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Robert Fishko, *Director*

BEN SHAHN

(1898 - 1969)

Lithuanian-American

Born in Kaunas, Lithuania, Ben Shahn spent his childhood studying the Bible to learn about the history of his Jewish ancestors. In 1906, at the age of eight, Shahn and his family immigrated to the United States and settled in Brooklyn. After finishing elementary school in New York, Shahn became a lithographer's apprentice, where he mastered lettering which would become an important facet of his social realist art.

Earning wages through jobs requiring illustration or lettering, Shahn saved enough to attend classes between 1919-1922 at New York University, City College of New York and 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 1920's Shahn first traveled to Europe and spent time in France where political unrest seemed imminent from the false life imprisonment of the first Jewish officer of the Ministry of War, Alfred Dreyfus. Shahn saw the social injustice unfold in front of him and began to create portraits whose themes shaped his art throughout his career. Upon returning to America, Shahn became intrigued with significant court cases and social problems, which he articulated in his work. In the 1930's, after his first solo show with Edith Halpert in New York at the Downtown Gallery, Shahn joined the Farm Security Administration and traveled throughout America with Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange to document the devastation of the American farmers.

In May of 1933, Shahn assisted Diego Rivera during his execution of the Rockefeller Center mural and soon thereafter joined the WPA where he was commissioned to do various murals throughout Roosevelt, New Jersey, as well as at the Bronx Central Post Office. In 1942, Shahn briefly joined the Office of War Information to design many anti-fascist posters and pamphlets and later 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 in 1945.

Ben Shahn 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. 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. 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.”ⁱ

Ben Shahn was granted solo exhibitons during his lifetime at institutions that include the Tate Gallery in London (1946), the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1947), and the Philadelphia Museum in Pennsylvania (1969); as well as a traveling exhibition in 1962 at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, that followed on to the Galleria Nazionale D'arte Moderna in Rome and the Albertina in Vienna.

Throughout his life, Ben Shahn’s work was featured in publications such as *Art Front*, *Fortune* and *Harper’s Magazine*. Towards the end of his life, Shahn designed sets for plays and created murals for synagogues, homes and museums.

Works by Ben Shahn are represented in many museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., The Art Institute of Chicago; The Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio; the Fogg Museum at Harvard University in Cambridge; and the Tate Gallery in London.

ⁱ 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