BEN SHAHN:

HIS PHILOSOPHY, STYLE AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

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by Jeanette Budicin Eskedal

This study originated out of an interest in contemporary American art and a desire to study further an American artist of significance in his time, whose style could be considered original and whose contributions to art seemed important. The subject was not to be an artist who merely followed a previously established style but, rather, one whose painting could "stand alone" and who seemed important both as a molder of taste and style and as an initiator of a personal approach to art. Of the possible candidates, Ben Shahn was chosen because of the unusual quality and character of his work, his long period of influence and importance, and his insistence upon a personal style of expression.

The purpose of this paper is not to discuss in detail a large number of works by the artist, but, rather, to look

carefully at the whole body of his work as it relates to his philosophy of art. I have studied and summarized the important characteristics of the artist's style, traced various outside influences upon the work of the artist, and outlined the development of his style from the thirties to the present. Recognizing the large number of works produced by the artist and seeking the unifying factor of a similar medium, I have limited my study to the paintings of Ben Shahn. This paper is not necessarily presented as new material in the field, but, instead, as a gathering together of pertinent facts from divergent and obscure places into one study for consideration and analysis. I have added my personal findings where I have felt them applicable, but I have also relied heavily upon many authors and reviewers and upon the writings of the artist himself. A small number of plates of Shahn's work are included for the reader's interest, but no attempt has been made to show reproductions of all works mentioned in the study since none are discussed thoroughly and I have felt their inclusion would be of questionable and limited value. It is hoped that this study will prove helpful to those who wish further knowledge concerning the work of Ben Shahn.

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By

Jeanette Budicin Eskedal

A THESIS

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(Note: all plates reproduced in this paper are taken from James Thrall Soby's book, Ben Shahn: Paintings to which I am gratefully indebted. Other paintings mentioned in this paper but not reproduced may be found in same above-mentioned monograph.)

Introduction

Ben Shahn is probably one of the most unusual and significant of contemporary American artists, In a half-century dominated by abstractionists and non-objectivists Shahn has doggedly pursued a realistic style in which subject matter and content are all-important. He insists upon communicating with his contemporaries and upon dealing with themes which pare away the frivolous and lay bare the core of man's being--his thoughts, struggles, and hopes. Such seriousness of purpose has won Shahn a following throughout the world and most major museums and galleries contain examples of his work. A body of written material about the artist is available in divergent bulletins, magazines, and books, but Shahn, himself, writes articulately and has published a large number of books and articles in which he expounds his philosophy of art. Yet, for all the available verbiage concerning the artist, few sources contain a very thorough analysis of the complete body of the artist's work, of his style as a whole, of his development throughout his career, of the influences upon him, and of his personal philosophy of art. This study is presented in an attempt to fill the present void and to bring together literature and information in the field into one place for analysis, as well as to shed new light upon the work of the artist.

Furthermore, as Shahn approaches his seventieth birthday it seems fair to assume that the major bulk of his work has been completed, and, thus, the time is ripe for a thorough look at the development of his life's work.

Artist's Personal Background and History

Before a more careful analysis can be made, a brief summary of the artist's life, background, and work seems necessary. Ben Shahn, born in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1898, migrated to America, and more specifically to Brooklyn, with his Jewish family in 1906. While his Russian early childhood brings Shahn vivid, colorful memories, it was his rugged New York City upbringing and surroundings which molded the artist and still provides him with much of his subject matter. Shahn became a lithographer's apprentice at the age of fourteen and learned the trade by which he was to support himself until he was thirty-two and which was to have great influence upon his style as an artist, particularly upon his drawing. The artist's formal training was at New York University, the City College of New York, and the National Academy of Design, but he probably learned far more about painting on his two trips to Europe in 1925 and 1927. Shahn absorbed and observed a great deal of European culture during his lengthy stays there and came under the influence of past artists such as Giotto and Piero della

Francesco and present ones like Rouault and Dufy. It was a tine of formulating, digesting, and seeking his own identity for the artist. Upon his return to the United States Shahn was painting in a style greatly influenced by European art, and while his first one-man show held at the Downtown Gallery in 1929 was successful with resulting sales, he was not completely satisfied with his work and did not feel that he had yet made his painting style "his own".

Some experimental watercolors on the subject of the Dreyfus case motivated Shahn in 1932 to attempt a series of twenty-three gouaches on the widely-discussed Sacco-Vanzetti case. The series was an immediate success and marked the beginning of Shahn's mature style as an artist. It is in this series of paintings that we first see the profound concern for social conditions, the emotion, and the striking motive and message which were to mark Shahn's work throughout his career. In a similar vein, the artist's next work consisted of a series of paintings on the subject of the case of the labor leader Tom Mooney.

During the early thirties Ben Shahn was commissioned to work on projects for several ill-fated murals. Diego Rivera, who had liked the Sacco-Vanzetti series, employed him as an assistant on the fresco, "Man at the Crossroads", for the RCA Building in Rockefeller Center, New York, but

the mural was destroyed upon completion due to public displeasure. Shahn's paintings on Prohibition for the Public Works of Art Project were never executed into murals but remain in the form of easel paintings. The sketches which he submitted with Lou Block for the corridor of the Riker's Island Penitentiary in New York were accepted by Mayor La Guardia and the Commissioner of Correction but were rejected by the Municipal Art Commission on the grounds of psychological unfitness.[1] These murals, contrasting old and new penal methods, would have been a welcome change from the usual painting of the period in federal buildings, but, fortunately, Shahn was to have his chance at mural paintings in the years immediately following.

In the middle thirties, Shahn was employed by the Farm Security Administration as artist, designer, and photographer. The photographs which he took during this period and his memories of the country through which he traveled and of the people he met have provided and still furnish Shahn with a rich storehouse of images from which to build paintings and details of paintings.

Shahn's first completed mural was done for the Farm

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[1]Philippa Whiting, "Speaking about Art," American Magazine of Art, XXVIII, (August, 1935), 493.

Security Administration for the community center of a federal housing development for garment workers at Roosevelt, New Jersey, the community where he has resided ever since. Following this, the artist and his wife, Bernarda Bryson, were commissioned to do thirteen panels in the main lobby of the Bronx Central Annex Post Office, New York. The subject the artists chose was of workers across America performing their specific tasks under the Whitman quotation, "Democracy rests finally upon us."[1] Shahn's final and best prewar mural entitled "The Meaning of Social Security", the commission for which he won out of a field of 375 artists, was executed in the main corridor of the Federal Security Building, Washington D.C. The paintings represent the finest of American mural painting of the thirties with their direct and uncluttered style, and they were praised for their variety in texture and mood and for their good, yet sombre color.[2]

During the war, Shahn designed posters for the Office of War Information which have served equally well as easel paintings. Shahn also designed posters following the war for the C.I.O. and in 1948 for Henry Wallace's Third Party

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[1]Oliver W. Larkin, Art and Life in America, (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1956), 438.

[2]"Shahn Best of 375," Art Digest, XV, (November 15, 1940), 8.

Movement. Shahn's poster style is direct and forceful as, indeed, is all of his work, whether commercial art or fine art.

From World War II until the present, Ben Shahn has taken many commercial commissions for such concerns as the Columbia Broadcasting Company, the Container Corporation of America, and Time, and he has done illustrations for books both by others and by himself. Throughout this body of work there persists a high degree of workmanship and dedication which makes the works equally at home as "fine art" drawings and paintings or within their original more commercial art settings, and many have easily crossed the line to find their way into private and public collections.

Throughout his career, no matter what may occupy the main bulk of Shahn's time, the artist has found time to do easel paintings. Some of these have been part of series dealing with social and political themes which moved the artist greatly, but others are more individual and personal. During the years from 1939 to 1941, Shahn painted a group of canvases which he called "Sunday paintings", not only because many of them were painted on the day mentioned but also because they embody a more relaxed, lyrical, and personal outlook on the American scene. They show his impressions of the country and people gathered while

photographing for the F.S.A., and they show workers, children, and poor, simple people relaxing, enjoying a moment of leisure.

In a much more somber vein, Shahn's next group of paintings dealt with the loneliness and isolation and destruction following in the wake of World War II. It is the aftermath of war rather than the actual fighting itself which moved the artist. Other themes which have inspired Shahn include the Centralia mine disaster, Scott's Run defendants, and a tenement fire in which all of the children of the negro, Hickmann, died. Shahn's most recent series, began in 1960, is entitled "The Saga of the Lucky Dragon" and was inspired by the incident in which a Japanese fishing boat accidentally wandered into an area of radioactive fallout during an American atomic bomb test in the Pacific. The result was the illness but eventual recovery of members of the crew with the exception of one who died of unknown causes. Shahn used the particular of this incident to express the more universal tragedy of atomic warfare and "the unspeakable tragedy toward which the world's people are moving".[1]

In addition to his paintings, Ben Shahn is well-known for his drawings and graphic works. He has also done sets

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[1]Jean Lipman, What is American in American Art, (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), 95.

for plays and ballets and wall mosaics for Jewish congregations and for Grady High School in Brooklyn. Shahn was selected one of Ten Best Painters by Look magazine in 1948, and in 1954 he was chosen, with Willem de Kooning, to represent American art at the Venice Biennale where he received one of the show's top three prizes. Shahn's fame as an artist has won him summer teaching posts at the Boston Museum School and the University of Colorado, and, in 1956, led to his being named as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University, the lectures from which he has published in book form under the title, The Shape of Content.

In general, then, Ben Shahn is an artist of renown and great proficiency in many different areas of art. He is well-known and widely-admired both through his art works and his written material. Throughout his career Shahn has been uncompromising and a strong defendant of his own beliefs and philosophy of art. In interviews and in his own writings Shahn is extremely articulate and sets forth his philosophy in a scholarly and convincing manner. Thus, we turn to the artist, himself, to discover the beliefs which motivate his painting.

Artist's Philosophy

Shahn's work is serious in intent and digs below the

surface to the important issues in man's existence.

> At some point very early in my life I became absorbed--not in Man's Fate, but rather in Man's State. The question of suffering is an eternal mystery wearing many masks and disguises as well as its true face, but its reality impinges upon us everywhere...Whatever my basic promptings and urges may be, I am aware that the concern, the compassion for suffering--feeling it, formulating it--has been the constant intention of my work since I first picked up a paintbrush.[1]

Shahn is a compassionate artist, dealing with human emotions and man's eternal state of suffering. The artist does not see life as an easy, carefree existence, but one in which a good deal of sadness comes.

> All the wheels of business and advertising are turning night and day to prove the colossal falsehood that America is smiling. And they want me to add my two per cent--Hell, no![2]

Shahn has not been an artist to follow the popular trends of his day, but, instead, he paints according to his deep inner convictions about art and life. Shahn is a fair and honest person and hates unfairness and injustice.

> 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.[3]

Thus, the most persistent and important themes which run

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[1]Lipman, 95.

[2]"Baffling Ben," Time, LVIII (November 5, 1951), 82.

[3]John D. Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," XXXVII (April, 1944), 136.

through Shahn's work from the Sacco-Vanzetti series to the "Saga of the Lucky Dragon" are compassion for human suffering and hatred of injustice no matter where it is found. With such strong feelings dominating the artist's philosophy it is not surprising to find a good body of his work devoted to social and political reform, as well as to sympathy for the common worker or laborer.

Shahn is a humanist and believes in the worth and dignity of man and his culture. Art has no significance for him except as it deals with humanity.

> I find that my own array of values--at least the conscious ones--rotate around the central concept of man as the source of all value. Thus whatever institutions and activities have the avowed purpose of broadening his experience and his self-awareness are particularly dear to me.[1]

The artist feels art cannot free itself of its human origin, and therefore, must deal with human emotions and values. If it does not speak to man, its creator, it has no right to exist.

> I think any artist...will agree that art is the creation of human values. It may have cosmic extension...But however earnestly it reaches out into the never-never land of time-space, it will still always be an evaluation through the eyes of man. It may deny but can

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[1]Ben Shahn, "How an Artist Looks at Aesthetics," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XIII (September, 1954), 50.

never cast off its human origin.[1]

The humanity which concerns Shahn is not a generalized, all-encompassing one, but a humanity composed of individuals with unique characteristics and feelings. The things which make one person different from another are of supreme importance and interest to Shahn.

> Generalities and abstractions and vital statistics had always bored me. Whether in people or in art it was the individual peculiarities that were interesting. One has sympathy with a hurt person, not because he is a generality, but precisely because he is not. Only the individual can imagine, invent, or create. The whole audience of art is an audience of individuals. Each of them comes to the painting or sculpture because there he can be told that he, the individual, transcends all classes and flouts all predictions. In the work of art he finds his uniqueness affirmed.[2]

Thus, Ben Shahn, the individual, desires to communicate through his art to each individual viewer. This is not to say that the artist is not concerned with universal truths for, indeed, he deals with many topics of wider significance, but that he does not forget the uniqueness and peculiar qualities of each person. Shahn uses the universal to illuminate the particular, as well as the particular to

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[1]"Ben Shahn," Magazine of Art, XLII (November, 1949), 266.

[2]Barry Ulanov, The Two Worlds of American Art, The Private and the Popular, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965), 87.

give significance to the universal.

The foundation of Ben Shahn's philosophy of art is that art must communicate to the viewer; that it must have a message. This message he calls "content", and he feels that it is not possible to have art without content, or there is no purpose in art at all. Shahn works on the assumption that most people "are interested in the hopes, fears, dreams and tragedies of other people, for these are the things that life is made of."[1] He further states that "there is no moral reason why art ought to go on if it has nothing further to express."[2]

Demanding communication as he does, Ben Shahn requires, first of all, that his works communicate to him. If they do this, he feels certain that they will also speak to others.[3] Apparently, he feels that he shares the same basic emotions with the rest of humanity, and what moves him will also move them. Shahn is conscious of composition, line, shapes, color, and all the other elements which the artist uses to create a composition which is pleasing in "form", but he says form alone is not enough. Form provides the tools by

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[1] Selden Rodman, Conversations with Artists, (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1957), 192.

[2] George Biddle, The Yes and No of Contemporary Art, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 175.

[3] Rodman, 191.

which the artist is able to communicate, but content is still the important thing in art. Form is "only the shape taken by content", says Shahn, and "there is absolutely no such thing as form without content. Form always has content of some kind, even though it may be only colored pigment."[1]

What then does Ben Shahn think of the current trend in non-objective art?

> But non-objective art denies all values and content except the machinery with which it is put together. I have heard it claimed that non-objective art is pure emotion. Well, that is pure mystique. Emotion is not abstract. It always has content.[2]

Clearly, then, Shahn refuses to accept any "art" which does not have content, which does not speak to its viewer. The artist, however, does not reject the discoveries in composition and color--or "form" as he would call it-- of the abstract and non-objective artists, for his own work has been greatly influenced by them, but he simply means that they do not go far enough--that they have elevated what should have been merely a tool to the whole purpose of art.

> In the case of non-objective art, I feel that the only experience the picture can give is the perception of disassociated form. Any allusive

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[1]"Ben Shahn", Magazine of Art, 266.

[2]"A Symposium on How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture," Interiors, CX (May, 1951), 102.

> quality the work may have is purely in the eye of the beholder. The impact of shapes and colors and lines, their interplay, their organization on a canvas are the sum total of the picture. These qualities are indeed the indispensable equipment of the artist; without mastery of them, he cannot create effectively. They are as basic as skilful handling of prosody is to the poet. But they are not the stuff of man's ultimate values. To make them the object of painting seems to me to question the worth of art itself.[1]

Thus, we return to the artist's conviction that art must deal with "man's ultimate values". "It is the mission of art to remind man from time to time that he is human,"[2] says Shahn, and his work certainly reminds man of his humanity. Art, to Shahn, cannot be separated from life, and it is not art, but life, which is Shahn"s primary interest. He is interested in art as a way of arriving at the truth about life and only "in so far as it enables me to express what I feel about life."[3]

The artist, if he is to have significance, cannot paint in a vacuum, in his own secluded "ivory tower" studio away from the people and issues of his time. Thus, Ben Shahn makes trips from his Roosevelt, New Jersey home into New York

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[1]"Ben Shahn," Magazine of Art, 269.

[2]Masters of Modern Art, ed. Alfred H. Barr (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1958), 162.

[3]Selden Rodman, Portrait of the Artist as an American (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1951), 32.

City or across the country or to Europe in order to keep abreast with the life and happenings of his age. Shahn feels that the artist cannot afford to be uninvolved in the great issues of his time; that he must do something to help alleviate the evils around him. He feels that the artist should have "social significance" in his painting to be great today, and that the "significance of his work depends upon whether it expands the scope and perceptions of the people who behold it."[1]

Therefore, it appears that Shahn believes art should not only communicate but also uplift and educate.

> The artist must operate on the assumption that the public consists in the highest order of individual, that he is civilized, cultured, and highly sensitive both to emotional and intellectual contexts. And while the whole public most certainly does not consist in that sort of individual, still the tendency of art is to create such a public--to lift the level of perceptivity, to increase and enrich the average individual's store of values.[2]

Thus, the artist becomes a molder of values and tastes within his public and bears a responsibility to do his task well.

Shahn feels that there is no subject which is unworthy

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[1]Rodman, Portrait of the Artist..., 28.

[2]Shahn,"How an Artist Looks...", 51.

for the artist to undertake as long as his goals and objectives are clear, and he does not forget his task of communicating with and educating his public. The artist's task, clearly, is not a light-hearted, carefree whim of fancy, but a serious and important job. Shahn feels that the artist chooses a subject to paint because "you like it a lot, or else because you hate it."[1] A subject about which the artist is neutral apparently is not good material upon which to build a painting.

Ben Shahn rejects artists who capitalize upon the public's desire for entertainment and mass-produce works for their box office appeal. His concept of creativity is "that of the ego which knows in its creative process no limits except those imposed by the medium."[2] Therefore, creativity can be applied equally as effectively to commercial art as to fine art, and to Shahn there is no difference for both should be approached with the same interest and standards. "There is no line of demarcation where the one ends and the other begins,"[3] is his philosophy, and his works bear this out,

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[1]Alexander Eliot, Three Hundred Years of American Painting (New York: Time Incorporated, 1957), 239.

[2]"Ben Shahn," Magazine of Art, 269.

[3]Leo Lionni, "Ben Shahn," Graphis, II (November, 1962), 472.

easily serving dual purposes in both fine and commercial art.

Thus, Ben Shahn's philosophy encompasses all of his art, and his works are related to each other by a sameness of spirit and purpose. The artist's philosophy of art and of life are the same; his personality is integrated with his work; and there is no disparity between his beliefs and his actions.

Artist's Media and Method of Working

Ben Shahn's painting style is distinctive and personal and is firmly based upon and dependent on drawing. Shahn reportedly spends two hours a day drawing in his studio "to learn to draw always better and better",[1] and drawings are as important to the artist as larger, finished paintings because they are "still dictated by the same broad experience or personal understanding which molds the larger work."[2] Understandably, then, Shahn makes a large number of preliminary sketches and drawings before he ever picks up a brush to begin a painting, and many of these drawings are sent to his dealer, The Downtown Gallery, for sale along with the finished painting. The artist does a number of

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[1]Ben Shahn, Love and Joy About Letters (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1963), 11.

[2]Ben Shahn, The Biography of a Painting (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Museum, Harvard University, 1956), 9.

sketches for each figure he plans to use in the final composition, "abstracting each one from the preceding one."[1] After he is reasonably satisfied with each figure alone, he begins to do sketches in which he works on the relationship of each figure to the others, and, finally he does drawings in which he concentrates on the balance and relationships of the composition as a whole. Here he begins to consider details and objects surrounding the figures and the relation of the figures to the background. Shahn usually does one completed, formal drawing in which the composition is finalized and is in the form which he expects to use in the completed painting. Being a creative and sensitive artist, Shahn, of course, may make additional changes in the composition as he progresses on the painting, for he also has the relationships of color, value, and texture to consider as he works. As the work progresses on the sketches and painting, Shahn often turns them upside down "to check abstractly the validity of color and composition...It shows up the differences between just an illustration and a well-designed picture."[2]

Drawing and painting for Ben Shahn are not relaxing, for

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[1]John D. Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," Magazine of Art, XXXVII (April, 1944), 138.

[2]Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," 138.

he is constantly struggling, not only with the relationships of color and composition, but also with the emotions and message which are always present in his work and give it its distinctive character. Shan speaks of this creative process as agony until he finally finds a "hook" upon which the whole picture seems to hang; then, the whole piece seems to come together and make sense; and the following work is less tumultuous and more harmonious for the artist.[1]

> When I am working...I work in a fever. It is agony for everyone, including myself. The criteria are inevitable, I want to get the emotional empact. The esthetics are but tools to express the human drama. The work goes on for from three weeks to two months, but I try to make the painting look as if it were done in two days. When I get to a point where added work would not fulfill the original concept, but weaken it, there I stop--even if not finished; I feel I can no longer go on.[2]

When the work nears completion, Shahn will lie back on the couch in his studio and study it for hours deciding on the last delicate refinements and alterations to be made, and after the painting is finished it will be kept around his house or studio for a number of days, as if he wishes to absorb and digest it before it is sent off to his dealer in

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[1]Thomas B. Hess, "Ben Shahn Paints a Picture," Art News, IIL (May, 1949), 55.

[2]Ralph M. Pearson, The Modern Renaissance in American Art (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 122.

New York.

Ben Shahn does not like to be watched when working, perhaps because painting is such a personal experience for him. He uses both hands interchangeably when painting, but he draws with his right hand only, because "drawing is closer to writing."[1] He uses tempera exclusively in his work because he says he likes "painting that is tight and clear and under control,"[2] and he feels that oil paint makes it to easy for an artist to cover over his mistakes. Shahn mixes his own tempera and adds different amounts of water at will depending upon the painting effects he desires. His paint consists of pigment added to a mixture of gum, honey, and glycerin with carbolic acid added as a preservative. He keeps the paint in samll jars by his desk, always ready for immediate use, and he is able to achieve a wide range of textures by adding egg white and varying the quality of water.[3]

Shahn, too impatient to wait for oil paint to dry, is able to work rapidly with his chosen medium and to arrive at the flat areas of color which are so typical of his work.

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[1]Rodman, Portrait of the Artist..., 81.

[2]Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," 136.

[3]Hess, "Ben Shahn Paints...," 55.

His ground is a board, covered with paper or muslin and coated with gesso.[1] His drawing is transferred to the gesso surface, the colors are roughly blocked in in tempera, and the painting is begun. Ben Shahn has arrived at the combination of media and materials which best suits his temperament and style.

Characteristics of the Artist's Style

Beside Ben Shahn's lifelong concern with injustice and his compassion for suffering, there have been certain themes or subjects which have been of special interest to him. His primary concern has always been mankind, the average person, or more specifically, the common laborer. With Shahn's profound respect for human life, few of his paintings are completely void of human form, and even those small number in which no figure appears are quite mindful of their human context. The faces of men are important for here it is that we read their emotions, and Ben Shahn frequently enlarges the heads of his figures in order to increase the emotional impact. His figures' facial expressions set the mood for his paintings, and the eyes frequently are the most expressuve feature of his highly expressive faces.

Hands are also very important in Shahn's work. His

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[1]Hess, "Ben Shahn Paints...," 55.

interest in their expressive qualities goes as far back as 1931 where we find hands playing an important part in illustrations he did for the Haggadah, as well as in the Sacco-Vanzetti series of the following year. Throughout the body of his work we find that he has exaggerated the hands of his figures in order to obtain an emotional impact. The artist tells of his interest in hands and the way in which he practiced them.

> I became fascinated with the expressiveness of hands in their many different positions, and how representative they are of people. I tend to judge people by their hands. Quite early I realized that a lot of artists shy away from drawing hands--putting them behind the back of a figure and other such ways of sliding out of doing them. And I was determined to learn how to draw hands in every position.

The hands which Ben Shahn draws are not the smooth, delicate, pampered hands of the rich, but the strong calloused, soiled hands of the worker. They are hands which have been enlarged and strengthened by manual labor. His hands, indeed, tell us a great deal about the people he paints.

Another love of Shahn's has been music, musicians and musical instruments. These subjects began to appear in his work just prior to World War II and have provided a lyrical element ever since. Shahn's musicians are not members of

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[1]Betty Chamberlain, "Ben Shahn," Art News, XXXXVI (October, 1947), 55.

concert orchestras and his instruments are not of the caliber made by Stradivarius, but, instead, they again are common people playing instruments with nicks and dents and probably off key, this time caught in a moment of relaxation spent in music. As might be expected of Shahn, his musicians are not sitting back having a carefree time of it, but even in the production of music, they are working and struggling to produce their few notes or chords. Their brows are furrowed, as in "The Violin Player"; they grip firmly onto their instruments; and their eyes stare off into space in deep concentration.

> Song, I observe, does not issue from an untroubled face; quite the contrary, the beautiful sounds, the subtleties and delicacies, the minors, the accidentals, all require an intense concentration on the part of the singer. That concentration produces a facial expression nearing agony.[1]

Thus, Shahn, the artist who deals with man's struggles, sees even in the seemingly untroubled element of music a good deal of effort and agony.

From the time he was a lithographer's apprentice until the present day, Ben Shahn has had a fascination for alphabets, letters, and type. Many of his paintings contain signs and/or lettering, and in the last ten years he has done hand

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[1]Shahn, "How an Artist Looks...," 48.

lettering for the texts of several books which he has illustrated. In the lithographer's workshop Shahn became greatly interested in the different varieties of type which were available to express different moods and feelings. In the different styles of alphabets he appreciated the "wonderful interrelationships, the rhythm of line as letter moves into letter."[1] He liked letters not only for the things they were able to spell out, but also for their own inherent beauty and feeling. When travleing for the Farm Security Administration, be became intrigued by the hand-lettered signs done by amateurs which were "a folk art of great quality, and one that was extremely amusing as well";[2] he took many photos of these signs; and he incorporated many of these signs into paintings "as an integral part of the work, not as something separate."[3] Shahn loves the letters themselves as if they were friends, and to him they are exactly that. Each has its own peculiarities and personality.

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[1]Shahn, Love and Joy About Letters, 13.

[2]Shahn, Love and Joy About Letters, 15.

[3]Shahn, Love and Joy About Letters, 17.

> I began to use letters now, not as local color and not as subordinate parts of paintings, but for their own sake, for their beauty, their own meaning. Words and letters may amplify and enrich the meaning of painting. They are at the same time independent and integral to the painting, and a contrapuntal element. They lend force and structure to the work, but they must be fully developed; they must, I think, be knowledgeable in themselves. A badly done letter is a pitiful thing in a painting and degrades it as a fully understood letter may enhance it and complement it.[1]

So it is that lettering plays an important role in the art of Ben Shahn. The love of letters has become such an integral part of his artistic style that even his drawings remind us of some sort of mystic heiroglyphic: a sort of secret writing which only the informed can decipher.

There are many general qualities and peculiarities of the art style of Ben Shahn which can be seen throughout the body of his work and which may be considered distinguishing characteristics of his style. As might be expected of a former photographer, Shahn has an interest in details which is refined and minute. This almost photographic attention to details enables the artist to depict the little things which make one person different form another and to provide the props and background most suitable to each character portrayed. Ben Shahn keeps a large file of photographs in

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[1]Shahn, Love and Joy About Letters, 17.

his studio because "photographs give those details of forms that you thing you'll remember but don't."[1] He refers to these photos often, and many times one or two of them will form the basis for a painting. His method of working is to balance large areas of broad, over-all impact with areas of fine detail for added interest.

> After I've got the relationship of forms working, then I go back to details. They've got to be right too. There's a difference in the way a twelve dollar coat wrinkles from the way a seventy-five dollar coat wrinkles.[2]

For all his interest in realism, Shahn does not function merely as a human camera, mechanically recording what he sees. Rather, all forms presented carry his own peculiar emotional flavor, for Shahn is not an artist who merely observes--he comments. Neither is Shahn's interest in details a slavish one in which each minute item is carried out in its fullest detail, but, rather, Shahn chooses the details which enhance, in the best way possible, the emotional impact of the painting.

> Don't try to paint every detail to achieve realism. One such detail carefully carried out will serve the imagination for all the rest.[3]

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[1]Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," 139.

[2]Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," 138.

[3]Rodman, Portrait of the Artist..., 74.

Sometimes details are added to form a contrast to other details in the picture. When details are used, Shahn paints them convincingly, sometimes resorting to the use of a magnifying glass to insure that they are properly rendered.

Among the most telling of the details used by the artist are those found in the architectural backgrounds which he sets behind figures. He uses architecture and architectural ornamentation in full detail to tell the viewer something about the people who live in these buildings, because he says, "whatever they have for decoration on their houses is very revealing about them."[1] Thus, architectural backgrounds are vital markers in the story the artist tells. Details are important in a Shahn painting and should be studied carefully; they are the keys to the character and emotional tempo of the people depicted, and as such, play an important role in the art style of Ben Shahn.

Shahn's paintings frequently have an overpowering sense of loneliness and isolation. Single figures appear in front of flat backgrounds like actors in front of stage sets, as in "Vacant Lot". (Plate III) When groups of figures appear in one composition, they often seem isolated from each other almost as if each existed in his own vacuum, unaware of the others' existence. Even when figures seem to relate to each

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[1]Chamberlain, "Ben Shahn," 55.

other, there appears to be an isolating body of air between them which seems to block conversation and allows communication only through expressions, gestures, and music. Among the most united in feeling of Shahn's groups of figures are his lovers and brothers, both drawn together by strong emotional ties, and his musicians, brought into a unity of feeling by the common bond of music. But for the greater part of Shahn's figures, the world is a lonely, almost threatening, place which must be faced alone; each man has his own problems and struggles and each must make his own independent decisions.

Shahn paints with boldness and directness, and his works read like posters or murals. His forms are generally flat and he makes little use of three-dimensional modeling. Sometimes perspective is used, but his color and textured painting technique tend to flatten the areas in which perspective would lead the eye into the distance. The viewer nearly always feels that he can reach out and touch the farthest most point in the background with little effort if he were to extend his arm into the space of the picture plane. This flatness of painting technique used by Shahn enables the viewer to concentrate more completely one the main subject of the painting--the emotional context or

message--rather than distracting him with sweeping vistas into the far distance.

Ben Shahn is an artist of contrasts and opposites. He likes to play one element in a painting against another which is completely different. This play back and forth points up the peculiarities which make people human and different from each other. Shahn contrasts the large and small, the light and dark, the crude and the finished, the smiling and the sad, and he likes to mix two-dimensional and three-dimensional elements in the same picture. If given the opportunity he will "have three vanishing points in one plane, or a half-dozen in three planes."[1] This use of divergent, conflicting elements gives Shahn's work a varied quality which keeps the viewer's attention and often makes him smile. This play back and forth keeps a balance in his compositions which make them work together as pleasing and complete units.

One form of contrast which Shahn frequently employs, like Shakespeare, is the use of comic relief in serious situations. Shahn's social comment is serious, but it is never bitter. He does not point an accusing finger and condemn the objects of his satire to destruction, but, instead, his mood is wry and sardonic.

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[1]Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," 138.

> My type of social painting makes people smile. The height of the reaction is when the emotions of anger, sympahty, and humor all work at the same time. That's what I try to do--play one against the other, trying to keep a balance.[1]

Indeed, Ben Shahn's works are not as devoid of humor and joy as some critics would like us to believe, but various emotions are present and each has its place in working out the balance of the whole body of feeling. A description of his work which Shahn likes and which shows this strange combination of feelings in his works is "hardboiled and beautiful".[2]

Shahn is most frequently classified with those artists who paint in the style of Social Realsim. As an artist who dislikes labels because they make things too simple and are often misleading, Shahn cannot be expected to enjoy being classified as a social realist, and he does not. However, perhaps a closer look at the style will reveal some important areas of affinity with the work of Shahn. Social Realsim has been defined as follows.

> ...a movement of particular force during the 1930's...a form of expressionism in which emphasis was placed upon the relationship of

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[1]Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," 138.

[2]James Thrall Soby, Contemporary Painters, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1948), 49.

> man to man, which revealed oppression, injustice, and strife, and which dealt with such themes as war, labor, and political corruption...was stimulated by the Depression at home and political and social events abroad.[1]

Ben Shahn has been described by the same author as "the most consistent investigator of this approach and concern in painting."[2] Certainly the previous definition applies very clearly to Shahn's work, which specifically deals with the relationships of men to each other and with "oppression, injustice, and strife." Also, the themes of "war, labor, and political corruption" have been ones of particular interest to Ben Shahn since the time of the Sacco-Vanzetti series.

Shahn's political leanings, particularly in the thirties when he had some connections with Communist-dominated organizations,[3] have appeared to be to the left, another of the characteristics given as typical of social realists.[4] Shahn seems to follow the philosophy of his teacher, Diego Rivera,

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[1]William H. Gerdts, Jr., Painting and Sculpture in New Jersey (The New Jersey Historical Series: Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1964), XXI, 237.

[2]Gerdts, Painting and Sculpture..., 237.

[3]Rodman, Portrait of the Artist..., 99.

[4]Peter and Linds Murray, A Dictionary of Art and Artists (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1959), 301.

that "art should be propaganda",[1] and yet his form of propaganda is tempered and softened by his esthetics. Shahn's political leanings seem more difficult to determine in the forties, and critics cannot seem to decide whether his general direction was left or right.[2] Rather than to assign the artist to a particular political camp, it seems more likely that Shahn has avoided whole-hearted espousal of any specific political party or group, but, instead, he has acted throughout his life upon specific and personal social convictions--feeling consistently called upon to speak out against injustice, no matter where it was found, regardless of political connections.

Thus, Ben Shahn seems frequently to choose topics for paintings which would classify him as a social realist. While the artist's choice of subject matter seems conclusively to place him within this school, his painting technique varies a great deal from that of the main bulk of social realists. Shahn is perhaps the most sophisticated of the lot. His compositions are harmoniously related; he is less obvious, allowing subtleties to carry his message; and he has not been limited to provincial concerns of only regional interest.

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[1] I. J. Belmont, "Exhibitions in New York," Art News, XXXI (May 13, 1933), 5.

[2] Rodman, Portrait of the Artist..., 37.

Shahn seems to have had the widest vision, the greatest variety of technique and subject, and the most far-reaching influence. Shahn, always an American in outlook and context, seems to go beyond the other social realists of his country to have importance on the international scene.

> Shahn's American character is that of the contemporary international man whose examination of his own country and his own time must take into consideration the character of the world of which his country is inevitably a part, the man whose patriotism is not blind faith, but a matter of the individual's obligation to see clearly, to fight injustice and corruption and stupidity wherever they infect national life.[1]

Shahn chooses subjects which can have bearing upon people anywhere, and he goes beyond the limitations of Social Realism as a school and speaks to humanity as a whole.

In choosing a specific event to paint, Shahn must feel that the emotions and circumstances involved will have a significance and meaning beyond the particular time and place.

> ...it became imperative that the whole affair be crystallized, made emotional and perhaps beautiful in its way, so that it would become a part of the general imagination, become immediate, symbolic, and clear.[2]

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[1]John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 519.

[2]Lipman, What is American..., 95.

Symbolism and allegory have played an ever-increasing and more important role in the painting of Ben Shahn. Since World War II the artist has become more and more "interested in symbols as such, to sense the latent power of the great archetypal images that are probably only half-recognized consciously, but are recognized instinctively."[1] An example of this tendency in his work may be seen in the painting, "Allegory", in which the particulars of the Hickmann fire inspired the universal of the symbolic fire-beast who goes beyond the threat and horror of fire itself to a more devastating and ominous force threatening to destroy all of mankind.

Shahn's use of color has an unusual, chalky character to it which makes it distinctively his own. Colors relate to each other well, and each seems to contain some of all the other colors used in the composition. In many pictures the colors become pastel-like through the addition of white, and are very close in value, with dark lines offering the only contrast. Shahn makes use of the contrasting effects of complements and primaries, but they are, again, often toned with white or gray. His faces and skin tones are frequently very chalky and death-like, being painted most often

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[1]Lipman, What is American..., 95.

in a bluish, grayish, or pinkish-white, and they certainly deny the "flesh and blood" quality of the skin of most live people. When Shahn's faces are more colorful, they still are not in the tone which would commonly be considered a "flesh tone", but, instead, he paints them a rather deep and brilliant orange. Clearly, then, the artist wishes to avoid flesh tones and substitutes colors for faces which are less familiar. This is done for the sake of emotional impact and helps to carry along the message of his paintings.

Shahn makes frequent use of deep and luminous reds and blues which are bright and clear and "read" well. Few paintings exist by the artist in which both of these colors are absent, and they are frequently emphasized by the addition of black accents in the composition. Ben Shahn's use of color is often arbitrary, being completely unrelated to the colors of objects in nature, as in his "Nocturne" in which bright orange faces, park bench railings, and tree branches dominate the painting. Shahn is not bound by nature, but uses colors freely to enchance the emotional impact of the picture, and his color is often as arbitrary as that of the Fauves or the German Expressionists.

Shahn's use of color is flat and poster-like and his forms appear almost as if cut from paper, yet he is able to

achieve subtle color modulations within the firmly defined areas of his forms. His color is applied in a thin manner, with no actual texture built up, but through uneven, almost blotchy brush strokes he is able to simulate a survace texture. He is, unlike his contemporaries the Abstract Expressionists, uninterested in the brush stroke per se, but only as the uneven application of paint enlivens the painting and helps to strengthen the visual impact.

Shahn's use of color is bold and unusual. He has been greatly criticized from many sides for his "messy and monotonously flat" color[1], for his failure to use broken color to achieve "sparkling vibration",[2] for the way he reduces form to a "thin veil of color"[3], and for his "use of 'bad' color combinations such as brown and blue (and) pasty near-whites for skin color."[4] In short, Shahn is criticized for breaking some of the established rules of art and for doing things which"are not done in mature works of art."[5] He is

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[1]Ralph M. Pearson, "Ben Shahn at the Modern," Art Digest, XXII (December 1, 1947), 36.

[2]Pearson, "Ben Shahn at the Modern," 36.

[3]Ralph M. Pearson, The Modern Renaissance in American Art (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 120.

[4]Pearson, The Modern Renaissance..., 122.

[5]Pearson, The Modern Renaissance..., 122.

considered to be amateur and crude by some because of his use of distortion and bold, raw colors, but nearly every significant artist of our century has been criticized on similar grounds of breaking with the past. Shahn does not deny the validity of these value judgments, but, instead, he states,

> As to 'crudeness' and 'raw colors' and the like, I believe that at times the crude areas of a painting have a positive quality--and I use them, consciously approving what feeling demanded.[1]

Therefore, as has been true in many other areas of Shahn's art style, it seems that the artist uses color consciously for the specific feeling he wishes to achieve.

The last characteristic of Ben Shahn's art style to be mentioned is his heavy reliance upon drawing. Shahn is one of our century's greatest draughtsmen; his use of line is descriptive and energetic. His paintings are greatly dependent upon and influenced by his drawing, and many of his painted forms are outlined as if with pen and ink. His drawings make use of many types of lines, both thick and thin, and Shahn can convey a good deal of feeling with a few simple lines. His use of line, as with painting, is economical and direct. His line is often so spiky that

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[1]Pearson, The Modern Renaissance..., 122.

much of his work appears as if it could be reproduced in wrought iron. Each individual line has its own peculiarities, but each fits harmoniously into the contrast and balance of lines which form the drawing as a whole. Shahn's drawings, like his paintings, are well-integrated yet dependent upon contrasts for liveliness and enrichment. Descriptive drawing, like all of the other characteristics of his art style, is used by Ben Shahn as a tool by which he tells his story and conveys his feelings about mankind. Thus, Shahn's style of working is closely and completely aligned with his philosophy of art.

Influences Upon the Artist's Style

Shahn, like nearly every other artist before him has been greatly influenced in his style of painting by various elements and incidents in his background and experience and by certain other artists and schools of art. We cannot imagine a more appropriate period for Shahn, the painter of man's struggles and suffering, to have painted than our own hapless, peaceless, disturbed century, and thus we observe that Shahn is a product of his own time, both an observer of it and a commentator upon it. That he was greatly influenced by the period in which he lived and lives seems unquestionable, for the great issues of his times are the subjects of his paintings.

> My tropism toward suffering may have become set during the Depression--I'm not sure about that, but it was certainly sharpened during the war. As the post-war period drew out, with its sense of aimlessness and lack of destination, I began to feel that suffering was innate in man.[1]

Shahn has reacted to and made comments upon the life of his time much as his forerunners, Hogarth, Daumier, and George Grosz did in their particular periods in history.

Some obvious and expected influences upon Shahn's style have been mentioned earlier and come from his background and early experiences. Shahn's hatred of injustice began when his rabbai told him a story which seemed unfair to the young boy whose home was still in Russia, but this hatred was certainly strengthened by the hard life his family lived and by the things he observed in Brooklyn. City life left a strong and permanent impression upon the young Shahn, and he was never quite able to escape from it. City architecture forms the background of many of his paintings, and city-dwellers are frequently the subjects. Shahn's special feeling for the working class no doubt stems from his early associations with members of this level of society.

Not to be discounted, however, is the not so strong, yet ever distantly present influence of Shahn's early childhood

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[1]Lipman, What is American..., 95.

in Russia. The atmosphere of folklore and festival of his small village crops up now and then in his work and lends to it a certain surface atmosphere of gaiety and richness of detail, particularly in his later paintings, which seem to parallel the work of Marc Chagall.[1] As recently as 1962, Shahn did a work entitled "A Childhood Memory" in which he depicts a Russian village,giving evidence to the fact that elements from the Russian childhood of Ben Shahn are still influencing his art style.

The artist's Jewish upbringing has provided him upon occasion with subjects for illustrations and works of art, and his early familiarity with the Hebrew alphabet instilled in him the beginnings of his love of letters.[2] We have seen that the artist's experience in the lithographer's workshop brought his early interest in alphabets and type into full bloom. Also, as a lithogrpahic engraver he had learned to work in a precise way, cutting the lines that he made against the resistant material of the stone, and when he turned to drawing, even with a brush and ink, he found that "this chiseled sort of line had become a necessity" and that "the

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[1] Soby, Contemporary Painters, 42.

[2] Shahn, Love and Joy About Letters, 5.

line retained that style."[1] Even in his painting, Shahn found that the influence of lithogrpahy had done much to shape his style.

> ...in my painting I found the influence of my early experience very strong, for I loved--and still love--the clear patterning of forms, the balance and movement of shapes and the sense of major and minor theme of which I had become so conscious during my early youth.[2]

Thus, many of the characteristics of Shahn's style, such as flat forms, directness, simplicity, precise line, and the "readability" of his compositions have their origin in his period of lithographic training and experience.

The years which Ben Shahn spent as photographer for the Farm Security Administration were also influential upon his style. He, of course, became interested in photographs and began to use them more and more as structures upon which to build paintings, and his present photo files, containing many photographs taken during this period, will bear out this influence. Equally as important were the memories he had of his travels for F.S.A. through the Mid-West and South, which provide raw material for works of art.

Diego Rivera, the great Mexican muralist, was to have

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[1]Shahn, Love and Joy About Letters, 15.

[2]Shahn, Love and Joy About Letters, 15.

some effect upon Shahn's work, and particularly upon his murals, when Ben worked under him on the ill-fated Rockefeller Center murals. Shahn undoubtedly learned a great deal from the flat, direct, bold, and well-related compositions in fresco by the distinguished Mexican, and the American was impressed with Rivera's convincing social comment and his use of art as propaganda. Rivera cited the primitive Rousseau as the modern artist who had the most influence upon him, and, perhaps it was the "douanier's happy combination of naive distortion, static confrontation and intensely realized detail that Rivera passed along to Shahn."[1]

Shahn's two trips to Europe opened a whole new world of art to him, and there he observed and digested the work of the revolutionaries of the modern art movement. He saw the work of many contemporary artists not yet influencing style in America but already great in Europe, and two, in particular, impressed him during these early years. The artist whom he liked the best was Rouault, and Shahn's work came immediately under his influence.[2] Perhaps the Frenchman's use of luminous color and bold, black outline are elements which are still present in Shahn's work today; certainly his use of

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[1]Rodman, Portrait of the Artist..., 103.

[2]Art U.S.A. Now, ed. Lee Nordness (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), I, 82.

red and blue with black dividing lines reminds us of Rouault. Shahn, somewhat surprisingly, was also impressed with the work of Dufy, whose decorative use of line and flat, arbitrary color can be seen in Shahn's art style.

Ben Shahn did not adapt as his own any one style which he observed among his contemporaries in Europe, but instead he has been influenced by the modern movement as a whole and has chosen certain elements of it to incorporate into his style. While often called a realist, Shahn's art style shows a good deal of influence from the abstract school in such areas as his arbitrary use of color, his use of flat, surface color and form, his use of distortion, and his use of geometric and abstract shapes.

During his second trip to Europe, Shahn came under the influence of another school of art, the "tight, hard patterning" of the Florentine School.[1] Giotto was his favorite of the group, and Shahn appreciated the Italian's flat, controlled use of forms which were forceful and direct. They spoke their message clearly, and Shahn wished to incorporate this kind of direct communication into his own work. Giotto's work is characterized by flat figures with emotions written

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[1]"Shahn Feels Deeply and Sees Clearly," Art News, XLIII (November 15, 1944), 18.

on their faces, soft, chalky pastel colors, and flat, simple stage set backgrounds--all, interestingly enough, present in the mature work of Ben Shahn.

Another artist whom Shahn reveres greatly and who has had influence upon his art style is Paul Klee. Shahn's nervous, skipping line owes much to the drawing of the Swiss artist. Klee's imaginative use of line and color has created many strange, unusual, and whimsical creatures which are highly original and personal. Shahn admires this creative quality in Klee's work and states, "Where content is highly subjective and personal new forms emerge. That is what Klee ought to mean to other artists."[1] Shahn, the individual, enjoys methods of expression which are unusual and original, and he has incorporated elements from the work of Klee into his own style, particularly in his more recent work. Shahn's flat use of color and subtle color gradations remind us of the paintings of Klee, and in such works as "Age of Anxiety" and "The Physicist" Shahn uses delicately modulated and related color squares which suggest strongly the influence of Klee. The Swiss artist's use of composition and his pleasure in surface pattern can be found in Shahn's work.

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[1]Henry Geldzahler, American Painting in the Twentieth Century (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1965), 113.

"That Friday: Yaizu" by Shahn brings to mind various village and town scenes by Klee, and Shahn's "Kuboyama" (Plate VI) reminds us of similar heads by Klee. Clearly, Paul Klee has had an important influence upon both the painting and drawing of Ben Shahn.

When surveying the work of Shahn before 1950 one cannot help but notice some strong and convincing similarities between his work and that of Surrealism. Perhaps because of his admiration for Klee's work, probably because he took special notice of Chirico when writing an article about his 1935 show at the Matisse Gallery for Art Front, and certainly because of his closeness of spirit and intention with the Surrealist artists who delved into the inner side of man's feelings and emotions, Shahn came under a strong influence from Surrealism, and many striking resemblances may be seen in his work. Shahn's use of void, airless landscape backgrounds with blue, cloudless skies seems to derive from the Surrealist world as does his juxtaposition of strange and seemingly unrelated and uncomplementary details. Shahn's figures sometimes stare off into space in a detached manner, looking at neither the viewer nor their companions, almost as if transfixed in some sort of Surrealist dream world of the subconscious. As we have noted, Shahn's compositions are frequently imbued with a supreme sense of loneliness and

isolation seemingly awaiting impending doom, much as in Chirico's "Melancholy and Mystery of a Street". As with Surrealism, Shahn's use of symbolism and his intended meaning at times seems unclear and difficult to determine, largely because it is personal. Shahn's work, as with Surrealism, is intended to deepen our awareness of ourselves and of others; Shahn makes us aware of our emotions and feelings, and Surrealism directs us to our subconscious. It seems quite clear that Surrealism has had a very formative influence upon the art style of the artist, but Surrealism, to Shahn, was too impersonal and incomplete.

> But the great failure of all such art, at least in my own view, lies in the fact that man's most able self is his conscious self--his intending self. The psychological view can at best, even assuming that it were accurate, tell us what man is in spite of himself..But the values of man, if he has any at all, reside in his intentions, in the degree to which he has moved away from the brute, in his intellect at its peak and in his humanity at its peak.[1]

Thus, Shahn was able to "pick and choose" those elements in the style of Surrealsim which best suited his own philosophy of art without coming under the influence of the entire school.

In the last twenty years a freer, looser, more painterly technique can be seen in Shahn's works. This new tendency

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[1]Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 51.

is found, in particular, in his background and reminds us very strongly of Abstract Expressionism. For example, in his "Portrait of Dag Hammerskjold" the background above the figure could easily stand alone as a painting in the Abstract Expressionist style. Shahn cannot accept the philosophy of this school of art, for to him it is without content, yet, he has been influenced by its painting style which he has found pleasing.

Throughout his career Shahn has taken, whether consciously or subconsciously, various characteristics of the style of different artists and schools of art and made them his own. In every case Shahn does not borrow directly but integrates each item into his own style and philosophy of art. He is an artist who has painted according to his convictions despite the current trends in art, and his style remains highly personal and expressive. His influence upon other artists has been widespread, both in America and Europe, and commercial artists, in particular, have ardently followed his style.[1] Among American painters Andrew Wyeth seems the most noteworthy of those influenced by Shahn. Wyeth's themes have picked up the "sense of loneliness and of

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[1]Art News, LVIII (April, 1959), 17.

spiritual malaise in the American scene" that has typified Shahn, and Wyeth uses Shahn's method of appealing to our sense of fantasy by "setting a figure starkly against an intricately embroidered expanse of nature."[1] Shahn, therefore, seems significant in his time as an artist of original ideas who copies none and influences many.

Development of the Artist's Style

Ben Shahn's style of painting has not remained constant throughout the bulk of his work, but it has changed and developed as the artist, himself, has changed and developed in his ideas about painting.

> The changes that an artist's work undergoes are the efforts that he makes to get closer to his fundamental ideas. They are the efforts to formulate in a visual language or, if you prefer, by visual means, the most deeply-penetrating thinking of which he is capable. The thinking he likes best, which means the most to him, is of paramount importance in his hierarchy of values...thinking is inseparable from emotion.[2]

Thus, Shahn, as a thinking artist, has made various changes in his work in order to bring it more closely in line with his fundamental beliefs.

Several trends of development are apparent when studying

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[1]Sam Hunter, Modern American Painting and Sculpture (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1959), 117.

[2]Lipman, What is American..., 95.

Shahn's work from 1930 to the present. His approach tends to become more general as he progresses, and he seeks more and more to arrive at universal meaning in his paintings. In the Sacco-Vanzetti series Shahn worked from photographs to portray accurately the people involved in the story, and he dealt with the particular events surrounding the trial only. The viewer may generalize from this series, feelings against racial injustice and sympathy for the working class, but the realistic image of Sacco and Vanzetti is still present before him. In Shahn's "The Saga of the Lucky Dragon" of 1961 he was inspired by the particular events of the story, but he was not content to depict the people involved in a realistic manner and merely to imply the more universal message he hoped to impart. Instead, he aimed directly at the universal meaning. The fisherman who died does not have the individual characteristics of the actual man involved, but, rather, the generalized features which make him symbolize all of mankind and which make the viewer feel that he, too, is involved in this story and is personally threatened by the horror of atomic warfare.

Clearly, Shahn's approach to painting has developed and enlarged since he first came to national attention in the early thirties. With this new approach Shahn faces the inherent danger of becoming generalized to the point that

meaning is lost for the individual. Some of his recent works seem more difficult to interpret than his early work of the thirties, but in the works, such as "Allegory", where his idea of achieving universality is utilized in its most meaningful manner, Shahn is able to communicate in an unprecedented manner.

> I had once believed that the incidental, the individual, and the topical were enough; that in such instances of life all of life could be implied.
>
> But then I came to feel that that was not enough. I wanted to reach farther, to tap some sort of universal experience, to create symbols that would have some such universal quality.[1]

Shahn's search for the universal has brought into his art the use of symbolism and, thus we find firebeasts, harpies and other creatures symbolizing universal meanings.

Nearly every area of Shahn's style has been effected by his gradual move from the specific to the general. His art has become more linear and more two-dimensional and flat, as we shall see later, with three-dimensional modeling nearly disappearing. When Shahn was more concerned with the specific it was necessary for him to paint in a naturalistic manner, but not that he chooses to underline the universal, forms have become more generalized and he no

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[1]Shahn, Shape of Content, 52.

longer is dependent upon realistic rendering. With the introduction of more generalized forms Shahn is not as concerned with details and, therefore, with the use of the photograph to supply these details accurately. In 1939, when painting "Sunday Football" (Plate II), Shahn searched through hundreds of election posters until he found the one he wished to incorporate as a detail in his painting, though to the average person, election posters all seem very much alike. This type of precise interest in the smallest details of reality is not true of Shahn today. Although he still uses details to help us sense the peculiarities of the subjects he depicts, these details are often no longer drawn from real life, but, rather, from Shahn's imagination--as we see in "Kuboyama"(Plate VI) where a profusion of detail covers the picture plane but is intended only to give the surface richness and to speak to our imagination rather than to be descriptive in a realistic manner.

As we study the body of Shahn's work we find a progressive development in composition. The artist seems to become more skilful and sophisticated in his use of composition as time goes on, and his canvases become more unified and balanced. Shahn's later work, such as "Chicago" done in 1955, is noteworthy in its use of space with well-integrated composition filling most of the available picture plane with

balanced and unified forms. In contrast, we see in the artist's earlier paintings, like "Tom Mooney with his Mother and his Wife" of 1933, a large amount of vacant space which, although adding to the sense of isolation and loneliness, does little to form a well-related and balanced composition where all parts work together to form a pleasing whole.

If Shahn's composition becomes more complex and integrated as he progresses, it also becomes more dependent upon abstract arrangements of elements. Shahn's more recent works would make pleasing abstract pictures even if one were to dismiss the subject matter present. The artist seems to be more concerned with the abstract relation of parts to the whole than he was in his earlier work, and he works consciously to make a balanced composition.

> There wasn't this struggle with my earlier work in smaller scale; an individual head or hand didn't have to be designed this way in relation to the whole.[1]

Thus, Shahn's compositional awareness has increased over the years, and he struggles much more consciously today with the relation of elements to the whole in order to form a more pleasing abstraction.

Abstract and geometric shapes, themselves, become much

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[1]Rodman, Portrait of the Artist..., 34.

more apparent the closer in Shahn's work one progresses toward the present. Such paintings as "Helis and Crystal" of 1957 and "Byzantine Isometric" of 1951 show this tendency to use geometric and abstract patterning of shapes upon a surface. Although recognizable subject matter is still present in these recent paintings, all forms within the picture have come under the spell of abstraction and have been altered from reality. Therefore, Shahn's use of distortion, always present even in his early works, increases as time progresses. Hands which were enlarged in the Sacco-Vanzetti series become huge in recent works such as "From That Day On" of 1961. Forms which still had bones and joints in 1933 seem to be made of rubber with no skeleton at all in 1953. All sense of realistic proportion is forgotten and distortion reigns in Shahn's abstraction-dominated post-war period.

Shahn's spirit itself seems to change from 1930 to the present, and the artist's work, which was once militant, propagandistic, and full of protest, has become poetic, lyric, and modulated. The great concern for human suffering is still present but it has been softened in its approach and made more personal. Instead of direct social criticism, Shahn has turned to the individual's private emotional experiences; poetry seems to replace satire.

As Ben Shahn's feelings softened, so did his color.

Colors which were once harsh and raw and contrasting became luminous and brighter, subtle and softer, and more harmonious. They related to each other in a more pleasing manner, and the color itself became more arbitrary. In general, Shahn's later works are brighter and more pleasing in color than works of his early period.

Shahn's painting style, too, becomes freer and less controlled. His brush strokes are looser and his technique is more painterly. Color is brushed on with feathery strokes instead of being tightly controlled as in earlier works. Shahn seems to enjoy the act of painting in his later years and finds pleasure in paint and color themselves.

Other tendencies in the development of the artist's work include an increased interest in lettering as time progresses. In his work of the thirties, as in "Scott's Run, West Virginia" (Plate I) of 1937, lettering is confined to signs which Shahn adds as descriptive details in his story. By the fifties and sixties, however, we find that lettering frequently is given more space in the composition and has the role of declaring the message of the painting, as in "Alternatives" (Plate V) of 1962. In recent years Shahn has also relied more heavily upon drawing in his paintings. The use of line has always been characteristic of the artist, but recent works like "Alternatives" seem to be dominated

by a mysterious line akin to writing. Certainly Shahn's flattening of forms makes a heavy use of drawing more possible since outlining nearly always makes forms two-dimensional.

Perhaps one of the most interesting areas to observe in the development of Shahn's artistic style is the changes he makes in his backgrounds and in their relation to his figures. Shahn's early works are usually set with architectural backgrounds which are often rendered in a fairly convincing three-dimensional manner. At other times, linear perspective is used to create the feeling of deep space behind the figures as in "Tom Mooney and His Warden". At any rate, in most of the works of the early thirties an amount of space, sometimes like a stage space, sometimes as more, exists between the figures and the background. There is air between them and there appears to be space in which the viewer could walk. Admittedly it is not the far-sweeping, deep space of the Renaissance which cuts holes in walls, but it is as much space as Shahn ever gives us.

During the late thirties changes began to appear in Shahn's work. In his murals, as the one at Roosevelt, Shahn employs an in and out kind of space. The background may ' zoom back sharply into space and then it is abruptly stopped and brought forward again; things close to the viewer are

contrasted with things far away. Some figures have backgrounds close behind them and others have a good deal of space between them and the objects which form their backgrounds. The contrasts of this type of background gives the murals a surface interest and excitement.

While some paintings of this period, like "Sunday Painting", still contain backgrounds which go back into space, a new trend is developing in Shahn's work. The artist now utilizes a flat wall to block off the distance and to shorten the distance between viewer and background and between subject and background. Examples of this technique are found in "Sunday Football" (Plate II), "Vacant Lot" (Plate III) and the famous "Handball". The blank wall tends to isolate the figures, silhouette them against the background, and diminish the space in which they exist. Space is beginning to flatten out.

In the forties, linear perspective is still occasionally used, as in "The Red Stairway", but usually the illusion of space is greatly diminished by the flat application of paint, as we see in "East 12th Street". The more frequent use of background introduced during this period was one in which a very shallow space existed and an object of some sort was placed between the figures and the flat, plain background. The wall as such is no longer used, but the background acts

the same as a wall since no feeling of depth is achieved. The object which serves as screen between figures and background is paper-thin and has openings through which the viewer may see the blankness of the background. The object used for the screen varies: in "Willis Avenue Bridge" it is the bridge girders, in"Four Piece Orchestra" and "Peter and the Wolf" (Plate IV) it is the trees, in "Nocturne" it is leafy nature forms, and in "Trouble" it is a rollercoaster. In each case the amount of space created in the picture is very small, and Shahn, clearly, is moving toward a more flat style.

During the fifties and sixties several types of backgrounds appear, but all share the common characteristic of being completely flat and two-dimensional. Some are plain and painterly like"Harpie" with brush strokes adding the only interest and texture. Others combine painterly qualities and intricate use of line, as we see in "Portrait of Dag Hammarskjold". Still others rely upon backgrounds composed of geometric shapes such as "Epoch" and "Age of Anxiety". A last category makes use of a dark, splotchy, inky, almost smeared-looking technique in which background and object join, and the viewer has difficulty determining where one begins and the other leaves off. Here the background and subject are highly integrated and are so well related that

they become part of each other, as the examples, "Vulture" and "Lute I", will bear out. Thus Ben Shahn's use of background has progressed from the three-dimensional to the flat, and from the realistic to the abstract.

Many changes ahve occured in the art work of Ben Shahn over the years. He has not been content to remain stationary in his style, perhaps in the fear of becoming stagnant, but he has constantly changed his methods in order to keep them in line with his thinking. The changes in his art, whether from the realistic to the abstract, particular to universal, harsh to soft, or propaganda to poetry, have not altered the underlying philosophy of all his work--a concern for human sufferings and feelings and a hatred of injustice wherever it is found. Thus, within the all-encompassing framework of his overpowering philosophy, Shahn has been free to alter the tools with which he works without destroying his original and underlying purpose.

Conclusion

Perhaps more than any other artist of our time, Ben Shahn is a painter of unchanging and unflinching conviction. Through nearly forty years of work he has persisted in his own style of painting, always insisting upon subject matter or content and never succumbing to the popularity of non-objective art. He has not been blind to the art of others,

but he has borrowed and digested those things which best suited and could be best adapted to his own temperament and philosophy. His style has always remained highly original and personal, and his work has a distinctive quality which marks it clearly as his own. Shahn,indeed, is a product of his times; he has not skirted or ignored the problems of his fellow men, but, instead, he has faced squarely the crucial issues of his day. Perhaps the most convincing argument for believing in Shahn's significance as an artist is the very fact that he speaks clearly of the issues and happenings of his day directly and forceably to the men of his day. He deals with emotions and feelings and those things which mold men's characters and personalities, and men everywhere are moved and respond. Shahn's style of art has changed throughout the years, but his initial purpose in painting has not changed. As long as Shahn is able to paint he will persist in telling us things about ourselves and about the world at large.

Shahn's work has been criticized from many sides for such divergent claims as sentimentalixm and crudeness, but he continues to paint according to his own inner direction. As it now stands, Ben Shahn is one of the most important of American artists, having won recognition on the international scene and having great significance for his century, his

country, and his world.

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8 *Scott's run, West Virginia • 1937 • The Whitney Museum of American Art*

Plate I

10 *Sunday football* • *1938* • *Estate of Mr. Herman Shulman*

Plate II

19 Vacant lot • 1939 • Wadsworth Atheneum, Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection

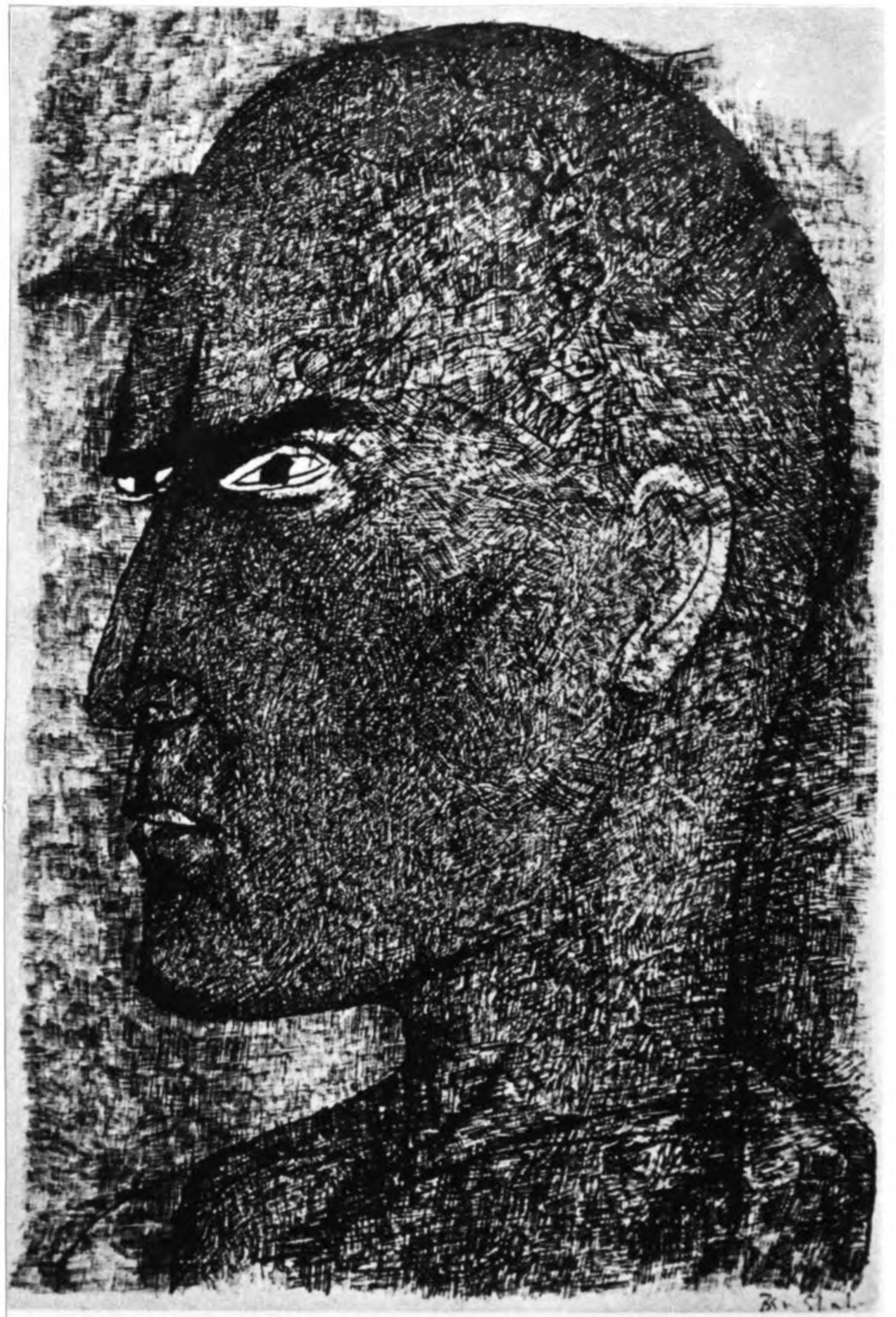
Plate III

31 Peter and the wolf • 1943 • Collection, Mrs. Eero Saarinen

Plate IV

76 Alternatives • 1962 • Courtesy, The Downtown Gallery

Plate V



96 Kuboyama ("Lucky Dragon" series) • 1961 • Collection, Robert Straus

Plate VI