



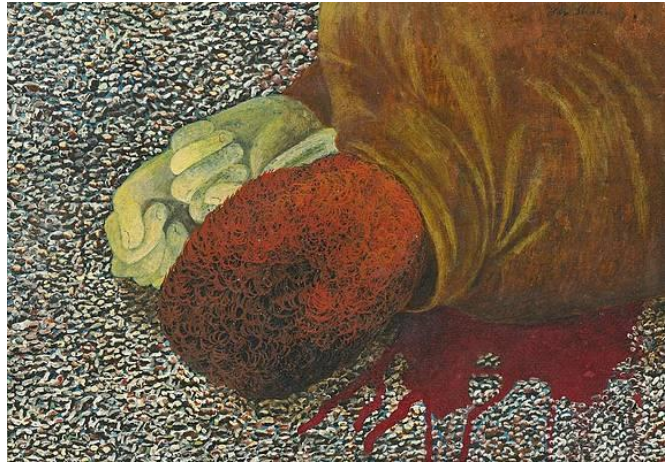
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Robert Fishko, *Director*

BEN SHAHN

(1898 - 1969)

Death on the Beach, 1945
tempera on board
9 1/2 x 13 3/4 inches
signed upper right "*Ben Shahn*"



Provenance

The Artist
(The Downtown Gallery, New York)
Sidney and Rosalie Berkowitz, New York
(acquired from the above, June 20, 1945)
Private Collection (by descent)
Private Collection, Australia

Exhibited

Ben Shahn, Brighton Art Gallery, Brighton, UK; The Regional Office of the Arts Council of Great Britain, Cambridge, UK; City Art Gallery, Bristol, UK, May 3 - July 12, 1947

Ben Shahn (retrospective exhibition), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, September 30 - January 4, 1948, no. 47.917

Ben Shahn, San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, CA, August 1948

Ben Shahn (retrospective exhibition), The Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, December 4, 1956 - January 19, 1957

Ben Shahn, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, NL, December 22, 1961 - June 24, 1962
(lent by Mrs. S. Berkowitz)

Traveled to:

Palais Des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, BE
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, ITA
Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna, AS

Sakowitz Festival of the Arts, Houston, TX, October 3 - 17, 1965, no. 95

Ben Shahn: A Retrospective Exhibition, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ, September 20 - November 16, 1969 (lent by Rosalie Berkowitz)

Ben Shahn, Nardin Galleries, New York, NY, February 27 - March 24, 1979, no. 31

Ben Shahn, National Library of Madrid, Madrid, Spain, March 27 - May 15, 1984

Ben Shahn, Pembroke Gallery, Houston, TX, February 27 - April 5, 1986

Literature

Soby, James Thrall. *Ben Shahn*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, 1947, pl. 31, Illustrated and p. 20, Listed.

Ben Shahn, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, NL, 1961, no. 19, p. 7, Illustrated and p. 15, Listed (Dutch title, "dood op het strand")

Ben Shahn: A Retrospective Exhibition, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ, 1969, no. 48, p. 65, Listed.

Note

A young Jewish immigrant from Lithuania, Ben Shahn arrived with his family in Brooklyn at the age of eight. Between 1919 and 1922 he studied at New York University; the City College of New York; and the National Academy of Design. Sharing a studio in 1929 with photographer Walker Evans stimulated Shahn's own interest in photography and he began photographing people and street scenes, first in New York and later around the country. These photographs served as the basis for many of his prints and paintings.

In the 1930s, Shahn submitted and executed mural proposals for the Public Works of Art Project, and he joined the Resettlement Administration in 1935 to document desperate conditions in the rural South while continuing his own work as an artist, designer and photographer. Shahn briefly joined the Office of War Information in 1942 to design posters and pamphlets and later in 1945, he worked for the Political Action Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations to help re-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt, serving as the CIO director of Graphic Arts.

Shahn's art is one of protest against injustice and prejudice. He is recognized as one of the leading social realists of the twentieth century whose art consistently displayed great empathy for those affected by social and criminal injustices.

Ben Shahn was deeply affected by the conflicts of World War II and created many war-themed paintings in the 1940s that tell stories of desolation and loneliness. Created in 1945, his art's anti-war sentiment is reflected in *Death on the Beach*, which is related to a large-scale tempera work created by the Artist the same year titled *Pacific Landscape* in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art. Both paintings depict haunting scenes of a lifeless soldier lying face down on a dune of small white stones, each painted painstakingly one by one.

Author Selden Rodman compares the technique to the luminous layering of “white writing” by Mark Tobey, and described, “During the three months Shahn worked at it [*Pacific Landscape*], covering one layer of impasto with another, he was conscious only of ‘protesting’ against the limitations of the medium and against that school of criticism which is always objecting to painting being ‘too rich,’ ‘too detailed,’ or ‘too realistic.’”ⁱ

Ben Shahn himself noted how several of his paintings from the mid-1940s expressed a new mode of perception. Shahn wrote that these works had become “much more private and more inward-looking. A symbolism which I might once have considered cryptic now became the only means by which I could formulate the sense of emptiness and waste that the war gave me, and the sense of the littleness of people trying to live on through the enormity of war.”ⁱⁱ

For the Abrams monograph published in 1972, Ben Shahn’s wife, Bernarda Bryson Shahn, writes about the sheer visual impact of his wartime works: “...it is emotional content, an outcry against war...all these impacted feelings are innate in the image. Recognition, the sense of desolation, precedes any words that might arise to describe it. The words follow or are not necessary at all.”ⁱⁱⁱ



Ben Shahn, *Pacific Landscape*, 1945, tempera on board, 25 1/4 x 39 inches
(Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Philip L. Goodwin)

Widely exhibited, *Death on the Beach* was selected for inclusion in *Ben Shahn*, a retrospective exhibition organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1948, curated by James Thrall Soby. *Death on the Beach* was presented in a second retrospective exhibition for Shahn presented by The Fogg Art Museum of Harvard in 1957. Ben Shahn’s fame grew when in 1962, Soby organized an exhibition of Shahn’s work, including *Death on the Beach*, to be presented at four European museums - Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; Palais Des Beaux-Arts, Brussels; Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome; and Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.

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- i Rodman, Selden. *Portrait of the Artist as an American; Ben Shahn: A Biography with Pictures*, 1951, p. 60.
- ii Polcari, Stephen. Essay, *Ben Shahn and Postwar American Art*, in *Common Man Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn*, The Jewish Museum, 1999, p. 71-72
- iii Shahn, Bernarda Bryson. *Ben Shahn*, H.N. Abrams, New York, 1972, p. 75