

BACKGROUND READING FOR PRESENTERS

Ben Shahn (1891 – 1969) "Still Music"

Ben Shahn's desire to create narrative art that focuses on social and political justice have come to exemplify [Social Realism](#) and the art of social consciousness. From his questioning religious teachings as a youth in Lithuania and up through the end of his life, Shahn remained true to his vision. He never failed to create artwork to draw attention to those for whom life was a struggle, and did so with dignity rather than pathos or sentimentality.

Born into an Orthodox Jewish family, Shahn witnessed both anti-Semitism and political persecution during his childhood in Lithuania. The Tsar's forces arrested Shahn's socialist father and imprisoned him in Siberia. As a young boy, Shahn began to take a stand against social injustice, a moral stance that would define his life's work. In 1906, when Shahn was 8 years old, his family immigrated to New York and reunited with his father who had long since escaped and settled in Brooklyn. In Brooklyn, his American fifth-grade teacher noticed and encouraged Shahn's nascent artistic talents. Despite his obvious talent, Shahn's mother demanded that Shahn get a job and help the financially strained family. Fortunately Ben Shahn obtained a job that nurtured his artistic growth as an apprentice in his uncle's lithography shop. By age 19 Shahn was a professional lithographer. In addition to taking art classes at the famed Educational Alliance on New York's Lower East Side, Shahn continued his education through self-study and night classes.

By the fall of 1919, Shahn had earned enough money to pursue a college education and proceeded to study at New York University, the College of the City of New York, and the National Academy of Design. In 1922, Shahn's married Tillie Goldstein, a suffragette and political activist. He continued to train as an artist, and took two lengthy trips to Europe and North Africa to study the environs, people, and the Grand Paintings of Europe. During the second, highly productive trip in 1928, he had created more than two hundred watercolors and drawings. Once back home in Brooklyn, Shahn began working full-time creating paintings, manuscript lithographs, and photographs, having basically taught himself photography - with a modicum of advice from his friend and celebrated photographer [Walker Evans](#).

Prior to World War II, Shahn was a lead practitioner of what has come to be called Social Realism. Such art works are narrative, figurative, and illustrative of the poor, oppressed, or those who live at the margins of society. Ben Shahn brought together different forms of visual culture to break down the barrier between mass media and fine art. In opposition to what Shahn called "the rules for pure art," the artist consistently inserted words, texts, and quotations into his artwork to emphasize the didactic nature of his art. Because of Shahn's apprenticeship and friendship with [Diego Rivera](#), [Frida Kahlo](#), and other prominent artists, he upheld the supremacy and universality of art over the false boundaries of nation states. Despite his rise in fame and prestige, Shahn remained committed to his audience and subject matter. Shahn never spoke down to the American people, rather he stood amongst the crowd and fought the same fights as they did. Ben Shahn died in 1969.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Ben Shahn (18911 – 1969) “Still Music”

Introductory

1. What do you think the artist entitled this piece?
2. The artist calls this picture “Still Music.” Why do you suppose he called it that?
3. This picture is done in outline. Notice the background. Is it real or imaginary? Why do you suppose Ben Shahn created a background of this type?
4. What kinds of music do you think would have been played in such a setting?
5. Is this picture beautiful? Why or why not?

Color

1. What colors does Shahn use? Are they bright or dull? Transparent or opaque? Translucent? A combination of these?
2. Since the objects in the picture are black outline, what do you think would have been the effect if the background was made up of very brilliant colors?
3. Would you have been attracted to the background colors or drawing if that were the case?
4. What conclusions could you then make concerning the relationship of the background to the outlined objects?
5. Should they compliment each other to fight for attention?

Space

1. Are there places in the piece where the space is more congested than in another place? How does the artist achieve this? (by a concentration of lines.)
2. Our attention naturally gravitates toward the black outlines. Would you say that the space in the piece is of equal importance?
3. Is there anything in this piece, which could contribute to a three-dimensional effect?

Movement

1. Is this a scene with a lot of movement? Explain.
2. What kinds of lines create movement?
3. Does the background contribute to the feeling of stillness or of movement? How?

Artist’s Intent

What sort of message do you think Shahn was trying to convey in this work?

SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

Ben Shahn (18911 – 1969) “Still Music”

1. Line rubbings

Materials: White construction paper, crayons, pieces of yarn or twine, other various textured items (see directions)

Have the students place lengths of coiled yarn under the paper. Color over with a crayon. Move the paper and color over with another color. Do this several times. Use a darker color to draw over the lines made from the rubbings. Experiment with other textures: toothpicks, pieces of screen, leaves, sandpaper, etc.

2. Line drawing

Materials: construction paper for backing. Various colors of construction paper or tissue paper, black extra fine sharpies (these can be found in the supply cabinet at the BCA)

Have students tear or cut pieces of construction paper or tissue paper and glue onto the large piece of paper. Students then make line designs with the sharpies.

3. String designs

Materials: Various colors of construction paper. Tempera paint, yarn

Dip long pieces of yarn in different colors of paint. Lay on construction paper in interesting designs. When the paper is covered with a variety of color dipped yarns, place a clean sheet of construction paper on top and toll firmly with a rolling pin. Lift for a completed piece.