

## Background Reading for Art Presenters

### Ben Shahn, 1898-1969 "Still Music"

Shahn was born in Lithuania on September 12, 1898. When he was very young, his father was forced to leave his home country and moved to South Africa because he had different beliefs than the people who ran the country. Shanna, his mother, and his two younger siblings stayed behind in Lithuania until they came to the United States of America when Shahn was 6 years old. Not long after, his family was back together when his father also moved to the United States of America and worked as a carpenter. They lived in New York City.

Shahn went to New York University to study biology, but left those studies to study art at City College two years later. He also studied art at the National Academy of Design. Soon after college, Shahn married and he and his new wife traveled through North Africa and Europe to learn more from great European artists. While he learned a lot, he was unhappy with his art works from that trip. He thought they were unoriginal.

Back in the United States, Shahn began to paint and photograph scenes from American life during the Great Depression and World War II. He wanted to show how hard life was for some people. He is well known for the social commentary within his artwork highlighting social injustices and political issues. Shahn was invited to travel throughout the U.S. to areas where people were treated unfairly. Shahn used his artwork to share these stories with the rest of the country.

Suggested Discussion Questions  
Ben Shahn, 1898-1969 "Still Music"

1. What do you see in this painting? It is called "Still Music." Why do you think the artist called it that?
2. Notice the background. Is it real or imaginary? Why do you think the artist painted it this way?
3. How did the artist show movement in this painting? Do the lines make your eyes travel around the piece?
4. The objects in this painting are all done in black outline. How did the artist use color?
5. How do the colors in this piece make you feel? Can you imagine what kind of music might have been played in this setting? Slow or fast, sad or happy?
6. Why do you think there are no people in this painting?

Suggested Extended Activities  
Ben Shahn, 1898-1969 "Still Music"

1. Line rubbings

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

Have the students place lengths of coiled yard under the paper. Color over with a crayon. Move the paper and color over with a different colored crayon. Do this several times. Use a dark color draw over the lines made from the rubbings. Experiment with other textures - toothpicks, lace, leaves, sandpaper, etc.

2. Line drawing

Materials: large piece of construction paper, various colors of construction paper or tissue paper, black marker/crayons, glue

Have students tear or cut pieces of paper and glue on a large sheet of paper. Have the students then make line designs with the marker or crayon.

3. String designs

Materials: Various colors of construction paper, tempera paint, yarn, rolling pin

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 roll firmly with a rolling pin. Lift for a completed piece.