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Ben Shahn's Sunday Paintings:
Explanations for His Shift from
Social Realism to Personal Realism

by

James Ellis

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ABSTRACT

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James W. Ellis

Ben Shahn's 1940 solo exhibition of his so-called "Sunday Paintings" at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York manifested a transformation that had occurred in his art during the 1930s. Both the formal language and the subject matter of his art had changed. I explore in depth the wide variety of contextual influences (political, professional, and personal) that informed this metamorphosis. Specifically addressed is the federal government's political realignment at the end of the New Deal, a paradigm shift in the emphasis of art criticism and artistic practice, and the influence of a "photographic-aesthetic" on Shahn's paintings. In spite of the easy answers offered by critics, historians, and the artist himself, the actual reason for Shahn's new visual language was a complex set of internal and exterior factors, not always directly related, but, nevertheless, all contributors to a condition in which Shahn felt compelled to change his course.
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Introduction

Ben Shahn's 1940 solo exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York of his so-called "Sunday Paintings" manifested a transformation that had occurred in his art during the 1930s. It was Shahn's first solo show in seven years, and it was clear that his way of painting was different. During the period between Shahn's last previous solo exhibition in 1933, *The Mooney Case* (fig. 1), and the Julien Levy exhibition of 1940, both the formal language and the subject matter of his art had changed. Although the period of transformation that I will address in this paper—which occurred from 1937 to 1940—was brief, it served as a kind of floodgate, opening up a whole new set of visual possibilities which Shahn exploited thereafter. I am not the first writer to address this pivotal moment in Shahn's career, but I am the first to explore in depth the wide variety of contextual influences that informed his late 1930s metamorphosis. By examining the political, professional, and personal contexts in which Shahn's transformation occurred, I hope to help my readers achieve a more complete understanding of this moment in Shahn's career. And I hope to show that in spite of the easy answers offered by critics, historians, and the artist himself, the actual reason for Shahn's new visual language was a complex set of internal and external factors, not always directly related, but, nevertheless, all contributors to a condition in which Shahn felt compelled to change his course.

I should first establish what specific elements of Shahn's art had changed from 1933 to 1940. The 1933 exhibition, *The Mooney Case*, was held in New York's Downtown Gallery from May 2-20. In many respects it was a continuation—both
thematically and formally--of Shahn's 1932 Downtown Gallery exhibition *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*. The subject matter of both shows was controversial--dealing with the murder trials of individuals who many Americans thought had been unfairly accused (figs. 2, 3). Shahn and others believed that Mooney was, in fact, on trial for being a labor organizer and that Sacco and Vanzetti were persecuted for their anarchist sympathies. Shahn's championing of these liberal causes brought him both praise and criticism.¹

During the early-to-mid 1930s, with the great Depression wreaking havoc on American society, Shahn searched for answers to the nation's economic woes through radical politics and socially critical art.² He sympathized with the worker's movement and socialist and communist organizations. Like his friend Diego Rivera--whom Shahn met in 1932 and assisted on the ill-fated/destroyed Rockefeller Plaza mural--Shahn believed that he should use his art to address social and political issues. Both *The Mooney Case* and *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* were attempts by Shahn to raise awareness of social injustices and to encourage reform. Shahn's political engagement, therefore, determined both the subject matter and content of his art during the early 1930s.

During this period Shahn utilized a representational visual language combining realistic elements with his own individualized expressiveness. While he believed that recognizable content was essential for conveying information to a large number of people, Shahn consistently incorporated humorous or unreal elements into his compositions (fig. 4). Using his own photographs and newspaper images as sources, Shahn incorporated accurate, illusionistic details into his restrained, stylized idiom. In the *Mooney* and *Sacco and Vanzetti* series Shahn toed the line between 'straightforward' reporting and critical editorializing by means of the subtle fusion of information and

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commentary. At times he deliberately distorted forms and chose witty juxtapositions that reflected his subjective attitudes towards his subject (fig. 5). Shahn also used dramatic architectural and landscape spatial recessions that show the influence of Rivera.

In my paper's first chapter I will go into further detail concerning Ben Shahn's general oeuvre during the 1930s and his place within the Social Realist movement. This will help to clarify what was so significant about Shahn's change of direction: not only was it indicative of a decline in Social Realism, it also was a confirmation that American art had reached a turning point, when a distinctly 1930s communal and social aesthetic was replaced by introspective and idiosyncratic 1940s idioms.

The works Shahn exhibited at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1940 were quite different from any others that he had produced during the 1930s.³ They were the first manifestation of Shahn's growing interest in the psychology of the people he painted. The 1940 exhibition was filled with paintings that focused on the interior world of individuals. He was no longer concentrating on topical, political issues, but instead depicting ordinary moments in the lives of people of little notoriety. In Seurat's Lunch of 1939, for instance, the lethargic mood of the anonymous figure seems to be the subject (fig. 6), and no reference is made to wider circumstances or political and social issues. Shahn concentrated on the subjective world of the man and his somewhat ordinary expression--while, at the same time, cleverly relating Seurat's pointillist technique to the speckled painting of the restaurant. In my second and third chapters I will delineate what I believe were the reasons for Shahn's turn from political criticism and content during the late 1930s and early 1940s. These included a war-time political and social climate that discouraged dissent, influential art critics and curators who were losing interest in realistic visual idioms derived from 1930s aesthetics, and Shahn's personal re-evaluation

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of his political beliefs.

Other paintings in the 1940 exhibition revealed Shahn's new formal direction. An unusual aesthetic informed his paintings, an aesthetic based on Shahn's extensive foray into the photographic medium during the late 1930s and his conscious adoption of certain tendencies of other photographers—especially Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans. The importance of photography to Shahn's paintings was never greater than during this transitional period. He worked as a photographer for the Resettlement/Farm Security Administration during the late 1930s, producing over six thousand images, and a 'photographic-aesthetic' began to dominate his work in other media. In the 1940 painting *Pretty Girl Milking the Cow*, for instance, Shahn based the entire composition on an earlier RA/FSA photograph (figs. 7, 8). For the *Mooney Case* and *Sacco and Vanzetti* paintings Shahn had used photographs merely as points of reference. The works exhibited in 1940 manipulated photographs in an entirely different way—as complete compositional *sketches*—revealing that Shahn had begun to rely on his photographs to a greater extent. Just as Shahn began to focus his attention on subjective experiences, he also began to paint in a more objective way—allowing his photographs to dictate the content of his paintings. This is the subject of chapter four.

It must be noted that Shahn's 1940 exhibition was greeted with great critical acclaim. It was at this point that museum curators and other influential people in the art world began to give Shahn greater attention and collect his works. Two of his best known paintings, *Vacant Lot* and *Handball*, were acquired directly from the 1940 exhibition for the collections of the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, respectively. I contend that the reasons for the show's success were the formal and thematic changes in Shahn's paintings. I also
maintain that Shahn's transition was not only the result of the various aesthetic and iconographic influences he came across from 1933 to 1940, but a conscious, pragmatic professional decision. The success that Shahn enjoyed after 1940 could not have been possible without the changes which first became evident to a wide audience at the 1940 Julien Levy show.

In 1944 Shahn had another solo exhibition at the Levy Gallery. By this point Shahn's expressive and psychological visual language reached a poetic and allegorical phase—in the sense that it featured hidden or highly symbolic meanings (fig. 9). These works should be viewed as a continuation of Shahn's increasing conceptualization and quest for universality first manifested in 1940. I will not address the 1944 exhibition to any great extent. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the visual, social, and cultural sources of Shahn's initial move away from his 1930's style Social Realism. Later works (such as those shown in 1944) will be discussed only as they relate to his earlier transformation.

This paper will deal primarily with Shahn's easel paintings and photographs. Although Shahn was an active mural painter and graphic artist during the years I discuss, I will make little attempt to integrate the evolution of his art in these media into this paper. Kenneth W. Prescott and Francis K. Pohl have already written about those areas admirably. I will largely concentrate on easel paintings as well as photographs—which I believe are integral to an understanding of Shahn's formal and thematic transformations.

To set the stage for Shahn's shift it is necessary to go back to his childhood and early career. There we will find the beginnings of Shahn's conception of the relationship of art to life. The sources of his commitment to 'social art' can be found in his early years. After establishing the basis of Shahn's work during the early 1930s, I will then
address which factors influenced the dramatic changes manifested in his art at the end of that decade.
Chapter One

Ben Shahn: the Social Realist

Important Factors in Shahn's Early Life

The sources of Ben Shahn's 1930s commitment to 'social art' can be found in his childhood. He was born in 1898 on the western edge of the Russian empire (in present-day Lithuania) in an area known as the Pale of Settlement. The area was one of the only places in Russia that Jews were allowed to settle, still the Jewish Community was subjected to systematic social, economic, and political persecution. At the time of Shahn's birth pogroms, government-organized massacres of Jews, were frequent occurrences in the Pale. Shahn's father, Joshua Hessel Shahn, was a socialist and an intellectual who organized resistance to the Czar, and consequently, he was a constant target for the government's police forces. With their situation growing increasingly tenuous, the Shahn family was forced to migrate to the United States. Young Ben Shahn brought to the strange new country a hatred of injustice and a strong suspicion of authoritarian rule.

Shahn spoke of his immigration to America as a "cataclysmic change." He arrived in the United States in 1906 at the age of eight and was jolted out of the familiarity of his existence in the Pale into a teeming Brooklyn neighborhood filled with
other Jewish immigrants, as well as dilapidated buildings, garbage-strewn vacant lots, and overcrowded brownstones. His new urban environment was quite different from the close-knit Lithuanian village of his birth, and Shahn's awareness his place in the world was greatly expanded.7

Like his father, Ben Shahn wanted to effect social change. Unlike his father, however, in the United States Shahn found in art an outlet for his sense of injustice. During the 1930s Shahn was part of a group of artists for whom moral and social outrage was the defining characteristic. Shahn's good friend Walker Evans isolated a trait that he believed differentiated American artists from their European counterparts during this period:

When you stop to think about what an artist is doing one question is, what is the driving force, the motive? In this country it is rather obvious; different, say, from European culture. The artist here is very angry and fighting. Everything makes him angry: the local style of living, and one's competitors. Even coworkers in the arts anger and stimulate him.8

It was this sense of anger that drove the Social Realists, and encouraged them to, as David Shapiro wrote, use their "art as a weapon."9

American art during the 1930s was dominated by social, political, and regional concerns. Modernist artists found themselves in the minority during a decade when artists focused on American subjects and generally realist formal languages. The images of Reginald Marsh, Edward Hopper, Grant Wood, and the RA/FSA photographers, often come to mind first when art historians think of this period (figs. 10, 11). However, the most successful and enduring works may have been those that combined European,
particularly Parisian, techniques with non-European aims. Jose-Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and slightly later artists such as Jack Levine and Jacob Lawrence were among that group, as was Ben Shahn.\textsuperscript{10} In 1932 Rivera recognized the fusion of international style with a distinctly American iconography in Shahn's art.

I saw yesterday the work of a lad [Shahn] -- formerly a painter of abstract art -- who has just completed a series of paintings on the life and death of Sacco and Vanzetti which are as moving as anything of the kind I have ever seen. The Sacco and Vanzetti paints are technically within the school of modernistic painting, but they possess the necessary qualities, accessibility, and power, to make them appropriate to the proletariat.\textsuperscript{11}

Ben Shahn, like other Social Realists, sought to speak for and to the common man. During the 1930s his art was a tool to communicate his worldview. He used art to point out instances of injustice--such as the Sacco and Vanzetti case--and, in his photographs for the RA/FSA, to encourage reform.

Shahn's Artistic Position During the Early 1930s

Ben Shahn experimented with radical politics during the early 1930s. This was quite in keeping with other Social Realists who saw no hope for ending the Depression through the conventional American system. He exhibited in John Reed Club shows, and in 1935 he served as an instructor at the John Reed Club School of Art. The John Reed
Clubs sought to "extend the influence of the revolutionary working class movement" and to "create and publish art and literature of a proletariat character." Also in 1935 Shahn signed his name to the petition calling for an American Artists’ Congress. Around the same time he worked for the Artists’ Union publication _Art Front_. In the 1940s all of these affiliations would lead some red-baiters such as Michigan Senator George Dondero and the House un-American Activities Committee to label Shahn as either a communist or a sympathizer. But in reality Shahn was never a member of the Communist Party, and during the late 1930s and 1940s he moved steadily towards the political center. Eventually Shahn lost interest in associating with radical leftist organizations. A strong commitment to the New Deal replaced Shahn’s quest for revolutionary solutions. His wife Bernarda Bryson Shahn later explained, "Despite his connections with leftist organizations, he had been constantly at war with them." In spite of this, leftist ideology was a great motivator during Shahn’s Social Realist phase. During the late 1930s however—when Shahn moved closer to the center—the political content of his art was tempered noticeably. This factor in Shahn’s transformation will be addressed in greater detail in chapter two.

In 1932 Shahn worked for Diego Rivera on the ill-fated Rockefeller Center mural _Man at the Crossroads_. The Mexican artist’s ideas and methods had a strong impact on Shahn and other social artists in the early 1930s. Rivera believed that art was a social creation, and that the "most significant" artists took part in what he called the "revolutionary spirit" of their times. He gave credit to artists such as Daumier and Courbet for their straightforward articulations of the social struggles of 19th century France. Rivera lamented that these artists were "heroic exceptions," though. He was quick to register his disdain for the idea of 'art for art’s sake.' Those who produced such
art were simply serving society's economic elite, turning their works into just another commodity for consumer consumption. Rivera and the Social Realists saw the potential of using art as a propagandistic tool in the class struggle. For these artists only social art with a propagandistic function was worthwhile.

Many Modernist writers, such as the critic and artist Roger Fry, have asserted that if art serves a propagandistic purpose it fails in some aesthetic or avant-garde way. The dichotomy of formal experimentation and social or political content became a recurring theme in 1930s and 1940s art criticism. Many believed that the primacy of subject matter in 1930s style Social Realism was incompatible with progressive, modernist formalism. Rivera's career seems to support this claim. He spent the years 1907-21 mainly in Europe experimenting with avant-garde (primarily Cubist) formal languages. But when he decided to use his art as a "weapon in the class struggle," Rivera found that formal experimentation had its limitations. In the Soviet Union he saw frustrated artists unsuccessfully attempting to persuade the masses to accept Cubism, Futurism, or Constructivism as the art of the proletariat. 13 Although he believed that the masses needed art that featured easy-to-read messages, Rivera was convinced that he could use the advanced techniques of the "isms"--which he came to consider bourgeois art--for propagandistic purposes if he adapted them to the proletariat's conditioned tastes. Rivera, along with his Social Realist disciples including Ben Shahn, sought to incorporate modernistic formal qualities into a visual language that would be powerful and accessible to a wide audience. Shahn, and others such as Jack Levine and Jacob Lawrence, discovered that a modernistic formalism was not incompatible with meaningful, social content.

When Shahn's Sacco and Vanzetti and The Mooney Case series' were exhibited
in the early 1930s the issue of art as propaganda was central to the critical discourse. Partisans of "art as a social weapon" and "art for art's sake" used Shahn's work as a critical battleground. Walter Gutman was an art critic concerned with the clarity and passion of the message in art that dealt with social issues. In his review of *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* Gutman found the intensity of Shahn's works to be unacceptably lacking. He wrote:

> Why choose a subject like Sacco and Vanzetti if one is not prepared to become a propagandist? Callot, Goya, Daumier, Thomas Nast -- all had the ability to invent symbols expressive of their subjects. Shahn has not shown that ability. Until his feelings are more passionate, more spontaneous, and more partisan he cannot create those eloquent symbols which are typical of an art deeply concerned with affairs.¹⁴

In an era when artists and their supporters were very concerned with where they stood both politically and aesthetically in relation to the rest of the art world, the non-dogmatic, non-heavyhanded (even humorous) nature of Shahn's paintings was seen as a shortcoming. (fig. 12) Ambiguity and the validity of a variety of responses were not recognized as merits in the extremely factionalized 1930s. Propaganda, humor, and inscrutability existed side-by-side in Shahn's art, and this disturbed critics who sought a clear-cut statement.

In a review of *The Mooney Case* another critic--who was sympathetic to Shahn's cause--felt that the artist's innate aesthetic sensibilities interfered with the strength of his message:

> This show at the Downtown Gallery emphasizes an alive issue of the moment:
the place of propaganda in art. And from the point of view of propaganda, Ben
Shahn could not have a better case than that of Mooney. Yet I do not see how
these paintings advance the cause. To me, they are purely illustrative in
treatment. They do not, as they surely should, rouse the emotions and quicken
the will to action in behalf of a man so abominably condemned to suffer. They
are rather a personal outlet for those feelings for his class which, as Mr. Rivera
says, absorb
the artist. . . . Looking at the works as paintings, however, one is struck with the
fine feeling for color. Here one senses the artist in the man, expressing himself,
as it were, subconsciously.\textsuperscript{15}

Both of the above critics believed that Shahn failed as a propagandist, due to his
apparent lack of the appropriate passion for his subject matter. Gutman questioned
Shahn's partisanship, while the latter critic doubted Shahn's ability to "rouse the
emotions and quicken the will." Both reviewers hit on an issue that would absorb the
attentions of Shahn in later 1930s and into the 1940s: the effectiveness of the overt
factious statement in art.

Even during the height of Shahn's Social Realist phase--from approximately
1930 to 1935--there were signs that he was not completely committed to the radical
politics and strict propagandistic messages that defined the movement as a whole.
Although he dabbled in radicalism and supported liberal causes, Shahn's main motivator
was the general human endeavor and individual motivations. The lack of a strong
partisan statement in the \textit{Sacco and Vanzetti} and \textit{Mooney} series' should be
acknowledged for what it was: a harbinger of what was to come in Shahn's Personal
Realist works (of 1937-40)--depoliticized explorations of individual psyches and
dispositions.
What I have been trying to do is lay a groundwork on which to build my investigation of Shahn's late 1930s transformation. I have presented an array of personal and cultural contexts in order to construct a working understanding of Shahn's personality and artistic character during the mid-1930s. It should be clear that although Shahn undoubtedly deserves his lofty position within the Social Realist movement, his unique political, social, and artistic orientations made it possible—or even probable—that he would move beyond that movement's inherent limitations. Ben Shahn began to work for the federal government's Resettlement Administration (RA) in 1935.16 At this point he left behind Social Realist painting and began to focus on other interests—specifically photography and more ecumenical subject-matter.

The Philosophy of the New Deal Art Programs

During the 1930s the Federal Art Project—like the Social Realists—explicitly and systematically attempted to offer a set of social, aesthetic and ideological priorities that often seemed to be anti-modernist, as well as anti-capitalist.17 The modernist penchant for timelessness and abstraction did not appeal to Social Realists who steadfastly wanted to address society's concerns in a clear and direct manner. Philip Evergood said, "The greatest art is the result of human experience -- a searching for the big truth in nature . . . As a matter of pure fact all good art throughout the ages has been social art.18 While modernist artists attempted to rise above quotidian matters and focus on elevated (and
some would say, elitist) themes, both the New Deal art projects and the Social Realists sought to improve the lot of common Americans through straightforward social engagement.

Ben Shahn and other liberal artists believed that the government, through its New Deal programs, could resolve the economic, political, and ideological problems of the United States' floundering capitalist system. The positivism of the populist Roosevelt appealed to those who dreamed of utopian commonality. In the New Deal programs Shahn recognized a politic movement he respected and could join. According to Bernarda Bryson Shahn, Ben Shahn's second wife, "Roosevelt's great task was to educate -- to educate the Congress, to educate the public, to make clear the dire crisis of the land, the poverty, the despair, the ground swell of unrest that were rising on every hand."19 Bryson Shahn was correct in asserting that widespread ignorance was one of the key obstacles to overcome if economic suffering was to be dealt with. Many people in the cities of the Northeast, for instance, were unaware of the deplorable conditions in the rural and agricultural sectors.20

The New Deal art programs attracted a wide spectrum of artists, including socialists and communists, by promoting a "nonantagonistic sense of classless consensus about shared national goals."21 Many Social Realists found in the New Deal a constructive outlet for their abilities that did not compromise their commitment to meaningful subject-matter. The federal government provided these artists a temporary safe haven as well as a major source of income during the Depression--a way for artists of many political and aesthetic persuasions to put food on their tables.

I do not wish to suggest that all Social Realists agreed politically or even artistically. That was not the case. And, of course, the goals of the New Deal art

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programs and the interests of the Social Realists were not always in sync. Indeed, the philosophy of Social Realism differed from that of the most of the government projects in a fundamental way. As Terry Smith pointed out, the Federal Art Project's primary goal of promoting a "classless consensus about shared national goals" translated into subject matter that downplayed class stratification and featured anonymous worker types (fig. 13). Federal art programs strove for unity--through the creation of a common American art--not social or class conflict. Certainly few art historians would contend that Social Realists used "nonantagonistic" methods. To the contrary, inspired by socialist and communist ideology, Social Realists often stressed in intentionally confrontational ways the stratification of economic/social groups and the abuses heaped on the working class (fig. 14). National commonality was not their objective. Social Realists focused on topical, dramatic events and significant moments in the lives of ordinary people, exposing pathos, injustice, and tragedies (fig. 15). The purpose was not to merely observe injustices but, also, to effect change.

In the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration (RA/FSA) Shahn found a government project that did attempt to rectify a social wrong. The purpose of the RA/FSA, unlike the Federal Art Project, for instance, was not to bring the nation together under a single unifying cultural history or "American aesthetic," but, rather, to point out individual cases of suffering in order to bring about relief and reform. For this reason it could be argued that the RA/FSA art projects belong within the Social Realist movement.
Ben Shahn's Role in the RA/FSA

Ben Shahn moved to Washington D.C. from New York in 1935 to work for the Special Skills Unit of the Resettlement Administration as a graphic artist. The Special Skills Unit organized cultural activities and provided works of art to RA/FSA communities. The goal was to provide for the cultural, as well as the economic, well-being of migrant farmers and rural workers. Activities the RA/FSA coordinated included art classes, classical concerts, and Federal Theater Project plays. Shahn was a strong believer in the program's objectives. In a later interview he recalled, "I felt very strongly about the efforts that this Resettlement Administration was trying to accomplish, resettling people, helping them, and so on . . . I don't think I ever felt that way before or since . . . totally involved." It should be noted, however, that a steady salary and other fringe benefits derived from working for the RA/FSA project also contributed to Shahn's enthusiasm.

Although Shahn was officially employed by the Special Skills Division of the RA/FSA (for which he produced mainly paintings, posters, and other graphic works) he was recruited by Stryker in 1935 and 1937 for temporary stints on the Historical Section's photography staff, during which time he took approximately six thousand images. In both 1935 and 1937 he traveled to the American South. On the first trip he documented economic and social hardships brought on by the Depression, as well as shocking examples of class stratification, racism, and exploitative labor practices. (fig. 16) In 1937 Shahn was sent back to the South to photograph examples of recovery that
could be attributed to RA/FSA initiatives, especially in RA/FSA planned communities. (fig. 17) Finally, in 1938, Shahn was officially put on Stryker's staff and was sent to Ohio to cover that year's unusually abundant harvest.²⁹ (fig. 18) As in his earlier paintings, Shahn focused on content more than style--his interest in subject-matter superseded aesthetic concerns.

The opportunity to travel through the country photographing people and places had many benefits for Shahn. Although he took his responsibilities to the RA/FSA seriously, Shahn exploited his trips for his own artistic purposes. By his own admission, Shahn intended to use the photographs he took as source material for later paintings: "The things that I photographed I did not take so much as photographs as documents for myself. A lot of paintings came out of them over the years."³⁰ Therefore, Shahn and the RA/FSA director, Roy Stryker, had a symbiotic relationship. Shahn used the program to finance trips around the country during which he built up a personal file of visual resources, while Stryker had free access to Shahn's compassionate and innovative photographs. (fig. 19) The two men were on manageable, but never particularly friendly, terms.

Roy was just another bureaucrat to me, but I realized very soon that without Roy this thing would have died. He was the one who was constantly going up to the Hill and constantly manipulating and so forth, making it possible for us to go out in the field, to be protected completely by him and for this I am very grateful.

Stryker allowed free reign to Shahn's artistic sensibilities.³¹ Since Shahn did not officially join the Historical Section's staff until 1938--previously he was employed by
the Special Skills Division and free lanced in 1935 and 1937--Stryker had little influence on the content of his photographs. Stryker never suggested books on photography to Shahn or provided him with "scripts" the way he did with other photographers. Perhaps Stryker was able to tolerate Shahn's *artistic nature* due to his stormy and confrontational experiences with Walker Evans. Evans, who worked for the RA/FSA from 1935 to 1937, was, like Shahn, well aware of the fringe benefits of working for Stryker (including free travel and materials, as well as increased attention). This was as great a motivator in Evans' participation in the project as was his interest in the RA/FSA's official purpose. Both Evans and Shahn exploited their relatively unregulated status to photograph what they pleased, how they pleased. Often the experimental natures of both the project and the photographers resulted in extraordinarily fresh and spontaneous images. (fig. 20)

The innovative nature of the RA/FSA photographic project was clearly understood by the staff. In 1944 Shahn commented on the ethical and formal goals of the photographers, saying they,

> had only one purpose -- a moral one I suppose. So we decided: no angle shots, no filters, no mats, nothing glossy but paper . . . We tried to present the ordinary in an extraordinary manner. But that's a paradox because the only thing extraordinary about it was that it was so ordinary. Nobody had ever done it before, deliberately. Now it's called documentary . . . We just took pictures that cried out to be taken."^{32}

Shahn's claim that "it had never been done before" is a bit misleading, however. Both Stryker and the RA/FSA photographers were aware of the precedent-setting work
of an earlier social gadfly, Lewis Hine. Hine used the camera as a didactic tool to inform
the public and encourage social reform. He is most remembered for his photographic
campaign against the outrages of child labor. (fig. 21) Hine differed from the RA/FSA
photographers in that he focused on urban, industrial themes, not the rural or agricultural
sectors, however. In many respects though, the RA/FSA file should be understood to be
a continuation of Hine's photographic legacy. Hine and his renowned student Paul
Strand set the standard for instructive, activist social photographers. 33

Another major contributor to the style and content of RA/FSA photographs was
the conventions of Social Realism. Certainly the RA/FSA photographers shared the
Social Realist's interests in contemporary society, social and political commentary, and
spurring their audiences on to some form of action. But, unlike Social Realist painters,
the RA/FSA photographers had to make concessions to the black and white
photographic medium. Manipulation of a literal photographic image is different from the
creation of a painted image. The RA/FSA photographer's three primary choices were
which subjects to photograph, what meaning they wished to convey, and how best,
technically, to achieve the desired effect. They did not have the painter's luxury of
incorporating fantastic or unreal elements into their compositions or freely manipulating
suggestive and moody colors. Certainly, RA/FSA photographs are subjective and
calculated, but, at the same time, they are black-and-white photographs and, as such, are
beholden to the dictates of the medium. Indeed, it has been argued that over the course
of the project a "FSA photographic style" emerged, which consisted of an synthesized,
aesthetized version of orthodox Social Realism.34 In some ways the "FSA style" could
be seen as an aesthetic middle-ground between 1930s Social Realism and the look of
black-and-white photo-journalism.
Stryker distributed his photographs to government agencies, local community organizations, and national periodicals. In addition, during the period in which the RA/FSA functioned, selections of the photographs appeared in at least 15 books. To secure a place for his photographs in such diverse popular markets, Stryker's photographs—to a certain extent—had to approximate the look of photojournalistic images. His staff included not only professional newspaper photographers like Carl Mydans but also individuals with stronger artistic sensibilities such as Shahn, Evans, and Dorothea Lange—who often expressed disdain for the sensationalism and superficiality of much of photojournalism. These latter 'artists' also frequently incorporated modernist compositional and lighting techniques into their photographs. The fusion of photojournalistic and documentary styles with 1930s modernistic techniques informed the most interesting RA/FSA photographs. (fig. 22) Indeed, by the late 1930s or 1940s it was clear that the distinctions between documentary photography and art photography had been blurred in the hands of talented individuals. The outstanding work of the RA/FSA went a long way to dispelling this dichotomy. RA/FSA photographs demonstrated,

to the photographic community and to viewers at large that divisions between art and document are difficult to maintain when dealing with images of actuality. [RA/FSA] and other works made clear that, no matter what its purpose, any camera image may transcend the mundaneness of its immediate subject and transmute matter into thought and feeling--the essential goal of all visual art.

Even some of the early American modernist photographers realized that the RA/FSA
photographers had erased 'fine art' distinctions that relegated documentary to an aesthetic second class. Edward Steichen, who in addition to being a pioneer in U.S. modernist photography also became, in 1947, director of the Department of Photography of the Museum of Modern Art, was ultimately "convinced that the fine quality of work produced by photographers working for the RA/FSA and for Life had effectively erased aesthetic distinctions among images made as personal expression, as photojournalism, or as social commentary." 37

The RA/FSA photographic file began to be seen as a distinct body of work by the general public and the photographic community when it was represented at the "First International Photographic Exhibition," held in New York, in 1938. Articles were written concerning the meaning of the RA/FSA photographs from that point until the end of the war. Over time the photographs, particularly those that deal with the problems of displaced farmers, have become the definitive imagery of the Depression era according to many critics. (fig. 23)

Shahn provided insight into the aesthetic, thematic, and formal choices he made within the context of the RA/FSA's mission:

I remember the first place I went on this [photographic] trip where we were active, one of the resettlements that we built. I found that as far as I was concerned, they were impossible to photograph. Neat little rows of houses. This wasn't my idea of something to photograph at all. But I had the good luck to ask someone, "Where are you all from? Where did they bring you from? And when they told me, I went on to a place called Scott's Run, and there it began. 38

The aesthetics of the RA's repetitive housing projects were unsatisfactory to Shahn,
while the *irregularities* of the inhabitant's original homes proved to be more interesting. (fig. 24) It would not be the last time that the regimentation of governmental projects would clash with Shahn's artistic preferences. More often than not, Shahn gave priority to his own formal and thematic interests over his official governmental demands.

As Stryker's file grew it took on the additional role of a definitive, visual and historical document, expanding its initial propagandistic function. In this extended capacity the iconographic choices made by Shahn seem more appropriate. During his travels Shahn did not focus solely on agricultural hardships and RA/FSA solutions, he also took pictures of vernacular culture including homemade store signs, domestic table settings, country fairs, bluegrass musicians, and square dances. (fig. 25) In Shahn's RA/FSA *œuvre* these homespun cultural subjects are interspersed with bleaker images of a white plantation foreman and his black tenant farmers, a well-armed sheriff watching over a strike demonstration, and dirty, poorly clothed children standing in the doorways of tumble-down shacks. (fig. 26)

Although Shahn's iconography was variable, his attention was consistently drawn to subjects that lie outside the traditional concerns of both fine art photography and photo-journalism. Shahn's work fits into a tradition of photographers including Walker Evans and earlier photographers like Paul Strand who pointed the artful camera at subjects previously hidden from it. Everyday subjects became Shahn's focus, as they had often been for the Social Realist painters. Ben Shahn--the photographer/artist--again made humanity the central element of his pictures. However, he often recounted that his work as a government photographer had altered his consciousness of the wider society, his art, and himself. Shahn wrote how he had
crossed and recrossed many sections of the country, and had come to know
well so many of all kinds of belief and temperament, which they maintained
with a transcendent indifference to their lot in life. Theories had melted before
such experience. My own painting then had turned from what is called 'social
realism' into a sort of personal realism. I found the qualities of people a
constant pleasure.  

Indeed, his subsequent paintings frequently did turn to personal or private moments in
the lives of ordinary people. In his paintings of the late 1930s depictions of
particularized compassion replaced collective struggle and public trials. The specific and
topical gave way to more universal, timeless themes reflecting his desire to depict what
he called the "transcendence qualities of people." While Shahn's expanding
consciousness--resulting from his photographic journeys--played a major role in the
transformation of his art, it was not the only factor. As I will later argue, his adoption of
a new subject-matter in his late 1930s paintings was accompanied by a concurrent and
systematic adoption of a new formalism based both on his photographic work for the
RA/FSA as well as political and art world pressures. The pleasures Shahn found in the
private moments of individuals during his RA/FSA journeys were only one factor in a
multitude of others that changed his art in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

A Personal Change
After Shahn finished his work for the RA/FSA he did something that would prove very important to his personal and professional lives. In 1939 he moved out of New York City and transplanted his family to Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey. The move came at a time when Shahn was re-evaluating his career and his style, and his new surroundings played a part in the decisions he made.

Jersey Homesteads was founded in 1936 by the RA/FSA, which bought twelve hundred acres and built a community (including streets, shops, houses, a factory, even a small farm) from the ground up. The houses were rented to New York City garment workers who were laid off in the summer months. The citizenry would work on the farm in the summer and in the factory in New York the rest of the year. The goal was to get workers and industry to the country and to promote farming. The Roosevelt administration saw this as one solution to the problem of unemployment in urban centers. Unfortunately, the project did not work very well. Many of the workers preferred to remain in the city during the summer, and therefore the population of the town steadily dwindled.

In 1937 Shahn had been commissioned by the RA/FSA to paint a fresco mural on the wall of the Jersey Homesteads' community center (fig. 27). While working on his mural Shahn developed a special bond with the town's citizens. He commented in 1962 that "most of the [original settlers] were immigrant Jews, and as good members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, they were also liberal Democrats, and revered President Roosevelt, particularly since he was so enthusiastically behind the Homesteads project." Shahn found a place where he could, quite literally, feel at home. It was community where he was freed from the problems of the city, but he was close
enough to oversee his career. Shahn was surrounded by other socially and politically committed people with a shared heritage. In addition he was close to the intellectual environment of Princeton University where Shahn had many friends. By moving from the city Shahn dramatically altered his physical and intellectual surroundings. Subsequently he came into contact with the suffering and angst of the streets of New York City less frequently. The impact of the daily political discourses in New York City as well as the imagery of the city streets let up in his 1938-40 canvases. The thematic de-emphasis of the latest social issues and controversies may have reflected his move to the suburbs.
Chapter Two

Reasons for Change

The Death of New Deal Art Programs

and Hard Times for the Political Left

During the late 1930s and early 1940s American art experienced a paradigm shift. Politicians, art critics, and artists began to question both the subject matter and formal languages used during the 1930s. This resulted in the emergence of a new generation of American artists whose primary concerns were self-styled aesthetics and abstraction. In general, artists of the 1940s were much more concerned with self-expression than collective projects. Much of 1930s art produced in the United States had been driven by a progressive activism, with artists joining in the wider struggle of the "Common Man" to procure power in the workplace and the government. Many artists, including Shahn, sympathized with Leon Trotsky—who said that art "is not a mirror, but a hammer: it does not reflect, it shapes" --and used their skills to affect change in American society. Yet as the 1930s drew to a close even Social Realists were influenced by dramatic changes in the art world and in society at large. 'Social artists' reacted to the decline in popularity of New Deal ideology and government patronage—as well as the
realignment of art criticism that favored non-objectivity and modernism--by assuming less critical and confrontational stylistic idioms. The themes of the Social Realists, in particular, proceeded from harsh censures of society to general allegories of good and evil. In Ben Shahn's case during the late 1930s he moved from overt social criticism to a focus on individuals and their particular plights. Yet this transformation did not occur until Shahn had reevaluated both his personal political beliefs and the purpose of his art.

Shahn consistently gave his support and time to institutions and organizations whose goals corresponded to his own. During the mid-1930s, in particular, he felt no qualms about being a team player. The RA/FSA project--with its "shared vision"--is a prime example of the tendency during the 1930s for artists to band together for the common good.43

Perhaps what was so remarkable about the 1930s was the optimism. Despite the real suffering that Americans endured because of the Great Depression, the belief grew that an energetic and expanding government could work for the individual and the local community to alleviate misery, restore political faith, and improve the very structure of society.44

Shahn, like many other artists, felt that his skills could best be put to use in civic activities, and he affiliated himself with organizations that he believed served the common good. But as the 1930s ended many of the more liberal artists' and political organizations that Shahn had been a part of either ceased to exist, declined in influence, or repositioned themselves politically and/or philosophically.
During the 1930s various organizations were established to protect the rights of workers. Mass employment of artists on New Deal projects made unionization necessary. The Artist's Union (AU) was formed in 1934 to encourage government patronage and to represent artists in their labor negotiations with the Federal Art Project and Works Progress/Projects Administration. Like other worker's unions, the AU lobbied for improved wages and stable terms of employment. Reactionary voices were very vocal during the 1930s. The Union's detractors often accused the organization of being a tool of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). In addition, President Roosevelt was accused of "sovietizing" U. S. agriculture, and the RA/FSA was criticized for its "socialist overtones." Clearly, red-baiting was not an activity that was confined to the 1940s and 1950s. Because of this state of affairs Shahn realized that there was a price to be paid for radical affiliations.

Shahn joined the Artists' Union, but this does not necessarily indicate the artist's allegiance to the CPUSA, or communist ideology in general. As Seldon Rodman, the artist's close friend and biographer, wrote,

Whether Shahn was or was not a card-carrying Communist for a brief time is beside the point. The fact is during this period he took an active part in such Communist-dominated organizations as the Artists' Union; that he edited five issues of its organ Art Front; and that Bernarda Bryson [the artist's second wife], who came into his life at this juncture, was herself an officer in the Union and an active Party member. The fact is also that Shahn demonstrated during this period exactly the same refusal to take orders from politicians of any camp that has always characterized him.\(^{46}\)
Shahn provided two illustrations for the *Art Front* publication: a group caricature entitled *The Committee of 100--Count 'Em!,* in the November 1934 issue (fig. 28), and another caricature of Jonas Lie, the president of the National Academy of Design, in the April 1935 issue. These illustrations demonstrate how political and social content and commentary dominated Shahn's work during the mid-1930s. Shahn's concurrent paintings, such as the *Prohibition* series for a proposed mural for the Casino in Central Park, also show that Shahn was concerned with major social issues during this period (fig. 29).

Issues of patronage were at the heart of the Artists' Union. Through *Art Front,* the AU's periodical, the Union closely aligned itself with the FAP. The Union wanted both government patronage and the FAP to be made permanent through the establishment of a Federal Department of the Arts. Government patronage was considered essential to the preservation of the vitality of American art. The failure of private patronage in the United States was evidenced by the country's inability to support very many artists (worsened by the Depression's economic constraints) and a general disinterest in bringing art to the wider public. As Chet La More, an artist and Artist's Union member explained,

> The artist quite correctly refused to accept this failure [the failure of private patronage] as meaning the end of contemporary art. From his vantage point at the bottom of the economic pile, he was able for the first time to realize the necessity for support from the entire population. The first Artists' Union demanded and won Government support and sponsorship for art through the PWAP. The importance of government support is that it constitutes support for art by the people as a whole. Culturally such support is important in that it demands a growth within
the art movement itself toward the entire people. The face of American art at last was turned toward the entire population through economic and cultural necessity.\(^47\)

The eventual disappearance of the federal art projects had a detrimental effect on many artists. Once again the private sector had to be counted on to support American art. The demands of the general art public were quite different from those of the federal government. Artists had to follow the trends of the art market to survive. And Ben Shahn's works of Personal Realism were--to a certain extent--his attempt to conform to late 1930s art market dictates.

Mixing Marxist-Stalinist rhetoric with 'progressive' American political fervor, *Art Front* sought what it called an "American Socialism."\(^48\) Although *Art Front* was dominated by the Communist Party and committed to art as propaganda, *at its inception* the publication seemed open to many diverse opinions and artistic styles. Art historian Fred Orton has claimed that *Art Front* "was always prepared to debate whether the art they were to produce should be social realist or modernist, expressionist, surrealist, abstractionist, etc.--there was, after all, no Party-line on art at the time, even in the Soviet Union."\(^49\) Other writers disagree with Orton's assessment of the absence of a Soviet "Party-line." Socialist Realism was proclaimed in literature by Zhadnov in 1932, and was quickly applied to the visual arts (perhaps Orton underestimated the doctrinaire Stalin's autocratic policies, which included aesthetic dictates).\(^50\) Whatever the case, from 1935 on the infighting between supporters of Stalin and supporters of Trotsky among Soviet/Communist sympathizers in the U. S. became intense. Shahn, who during the early and mid-1930s supported Trotsky and Trotsky follower and friend Diego Rivera, gradually became disillusioned by the rivalry.
In addition to the political discord, *Art Front* slowly began to turn a disapproving eye towards Social Realism and Regionalism—under the direction of the journal’s first editor, Stuart Davis. Davis believed the artist should separate political activism from the process of choosing artistic subject matter. He wrote, “there is no such thing as nonpolitical art in the sense that every artist is always in a specific political relation whether positively or negatively. But this political relation . . . is not the subject of his art, which consists of his own contribution to the affirmation of order in the materials of art.” Although not necessarily an advocate of “art for art’s sake,” Davis gave as much, if not more, attention to form (and its own, independent value) as he did to content. This certainly did not conform to Shahn’s viewpoint at that time. Shahn felt at odds with both the hard-line, Stalinist politics of certain members the Artists’ Union and the aesthetic illiberality of Davis. A remarkably tolerant man. Shahn left *Art Front* late in 1935. He explained,

I was fed up with factional bickering from the start, but in the early editorial meetings when the Communists fought my efforts to broaden the sheet I’d debate with them until five in the morning. That was the only way you could ever beat them—by outlasting them. But this couldn’t go on forever if I was to continue painting. When they insisted on running an article entitled, ‘Rivera’s Monopoly,’ calling that artist ‘a willing prostitute who makes his work pay,’ I got out.52

Shahn was also a part of the American Artist’s Congress (AAC) which first met in February of 1936 in New York.53 The AAC was formed in part as a reaction to the rise of European fascism and the Spanish Civil War. Fearing that fascism and a worldwide economic depression, as well as the rising specter of world war, were "at
odds with all the forces of human culture," the Congress declared, "The time has come for the people who love life and culture to form a united front against them, to be ready to protect, and guard, and if necessary, fight for the human heritage which we, as artists, embody."54 Under Stuart Davis' leadership the AAC attacked fascism abroad and censorship at home, and--through its journal, American Art--served as an advocate of the Federal Art Project. At the same time, the AAC's antagonism against Europe's fascist regimes and the Communist Party's influence on the AAC made the organization a frequent target of America's right-wing.

As with the Artists' Union, political infighting within the AAC led to discord and secessions. During the late 1930s the AAC leadership began to take an immoderately pro-Stalinist 'line'--defending the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 and the Soviet leader's show trials of political foes (especially the heinous trials of 1937 that featured torture-induced false confessions and mass executions). Finally, on April 4, 1940, the AAC passed a motion supporting the Soviet Union's invasion of Finland. In protest of these AAC positions Trotskyites and other non-Stalinist members seceded from the Congress in droves. At that point the moderate left-wing--which included Shahn--joined the right-wing in opposition to the AAC. This was a crucial turning point in the growing reaction against 1930s aesthetics and their implied politics. After the AAC came out in support of the invasion of Finland,

the support for social and socialist realist painting came under persistent and severe attack: the political and artistic orthodoxies established by the Comintern, controlled by Moscow, were assailed both by the right wing and by the followers of Trotsky (the 'Left Opposition') in the USA.55
The decline of the AAC was a key moment in the art world's shift of emphasis from 1930's collective activism to 1940's individualism. In addition, the intolerance of the AAC was a major factor in Shahn's reevaluation of his own relation to radical politics and the confining nature of propagandistic art and Social Realism. Shahn was one of the artists who left the AAC after it became clear that the Congress' politics could not be reconciled with his own. He determined that both radical politics and his earlier way of painting were too rigid and confining. Artists of many persuasions came to realize during the 1930s that the progressive movement in the United States was becoming too rigidly defined to remain effective. Thomas Hart Benton said, "If the radical movement is to get anywhere in this country it has got to drop Marxism as an outworn historical and economic notion and rely wholly on a pragmatic observance of developing facts. You can't impose imported ideologies on people." Benton accepted—as did Shahn during the late 1930s—that in spite of all their intentions, the utopian ideals of radical reformers overlooked America's economic and political realities. In 1957 Shahn recalled that he,

was not the only artist who had been entranced by the social dream, and who could no longer reconcile that view with the private and inner objectives of art. As during the thirties art had been swept by mass ideas, so during the forties there took a mass movement towards abstraction. Not only was the social dream rejected, but any dream at all.

Although he rejected radicalism during the mid-to-late 1930s, Shahn did not spurn his commitment to affecting social change through political cooperation. Shahn's
late 1930's government work should be seen as a continuation of his resolution to improving society through communal bonding and projects. However, eventually even Shahn's official government affiliations became suspect during the 1940s. As Jonathan Harris has written, from the late 1930s onward the federal art programs were increasingly associated with leftist politics by forces both within government and the art world.\textsuperscript{59} The separation of the artist from the 'establishment' political system, through the elimination of New Deal projects, discouraged many artists from using 'social' subject matter in their art. In part, the growing isolation of the individual artist and the associated suppression of social content in art encouraged Shahn to change the form and content of his work.

After the demise of the New Deal, organizations that were aligned with it were often accused of being 'communistic' by reactionary forces. Ben Shahn never renounced his support of the ideological underpinnings of New Deal art projects but he did downplay the importance of his involvement with associations such as the Artists' Union and the American Artists' Congress. He did not encourage those who later called his affiliations communistic.

By the end of the 1930s not only were political reactionaries voicing their disapproval of the politics of the New Deal liberals (and by association Social Realism and collective art organizations like the AU and AAC), even the art establishment lashed out against its own liberals. The left-wing leadership of the AU and the AAC were frequent and easy targets for reactionaries who thought—as the Cold War began—that any form of dissent, particularly Soviet inspired dissent, could not be tolerated. "In the early 1940s, after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939, the Soviet invasion of Finland, and the disarray this caused the American Left (divided, increasingly, between
Stalinists and Trotskyites), *Art Digest* published a series of articles attacking the American Artists’ Congress and, by implication, the Federal Art Project.⁶⁰ Clearly the day of government patronage of and public and critical enthusiasm for ‘social’ art was swiftly passing.

It should not be overlooked that Shahn’s late 1930s formal and thematic changes were greeted with critical praise and continuing success. Shahn’s achievements in the later 1940s and 1950s were made possible by his adoption of a more universal, and less topically political, visual language. A cynic might suggest that the change in Shahn’s art in the late 1930s and early 1940s was a pragmatic decision meant to bring continued critical and monetary rewards. Although the aesthetic viability and emotional sincerity of his 1940s-50s work tend to cast doubt on that hypothesis, there is no question that Shahn’s artistic shift was welcomed with enthusiasm by modernist/formalist critics and right-wing politicians. During the late 1930s and early 1940s critics frequently equated Social Realism with leftist propaganda, and they also assumed all Social Realist art promulgated a communist worldview. By turning from the specific social criticism of Social Realism to a more abstract, allegorical style Shahn killed two birds with one stone. He distanced himself from unpopular leftist politics and he made a concession to the growing tide of abstraction.

During the 1930s, radicals, liberals, and progressives felt represented by (or at least included in) the New Deal art projects. The WPA and FAP’s make-work programs enfranchised many members of America’s left. As Bernarda Bryson Shahn wrote, artists such as Ben Shahn not only felt that government art projects could improve America, but also that the artist himself was a vital part of the progress. "Art, it was thought, might actually help the people to weather the Depression by giving them meaningful and
hopeful communal (and governmental) symbols. With the decline of Roosevelt's programs, however, those who had enjoyed the openness and sense of purpose of the New Deal found themselves under attack. In addition, the Artists' Union and the American Artists' Congress could no longer be counted on to support the individuality or the financial well-being of artists. As Francis Pohl wrote Ben Shahn, and others, found themselves "New Deal Artists in a Cold War Climate." The aesthetic choices Shahn made reflect his desire to leave behind 1930s style collective, social protests--and the particular politics they suggested.
Chapter Three

The Composition of Modernism

New Currents in Late 1930s Art Criticism

As was alluded to at the end of chapter two, the late 1930s witnessed a shift in the emphasis of art criticism in which writers turned their attention from subject matter to formal characteristics. Of course, this is a bit of an overstatement—there continued to be art writers, historians, and critics for whom iconography and narrative were of paramount importance. But during the mid-1930s several enduringly influential American writers emerged who were concerned with formulating a cohesive modernist art history. Although their historiographies and methodologies were usually formed out of traditional formulas such as connoisseurship and contextual studies, in choosing to deal with modernist art—and its formal qualities—these writers had to address unique issues. The formalist experimentation and non-representational elements of much late 1930s and early 1940s modernism required new criteria for judgment and critique. Frequently during the 1930s modernist art critics emphasized the growing importance of abstraction in avant-garde art. Unfortunately, abstraction was stressed while other forms of expression, such as realism or 'social' art, were excluded form the discourse.

Of course, Ben Shahn did not have a solo show of his paintings from 1933 to
1940, and therefore he did not react immediately (in a public forum, at least) to the criticism of the writers I am about to discuss. He was, however, aware of the shift in aesthetic tendencies and art criticism during the latter 1930s. It is my contention that Shahn's works exhibited at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1940 were--in part--a manifestation of his reaction to the growing critical repudiation of Social Realist tenets. Although Shahn never relinchnished his hold on recognizable, representative art, he did yield a bit to the rising tide of formal emphasis. While Shahn did not turn to 'art for art's sake,' he did ease off his commitment to 'subject for subject's sake'--exemplified by his Dreyfus Case, Sacco and Vanzetti, and Mooney Case series of the early 1930s. While the following critics and historians did not write about Shahn during the 1930s, they were significant voices that reflect a paradigm shift in the art world occurring during that decade. I present their ideas in order to illuminate another factor in Shahn's late 1930s metamorphosis--his curbing of the easy to read, topical characteristics of his early 1930s style in favor of a less narrative, more conceptual, and more 'abstracted' idiom.

The initial director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., had a considerable impact on the American conception of avant-garde aesthetics and modernism during the 1930s. Through MoMA's exhibitions, collections, and publications, Barr helped introduce the American public to modern art. His construction of modern art history was not particularly theoretical, though. Barr did not rely upon difficult to understand philosophical, political, or social concepts. Instead he conceived of art history as a "story." Modern art moved along in a linear progression of introductions, developments, and conclusions. Spectators could clearly see MoMA's story of modern art unfold as they perused the museum's galleries. The modernist narrative told by MoMA had two great advantages: it was unencumbered by the
complex contexts that today most contemporary art historians accept as essential to
greater understanding, and, thanks to its simplicity, Barr's philosophy was readily
comprehensible by the ordinary museum visitor.63

Certainly MoMA's presentation of a linear progression, or evolution, of modern
art--specifically the strain of modern art that privileged formal experimentation and non-
objectivity--had its detractors. The absence of Social Realism and Regionalism on
MoMA's walls was an indictment of those movements' importance to modern art. The
emphasis that Barr and MoMA place on abstraction and on formal qualities--as opposed
to overt 'social content'--had an influence on artists, critics, and the general public. Barr's
apathy towards Ben Shahn's art, and Social Realism in general, may have influenced the
artist's artistic decisions during the late-1930s. Ironically during the 1940s, under the
leadership of James Thrall Soby, MoMA became one of Shahn's greatest advocates.
Soby began his association with MoMA in 1943 and developed a strong bond with Ben
Shahn and his art--promoting the artist by publishing no less than three books
concerning the artist and organizing Shahn's first retrospective at MoMA in 1947.
However, during the 1930s--under Barr's direction--MoMA turned a disapproving eye
towards Shahn and the Social Realists. The artist simply did not fit into MoMA's
constructed history of modern art--which emphasized abstraction.64

Barr was truly subjective in his view of modern art history--he saw what he
wanted to see. However, lacking a wider consideration of contexts, Barr's narrow,
comparative study of internal formal characteristics fails to give lasting satisfaction.
Subsequent art historians have begun to demonstrate that a wide variety of social and
cultural influences had an impact on early modernist formalism and abstraction.65 In
spite of Barr's groundbreaking work, his ideas are constantly being expanded and
revised. Still, it can be said with certainty that Ben Shahn was aware of Barr and MoMA's ideas and practices, and, I believe, they played a part in his late 1930s aesthetic metamorphosis.

I do not believe, however, that MoMA's exclusion of Social Realism from its walls or Barr's endorsement of an evolution of abstraction in significant modern art alone caused Shahn to turn to a more visually conceptual art. Shahn's RA/FSA inspired photographic-aesthetic and his personal reaction to the "transcendent indifference" of individuals he came across during his RA/FSA trips were probably the major factors in Shahn's formal and thematic changes, respectively. This will be addressed in detail in chapter four. I present Barr and MoMA merely to address an example of the rising tide of critical (and official) acceptance of abstraction during the mid-1930s, and the concurrent critical rejection of Social Realism. Shahn could not have been immune to such disapproval.

Modernist art criticism and theory in the late 1930s and 1940s had a dual effect. First, it helped establish the canon of the modernist period, giving a dominant position to abstraction's evolution and culmination in "pure painting." And it also pushed to the periphery art movements that seemed to contradict or weaken the standard account. Social Realism, as well as continuing academic traditions, "kitsch," folk art, etc., were either dismissed or ignored.

The 1930s were pivotal exactly because many post-1945 [and earlier] artists and modernist writers seemingly had come to define themselves and their values in opposition to the statist, socialist or communist principles held by those active in art, politics, and art administration during the Depression.66
Negative art criticism of social and New Deal art took a variety different forms depending upon which specific target the condemnation was directed at. Many regional newspaper writers attacked FAP artists for producing "bad art." Writers complained that Project artists added "nothing to beauty or aesthetics" and were "ignorant of local tradition and knowledge." Thus, both their form and content were denounced. Social Realism was also attacked in art journals by writers who felt that the political and social agenda of art during the 1930s overlooked the importance of artistry—the aesthetics were qualitatively lacking. In the minds of some of these writers America's leftist artists were turning into dupes of the Soviet leadership—which was becoming increasingly more suspect even among former supporter.

In a May 1940 editorial in *Art Digest*, Peyton Boswell, the journal's editor, called for what he called a "return to the aesthetic." Boswell declared that artistic political activism and American scene painting had worn themselves out during the 1930s. Both were "ready for the scrap heap." In more liberal publications related commentaries could be found. From 1937 to 1940 the *Partisan Review*, a left wing journal, began to disassociate itself from Stalin, Marxism, and Socialist Realism, turning instead to the writings and philosophy of Leon Trotsky, who believed that Stalin had "betrayed the revolution." Trotsky, and his associates, Diego Rivera and André Breton, published a manifesto in 1938, "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," which encouraged artists to free themselves from Soviet-inspired Socialist Realism and its pro-Stalinist implications. American artists took this call to freedom as a justification to leave organizations such as the Federal Art Project and the American Artists' Congress—which was similarly viewed as dogmatic and constraining.

Thus, both the art press and important art philosophers and artists joined in the
battle already being waged by the right-wing against the New Deal's federal art programs and Socialist Realist and Social Realist aesthetics. The horrific policies of Stalinism put a black mark on 1930s 'social art' (produced in both the USSR and USA) that still has not been completely erased. The radically partisan implications of Social Realist art—including Ben Shahn's--was just one more reason for art critics and writers to embrace more politically neutral modernist forms of art at the end of the 1930s.

By the mid-1930s art writers had already formed an art historical construct in which realism and modernism sat at polemic extremes. The degree of artistic mediation on subjects usually distinguished the realist from the modernist. According to polemicists such as Alfred Barr, Jr., and Peyton Boswell, American realism--particularly in the age of photography--was based on verism, while modernism, on the other hand, was distinguished by its conscious manipulation of formal qualities--in photography and painting this included unusual lighting, cropping, unexpected vantage points, addressing the flatness of the picture plane, and independent studies of color, dark, and light--free from reference to the material world. Generally, Modernist critics associated realism with subject, and modernism with technique. Few artists could, or wanted to, fall absolutely on either side of the fence, however. Elements from both traditions mixed freely in 1930s and 1940s American art. In Shahn's case, he never completely abandoned the lessons he learned in Europe. But, like Rivera, he altered modernist languages to suit his social and propagandistic purposes. Indeed, characterizing either Social Realism or documentary photography as anti-modernist seems an empty argument. As we will see, 'actuality' of subject-matter and modernist formal languages are compatible in much of Shahn's art.

Of course social content may be found in even the most abstract compositions.
Meyer Schapiro wrote an insightful article in 1936 entitled "The Social Bases of Art," in which he distinguished realist and the modernist artists not by formal languages or subject-matter, but rather by their attitudes and distinct relations towards society. Schapiro discounted those who claimed that modern painting (presumably the European work of the 1920s and 1930s) lacked a social aspect. Schapiro, at least during the 1930s, did not buy into the modernist doctrine that abstraction followed its own internal evolution, devoid of societal influences. He wrote:

The movement of abstract art is too comprehensive and long-prepared, too closely related to similar movements in literature and philosophy, which have quite other technical conditions, and finally, too varied according to time and place, to be considered a self-contained development issuing by a kind of internal logic directly from aesthetic problems. It bears within itself at almost every point the mark of the changing material and psychological conditions surrounding modern culture.

The social content of modernist art was obscured by both the claims of subjectivity by individual artists and the lavish attention modernists paid to "pure" formal qualities. Careful examination revealed that modernist artists shared the realist's concern for social contexts.

If we examine attentively the objects a modern artist paints and the psychological attitudes evident in the choice of these subjects and their forms, we will see how intimately his art is tied to the life of modern society... Although painters will say again and again that
content doesn't matter, they are curiously selective in their subjects. They paint only certain themes in a certain aspect.\textsuperscript{72}

Schapiro went on to give a rather standard Marxist explanation of the modern artist's dilemma. Abstraction springs from the artist's sense of detachment from nature, history, and society. Through this disentanglement it is possible for the modernist to achieve unprecedented, individualized qualities. Free of societal constraints the avant-gardist explores private and fantastic impulses, while, on the other hand, those artists who consciously attempt to remain actively engaged with society must make more pragmatic choices. Rationality, not "private and fantastic impulses," must guide such a socially committed artist. During the 1930s this translated into a realistic formal visual languages for the socially engaged artist such as Shahn. Of course the degree to which an artist wished to be socially engaged or indulge his or her "private and fantastic impulses" was also, according to Marxism, a function of the artist's and the audience/patron's economic circumstances. But now we are straying too far from the central concerns of this paper. What is significant is how prophetic Schapiro's article will prove to be when we examine the way in which Shahn toed the line between social and private content and realism and abstraction in his late 1930s paintings. Only during the 1940s and 1950s, when the art world was utterly swept away with individualism and inner stimuli, did 'social' artists and those other artists devoted to recognizable imagery accommodate their art to the new wave--and then only to a certain extent. In Shahn's case, he first shifted from public to personal subject matter and then later delved into allegory.

In retrospect the most important early attacks on Social Realism and defenses of 1940s to 1950s American style modernism were Clement Greenberg's articles "Towards
a Newer Laocoon," and "Avant-garde and Kitsch." In these early essays Greenberg had not yet arrived at the emphasis on formalism that would characterize his later writings. In "Avant-garde and Kitsch," in particular, Greenberg stressed the intimate relationships between popular culture, modernistic "high art," and social contexts. In his socialist-inspired essay Greenberg argued that both avant-garde art and kitsch emerge from the same foment of popular culture. The "culture of the masses" can produce "simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T. S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a Saturday Evening Post cover." Clearly, Greenberg is encouraging the reader to distinguish between different classes of culture based upon these comparisons. His essay is laden with such relative quality judgments. Greenberg's main goal, it seems, was to defend "high art" from the contamination of "mass culture." Towards this end he advocated an art that elevated itself above the quotidian. By purifying itself of the impurities of daily life, art could move towards it own unique eventualities. With this conclusion Greenberg does not seem so far from Schapiro.

Shahn's move away from specific incidents of "mass culture" as subject matter to more universal "elevated" themes during the 1930s can be easily demonstrated. In 1932 Shahn painted a work entitled Demonstration in Paris (fig. 30)--one of the paintings from the Sacco and Vanzetti series. In this work Shahn represented a demonstration that he had observed while traveling in Europe during the 1920s. I am not sure to what extent Shahn relied upon photographs in this work, but what is clear is that he attempted to recreate the actuality of the incident (by use of accurate details) investing the scene with a sense of 'realism.' Shahn included a placard expressing the demonstrator's cause, as well as factual--yet non-essential--depictions of the clothes of the people and a Parisian streetcar. He did this in order to provide the viewer with both the significance of the
event as well as the sense of what it must have felt like to have actually been present. Shahn is more concerned with narrative and description than in his own subjective interpretation of the scene.

In a work from 1939, *Vacant Lot*, Shahn has clearly moved away from such topicality (fig. 31). The subject matter of this painting is not what is literally shown, but, rather, what is felt. *Vacant Lot* is a painting about solitude and the transcendence and persistence of the child at play. A tiny child (relative to the great wall) finds a way to amuse himself even in the bareness of a vacant lot, all by himself. The theme of a solitary figure providing his own entertainment is a common one in Shahn's Personal Realist phase--e.g. *Pretty Girl Milking the Cow* (fig. 7) or *Sunday Painting* (fig. 32). In *Vacant Lot* Shahn contrasts the boy, who is organic, active, moving, somewhat specifically dressed, and polychromatic, with the wall which is un-movable, static, seemingly permanent, non-specific (it is notable for its generic 'wallness'), and largely monochromatic. The unrelenting shallow depth provides a background and a setting for the solitary player--there are very few visual releases and the space is almost suffocatingly confined. The child, however, seems oblivious to his artificial constraints. He looks inside himself for inspiration and creative ways to have fun, as if the imagination and initiative of the individual could transcend any limitations that society (the wall) could attempt to impose. This is Shahn's great painting of the Personal Realist phase. It encapsulates all the themes that obsessed Shahn from 1937 to 1940--isolation, individuality, transcendence, and initiative.

For *Vacant Lot* Shahn relied heavily upon his own photograph, of 1934 (fig. 33). Although Shahn made literal use of the photograph's composition and certain secondary motifs, he eliminated elements that were irrelevant to the main theme. The photograph
featured two other children who tended to suggest wider society, or support and friendship. They were deleted. A building on the left of the photograph (which added more specificity to the setting, extended the depth, and introduced more 'breathing room') was also removed. Also all of the other superfluous details (the sidewalk, the excessive rubble, the irregularities of the wall, etc.) were taken out in order to focus more directly on the theme of the boy and the wall. This was Shahn's typical method for extracting and distilling more universal meanings from specific photographs. Yet for all of its reliance on the photographic source, *Vacant Lot* seems strangely timeless. It brings to mind a mood or state of being that is familiar--albeit on an unconscious level--to many viewers. As James Thrall Soby described it, the painting is "penetrating in its evocation of childhood and absorption in play."74

In his paintings of the latter 1930s, Shahn often tried to elicit such non-specific reactions. Transcending everyday occurrence and touching some universal nerve became the goal. Personal Realism, in works like *Vacant Lot*, was Shahn's way of achieving this aim, without resorting to non-objectivity. Other artists sought similar objectives to what Shahn achieved in *Vacant Lot* through abstraction. In a sense Shahn followed Greenberg's dictates. He took a rather common, everyday subject and through a process of refinement and distillation--eliminating the impurities--arrived at a painting that offers a more undiluted message. Still, it must be noted that Greenberg could not wholeheartedly endorse a painting like *Vacant Lot*. It was still too tied to a narrative or anecdote. Greenberg advocated pure non-objectivity, while Shahn, on the other hand, preferred "abstracting" from sketches and photographs.

As the 1930s came to a close, Ben Shahn realized that he could not reconcile his earlier way of painting with the new "private and inner objectives" of his art. He knew
that his way of painting had to change to conform to his new goals—depictions of transcendence and universality. But Shahn could not commit himself to the practice of abstraction as other artists would. The rejection that entailed—in Shahn's mind self-commitment—was too high a price to pay. The idea of supplanting his commitment to social subject-matter in favor of detached abstraction was anathema to Shahn. He later explained that artists who turned to abstraction merely to follow the aesthetic trend were committing an unscrupulous act.

Many of those names that, during the thirties, had been affixed to paintings of hypothetical tyrannies and theoretical cures were now affixed to cubes and cones and threads and swirls of paint. Part of that work was—and is—beautiful and meaningful; part of it does indeed constitute private experience. A great part of it also represents only the rejection, only the absence of self-commitment.75

Thus, abstraction did not offer Shahn the possibilities that it did others during the 1940s, indeed, in Shahn's mind it was merely a "cul-de-sac." So what alternative did he find? For Shahn the challenge was to unite image and idea into a single impression, to create "an image of which meaning is an inalienable part." Shahn's ultimate solution was to create highly allegorical and symbolic works. These are the paintings that he began to exhibit at the Julien Levy show of 1944 (fig. 34). But the intermediate solution was to create works that dispensed with the incidental and topical—hallmarks of his paintings during the early 1930s. These intermediate works were those shown at Julien Levy in 1940—paintings that retained imagery drawn from personal experiences and RA/FSA photographs, yet focused on the moods and psychology of individuals (fig. 35). This was Shahn's reaction to the critical rise of abstraction as well as his personal solution to his
new artistic objectives.
Chapter Four

Photography and Shahn's Aesthetic and Thematic

Metamorphosis

The Sunday Paintings

The first manifestation of Shahn's new visual language were the so-called "Sunday Paintings," of 1937-1940—a designation Shahn himself gave to these works. Due to the time constraints of his late 1930s government assignments, Shahn was only able to work on easel paintings during his non-salaried hours, hence the identification. The Sunday Paintings—those works that were exhibited at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1940 76—are the first paintings that Shahn called Personal Realism, signifying his recognition that they were fundamentally different from Social Realism. The introspective subject-matter was Shahn's most obvious detour from the major tenets of Social Realism, but also the formal characteristics of the Sunday Paintings—especially the 'photographic-aesthetic' and more abstracted qualities—set them apart from Shahn's earlier, more typical, Social Realist works.

The Sunday Paintings drew both their style and content from Shahn's RA/FSA photographs—from which he culled entire compositions or specific motifs and figures, which he then isolated, de- or re-contextualized, and monumentalized. He manipulated
his photographic sources in such a way that the interior energies and psychological states of his protagonists were made the nuclei of the paintings. His techniques were not so different from those of the caricaturist. The reader may recall that satire was a major component of Shahn's *Tom Mooney* and *Sacco and Vanzetti* series. In those cases Shahn used subtle distortions and humorous juxtapositions to "ridicule and show his contempt for the follies, stupidities, and abuses in life" (Fig. 36). Although Shahn was not attempting to ridicule or lampoon his Sunday Painting protagonists, he did exaggerate their mannerisms and bodily features to invite the observer to make qualitative and subjective judgments about their motivations and characters. The Sunday Painting people—as they originally appeared in his RA/FSA photographs—became pliable entities onto which Shahn projected his own meanings. Contemporary critics and astute observers praised Shahn's skillful formal manipulations of his photographic sources, but rarely recognized that Shahn's manipulations altered fundamentally the original meaning of the photographs. Shahn's changes transformed relatively objective records into highly loaded personal statements.

Although Shahn's works of Personal Realism often quote directly from RA/FSA photographs, the stress he placed on solitary figures—and the elimination of clarified settings and superfluous details—blur the specific references. By the latter 1930s Shahn had developed a mature style that fused realism, stylization, distortion, and fantasy. During the later 1940s Shahn began to incorporate allegory and cryptic symbolism into his paintings. These changes, which made the conception of the artist more important than a literal style or subject-matter, were largely a reaction to, or Shahn's alternative for, abstraction that began to dominate American art during the late-1940s. In spite of the clearly subjective nature of Shahn's Personal Realism, he continued to believe that
artists should remain "engaged" to social concerns--committed to more than just formalistic experimentation. What is truly ironic, however, is that while Shahn's Personal Realism can be seen as a moderated attempt to remain socially engaged, the people who populate his Personal Realist canvases are conspicuously disengaged from society and its major issues.

The Role of Photography

Like Thomas Eakins and Edgar Degas, Shahn continually used photographs as source material for his paintings.78 This is clearly the case in the early series' The Dreyfus Affair and The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti of 1930 and 1932. In the former series Shahn used photographs found in a book he bought in Paris. For the latter series Shahn visited the New York Public Library where he found newspaper photographs and illustrations published by the Sacco and Vanzetti defense committees. In some instances Shahn quoted verbatim from these photographic sources (figs. 37, 38). As early as 1930 Shahn began to keep a photographic file that included newspaper images, magazine pictures, government agency photos (that Shahn either ordered or purchased), and later his own photographs.79 He organized his collection of photographs in folders labeled according to theme or motif.80 These images formed a collection of visual references that would come to dominate the iconography of Shahn's art from the late 1930s through the 1940s. As noted earlier, however, Shahn did not slavishly copy his photographic
sources—he made significant compositional changes and re-contextualized freely to achieve his desired effect.

At different points in his career, Shahn used photographs in different ways. While researching this paper I frequently encountered both advocates and critics of Shahn's work who insisted that he simply used photographs as visual notes, memory aids, or records of details—the implication is that photographs played a minor role in Shahn's creative process. But the idea that Shahn was disinterested in photography as anything other than a modernized preliminary study—in the French sense of an étude—is called into question by his tendency to persistently concentrate on specific themes in his photographs as the basis of later paintings—especially the activities of people and their larger significance. Shahn rarely photographed the way a photojournalist might—attempting to simply record the facts. On the contrary, he explored subjects with the probing curiosity of the sociologist or the psychologist. Indeed, the topics of Shahn's photographs—like his Sunday Paintings—are, more often than not, far-reaching universal themes embodied by distinct individuals, not space—or place—bound incidents. During the late 1930s, Shahn—who was always primarily concerned with the attitudes and motivations of people—used photography to explore the appearances and actions of individuals so he could gain insight into human character and convey his discoveries onto canvas.81

Since it is my contention that photography served as the aesthetic basis of Shahn's late 1930s paintings, it is incumbent upon me to clarify his somewhat ambiguous relationship to the medium. Shahn had strong feelings about photography's place in the realm of fine art and its role in his process of image making. Although, in general, he believed that his photography should take a secondary role to both his
paintings and graphic work, ironically, the content and form of most of his art during the 1940s was based upon his work with the camera. Shahn’s statements concerning photography reveal contradictions that suggest that he never fully resolved the interdependence of photography and his work in other media.

The Amateur who Disregarded Print Quality

Compounding the difficulty of appraising the relationship between Shahn’s photographic sources and subsequent paintings is his misleading embrace of his amateur status as a photographer. Shahn was never a particularly skilled technician with the camera, and he never made a great effort to acquire technical proficiency. In fact, Shahn actually seemed to take pride in being disinterested in print quality—as if there was some moral goodness in producing inferior prints! Speaking of his days as a RA/FSA photographer Shahn remembered,

I thought of photography purely as a documentary thing, and I would argue rather violently with photographers who were interested only in print quality. All that bored me. I felt the function of a photograph was to be seen by as many people as possible. I felt that the image was more important than the quality of the image—you understand?²

This attitude that placed image over print, content over form, was not an entirely original idea. There were other photographers working in the 1930s who developed the same
idea at an earlier date. The most significant in regard to Shahn was Henri Cartier-Bresson. Ben Shahn, like Cartier-Bresson, accepted the idea that the image—rather than the quality of the print—was of primary importance. And, in fact, during the mid-1930s, he did make a clear decision concerning the importance of printing his own negatives. Speaking of his days at the RA/FSA Shahn recalled,

My negatives I know were very uneven, and a real trouble for the printer. I would insist in the beginning on printing my own stuff, and then when I did so much, they had to bring in some printers. I would give them the quality of the thing I wanted and they would put it in the file, so when they had a call for it, they could reproduce it. They were much better printers than I was. They could reproduce it exactly.

What the RA/FSA staff printers were able to reproduce were Shahn's admittedly "uneven" negatives. In Shahn's view the inconsistent quality of his photographs did not mean that they were failures. Indeed, the formal eccentricities (or shortcomings) of Shahn's images were the inevitable result of both his technique—intimately tied to the quick and spontaneous nature of the Leica camera he used—and his confessed lack of interest in print quality. "With the separation of the act of seeing [selecting and composing] from the craft of making [processing and printing], there emerged a new aesthetic posture that accepted grainy textures, limited tonal scale, and strong, often harsh contrasts as qualities intrinsic to the photographic medium." This was quite at odds with the history of "art photography" in the United States, which had traditionally placed great importance on clarity and precise details.

Although Shahn, along with Cartier-Bresson, discounted the importance of the individual print (in contrast to traditional art photographers and Shahn's colleague
Walker Evans), I believe it is clear that Shahn made deliberate formal choices when he took his photographs. His attention was on composition, light and dark, and the relationships of figures (formal/quality issues for the photographer, not the printer), but not on developing, printing, or presentation. In fact, even if he wanted to, Shahn had no control over the actual printing and display of his RA/FSA photographs. He couldn't develop all of his own negatives and his RA/FSA superiors, Rexford Tugwell and Roy Stryker, controlled the photograph's distribution and exhibition. Still, in spite of his laissez-faire attitudes towards print quality and their resulting unevenness, Shahn's photographs were often very successful on other levels. Roy Stryker explained:

Shahn came back with pictures that were like his paintings--imaginative, beautiful things not restricted by technique. They were often out of focus and overexposed or underexposed. When Arthur [Rothstein] or Walker Evans or Carl Mydans would get to worrying too much about technique I'd bring out Shahn's photographs and say, 'Look at what Shahn has done and he doesn't know one part of a camera from another.' I wanted them to know how small a part the mechanical tool--the camera--played in making a good picture.\(^{86}\)

It was life, not art, that interested Shahn, and--as with his paintings--the camera was a mere instrument of communication. If photography helped him make a point more clearly and effectively that was sufficient. In a 1946 interview Shahn said, "I am a social painter or photographer. I paint or photograph for two reasons: either because I like certain events, things, or people with great intensity or I dislike others with equal intensity."\(^{87}\) The artistry of a photograph played a subservient role to the message.

However important Cartier-Bresson was in the development of Shahn's
philosophy of photography (particularly the matter of singular prints and print quality), he was of equal importance to Shahn's techniques of picture taking. Cartier-Bresson inspired the formal qualities of the rushed, impromptu image--so prominent in Shahn's RA/FSA photographs (figs 39, 40). This will be discussed in detail later, but at this point I must stress that the eccentricities of Shahn's photographs are not the result of naiveté or lack of sophistication--as has often been argued. Shahn commented in 1944:

When you spend all day walking around, looking, looking, looking through a camera viewfinder, you get an idea what makes a good picture. What you're really doing is abstracting the forms. Photographs give those details of forms that you think you'll remember but don't--details that I like to put in my paintings.\(^{88}\)

Shahn associated his "good pictures" with the abstract qualities of composition and the inclusion of significant details--two qualities that continuously flow throughout Shahn's oeuvre. While his RA/FSA experience allowed Shahn to develop a formal photo-aesthetic--born from extensive experience--his images also retained a quality of spontaneity. Although Shahn valued the extemporaneous qualities of his RA/FSA photographs, and exploited those features in his Sunday Paintings, this photo-aesthetic was neither unplanned nor unreflective. It was the result of Shahn's careful consideration and adoption of Cartier-Bresson's non-elitist philosophy and impromptu technique. Shahn's later manipulations of his RA/FSA photographs was, however, an entirely original invention.
Shahn's Advocates De-emphasize his Photographs

Shahn's supporters were often reluctant to make a big issue of his photographs. In 1947 when MoMA was organizing Shahn's first retrospective James Thrall Soby, the show's curator and Shahn's most influential advocate, did not even want to include his photographs in the exhibition. Laura Katzman has explained that part of the reason for Soby's attitude was the low reputation of photography among art critics and the apolitical image that MoMA wished to construct for Shahn.\textsuperscript{89} MoMA's formalist and modernist conception of art history—which stressed the internal, formal progression of modernism, especially the evolution of abstraction—had no place for the bellicose, recognizable social/political content of Shahn's photographs. In addition, the specifically New Deal-linked imagery of Shahn's RA/FSA work was becoming increasingly unpopular in the reactionary political climate of the 1940s. Soby did not want to stir up political controversy, especially when MoMA was attempting to present Shahn to the public as a universally acceptable artist, whose work could (and did) appeal to both the political/social Right and Left.

But the main reason for Soby's de-emphasis of Shahn's photographs was the lack of a consensus over the medium's right to be considered a high art, and the status of documentary photography within the medium.\textsuperscript{90} Certain influential members of the art world, including Edward Steichen, believed that not only was photography an authentic art form but that even aesthetic distinctions within the media concerning subject matter were invalid. Steichen was convinced that "the fine quality of work produced by
photographers working for the Farm Security Administration and for Life had effectively erased aesthetic distinctions among images made as personal expression, as photojournalism, or as social commentary."

Soby, on the other hand, held the opinion that photography was a qualitatively lower form of art than, say, painting. This is clear from a statement Soby made in his monograph Ben Shahn—which came out in 1947 coinciding with Shahn's retrospective—concerning the aesthetics that informed Shahn's photographs. Soby asserted that Shahn's "approach to photography was almost certainly dictated by his vision as a painter," and that "while Shahn's painting often records a photographically arrested reality, its impact is quickened by the most exacting and imaginative painterly means." Soby concluded that, "In brief, Shahn uses photography as other artists use preliminary sketches, and from its notation precedes under the compulsion of a painter's inner vision."92

I am convinced that the low regard in which Soby held photography tainted his opinion concerning Shahn's process. While it is true that Shahn initially approached photography with a painter's eye and with the intention of recording information (as with a preliminary sketch), it is my contention that during the late 1930s this approach was completely reversed. Shahn's total immersion in the photographic medium—at the same time that he temporarily abandoned easel painting—forced Shahn to develop a photographic aesthetic. He began to envision the world through a camera lens and the compositional and formal choices he made were the result of this new, though ultimately fleeting, visual acuity. Shahn fell under a "camera's eye vision of life"—using the viewfinder (quite literally) to organize abstract compositions, as well as capture momentary details which he later incorporated into the Sunday Paintings, of 1938-1940.

Soby's evasion of Shahn's photographs was also probably related to the fact that
there were critical--and even financial--prices to be paid by the realist painter who relied too heavily on photographic sources. Representational painters who used photography extensively, such as Shahn, were often criticized in two ways. First and foremost, critics claimed that using photographs compromised artistic imagination, and in the second place, for realists, photographic sources constituted a form of cheating. Similar criticisms had been directed at earlier painters such as Thomas Eakins. James Thrall Soby was particularly worried that public knowledge of Shahn's photographic sources would diminish his painting's aesthetic and market values (problems for both Shahn and MoMA). For this reason only a handful of Shahn's photographs appeared in the 1947 retrospective.

The issues of Shahn's reliance on photographic sources and the implications for the artist's work in other media were not resolved quickly:

At the time of his first retrospective of photographs in 1969, shortly after the artist's death, Bernarda Bryson Shahn, his widow, also worried about the relationship between his paintings and photographs. She suggested that knowledge of such connections would, in the public's eye, minimize Shahn's seriousness as both a photographer and painter as well as his respect for photographs or paintings as independent art forms.93

That having been said, Bernarda Bryson Shahn also understood that photography was a vital part of her husband's work and that regardless of her reservations the public deserved to see and study his photographs. In 1972 she explained that her husband "felt
that photography was a great and valid form of expression" and that "he believed in photography used to record [and] he believed very much in its power to discover and reveal."\textsuperscript{94} Bryson Shahn went on to say that Ben Shahn "claimed photography was the clearest way to communicate in human terms."\textsuperscript{95} In other words, according to his wife and artistic confidant, Shahn thought the photography kept equivocation to a minimum and the camera could uncover the truth. Although today the objectivity and ambiguity of photography are strongly contested issues, that is not the concern of this paper. It is sufficient for my purposes to record Shahn's opinion. He conceptually separated the two media of photography and painting. The former was the more objective and clearly communicative, the latter was more subjective and subtle. Shahn's art during the 1930s and 1940s consisted of a prolonged dialogue between the two media--with photography taking the upper hand in his development of the Sunday Paintings.

The dependence of Shahn's paintings on his photographs should not be exaggerated, however. Compared to other artists, such as Eakins or Charles Sheeler, Shahn exploited his sources with expressiveness, humor, and fantasy. An example of Shahn's free manipulation of a photographic source is the painting \textit{Willis Avenue Bridge}, of 1940--one of the Sunday Paintings exhibited at the Julian Levy show of 1940 (fig. 41).\textsuperscript{96}

The subjects of this painting are two elderly African-American women sitting on a bench that is positioned on a bridge--the bridge is identifiable by the painting's title and its characteristic support beams. The women are a study in contrasts--one is thin and the other is heavy, one appears healthy while the other is sick or injured, one is adorned with jewelry and glasses and the other is not, one's expression is alert and focused while the other appears lost in thought. Shahn liked to employ visual counterpoints in his art.
In 1944 he explained:

Most important is always to have the play back and forth, back and forth. Between the big and the little, the light and the dark, the smiling and the sad, the serious and the comic . . . My type of social painting makes people smile. The height of the reaction is when the emotions of anger, sympathy, 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. 97

In Willis Avenue Bridge Shahn kept the individuals quite distinct. Although the women are, to an extent, emotional types, they are not visual clichés'--because they are so distinctive and clearly refer to particular individuals. In fact, the separate and contrasting physiognomies of the women are the central theme of the painting. Even during his Personal Realism phase--when Shahn tried to capture more universal expressions and emotions--he never reduced his figures to stereotypes.

Shahn used the thematic components of Willis Avenue Bridge to create contrasts while still achieving a formally balanced design. The organic nature of the women is accentuated by the harsh artificiality and geometric patterned abstraction of the bridge. While the bridge beams are compositionally unifying--providing an 'all-over' structural backdrop--the jarring heat of the orange hues contrasts dramatically with the overall sedate, cool color scheme. The bridge's strong diagonals also perform at least two other significant functions: first, they add movement and visual tension--this is a very active composition--and second, they limit the illusion of a recession into space. Thus, what

Ellis 63
Shahn presents is a sort of stage space on which the central drama--the women's expressions--can be played out.

The women are infused with the most dramatic pathos and energy. Although they are clearly a couple--in the sense of being friends, or family, etc.--they are emotionally disconnected from each other. Their personalities--as conveyed through their eyes and their body language--are not at all in sync. One woman seems defeated, both physically and emotionally, resigned to her fate. The other is resolute, determined, and filled with the strength and fortitude to conquer any obstacle. My subjective reading is reinforced by the revelatory poses of the women--one with a bowed head, downward glance, and slopped shoulders, the other with a firm, clenched fist, bright eyes, and proud, erect posture. Although, significantly, we cannot say with certainty what worldly pressures have afflicted these women (perhaps prejudice, sexism, or social/political disenfranchisement) we can identify two distinct reactions. One has been beaten down, the other maintains her dignity with "transcendence."

The degree to which Shahn accommodated this painting to its photographic sources reveals his intentions (figs. 42, 43). He transferred the main elements of the photographs to the painting without great alterations. The poses and physical characteristics of the women are directly transcribed from one photograph. And the general pattern of the bench and bridge--although in the painting the beams are inverted--are copied truthfully from another photograph. But Shahn's manipulations are telling. The women's expressions are made more intense and representative of very specific attitudes. The urban settings--clear in both photographs--are discarded in favor of a more indeterminate, abstract context. While the photographs seem to be strong determiners of the painting's ultimate composition and Shahn's alterations are kept to a minimum, the
changes plainly reveal Shahn's goal. He consciously discarded specific contexts and topicality in an attempt to depict the interior, psychological intensity and melancholy of the individuals. *Willis Avenue Bridge* can accurately be called Personal Realism--based on its verisimilitude and private subject matter--but it is also infused with Shahn's subjective expressiveness and artistry.

The ability of photographs to pluck snippets of substance from life were an invaluable resource for Shahn, who during the late 1930s and 1940s increasingly sought to isolate and universalize fractions of his photographic sources. A good example of Shahn's tendency to re-contextualize and re-interpret figures culled from photographs is the 1940 painting *Pretty Girl Milking the Cow* (fig. 7).

*Pretty Girl Milking the Cow* was one of the RA/FSA photograph-inspired paintings included in the 1940 Julien Levy show. It is a prime exemplar of Shahn's desire to use extremely specific photographs to produce paintings with broader applications.

In the painted image a man sits comfortably on the ground within a fertile, grassy landscape and plays a harmonica. Fallen leaves cover the field, suggesting the autumn season--the specific mood of that season is reinforced by patches of grass turning brown and the dark, forbidding sky. The viewer can pick out certain details that lend a specificity to the setting. On the horizon line are the remains of a fence (boards and beams, etc.). And on one of the trees are carved the initials "P. M.". Yet in spite of these elements the landscape is portrayed in a fairly general way, in the sense that the place, date, and location are not made absolutely clear. While this relatively generic treatment of the landscape reflects Shahn's desire to downplay a specific setting--to focus on the psychology of the figure--the artist's lack of interest in the landscape genre may have also played a part.
The landscape setting serves the subsidiary role of isolating and emphasizing the true subject of the work--the man and his internal world. While certain details tend to re-enforce the individuality of the man, these may be the result of an extreme reliance on a photographic source--rather than Shahn's attempt to be topical or realistically descriptive. The rolled-up sleeves, suspenders, plaid hat, the specificity of the folds in the man's shirt and pants, his white socks, and the specific placement of his feet all suggest how closely Shahn followed the dictates of his photographic source.

However, the changes that Shahn imposed on the figure indicate the artist's intentions. The man was moved from an off-center position in the photograph to the very middle of the composition and was greatly enlarged in relation to the overall composition. In addition, Shahn has distorted the size of the man's hands and face--traditionally the most expressive parts of the body--in concordance with the conventions of caricature. Shahn was never very interested in the literal depiction of anatomy, and in this work the body is only used as a vehicle to express the subject's mood.

Color is also used to focus attention. The overall drab, cool color-scheme is countered by two strongly projecting warm colors: the orange-yellow leaves--that form a pattern helping to unify the composition--and the garish, hot pink of the man's shirt. The outlandish hue of the shirt serves as the focal point of the entire painting--ensuring that the viewer's attention is continually brought back to the man, the central motif.

The modifications that Shahn made to his photographic source--his own RA/FSA picture, *Musgrove Brothers, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania*, 1935 (fig. 8)--were done for two reasons: to focus attention on the single figure and to produce a more balanced composition. The peculiarities of the actual landscape--which included a couple of trees and some houses on the horizon--were eliminated, as were three
additional people. The elimination of the other figures—the remaining man's brothers—diminished the original photograph's sense of community, family, and society. Shahn chose to present the viewer with a solitary individual who dominates his natural setting.

The harmonica player is an isolated—yet not unhappy—man. He provides his own entertainment, and seems unfettered by topical events or even his environment. This self-absorptive, transcendent attitude is what Shahn was trying to convey; the protagonist (at least temporarily) is indifferent to the issues of the world and he functions outside the contexts of larger social problems. Divorcing his figure from the peculiarities of existence (through de-contextualization), Shahn elevates—or iconicizes—his subject, turning an extremely specific photograph into a more enduring painted image.

At his point I would like to turn my attention to a painting Shahn completed in 1946, *East Twelfth Street.* (fig. 44) The reason that I include this analysis of a work that lies outside the purview of this paper—the latter 1930s—is to emphasize how deeply and exactly Shahn relied upon photographic sources (for compositions, moods, lighting, color, relations of form, and other details including clothes, atmosphere, etc.) during the period from 1937 to 1940. A true 'photo-aesthetic'—borne from almost direct translations of photographs into paintings—inform the paintings he showed at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1940. In contrast, by the mid-1940s Shahn used photographs as mere jumping off points, or as in my example, *East Twelfth Street,* as visual archives. Shahn exploited two photographic sources for *East Twelfth Street,* treating them as storehouses of collage elements—easily mixed and mingled, with interchangeable elements, which he altered significantly in regard to color, stylization, and meaning (figs. 45, 46). The importance of the artist's hand and his imagination once again began to be more important than the
use of the camera in Shahn's mid-1940s paintings.100

Within a limitlessly receding architectural setting three girls skate towards the horizon. Five strongly defined lines--describing the edges of the architecture and the division of sidewalk and street--converge on a distant vanishing point, dividing the composition into distinct colorfields and forming a sort of pie-like arrangement. The architecture is simplified to two horizontally balanced triangular wedges. And the architectural details--gothic buttresses and classical oculus', which seem more decorative than functional--are suggested simply by a repetition of seemingly incised lines that diminish in size as they recede. The eye is led in a circle around the design, which at its most basic level, is a simplistic alternation of red and white geometric shapes. Especially in the broad, painterly white sidewalk and red road, Shahn seems to be experimenting with formal qualities, attempting to render planes of largely monochromatic color in interesting ways. In *East Twelfth Street* Shahn does not seem very far from pure abstraction.

The skating girls--the painting's only organic elements--offer a refreshing oasis within the harsh artificiality, coldly impersonal, and excessively designed painting. Although the girls would at first seem to be identical 'peas in a pod,' close observation reveals slight irregularities--in their clothes and movements--that lend a specificity to each one. Shahn made subtle variations in their berets, the folds of their coats, and their gestures that offer barely perceptible insights into individual personalities. However, it is the composition--particularly the abstract nature of the lines and colors--and not the human element that seems to interest Shahn in this work. Undoubtedly, he spent much more time and attention on arranging the design and painting the large, flat planes of color than he did on rendering the three girls. By 1946 Shahn had moved beyond
depiction's of mental 'transcendence'--the goal of 1937-1940--to more general explorations of formal characteristics. *East Twelfth Street* features a decidedly 'painting-aesthetic,' reducing the photographic sources to a subservient role and at the same time, evidently, reflecting a disinterest in politics and social issues.

The degree to which Shahn relied upon his photographic sources is what is most significant for my purposes, though. Shahn used two photographs, one featured the girls and the other the architecture. Shahn extracted the girls from the first photograph (fig. 45), disregarding their original context and activity. Instead of cautiously ascending a stairway leading up to a building (as they are seen in the photograph), they are shown in the painting energetically skating on solid ground into the distance. The original two girls are enlarged and moved to the bottom of the picture plane in the painting, and a third girl is added whose diminished scale suggests a recession of space into the distance. The second photographic source (fig. 46) provided the architectural setting. 101 Although Shahn retained the general arrangement of the photograph, he cleaned it up--eliminating extraneous details and irregularities--to achieve aesthetic clarity. All details that would distract from the central theme--including extra buildings, streetlights, cars, etc.--were omitted. The effect is a city street turned surreal in an attempt at universality. It is an idealized setting that serves as a perfectly unsullied stage for the girls to act upon.

It is important that I emphasize this point: during the mid-1940s Shahn did, in fact, retain some of his tendencies of 1937-1940 (such as de-emphasizing politics and social issues, focusing on personal moments, and attempting to convey more ecumenical and less topical themes), but--and this is vital--he began to rely less heavily on his photographic sources. The works shown at Julien Levy in 1940 were often almost direct.
transcriptions of photographs, Shahn was manipulating his sources to a limited extent. By the mid-1940s, when his motivations changed, Shahn began to use photographs simply as points of reference, trusting more in his own imagination and abilities as a painter. For instance, comparing *East Twelfth Street*, of 1946, to *Vacant Lot* (fig. 31), of 1939, one immediately is aware how profoundly the photographic source and 'photo-aesthetic' informed the latter.

The Role of Photography

One of the main propositions of my thesis is that Shahn's complete immersion in the photographic medium was a primary explanation for the formal--as well as iconographic--shift of his paintings in the late 1930s. Many authors have already acknowledged that Shahn's photographic file, largely based upon his RA/FSA work, served as a visual repository of subject-matter for his paintings during the 1940s (i.e., Pohl, Soby, Katzman, Pratt, and Shahn himself). But rarely has the *extent* of his painting's reliance on photographs during the 1930s been discussed--in fact, James Thrall Soby and Bernada Bryson Shahn attempted to conceal this reality. The truth is, Shahn consciously incorporated photographic techniques and a photographic aesthetic into his paintings following his extensive foray into the photographic medium. No longer was he content to use photographs merely to chronicle motifs, study textures and lighting, or record ephemeral details as he had during the early 1930s. Instead, Shahn
embraced and emulated the visual qualities present in the work of photographers like Cartier-Bresson--including dramatic cropping, irrational unselectivity of detail, and the use of unconventional vantage points. He then translated those compositional qualities, along with iconographic matter, from his photographs onto painted surfaces.

In addition, Shahn accepted and even reveled in the uncontrollable aspects of photography. He learned to love his photograph's 'happy accidents' and they became regular features of his new style of painting--although he was selective as to which 'accidents' he allowed to remain. The asymmetry and cropping of Shahn's photographs may have been the result of the rush to capture a scene or the desire to record a single motif within a crowded environment, but when these qualities were used in Shahn's later paintings they have the effect of fresh spontaneity and a continuation of the visual plane (Fig. 47). Photography opened up a whole new world of visual possibilities in the painting medium.

It was through re-contextualizing that Shahn was able to transform the mundane into the timeless. He took the people in his photographs out of their original environments and distilled their moods and meanings--like an icon.\textsuperscript{102} Shahn also attempted to condense meaning and references in his photographs--which frequently featured highly compressed space and ambiguous backgrounds (figs. 48, 49). In these photographs, the stress was on the individuals, not the circumstances. His RA/FSA inspired paintings were similar in this regard. But the paintings differed from the photographs in the degree to which they de-emphasized narrative. In his late-1930s search for universality, Shahn moved from telling stories--influenced by his respect for the work of both Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson--to producing icons and representing emotional characters. In this way he replaced his Social Realism with a
'higher art,' one that fit more comfortably into art historical traditions. The icon, the allegory, and the symbol--features of Shahn's 1940s oeuvre--were more palatable forms of expression during the 1940s, especially to modernist artists and critics.

The Transformative RA/FSA Experience

All of this discussion about Shahn's personal motivations for his 1930s photographs would seem to suggest that he ignored the specific goals of the RA/FSA so that he concentrate on his own artistic concerns. And it is true that the pragmatic goals of the RA/FSA were, at times, at odds with the photographers personal, artistic interests. But I do not wish to imply that Shahn did not take his RA/FSA responsibilities seriously. The truth is quite the opposite. He was genuinely concerned with the suffering people endured due to economic hard-times, and his photographs dealt directly and systematically with distress and discomfort in the 1930s. But they did so in a more warmly personal and humanizing way than did the work of some of the other RA/FSA photographers. Shahn did record the essential facts of the places that he visited, but he also never strayed from the underlying spirit of the people and the times. Shahn's RA/FSA trips opened his eyes to social aspects of the United States of which he previously had been unaware. He internalized what he witnessed and later this re-surfaced in his work in a dramatic way. Shahn later explained that he took the experience very personally:
When I went down South in Arkansas, and Mississippi, and Louisiana, all for the Farm Security, and took thousands of photographs these sharp definitions that I had formed by living only in New York just disappeared . . . and it took a long period of time. I came from the so-called social realism into the personal realism: it was based on my own experience and not somebody else's experience.104

The above quote, from 1965, was one of Shahn's final statements concerning the origins of his Personal Realism. It helps to explain why in the later 1930s Shahn came to recognize the limitations of Social Realism. The issues that seemed so important in political and aesthetic debates in New York City and Washington D. C. were of little significance to the dispossessed and disenfranchised people Shahn encountered in the South and Midwest. These people were more concerned with their own personal struggles—-not sweeping social and governmental issues. Shahn's RA/FSA photographs record not only the political and social circumstances of individuals, but also, their personal emotions, hopes, and disappointments.

It is a paradox that at the peak of Shahn's involvement in communal government art projects he was drawn to personal, transcendental subject matter. His RA/FSA experiences led Shahn to a greater realization of the plight of individuals—outside the realm of social movements and political circumstances—-and this is evident in his paintings. There are, of course, some exceptions. In some late 1930s works such as Scabbies are Welcome, of 1937, individuals seem to be helpless pawns in external economic circumstances that are beyond their control (fig. 50)—-but in Shahn's late-1930s oeuvre this is generally not the norm. The late-1930s paintings reveal a psychological change in Shahn's protagonists. The individuals in Seurat's Lunch, of 1939, and Pretty
*Girl Milking the Cow*, of 1940, for instance, seem to have little concern for politics and the greater society (figs. 6, 7). Shahn's actors live in a world of his own creation, subjected to manipulations--both formal and environmental--that impose new meanings.

What a distance Shahn had traveled from his 1930s works of Social Realism--like the *Sacco and Vanzetti* series--and the specific mission and images of the RA/FSA photographic project! What function does the painting *Pretty Girl Milking the Cow*--and its introspective harmonica player--play in the political and social debates of the late 1930s? The protagonist seems uninvolved, even disinterested, in these issues. Perhaps this is a reflection of Shahn's own attitudes. Comparing Shahn's Sunday Paintings to his early work, the viewer can only be shocked by the artist's complete turn around. By the late 1930s Shahn was clearly an artist more concerned with formal issues and his own subjectivity, than in political or social debates.
Conclusion

There have been numerous attempts to explain the formal and thematic change in Shahn's art during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The artist himself chose to take a philosophical approach, emphasizing his personal reactions to both the "transcendent indifference" of the victims of the Depression and the devastation, especially in Italy, of World War II. In Shahn's own explanations, the resurgent spirit of humanity--in the face of intense suffering--opened his eyes to the limitations of Social Realism's topical references and ecumenical theories. This certainly may have been within Shahn's subconscious during the period of his transformation, when--in order to address the wider concerns of civilization--he believed it was necessary to expand his formal language and his iconography. But this was not the only, or perhaps even primary, explanation. I have already discussed the role that the medium of photography played in the content and style of Shahn's late 1930s paintings. But I believe that there were other personal and professional reasons for Shahn's new direction. He was well aware of the changes that were occurring in both the art and political spheres. Shahn needed to adapt to changing times if he wished to remain a vital and important artist still capable of addressing a wide audience. It is my contention that Shahn made pragmatic decisions concerning the aesthetics and themes of his own art in relation to the times. The reasons for Shahn's decisions were both personal and professional.

During the late 1930s Shahn made a dramatic move away from overtly political statements in his paintings. The partisan, liberal content of The Passion of Sacco and
Vanzetti gave way to de-politicized, and less controversial, subjects. The single greatest factor in this shift was Shahn's rejection of radical leftist politics in favor of the more moderate New Deal agenda of President Roosevelt. Shahn's early 1930s radical anger was replaced by reformist zeal. Shahn believed that not only could something be done within the framework of Roosevelt's administration, but that it was being done. The optimism instilled in Social Realist artists by the New Deal changed the biting edge of their art. Solving, not identifying, problems became Shahn's focus during the late 1930s.

Other writers such as Francis Pohl have tended to focus on the thematic transformation in Shahn's mid-1940s art, when an oppressive and aggressive reactionary US political climate forced Social Realists to reconsider the content and aesthetics of their work. But in doing so these writers have tended to give short shrift to the paintings from 1937-1940, when the seeds of Shahn's metamorphosis were planted. The introspection and subjectivity that would come to dominate Shahn's work from 1940 onward were first manifested in the Julien Levy show of 1940. However, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that Shahn's work did change significantly during the years from 1940 to 1944—and perhaps this change is not plainly related to what was happening to his art during the late 1930s.

Shahn could not fail to address the enormity of suffering produced by the Second World War. When he saw the devastation of Europe during his tenure at the Office of War Information the optimism of the RA/FSA gave way to an urgent need to deal with his internal reaction to enormous atrocities. "According to his own account in The Biography of a Painting, he could no longer reconcile the social dream of the thirties with his 'private and inner objectives of art.'"105 In part this explains works such as The Red Stairway, of 1944, with its general statement on the resilience, and perhaps futility,
of the human spirit. (fig. 51) But personal reactions to the war were not the only reasons for Shahn's metamorphosis during the period from 1935 to 1945. The first transforming factor was Shahn's attempt to capture the transcendent qualities of his RA/FSA subjects.

In the late-1940s with a growing reaction against thirties style liberalism and political activism, the introspection and pessimism of The Red Stairway gave way to a style of painting that seemed, in its own way, detached from politics altogether. "Shahn's attempt to define for himself a liberal political position immune to infiltration from the far left and Red-baiting from the right was accompanied by an effort to develop an artistic language equally resistant to political categorization."106 As Shahn moved away from overt social and political criticism, he increasingly incorporated abstract formal qualities and more general thematic concepts into his paintings in order to avoid the political/professional consequences.

Shahn would appear to have fallen prey to the critical assertion, or the pervasive influence of the assertion, that the aesthetic/formal 'high road' rejected literal subject-matter. True artistic merit is to be found through abstracting from nature, if not through pure abstraction. Certainly Shahn's adoption of a less literal formalism and iconography contributed to his continued success. Did he simply respond to his inner personal experiences when he formulated his so-called Personal Realism, or was he also searching for another, more universal yet still figurative, alternative to abstraction when addressing universal themes? Shahn would never relinquish his commitment to humanistic reference in his art, but he did have a strong desire to transcend the specific. At the moment of Shahn's transformation modernists were issuing a demand to move beyond realism amid a political environment that discouraged dissent. Shahn made this comment in 1951:
You may disagree with me that such a political atmosphere can have any effect upon the aesthetic content of art, to stipulate the trend toward abstraction, or toward anything else. I believe that it has. Abstract painting is, politically speaking, about the most non-committal statement that can be made in art . . . Abstract art had left its political banners far behind, and has for many years gone its way, "disengaged."\textsuperscript{107}

Shahn was quite aware that politics could, and did, affect aesthetics. He condemned the abstract artists "disengagement," but he consistently refused to acknowledge that his own art also become less overtly political and social during the late 1930s due--at least in part--to politics and the pressure of art critics. The concessions he made to changing political and aesthetic circumstances perhaps were too sensitive a topic for Shahn to address. But although Shahn never retreated completely from his commitment to recognizable content, he did shift his focus from direct social engagement to explorations of more general and relatively conventional symbolism, especially from the mid-1940s to the 1950s. In making his own aesthetic and thematic choices, however, it seems that a poetic, lyrical "humanism" was a preferable alternative to non-objectivity.

Shahn had compelling professional reasons for adopting a new visual language during the late 1930s. With the United State's entry into World War II and the advent of the Cold War reactionary forces infiltrated every area of American society, including the New York art scene. New galleries emerged in New York promoting abstract art--which could be considered politically 'safer' than Social Realism. The time was perfect for a formal and thematic shift in America's art. Anti-Communists and nationalists joined forces with formalist/modernist critics in denouncing 1930s style realism. Reactionaries
mistrusted any political content, especially critical Social Realism, and modernists questioned the relevance of realistic modes of painting altogether. Dealers frequently found that the demand for highly politicized paintings was drying up. The aesthetic and political "middle ground" seemed to be the best answer.

By avoiding artistic and political categories Shahn safeguarded himself. His quest for the expression of a "universal experience" coincided with political and art world contexts that discouraged controversy and criticism. It is very significant to realize that it was with the advent of his Sunday Paintings/Personal Realism--first shown at the Julian Levy show of 1940—that the major museums began to collect Shahn's paintings. His popularity boomed after his transformation to a less dogmatic style and content. Indeed, it could be argued that the continuing relevance of Shahn, as evidenced by his 1947 retrospective, financial success during the 1950s and 1960s, and his reemergence as a topic of contemporary art historical discourse, is based upon the new direction his art took in the late 1930s. By making a conscious decision to artistically react to the rise of abstraction and political reactionaries, by forming a new hybrid visual language Shahn ensured his place of relevance within mid-century American art.
Notes to Introduction and Chapter One

1 The case of Sacco and Vanzetti has generated an immense amount of literature and controversy. For arguments on behalf of the two defendants see Herbert B. Ehrmann's *The Untried Case: The Sacco-Vanzetti and the Morelli Gang* (New York, 1933) and *The Case That Will Not Die: Commonwealth vs. Sacco and Vanzetti* (Boston, 1959). John Dos Passos offers a view of the case from the eyes of an American intellectual and artist in *Facing the Chair: The Story of the Americanization of Two Foreign-born Workmen* (Boston, 1927).


3 During the late 1930s the artist was employed full time by the United States government and, therefore, had little opportunity to prepare easel paintings for this show. Shahn worked actively on the weekends during 1938 and 1939 and he called the resulting works his "Sunday Paintings."

4 The emphasis on the introspective individual was not the only new element in Shahn's early 1940's paintings. He also began to use more cryptic, even fantastic, themes. By the late 1940s Shahn's repertoire of motifs would include harpies, birds with human heads, and "curious and indecipherable beasts." Yet even as World War II raged, Shahn had begun to paint somehow less-than-innocent children behaving in pseudo-ritualistic ways within surreal settings, fusing mysterious classical decorations and scarred landscapes.

5 After Czar Alexander II was assassinated on March 1, 1881, persecution of the Russian Jews increased dramatically. Joshua Shahn was forced to flee first to South Africa and then to America, after which he sent for his family.
Shahn's battle against social injustice was not limited to those maltreatments that he personally encountered, however. Anti-Semitism, for instance, did not play a major thematic role in his art. Indeed, at times Shahn sought to separate his ethnic and artistic identities. When asked, in 1966, if he considered himself a Jewish artist Shahn replied, "I am a human artist. I don't like categorization in groups. I wouldn't be interested in an exhibition of Jewish painters." (Francis Pohl, *Ben Shahn*, p. 28.)

Later, when he traveled for the RA/FSA to explore the ravages of the Depression in the rural American South, his consciousness was similarly expanded.


One of the best surveys of the Social Realist movement is Shapiro's *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, a first-hand anthology of critical writings. Not only is it an informative over-all guide, Shapiro also devotes a chapter specifically to Shahn, incorporating critical reviews, biographical excerpts, and the artist's own writings.

The combination of avant-garde techniques with serious topical subject-matter made Shahn's production during the 1930s doubly significant. In the 1940s, however, the political content of art would be scrutinized to a greater extent by suspicious eyes. Art that was "appropriate to the proletariat" fell out favor in a wide spectrum of arenas. In the 1940s, Shahn and others frequently sought in modernistic techniques shelter from a political and aesthetic storm.


Ben Shahn joined the RA/FSA in 1935, after having been recommended by Ernestine
Evans, Walker Evans' wife and a member of the bureau's planning board. Initially, Shahn worked for the administration's "Special Skills Division," producing posters, pamphlets, and murals--propaganda that advocated the goals and necessity of the RA/FSA.


18 Philip Evergood quoted in Cecile Whiting's Antifascism in American Art, p. 165.


20 James Curtis' Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth is a solid critical investigation of the RA/FSA's publicity division, and the method's that were used to present rural poverty in ways that the Eastern middle-class could understand.


22 In Ben Shahn's case, for instance, although city struggles had been the general concern of his early 1930s Social Realist works, he found himself working for the RA/FSA photography project that focused primarily on the rural and agricultural sectors. Characteristically, though, Shahn found a way to incorporate urban themes even into RA/FSA works. The urban, industrial worker theme is evident in Shahn's mural at the Jersey Homesteads community center in New Jersey. City laborers are also found in his mural for Louisville High School, also in New Jersey.

23 Terry Smith, Making the Modern, p. 285.

24 In 1935 President Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration as part of his New Deal economic relief agenda. The RA was absorbed into the Department of Agriculture in 1937, and was renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The RA/FSA was responsible for alleviating the problems of displaced and disenfranchised small farmers who were afflicted by the dual miseries of the Great Depression and the droughts and dustbowls of the early 1930s. The RA/FSA provided low-interest loans to poor farmers allowing them to become landowners, reforested over-harvested timberland, and established communal farms and well-ordered rural villages to provide jobs and homes for city workers who fell victim to urban unemployment. Rexford Tugwell, a professor of economics at Columbia University, was named Assistant Secretary of Agriculture and placed in charge of the RA.
In spite of the RA/FSA's stated humane goals, it continuously suffered from insufficient funding and Congressional accusations of the "sovietizing" of American agriculture. Roosevelt's political opponents and the influence of big agricultural interests assured that the RA/FSA could never count on secure financing. The President understood that the newness of the RA and its "socialistic overtones" could prove unpopular, so an information and publicity division was set up to inform both the public and Congress of its necessity. The publicity division of the RA was called the Historical Section and it was headed by former student of Tugwell, and fellow Columbia economics teacher, Roy Stryker. Stryker was interested in using visual information to support texts. While studying at Columbia he earned money by providing photographs and visual data for publications dealing with economics and history. By the time he arrived in Washington, Stryker was well versed in the power of photography, in conjunction with text, to document 'real' economic conditions.

25 It could also be argued that the Federal Art Project belongs within the Regionalist movement, or vice-versa. Their shared belief in a positive, collective American history and their shared desire to create an "American aesthetic" unify them both in programmatic and formal ways.


27 In Doud's "Interview," Shahn said, "I had a desire to see the United States, I didn't have a penny. It was in the middle of the Depression, and I couldn't get as far as Hoboken at that time. It was really a serious time. I thought I'd never get out of New York again, and so when this thing came along with the idea that I should wander around the country for three months, I nearly jumped out of my skin with joy. And not only that, they were going to give me a salary, too! I just couldn't believe it! Anyway, I went, and I found things that were very surprising to me."

28 Ernestine Evans recommended to the head of the Special Skills Unit and Stryker that Shahn should be considered for the photographic staff in mid-1935. Stryker's offer to Shahn of approximately $3,200 in salary plus travel per diem for his three-month 1935 trip through the South played a major part in Shahn's acceptance.

29 Both Susan H. Edwards and Laura Katzman wrote Ph.D. Dissertations on Shahn's

30 This excerpt is from Richard Doud's interview of Shahn on April 14, 1964 for the Archives of American Art. It is reprinted in John Morse's Ben Shahn, p. 137.

31 Stryker did exercise some control over Shahn and other RA/FSA photographer's work through censorship. In the mid-1930s Stryker and an assistant were punching holes into "rejected" negatives. Unfortunately thousands of images were lost in this way, including some that Shahn was particularly fond of. Bernarda Bryson Shahn later recounted that her husband considered Stryker a "vandal" for his actions.


33 For indepth studies of Hine and Strand, I recommend Walter Rosenblum, Naomi Rosenblum, and Alan Trachtenberg's America and Lewis Hine (Aperture, Millerton, N. Y., 1977) and Calvin Tomkins' Paul Strand: Sixty Years of Photographs (Aperture, Millerton, N. Y., 1976).

34 Terry Smith makes this argument in Making the Modern, p. 327. Although his assertion that an FSA style emerged (based primarily on the formalism of Evans) is convincing, Smith's statements concerning "orthodox Social Realism" seem misleading. Social Realism took on a myriad of forms, and--beyond the widest generalizations--one cannot isolate many concerted features.


38 John D. Morse, Ben Shahn, p. 136.

39 Ben Shahn, "Biography of a Painting," The Shape of Content, p. 40.
Notes to Chapter Two

40 Shahn chose to depict the history of the Jersey Homesteads inhabitants in his mural. He showed their arrival at an Ellis Island type immigration center, their work in the sweat shops of New York, and their struggle to unionize. Through hard work and education, Shahn depicted the Homestead’s citizens making contributions to the national infrastructure and industry. The mural is a generally optimistic portrayal of the "American Dream." Shahn also included references to American racial prejudice and the threat of oppression, however.

41 A plethora of influences informed this generation's methods and aspirations. Major European modernists, due to the World War, visited or permanently moved to New York. Their presence, like the Armory Show of 1913, led American artists to reevaluate domestic trends. In addition, a wartime political context replaced the liberal, pseudo-socialism of Roosevelt's New Deal program. This led to the decline of government patronage and a questioning of the content of New Deal/Social Realist/1930s art. All of these factors created a favorable climate for the emergence of American abstraction.

42 From Leon Trotsky's, Literature and Revolution (The University of Michigan Press, 1968), pp. 136-161. It was written in 1923.

43 Certainly there were other factors. The desire for employment, a paycheck, and to establish a reputation were more pragmatic reasons. The financial issue was an important factor in Shahn's decision to join the RA/FSA photographic staff, for instance.


46 Seldon Rodman, Portrait of the Artist as an American, p. 99.

47 From Art For the Millions, Francis O'Connor (ed.), p. 237.

48 Jonathan Harris, Federal Art and National Culture, p. 145.

Matthew Cullerne Bown contends that the theory of Socialist Realism (the Soviet counterpart to America's Social Realism) "was elaborated progressively throughout the 1930s. In this and subsequent decades, the theory was subject to constant emendation and reinterpretation by the party and by artists . . . it reflected the development of Soviet society and party policy." (Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin*, p. 90) For an in-depth and authoritative account of socialist realist art, consult Bown's recent publication *Socialist Realist Painting* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998).

Stuart Davis Papers, Harvard University Art Museums, on deposit at Houghton Rare Book Library, Harvard University, Reel 2, April 3, 1940.


The Congress brought together a wide variety of artists including Margaret Bourke-White, Paul Manship, William Gropper, and Moses Soyer in its "united front." Like the Artists' Union, the AAC claimed that due to the shortcomings of private patronage and the oppressive practices of art dealers, government sponsorship was the only recourse for artists who wanted to address and educate the wider public. Also like the Artists' Union, the AAC called for the establishment of a permanent federal department dedicated to American art. Stuart Davis, who served as the National Executive Secretary of the Congress, argued that "art, as an essential cultural wealth, had to be conserved, just as our banks, industries, agriculture, sciences, and educational system needed government support to protect them against destruction." (Stuart Davis, "American Artists' Congress," cited in Francis O'Connor's *Art For the Millions*, p. 249.)


Jonathan Harris, "'Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960,' in *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties*, p. 38.
In 1940, a group of former AAC members--including Columbia University art historian Meyer Schapiro and artists such as Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Ilya Bolotowsky--established the Federation of Modern American Painters and Sculptors (FMAPS). The organization played a key role in post-war avant-garde aesthetics. The Federation was interested in distancing itself from both Stalinism and the social aesthetics of the AAC. A non-political association, the Federation was in Max Kozloff's words, "interested more in aesthetic values than in political action." From this point on the style and subject matter of artists like Ben Shahn came under constant attack from the right-wing as well as artists and critics uninterested in Social Realism. These attacks from the right and left reached their nadir, of course, during the late 1940s when Modernist critic Clement Greenberg announced Shahn's work was "essentially beside the point" (1947), and Michigan Senator George Dondero called Shahn a "pet of the Museum of Modern Art . . . a Communist-fronter and member of the John Reed Club" and an associate of such "disreputable" characters as Rivera, Orozco, and David Siqueiros (1949).


For an engagingly critical, yet methodologically sound, account of the rise and fall of the New Deal art programs--particularly the Federal Art Project--see Jonathan Harris' *Federal Art and National Culture*. To get a better understanding of how political agendas and aesthetic warfare led to the demise of Roosevelt's federal art please see Harris' seventh chapter, "The End of the Federal Art Project: Art, Politics, and the State."

Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, p. 141.

Notes to Chapter Three

It was pretty easy to march with the liberals and the progressives in the years of Roosevelt. We knew he wouldn't let us go wrong. Until another leader we can trust, as we trusted him, takes up the fight we like to think of as ours -- the fight for tolerance, which is the basis of any fight for peace -- its going to be tough to be a liberal. -Frank Sinatra

"Letter to the Editor,"

The New Republic, January 6, 1947

After the end of the Roosevelt era, the forces of reaction ensured difficult times for liberal Americans. As the Cold War began, the New Deal and its advocates lost their air of respectability. Conservatives began to question liberal's motives and affiliations. Ben Shahn, who had been committed to the political principles of the New Deal, found himself without the government patronage he prospered under. He also found his own political ideals under fire. The optimism that inspired Shahn's RA/FSA days was replaced with uncertainty as he eventually was investigated by the FBI and blacklisted by CBS. In the late 1940s, President Truman instituted a loyalty program aimed at purging communists from the government. Similar purges were carried out in labor unions. As a result of Cold War paranoia, American liberals of every sort experienced injustices and censures.

Growing national intolerance had a personal impact on Ben Shahn. While Shahn could never have been classified as a leftist radical, he did hold a position along the left/liberal continuum. During the campaigns of Roosevelt this continuum was the nucleus of success. But as World War II ended, the Democratic Party systematically

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tried to squeeze out radicals among its numbers. Such intolerance changed the
complexion of the organizations that Shahn worked for -- most notably the Office
of War Information and the Congress of Industrialized Organizations. He found that he
didn't have a place in government or even in the Democratic Party. In the later 1940s
Shahn joined Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party's unsuccessful presidential
campaigns. Liberals gradually found their voices pushed to the periphery of American
political discourse.

In 1948 the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) began to
investigate the suspected infiltration of the U. S. government by communists intent on
espionage. Sensationalistic hearings targeted former members of the CPUSA and New
Dealers. "Un-American" was universally understood to mean communist or
communist affiliated. In 1949 the anti-Communist crusade took an almost surreal turn
on the floor of the House of Representatives. Senator George Dondero of Michigan
made four statements to Congress in which he attacked modern art and its
practitioners as communistic. Dondero singled out specific artists, movements,
galleries, and exhibitions. Dondero cited Ben Shahn and his affiliations that he
considered communistic: the John Reed Club, the American Artists' Congress, the
Artists' Union, the State Department's 1947 exhibition 'Advancing American Art,' the
American Contemporary Art Gallery, the New Masses art auction, March 24, 1942,
National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions, Shahn's support of Wallace,
and Shahn's assistance to Diego Rivera on the Rockefeller Center mural. Although the
HUAC and Dondero were late-1940s extremes forms of anti-liberalism they are
representative of the culmination of reactionary attitudes that had their origin in the
paradigm shifts in politics in the early 1940s.

The desire to "ferret out" the communists lead investigators and accusers down
long, meandering paths of affiliations. The American Artists' Congress, the Artists'
Union and Art Front so closely aligned their agendas with the Federal Art Project that
all fell under the "communistic" label. By the late 1940s the Federal Art Project, the
Works Progress Administration and the entire New Deal were constructed as
communistic by reactionary forces inside and outside the U. S. government. What this
meant to the future of American politics is not the focus of this paper. Its impact on
socially committed artists such as Ben Shahn is. Artists no longer had a part in shaping American policy at the government level. They were forced back into the free market, and the patronage of corporations and entrepreneurs again became of primary importance. "Social painting" and art's communal function became central to art critical debates. Artists like Ben Shahn, already disillusioned by anti-liberalism in the government and the worker's struggle, also found themselves under personal attack in art world discourses.


Barr did not endorse all abstract art though. The American Abstract Artists (AAA) was formed in 1936 by a group of artists who felt excluded from MoMA's story of modern art. It seems that the narrative presented at MoMA was too limited for even for this group—which included Josef Albers, Balcomb Greene, Ad Reinhardt, and David Smith. The narrowness of MoMA's focus has continued to garner critical complaints. Even after Barr had left MoMA Thomas Hess complained that "the basic structure [of MoMA's presentation] . . . seems to be that familiar formalist one which moves with a deathly sort of inevitability from the 1940s to the '60s, from Pollock to Morris Louis, the 'style' purifying itself of 'irrelevancies.'" (Thomas Hess quoted in Carol Duncan's, *Civilizing Rituals*, p. 104.)

For example, see Patricia Leighten's *Re-Ordering the Universe* for an exploration of the political and social underpinnings of Picasso's Cubist-era work.

Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, p. 3.

*World Herald*, Omaha, Nebraska (n. d.), HC/1109/AAA.

Quotations are culled from Jonathan Harris' *Federal Art and National Culture*, p. 154

My primary source for this information is Jonathan Harris', "Capitalist Crisis and Artistic Culture During the 1930s," *Modernism in Dispute, Art Since the Forties*, p. 38.

Meyer Schapiro, *First American Artists' Congress*, 1936 (New York: 1936), pp. 31-
37. Schapiro's essay is reprinted in David Shapiro's *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, pp. 118-127.


73 "Avant-garde and Kitsch" was published in the *Partisan Review* (Fall, 1939), as was "Towards a Newer Loacoon," (July-August, 1940).

Notes to Chapter Four and Conclusion

75 Ben Shahn, "The Biography of a Painting," The Shape of Content, p. 40.

76 Twenty paintings were shown at the Levy show of 1940. The best known are Handball, Willis Avenue Bridge, Vacant Lot, Sunday Painting, Pretty Girl Milking a Cow, Scotts Run, West Virginia, Seurat's Lunch, Sunday Football, and Portrait of Myself Among Churchgoers. Others included Scabbies are Welcome, Sunday Morning, Unemployed, Three Men, Sunday WPA, Spring on Morton Street, Modern American Sculpture, and Photographer's Window.

77 Clement Greenberg, in his review of Shahn's 1947 MoMA retrospective, accurately distinguished the photographic aesthetic that underlie Shahn's paintings. He also credited the change of Shahn's formal language, not a de-emphasis of political messages, for the "improvement" of Shahn's art during the 1940s. Shahn's greatest supporter at MoMA, James Thrall Soby, on the other hand, downplayed the importance of photography to his paintings. Instead, Soby preferred to contrast Shahn with the "disengaged" pure painters, while simultaneously placing Shahn into a greater art historical tradition. Soby acknowledged the "poetic transformation" of Shahn's 1940s oeuvre, but tried to explain it within what he termed the overall "paradoxical nature" of Shahn's career.

78 Shahn's RA/FSA photographs were not his first to explore conditions with the eye of a sociologist. His earliest forays into the photographic medium express Shahn's interest in human interactions. Laura Katzman has explained that in the early 1930s (on the streets of New York), "photography functioned for Shahn, in part, as a tool for examining ethnic and racial groups and relations between these groups." ("The Politics of Media," p. 65) Shahn also studied other psychological issues in the early 1930s with his camera. Susan H. Edwards found a link between Shahn's compositional choices and the mental conditions he wanted to investigate. "The averted gaze and de-centered figures separated by open spaces seen in photographs...
such as *Untitled, Boys in Vacant Lot* . . . suggest the complexities of psychological and social relationships as well as the fragmentation and disenfranchisement of the individual in thirties America." (*Ben Shahn: The Task of Photography in Thirties America*, p. 4) Significantly, the themes analyzed in photographs such as *Boys in a Vacant Lot* were at the very center of Shahn's paintings as he moved into his Personal Realism phase.

79 The earliest entries into Shahn's visual files were drawings the artist executed in Europe and North Africa during 1924-25 and 1927. Shahn continually returned to his files to find ideas for later works. For instance, Shahn used a sketch he had executed of North African nomads for an advertisement he was commissioned to do for The Container Corporation of America in 1944.

80 These photographic files are now housed at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

81 In fact, Shahn usually conveyed his discoveries onto paper. Tempera and gouache were his preferred modes of painting in the late 1930s, and therefore, he, of course, usually worked on paper. I use the term "canvas" to signify that Shahn was transferring ideas from the photographic to the painted medium.


83 Shahn met Cartier-Bresson when the French photographer had his first exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery (Shahn's own gallery) in 1933. This was a most significant time for the two to meet because this was the period in which Shahn was formulating the photo-aesthetic that would underlie his RA/FSA images. Cartier-Bresson had an impact on Shahn's evaluation of the artistic value of the photographs he produced. The preciousness of the single print as an "aesthetic object" did not interest Cartier-Bresson at all. He realized that individual negatives can be mass-printed to reach a wider audience, lessening the importance of any individual print. In addition, Cartier-Bresson--who made his living producing photojournalistic photographs for periodicals such as *Vu*--accepted that he could not be the final arbiter over every aspect of the printing, presentation, or uses of his work.

Art, quoted in John D. Morse (ed.) *Ben Shahn*, pp. 138-139.


87 Quotation from Davis Pratt's preface to *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*, pp. vii-viii. The source is not given in Pratt's preface.


89 For an indepth analysis of the way that Soby and MoMA treated Shahn's photographs see Katzman's, "The Politics of Media," pp. 61-65.

90 In spite of the early pioneering efforts of Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen (and even earlier Matthew Brady), many American critics did not consider photography an art form. A few respectable New York galleries, such as the Julien Levy, exhibited photography during the 1930s, but they were the exceptions. Through World War II the generally held view was that photography's proper role was to visually document information literally and objectively.

91 Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, p. 508. In 1947, Steichen, an early modernist photographer, became director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art. This was, perhaps, a bit too late to have much of an impact on James Thrall Soby (who was curating Shahn's retrospective the same year) and his opinions concerning the aesthetic value of Shahn's photographs. During Steichen's tenure, however, the museum turned a more liberal eye towards photography and documentary.


94 Bernarda Bryson Shahn in Davis Pratt's *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*, p. iix.


96 It should be noted, however, Shahn took the photographs that inspired this painting in New York, in 1932--not while working for the RA/FSA.

The name of the painting is the song that the man was playing on his harmonica. This was a later observation on the part of Bernarda Bryson Shahn.

In Portrait of the Artist as an American, p. 78, Selden Rodman provides the following comments about Pretty Girl Milking the Cow: "The leaves in this picture are as positively ugly as the meadow in the other (Sunday Painting) is depressingly banal--comment enough on Shahn's far from pastoral attitude towards pure landscape, of which these pictures are the closest approximation in his mature work. It is significant that Shahn chose, of all rural places to live in, Roosevelt--a flat, clustered, almost treeless settlement of urban garment workers--and even Roosevelt, he once complained to a reporter, 'looks too much like Sunday every day in the week.'"

By the mid-1940s pure mood and theatricality supplanted Shahn's interest in transcendent indifference. Along with this redirection of themes, Shahn began to experiment with formal characteristics freely, abstracting and purifying his art of topicality (even more so than in the late 1930s).

It is necessary, at this point, to identify a specific iconographic correspondence between Shahn's 1930s photographs and his later paintings. In each medium, Shahn used architecture as both a means of establishing setting and of creating a shallow depth. This can be seen clearly in the 1935 photograph Street Scene of Maynardsville, Tennessee (fig. 48) and the well-known paintings Vacant Lot, of 1939, and Unemployed, of 1938 (fig. 31). The architecture serves to isolate the action, eliminate a distracting horizon, and to provide clues of individual's social and economic conditions. The shallow depth, creating a sort of stage setting, is a common convention for artists concerned with narrative clarity. It can be seen in the murals of Giotto and the panels of Poussin, for instance. Shahn manipulated architecture in his images the way a stage designer would manipulate backdrops, to contain and clarify the primary message. In the later 1930s and into the 1940s, Shahn began to incorporate sharply receding walls and buildings into his paintings, suggesting infinite depths--examples include Spring, of 1947, or the much earlier Scotts Run, Virginia, of 1937. This is another example of Shahn's later attempt to move beyond the specific and refer to, literally, broader horizons. Perhaps the best example of this quality in Shahn's late 1940s work is East Twelfth Street, of 1946.
The paintings that Shahn's photographs inspired usually further abstracted from the original by isolating people or objects from specific environments and by re-contextualization. Shahn explained the later paintings as allegorical, but compositionally they were something else, iconic. The clear, specific narratives of the *Sacco and Vanzetti* and *Mooney* series were replaced with paintings that focused on the psychic interior—even the spirituality—of isolated individuals. The viewer is invited to ponder the paintings to glean some universal meaning, some profound insight, some all-encompassing perspective on the purpose of existence. By taking elements out of their original contexts and placing them in new, ambiguous milieus, without clear explanations, Shahn changed meaning. His photograph-inspired paintings distilled signification until they seem to be embodiments of pure expression.

Roy Stryker attempted to maintain personal control over his photographer's iconography and content. He supplied them with visual "scripts" that outlined in quite specific terms what was to be recorded. These instructions reflected what Stryker felt would be most compelling and persuading evidence to support the RA/FSA's goals. As the goals of the program changed, so did his photographic requirements. In the early days of the FSA, Stryker told his photographers to shoot "unsatisfactory farm areas . . . or destitute or low income farm families." When Stryker wanted to show the positive results of RA/FSA initiatives—from 1937-42—he asked for more upbeat photographs such as "prosperous independent farmers . . . the spirit of social equality that pervades all walks of life . . . and the fresh earth." Most of the photographers Stryker employed—such as Ben Shahn and Dorothea Lange—shared his commitment to the active, social role of photography. But aesthetic goals and independent spirits often led them to overlook the vague limitations of Stryker's scripts. In general RA/FSA photographers took Stryker's scripts as "suggestive frameworks" that they could amend to suit specific experiences.

From the transcript of "A Profile of Ben Shahn," on *The Open Mind*: WNBC television interview, Sunday, January 17, 1965, James Thrall Soby Papers, the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.


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