



Ben Shahn built his mural *The Meaning of Social Security* around the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, giving pictorial form to the President's June 8, 1934, address on the Social Security legislation:

“This security for the individual and for the family concerns itself primarily with three factors. People want decent homes to live in; they want to locate them where they can engage in productive work; and they want some safeguard against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated from this man-made world of ours.”

The Social Security Act was passed on August 14, 1935, as part of the New Deal program of sweeping social reforms that responded to the economic crisis of the Great Depression. Shahn's Social Security mural vividly captures the ambitions of the New Deal programs and also serves as an example of government efforts to extend patronage to the arts in the 1930s.

The growth of the arts was encouraged and administered by the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project, the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the Federal Works Agency. As a consequence, original works of art grace many federal buildings in Washington, D.C., such as the Wilbur J. Cohen Health and Human Services Building, originally designed in 1940 to house the Social Security Administration, and since 1954 the home of the Voice of America. Murals and sculpture were envisioned by the architects to embellish the thrifty



design, enhance the workplace, and contribute to a growing national collection of fine arts. They were intended to educate, inspire, and affirm long-cherished traditional values.

The Art Commission

Ben Shahn's Social Security mural was commissioned in 1940 by the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration of the Federal Works Agency, which operated from 1934 to 1943 to create art for newly-built federal buildings. Unlike other New Deal agencies that employed artists on relief, the Section chose artists through anonymous national competitions. The Section was concerned with talent, merit, and avoiding favoritism. Shahn's work displayed an appealing balance between the abstraction of naturalistic forms and the maintenance of recognizable content.

His sketches were unanimously chosen for the most prominent interior location

Ben Shahn with assistant John Ormai

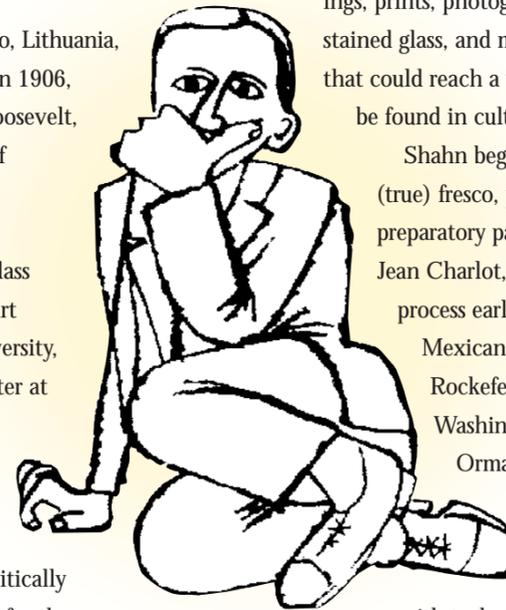


East Wall: Unemployment

from 375 entries by a jury of leading American artists. Artists Philip Guston and Seymour Fogel were also selected to interpret the theme of Social Security for other areas of the Cohen Building.

The Artist: Ben Shahn

Ben Shahn was born in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1898, immigrated to the U.S. in 1906, lived in the New Deal town of Roosevelt, N.J., and died in 1969. The son of craftsmen, the artist grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y., exposed to both Orthodox Judaism and working-class socialism. Shahn studied at the Art Student's League, New York University, City College of New York, and later at the National Academy of Design. He also took art classes in Paris in the 1920s and travelled throughout Europe and North Africa. As a struggling, politically active painter who worked briefly for the Communist Party during the Depression, Shahn's first



critical recognition came from his compelling Sacco and Vanzetti series (1931-32). This work secured his reputation as a “social realist” devoted to fighting injustice and promoting the human rights of underprivileged peoples. Shahn was prolific in a variety of media: paintings, prints, photographs, posters, drawings, murals, stained glass, and mosaics, gravitating towards work that could reach a wide audience. Today, his work can be found in cultural institutions worldwide.

Shahn began the Social Security mural in buon (true) fresco, painting on wet plaster. He did preparatory panels in fresco under the guidance of Jean Charlot, but had learned the labor-intensive process earlier in 1933 while assisting the famous Mexican artist Diego Rivera on the ill-fated Rockefeller Center mural in New York. In Washington, Shahn was aided by John Ormai, but the poor condition of the wall forced him to turn to tempera on dry plaster (fresco secco).

Despite Shahn's frustrations with technical matters, in 1944 he claimed that this mural was the best and most satisfying work he had

done, noting he had all the decorative qualities and the details under control. He had also mastered Rivera's technique of playing bold figures against deep space and strong architectural forms. The mural helped Shahn realize his vision of the artist's role in society. In 1952, a decade after completing the commission, Shahn spoke eloquently to this issue at a symposium at the University of Buffalo:

“For life, seen and valued by the artist, emerges with new meaning. It is not just the artist's experience, but his values, his judgments, made with love, or anger, or compassion, that live in the work of art and make it significant to the public. For they change and modify the public's own values, and create value where there was none before.”

The Meaning of Social Security

I feel that the whole Social Security idea is one of the real fruits of democracy. There may be some limitations to my powers of exposition, but at least it is my aim to make the mural a clear and feeling picture of Social Security, and, I hope, one that may be understood by average Americans.

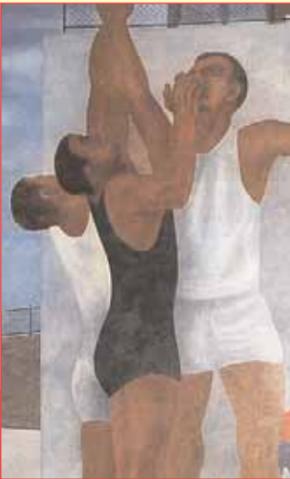
— Ben Shahn
Letter to Edward Bruce
Section of Fine Arts and Painting
July 14, 1941



West Wall: Work, Family, Social Security

Shahn wrote to Ed Rowan on November 7, 1940: “Using the Family as a central theme, over the middle door, I have placed over the left door, the theme of Work, over the right that of Security. Immediately surrounding the Family are, on the right side, the building of homes, on the left, a suggestion of tremendous public works, furnishing employment and benefiting all of society. At the extreme left of the panel are seen youths of a slum area engaged in healthy sport in handball courts. At the extreme right is seen the Harvest—thrashing and fruit-gathering, obvious symbols of security, suggesting also security as it applies to the farm family.”

Shahn depicted these themes in primary, eye-catching colors, big generalized shapes, and sharply receding, diagonally oriented forms that are at once formally dynamic and emotionally uplifting. Despite the stylistic unity and social



West Wall: Work

optimism conveyed here, the mural is also somber in tone. Shahn's bold forms are tempered by the subtleties of his unique tempera technique, used to build up a surface of thin glazes in which pigments permeate through one another, suggesting the layering of time and memory.

East Wall: Child Labor, Unemployment, Old Age

The East Wall, in contrast to the West Wall, portrays the societal ills that Social Security was intended to alleviate. Shahn wrote: "Unemployment being the greatest cause of insecurity, I have devoted to it the largest central panel. I have tried to give the feeling of endless waiting, men standing and waiting, men sitting and waiting, the man and the boy going wearily into the long empty perspective of a railroad track. Against a background of a typical stark, unlovely company house, I have placed in close proximity waiting men and discarded machines."

"The panel to the left depicts the insecurities of childhood. The little girl of the mills opens doors to show us breaker boys working in a mine. The crippled boy issuing from the mine symbolizes the perils of child labor. To the right, a homeless boy is seen sleeping in



East Wall: Child Labor

the street; another child leans from a tenement window. The panel to the right shows the insecurity of dependents—the aged and infirm woman, the helpless mother with her small child."

Shahn employed the same formal techniques on the East Wall of the mural – broad masses and flat layers of transparent and opaque pigment – only the somber tone is more pronounced here. The desolate environments, however, are not lacking hope; the needy people are not without dignity. The immobility of the endless waiting is relieved with blue skies that suggest flux and imminent change. The jobless, the elderly, and the disabled are presented in clean, respectable clothing; the men in hats and ties, the woman on crutches adorned with pearls.

Shahn expressed progressive ideas not legislated in the original Social Security Act by depicting farmers and what appears to be a domestic worker, neither of whom were covered by the Act. Only through later amendments did more American workers come under the Act's protection. The mural is also far reaching in its overall message about Social Security. According to Shahn, security is to be experienced by people of both genders, different ages, jobs, races, ethnic and regional back-

grounds, all of whom the artist treated with unidealizing respect. The mural, however, is conventional in how the artist pictured men and women in traditional roles, without acknowledgment of the many women who were employed outside the domestic workplace by the early 1940s.



East Wall: Old Age

Shahn painted this mural in the midst of the United States' mobilization for World War II. In fact, the Social Security building was occupied by war workers at this time because the Pentagon was not completed until 1943. Shahn later recalled stories of how the mural boosted morale during this period of worldwide political upheaval. Still, these panels were criticized before and after their completion. In early 1941 a Social Security board member complained about the "deformed" boy on crutches. Shahn kept this figure, feeling it stood strongly as a symbol of what Social Security was intended to ameliorate. In the post-war economic boom, many Americans resisted reminders of the Depression and the New Deal; workers in the Cohen Building, for example, found aspects of the mural depressing, which subjected the artwork to possible removal. Strong support for the mural came from leading members of the art community, including Duncan Phillips, founder of the Phillips Collection. Writing to Museum of Modern Art curator James Thrall Soby on July 7, 1947, Phillips said "I am shocked to hear for the first time that Ben Shahn's murals in the Social Security Building are in danger of being covered over or destroyed...I will write a letter of

protest since I agree with you that Shahn is one of our most distinguished artists and his murals among the best executed under the Treasury project." Phillips and others helped to protect Shahn's mural and the artists' reputation, as well as the larger cause of artistic freedom. A compromise was subsequently struck, and the East Side of the mural was eventually covered with curtains.

In 1993 under the close direction of the U.S. General Services Administration, Public Buildings Service, the mural was restored by art conservators, and public access to this significant cultural asset was greatly improved. On October 17, 1995, *The Meaning of Social Security* and the Hearing Room Lobby in the Cohen Building were rededicated to the memory of Ben Shahn and all artists whose works enrich federal buildings by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, the Voice of America, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. General Services Administration.

With careful and consistent stewardship of this original work of art, generations of Americans and visitors from other countries will be free to interpret the meaning of the mural for themselves.

— **Guest Curator**
Laura Katzman
Associate Professor of Art and
Director of the Museum Studies Program
Randolph-Macon Woman's College
Senior Research Fellow
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Ben Shahn

Photographs courtesy of Bernarda Bryson Shahn; drawings from Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957); letters quoted are housed in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. All works by Ben Shahn © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, NY.

For an appointment to visit Ben Shahn's Social Security mural, contact Voice of America's Office of Public Affairs at (202) 203-4959.

For More on the Artist:

Chevlowe, Susan, et al. *Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn*. Princeton: Princeton University Press for The Jewish Museum, 1998.

Greenfeld, Howard. *Ben Shahn: An Artist's Life*. New York: Random House, 1998.

Kao, Deborah Martin, Laura Katzman and Jenna Webster. *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Harvard University Art Museums, 2000.

Katzman, Laura. *The Politics of Media: Ben Shahn and Photography*. Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1998.

Katzman, Laura. "Art in the Atomic Age: Ben Shahn's *Stop H-Bomb Tests*," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 139-158.

Linden, Diana. *The New Deal Murals of Ben Shahn: The Intersection of Jewish Identity, Social Reform, and Government Patronage*. Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1997.

Pohl, Frances. *Ben Shahn: With Ben Shahn's Writings*. San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1993.

Pohl, Frances. *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989.

