more personal statements. His protagonists' interior energies and psychological states became the nuclei of the new paintings.

Willis Avenue Bridge (1940), one of his Sunday Paintings, is an example of Shahn's free manipulation of photographic sources. Two elderly African-American women sit on a bench located on a bridge that once spanned New York City's Harlem River. The painting features a compositional play back-and-forth and the women are a study in contrasts. One wears jewelry and glasses; the other does not; one is thin, the other heavy; one appears healthy and alert, the other is sick or injured and lost in her thoughts. Shahn based *Willis Avenue Bridge* on two photographs (one showed the women; the other showed the structure of the bridge and an urban background). Although he transferred the main elements of the photographs to the painting without major alteration, his manipulation of details is telling. Shahn isolated the women by discarding their urban setting and intensified their expressions.

Ben Shahn, *Willis Avenue Bridge*, 1940.

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

Ben Shahn, untitled photograph, 1935.

Through re-contextualizing and minimizing specific narratives, Shahn converted the mundane into the timeless. He removed original environments and distilled meanings, the way earlier religious icon painters removed saints from their environments and distilled their meanings. Shahn's images invite reflection and universal interpretations. The people in his paintings became embodiments of pure expression.

As was mentioned, art critics complained that Shahn's early social realist endeavors, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1932) and *The Mooney Case* (1933), lacked a clear-cut partisan message and fell short of being entirely effective propaganda. In general, critics lauded Shahn's 1940 exhibition. They mentioned the artist's integrity and authenticity (based on his newfound photographic aesthetic), and noted the evocative quality of his new paintings (based on their subtle modernist qualities).[21] Shahn's exciting new style made the show a success and had practical consequences. It was at this point that America's leading museums began to collect his works,[22] and, in hindsight, Shahn's later successes seems predicated on the breakthroughs of his watershed Julien Levy show.

A cynic might suggest the artist's late-thirties shift was a pragmatic decision or a *career move*. Many commentators associated social realism with contentious political issues. The important mid-century American art critic, Clement Greenberg, for instance, dismissed social realism as "simply kitsch in the service of political programs."[23] By turning toward a more abstract, allegorical style, Shahn disassociated his work from prickly political matters and, simultaneously, made concessions to the growing tide of modernism and abstract art.

Shahn's *Vacant Lot* (1939), for example, was less a literal depiction than an aestheticized suggestion of a feeling. *Vacant Lot* is about solitude and the transcendent joy of a child at play. The tiny, solitary boy amuses himself in a bare, abandoned setting. The boy is organic and active; the wall is artificial, static, and largely monochromatic. The wall it is notable for its generic *wall-ness* and its harsh flatness (calling attention to the evenness of the picture plane, a hallmark of abstract painting). The shallow depth offers no release; the confined space is suffocating. The child, however, seems oblivious to such limitations. He finds inspiration within himself. His imagination and initiative go beyond the imposed restrictions. *Vacant Lot* has a recognizable subject (which was based on the Shahn's own photograph), but the painting encapsulates timeless themes—isolation, individuality, and initiative. James Thrall Soby described the painting as "penetrating in its evocation of childhood and absorption in play."[24]

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

Ben Shahn, *Vacant Lot*, 1939.

Although Shahn represented private passions, he never resorted to pure abstraction, as did other artists. Shahn thought social realists who turned to abstraction merely to follow the aesthetic trend were committing an unscrupulous act. Shahn explained, "Many of those names that, during the thirties, had been affixed to paintings of hypothetical tyrannies and theoretical cures [social realists] were now affixed to cubes and cones and threads and swirls of paint. Part of that work was--and is--beautiful and meaningful; part of it does indeed constitute private experience. A great part of it also represents only the rejection, only the absence of self-commitment.[25] Abstraction did not offer Shahn a viable pathway; indeed, he considered it a mere cul-de-sac. Shahn's challenge was uniting image and concept in a single impression, using individual people to explore transcendent states.

CONCLUSION

There have been numerous attempts to explain the formal and thematic change in Shahn's art during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The artist himself took a philosophical approach, emphasizing his personal reaction to the transcendent indifference of the victims of the Depression and World War II. According to Shahn, the resurgent spirit of humanity in the face of intense suffering opened his eyes to the limitations of social realism. "[H]e could no longer reconcile the social dream of the thirties with his 'private and inner objectives of art'."[26] There were other factors though, such as Shahn's extensive foray into photography and his adoption of a photographic aesthetic. Shahn's (conscious or subconscious) reaction to changes in art and art criticism was also a factor. All of these personal and professional reasons changed Shahn from an important, though politically and socially specific, social realist painter into a more complex, distinctive, and enduringly relevant mature artist.

References

Anonymous (1933, May 13) Reviews. *Art News,* 5.

Badger, A. (1989). *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940,* The Noonday Press, New York.

Baigell, M. (1984). *A Concise History of Americ.an Painting and Sculpture,* Harper & Row, Publishers, New York.

Baigell, M. (1974). *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s,* Praeger Publishers, New York.

Baldwin, S. (1968). *Poverty and Politics·: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration.* North Carolina University Press, Chapel Hill.

Barr, A. (1936). *Cubism and Abstract Art,* The Museum of Modem Art, New York.

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

Chevlowe, S. (1998). *Common Man Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn,* Princeton University Press and The Jewish Museum, New York.
Curtis, J. (1989). *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth. FSA Photography Reconsidered,* Philadelphia, Temple University Press.
Doss, E. (1991). *Benson, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
Doud, R. (1964, April 14). *Interview with Ben Shahn*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.
Edwards, S. (1995). *Ben Shahn and the Task of Photography in Thirties America*, Hunter College of the City University of New York.
Edwards, S. (1995). *Ben Shahn: The Road South,* History of Photography, 19: 13-19.
Evans, W. (1995). *Icognito*, Eakins Press Foundation, New York.
Frascina, F. & Harrison, C. (1982). *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology,* Harper & Row, Publishers, New York.
Glass, F. (1987). *Ben Shahn in the Age of Abstract Expressionism*, Socialist Review: 83-111.
Greenberg, C. (1939). *Avant Garde and Kitsch*. The Partisan Review: 34–49
Greenfeld, H. (1998). *Ben Shahn: An Artist's Life,* Random House, New York.
Gutman, W. (1932, April 20) Reviews. *The Nation*: 475.
Harris, J. (1995). *Federal Art and National Culture, the Politics of Identity in New Deal America,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
Harris, J. (1987/1988). State Power and Cultural Discourse: Federal Art Project Murals in New Deal USA, *Block 13*: 28-42.
Johnson, O. (1932, July) *The John Reed Club Convention*. New Masses: 14- 15.
Kahan, R. & Stott, W. (1974). *Walker Evans: Photographs from the Let Us Now Praise Famous Men Project,* The University of Texas, Austin.
Katzman, L. (1993). *The Politics of Media: Painting and Photography in the Art of Ben Shahn*, American Art: 60-87.
Klingender, F. D. (1943) *Marxism and Modern Art: An Approach to Social Realism*, Lawrence & Wishart, London.
Lewis, M. (1998, June). *Art, Politics & Clement Greenberg*. Commentary, https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/art-politics-clement-greenberg/
Morse, J. (1972). *Ben Shahn*, Praeger Publishers, New York.
Morse, J. (1944). *Ben Shahn: An Interview*, Magazine of Art, 37(4): 36-41.
O'Connor, F. (1973). *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s*, New York Graphic Society, Greenwich.
O'Connor, F. (1972). *The New Deal Art Projects, an Anthology of Memoirs,* Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D. C.
O'Neal, H. (1976). *A Vision Shared: A Portrait of America 1935–1943, Steidl Verlag,* Brooklyn.
Park, M. & Markowitz, G. (1998). *New Deal for Public Art*, Critical Issues in Public Art, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D. C.
Pohl, F. (1993). *Ben Shahn,* Pomegranate Artbooks, San Francisco.
Pratt, D. (1969, October 27). *Ben Shahn as Photographer*, Harvard Bulletin: 33-55.
Pratt, D. (1975). *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
Prescott, K. (1982). *Prints and Posters of Ben Shahn*, Dover Publications, New York
Rivera, D. (1932) The Revolutionary Spirit in Modem Art, *Modern Quarterly*, 6(3): 56.
Rosenblum, N. (1984). *A World History of Photography,* Abbeville Press, New York.
Shahn, B. (1956). *The Biography of a Painting*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)

Shahn, B. (1960). *The Shape of Content*, Random House, New York.
Shahn, B. B. (1972). *Ben Shahn*, Harry N. Abrams, New York.
Shapiro, D. (1973). *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, Frederick Ungar Publishing, New York.
Soby, J. (1947). *Ben Shahn*, Penguin Books, West Drayton.

NOTES:

[1] Shahn was Diego Rivera's assistant on the ill-fated mural *Man at the Crossroads* (1934) in New York City's Rockefeller Center. In 1932, Rivera wrote "I saw yesterday the work of a lad [Shahn] … who has just completed a series of paintings on the life and death of Sacco and Vanzetti which are as moving as anything of the kind I have ever seen. The Sacco and Vanzetti paints are technically within the school of modernistic painting, but they possess the necessary qualities, accessibility, and power, to make them appropriate to the proletariat." Rivera, D. (1932) The Revolutionary Spirit in Modem Art, *Modern Quarterly*, 6(3): 56.
[2] See Shapiro, D. (1973). *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, Frederick Ungar Publishing, New York.
[3] Evans, W. (1995). *Icognito*, Eakins Press Foundation, New York, 14.
[4] Johnson, O. (1932, July) *The John Reed Club Convention*. New Masses: 14- 15.
[5] See Klingender, F. D. (1943) *Marxism and Modern Art: An Approach to Social Realism*, Lawrence & Wishart, London; Greenberg, C. (1939). *Avant Garde and Kitsch*. The Partisan Review: 34–49.
[6] See A. Conger Goodyear's *The Museum of Modern Art: The First Ten Years* (MoMA, New York, 1943), Margaret Scolari Barr's "Our Campaigns," in *New Criterion* (Summer, 1987), or Irving Sandler and Amy Newman's (eds.), *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr Jr.*, (Abrams. New York, 1986).
[7] Quotations are culled from Jonathan Harris' *Federal Art and National Culture*, p. 154
[8] Gutman, W. (1932, April 20) Reviews. *The Nation*, 475.
[9] Anonymous (1933, May 13) Reviews. *Art News*, 5.
[10] O'Neal, H. (1976). *A Vision Shared: A Portrait of America 1935–1943, Steidl Verlag*, Brooklyn, 6.
[11] Doud, R. (1964, April 14). *Interview with Ben Shahn*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.
[12] Harris, J. (1987/1988). State Power and Cultural Discourse: Federal Art Project Murals in New Deal USA, *Block 13*: 28-42.
[13] Morse, J. (1944). *Ben Shahn: An Interview*, Magazine of Art, 37(4): 39. Shahn's claim that "it had never been done before" is misleading. An earlier social gadfly, Lewis Hine (1874-1940) used the camera as a didactic tool to encourage social reform of the outrages of child labor. Hine, however, differed from the RA/FSA photographers in that he focused on urban, industrial themes, not the rural or agricultural sectors.
[14] Rosenblum, N. (1984). *A World History of Photography*, Abbeville Press, New York, 377.
[15] Park, M. & Markowitz, G. (1998). *New Deal for Public Art*, Critical Issues in Public Art, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D. C., 128.
[16] Morse, J. (1972). *Ben Shahn*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 136.
[17] Shahn, B. (1956). *The Biography of a Painting*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 40.
[18] This excerpt is from Richard Doud's interview of Shahn on April 14, 1964 for the Archives of American Art. It is reprinted in John Morse's *Ben Shahn*, p. 137.
[19] Morse, J. (1972). *Ben Shahn*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 137-138.
[20] Soby, J. (1947). *Ben Shahn*, Penguin Books, West Drayton, 12-13.
[21] Greenfeld, H. (1998). *Ben Shahn: An Artist's Life*, Random House, New York, 170–172.
[22] *Vacant Lot* and *Handball*, both of 1939, were acquired directly from the Julien Levy exhibition by the Wadsworth Athenaeum and the Museum of Modern Art (New York), respectively.
[23] Lewis, M. (1998, June). *Art, Politics & Clement Greenberg*. Commentary, https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/art-politics-clement-greenberg/
[24] Soby, J. (1947). *Ben Shahn*, Penguin Books, West Drayton, 12.
[25] Shahn, B. (1956). *The Biography of a Painting*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 40.
[26] Prescott, K. (1982). *Prints and Posters of Ben Shahn*, Dover Publications, New York, viii.

ISSN 2055-0030(Print), ISSN 2055-0049(Online)