RESEARCH ESSAY

"The Jersey Homesteads Mural:

Ben Shahn, Bernarda Bryson, and History Painting in the 1930s"published in *Redefining History Painting*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

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Jersey Homestead Mural, (detail), photograph by Susan Platt

In a mural for the community of Jersey Homesteads, (now Roosevelt), New Jersey, Ben Shahn, with the assistance of Bernarda Bryson,[1] redefined contemporary history painting by combining the difficult medium of true fresco with unusual historical themes, and a spatial order that dramatizes the psychological aspect of the scenes. Painted during 1937-1938 in a medium which demands rapid work in large simple forms, the mural nonetheless includes three detailed and interrelated historical episodes with many subordinate scenes and references. The primary themes are Jewish immigration, Union organizing, and the planning of a cooperative community in the early New Deal Resettlement Administration. Spatially, the mural combines the traditional linear perspective of the Renaissance, the shallow space of some photographic portraits, the three dimensionality of theatrical sets, and the arrested action of film frames. These various devices serve to underline the contrasts between the dynamic and the static experiences depicted.

In narrating history, the mural departs from the tradition of the unified tableau, based in the theory of Diderot, which focuses on a single moment in which the action hangs in the balance, the peripateia. In the traditional tableau there is frequently a single identifiable heroic figure who with gesture and pose, implies the leadership of the moment in history depicted. This concept of history descends into still photography as the "decisive moment." Instead of the peripateia, the mural created in Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey presents groups of figures acting as part of an on-going process. The only suggestion of a "decisive moment" is provided by one central enlarged and isolated figure, but that figure, a union leader, is intentionally anonymous and emerges from a group. The decisive moment is replaced by historical process, a process based on economic and political forces. Although some identifiable portraits are included, these specific individuals act within a group, not as heroic individual leaders. At the same time, however, there is in some of the individual scenes the symbolism, if not the heroism of the traditional tableaux. The tableau without heroism, but laden with symbols, is a common approach in New Deal murals. But usually history is depicted as static: the anonymous worker, farmer, or homesteader becomes the symbol of historical stability. In Shahn's mural the worker, in groups is, instead, a symbol of historical process and change.

In addition, there is a major element in the Jersey Homesteads mural of what Barthes calls the "obtuse" or "third" meaning that of emotion, beyond narrative discourse. In Barthes as developed in Camera Lucida, the element beyond narrative is personal memory. As elaborated on by Victor Burgin the third meaning is psychological, more than simple recollection it includes the idea of the fantastic and imaginary. [2] In the Jersey Homesteads mural Shahn's personal memories, as well as his autobiographical and psychological investment in the imagery that he is painting imbues it with this "third" meaning. Burgin also distinguishes between the symbol and the hieroglyph. The symbol is closer to a narrative device, existing within an historical context, while the hieroglyph, in Burgin's lexicon, is linked to the imaginary, outside of narrative discourse. In Shahn's mural, this analysis can provide helpful insights, although the symbol and the hieroglyph often coincide in the same image. The narrative symbol coincides with the

emotional hieroglyph. For example, the depiction of the new arrivals hall at Ellis Island is both a symbol of an historical event, and a personal memory of Shahn's own life experience. [3]

The unusual approach to history painting in Jersey Homesteads is in part the product of the time in Shahn's career in which the mural was executed. He created the large fresco shortly after he had worked for several years with the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, an invaluable apprenticeship in both the fresco technique and the process of painting history from a Marxist perspective in large scale murals. At the same time, personally, he was making a painful dislocation from his first marriage, to a woman who was a part of the Jewish community in which he had been raised, to a second marriage, to Bernarda Bryson, a Midwestern radical artist/journalist deeply involved with the contemporary concerns of the Depression. Other factors that contributed to the final form of the mural include the particular government sponsorship to which this commission belongs, Shahn's rapport with those sponsors, the audience to which it was addressed, and finally, his method of working.

The mural's unofficial title indicates multiple agendas, all in contrast to the more typical "American Scene" New Deal mural themes: "Struggles and achievements of immigrant workers or the benefits of unionization and community." The painting presents facets of American history rarely depicted in murals: Jewish immigration and labor unions. It also refers to contemporary European political history, specifically Hitler's oppression of the Jews, contemporary politics in the United States, in the development of the New Deal Resettlement program, and the history of the community of Jersey Homesteads itself. The mural is, finally, Ben Shahn's own history: he came to the United States from Lithuania as a Jewish immigrant in 1906 at the age of eight, participated in radical activities in the Artists Union in New York, and then joined the New Deal.

On the left the mural is dominated by a large wedge shaped group of immigrants walking briskly toward the foreground across a red bridge with a portrait of Albert Einstein among the leaders. Also included in this group are portraits of Shahn's own parents. Next to Einstein and actually leading the group is a dominating female figure that is Shahn's mother,[4] as well as the

archetypal Jewish matriarch; she wears a shawl covering her head, the traditional dress of a Jewish woman and borrows from images of Shahn's own great grandmother as well as Lewis Hine's stunning photograph of a young Jewish immigrant. To her right is Raphael Soyer, although his features also suggest Shahn's father. Further back, almost buried in the midst of the crowd is another famous scientist, Charles Steinmetz, the brilliant hunchbacked electrical engineer who became known as the "modern Jove" when he created lightning in his laboratory in 1922.[5] Many of the figures prominently wear badges that identify their number on the ship manifest, without which they could not enter the United States. Badges were also used during early pogroms to identify Jews, as well as in Nazi Germany.

The group purposely conflates several eras of immigration. Steinmetz and Shahn's own family came as political radicals to the United States fleeing late nineteenth and early twentieth century Jewish pogroms in Russia[6] while Einstein came to escape from Hitler's repressive policies in 1933. Bernarda Bryson recently stated that emphasis on the large group of immigrants combined with specific individuals was intended to underline that immigrants made major contributions to the society to which they came.[7] Einstein was also living in nearby Princeton and a supporter of the Jersey Homesteads community.

Shahn used many approaches to suggest action and drama without utilizing heroic individuals or traditional gestures: several different diagonal perspective constructions are based on Renaissance techniques. At the same time he punctuates the coherent mass of the immigrants by assertive portraits, photographs drawn from a combination of family albums, Lewis Hines' photographs, and anonymous newspaper images. These contradictory modes conflate the idea of memory and history, or in Roland Barthes' terms, the punctum, and the studium. They combine symbols of history, both spatial and figurative, drawn from Shahn's research in photographic files, with the hieroglyphs of his own imaginary and real personal history.

The mural is even further complicated by adoption of the Brechtian epic theatre technique of groups of workers as symbols of active social forces. Shahn also invokes the spatial and temporal collage of such films as Eisenstein's Potemkin in which long shots and close-ups,

flashbacks, contemporary events, and even hallucinations, are combined: in the immigration segment smaller scenes refer to related developments. The intolerant actions of the Nazis appears in a ghetto scene in the upper left corner with Nazi signs in gothic lettering which say in German "Germans beware: don't buy from Jews," " Attention Jews, Visit Forbidden. " Also in this scene are the coffins of the radical anarchist martyrs, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler and a shoemaker, who were put to death in 1927 in the United States. These coffins also are symbols of all victims, but particularly Jews, who died as a result of political repression. Prominently, in the lower left, is the Registry Hall at Ellis Island. It is shown starkly without benches as it was when Shahn arrived, but improbably entirely empty except for a one isolated family and a single man, an accurate depiction, since men frequently immigrated separately from their families. Above the immigrant group are families sleeping in a city park. These images all inhabited Shahn's memory. Significantly, the original plan of the mural had subordinate immigration scene as pogroms, ghettoes and the Jewish Passover, invoking the Jewish traditions before immigration as Shahn had experienced them as a child or heard about from his family.

The central section of the mural focuses on the history of unionization. It includes several types of garment workers compressed into tight spaces in contrast to the expansiveness of the arriving immigrants: assembly line workers with sewing machines, pressers bending over steam irons and home piece workers dominated by a maternal figure. In this section Shahn was combining photographic sources of sweat shop conditions by Lewis Hines, Jacob Riis and others, but he has a less personal connection to the scenes as his own family came from a tradition of skilled craftsmen and he apprenticed as a lithographer at a young age. The stasis of the sweatshops is countered by the line of the workers (among whom, significantly, is Bernarda Bryson) filing into a union hall with brick work that ties the mural to the brick of its setting, originally the community center of the town. Since Bryson was a key figure in encouraging Shahn's radicalism and participation in organized strikes, her placement is revealing.

At this point there is a sense of break (or scene change) in the sequencing of the mural as it shifts to the process of unionization and away from immigration. The last two parts of the

mural are also distinguished by the fact that they have only one female, a traditional mother in the background; with the emergence of the Union the action is by men, although historically, young girls played a dramatic role in the process of unionization. [8] The only dominant individual figure in the mural is the large speaker based on a "soap box orator" from Shahn's own photographs in New York on the Lower East Side, now metamorphosed into a union leader. Again the sense of a zoom close up against a film set is suggested: behind the speaker are the buildings that figured in the early tragic events of the garment workers that led to the creation of the union. The buildings are marked with signs referring to businesses that resisted unionization including the famous "Triangle Shirt Factory," scene of a horrific fire that killed 146 young girls in 1911 as a result of locked doors that were intended to give access to staircases.

The union organizer is the largest figure in the mural, and the closest to an heroic individual but he is understated: he does not gesticulate except to point down to the workers below him, several of whom are also based on Shahn's own photographs. The words of the speech are written on a sign (suggesting a silent movie with captions). They are drawn from a speech by John Lewis, first leader of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO): "One of the great principles for which labor and America must stand in the future is the right of every man and woman to have a job, to earn their living if they are willing to work." [9] Quoting this speech, given in October 1937, documents the moment in labor history at which the mural was created. The American Federation of Labor, organized by craft unions such as the garment workers, was being altered by the development of the CIO which was seeking to organize the entire textile industry. The leader resembles John Lewis, but is, as with most of Shahn's "portraits," a composite of several people.

Directly below the union leader is a pensive worker that emerges from the crowd, brooding on the speaker's message and pausing between the past turmoil of the milling workers and oppressed factory workers, and the future, represented by a sequence of ordered doorways that are replicas of the doorways of successive union halls, based again on photographs. This central part of the mural is by far the most complex. The process of unionization is an abstract

idea, much less specific than the process of immigration, and Shahn had few visual references other than newspaper images from which to work. He himself was a part of the process only in the context of the artists' demonstrations of the mid 1930s, so he observed it as more of a commentator. On the other hand, the section also uses many of his own works as photographic sources. He is working with his own images of workers, rather than his remembered memories of immigration. The abrupt spatial and thematic segments seem to function as a metaphor of the difficult psychological transition that he himself was undergoing, from his roots in the restricted immigrant community of his youth, to the turbulent world of the activist mid1930s, and thence to the New Deal world of Washington, D.C. where he had a home with Bernarda Bryson for the first time.

The next section of the mural displays ordered and purposeful groups. It juxtaposes the benefits of unionization, a scene of education on the history of labor in a classroom [10] and the cooperative construction of a factory building in an agricultural setting. The workers constructing a factory are a specific reference to the Jewish garment workers who originally founded Jersey Homesteads in 1932. According to Bernarda Bryson the community was founded as follows:

" . . . It began expressly with a group of New York workers in the garment trades. They discussed nostalgically how great it would be to have a factory in a rural area where - during off seasons for instance -they would not be languishing unemployed in teeming city areas, but could have a plot of land, a garden and so on. In pursuance of this dream, each of some eight to fifteen families raised five hundred dollars each. They had heard of Benjamin Brown who was noted for having instituted co-operative projects in the United States . . . and in Russia. They went to him. He located a tract of land contiguous to his own in New Jersey. Hearing of the oncoming New Deal projects, Mr. Brown took a delegation of the garment workers to Washington where they met with Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, who immediately approved the project. " [11]

The conclusion of the mural is the New Deal. The last scene shows the men who took on the support of the utopian community that represented the ideals of the Resettlement Administration. A portrait of the New Deal administrator, Rexford Tugwell, leader of the

Resettlement Administration, is seen from the rear. Other portraits included in the mural are David Dubinsky of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, Sidney Millman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Heywood Broun, head of the Newspaper Guild and a spokesman for labor, Senator Robert Wagner, a sponsor of labor and housing legislation, and John Brophy, a leading advocate of industrial unionism, are included around a table, with the plan of the community tilted up as both a symbol of the planning of the town, and the planning process of the entire Resettlement Administration.

While the individuals in the New Deal scene are more specific than in any other section of the mural, that specificity is paired with their activity as a group understood as part of a process, rather than an individual initiative. It was around this table, with the planners of the Resettlement Administration that Shahn could have placed himself and Bernarda Bryson, for they both were involved as artists in its early programs. Behind the prominent New Deal group is a small "flashback" of a young family leaving a poorly planned community to join the new cooperative. The spatial stasis of the segment of New Deal administrators contrasts with the dynamic processes of immigration and unionization. It invokes the interest of the New Deal in re-establishing stability and traditional family units.

The New Deal provided a huge infusion of funds for the building of the community, and renamed it Jersey Homesteads in order to invoke a reference to the pioneers . After several calamitous events, [12] the government hired Alfred Kastner, a German architect from the Bauhaus and student of Gropes, assisted by Louis Kahn, to build the town. While the local residents might well have preferred a traditional style of architecture (as indicated by the transformations that have taken place in the houses over the decades since they were build), the utopian Bauhaus principles of functional architecture for workers dominated the entire planning. The government, although it provided the essential funds for the building of the community, also, in essence, took away the possibility of individual initiative from the residents.

Kastner invited Shahn, with Bryson as his assistant, to create a fresco in the town and designed what was originally the community building with the mural in mind. The dimensions of the wall and the lighting and viewing of the mural were all part of the original planning process.

The place of the Jersey Homesteads fresco of 1937-1938 within Shahn's own commitment to image contemporary history begins to explain the reasons for the mural's unusual approach. It also explains the striking differences of this mural from that of more traditional American Scene painting.

Shahn himself turned to the concept of history painting in 1927, at the time of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. The execution led to demonstrations and protests throughout the United States and Europe. Shahn was deeply moved by the profound injustice of the event, and saw it as comparable to the Crucifixion itself. He turned to individual sacrifice based on social injustice as a central subject of his work for several years. Victims suffering as a result of forces beyond their control was a theme with which Shahn had a personal connection as well, both as a part of an immigrant Jewish family, and, even more intimately, as a result of the drowning of his own brother Hymen in 1926.[13]

Shahn's first series of paintings inspired by social injustice was drawn from the nineteenth century Dreyfus case in which a Jewish officer of the French military was wrongly accused of misconduct and incarcerated for many years. The corruption and anti-Semitism in the military that had led to the indictment was finally revealed following the famous accusations by Emile Zola. Shahn's series consisted of a modest set of watercolors, each depicting a leading figure in the case with an ornate identifying inscription. Shahn's use of inscriptions would continue throughout his career. Trained as a lithographer, he was deeply attuned to the power of words and lettering.

In Shahn's Sacco and Vanzetti series of 1931-1932 he began to use contemporary individuals as paradigms for the great tragic heroes of history. While he had relied on secondary information for the Dreyfus imagery, in early 1931 he began clipping images and headlines from the newspapers as raw material for painting, and researching his images by means of

contemporary newspaper reports and pamphlets.[14] His style shifted from the elegant watercolors of the Dreyfus series to a more confrontational, simplified, and flattened approach based in part on the frontality of newspaper documentary photographs. He completed a set of twenty-three small gouache images on the Sacco and Vanzetti case which included portraits of the victims' parents, and friends. Shahn's series included portraits of various members of the families of the victims, the judges and jury, as well as such humble participants in the drama as "Enrico Bastoni who bought eels from Vanzetti on morning of December 24, 1919." In the catalogue Shahn included a dramatic quote from Vanzetti:

If it had not been for these thing, I might have live out my life talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have die, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. " (Sic)

The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti with its clear biblical reference was shown at the Downtown Gallery in the spring of 1932. It made a sensation in the art world attracting both ordinary, non-art world viewers and major collectors such as Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. One reviewer likened the paintings to those of Emanuel Leutze and Baron Gros as examples of history painting; he saw Shahn as a "valuable witness to our epoch."[15] Shortly after the exhibition Shahn enlarged three of the series as mural-scaled panels for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

Shahn had already begun work as early as 1931 on two other subjects based on cases of injustice, Tom Mooney and the Scottsboro Boys. Mooney, a labor organizer from San Francisco, had been wrongfully accused of throwing a bomb at a Preparedness Parade in 1916; the efforts to free him reached a peak in 1931 with massive petitions and protests throughout the world. The petitions were unsuccessful; Mooney remained in San Quentin prison until one month before his death in February 1939. Based on contemporary news clippings, the Mooney sequence by Shahn included a three part image titled "Apotheosis" featuring Mooney framed in a court room and Mooney's flamboyant mother, who had figured prominently in the newspaper photographs, as an emblematic saint-like figure with a dramatic sash. The Mooney Series was shown with an

introduction by Diego Rivera in the spring of 1933. Rivera's introduction declared polemically that Shahn's "subject matter is the struggle of the proletarianized American petit bourgeois intellectual against the degeneration of the European bourgeoisie transplanted on this continent. " [16]

During that same spring the case of the Scottsboro boys, nine black teenagers given death sentences in 1931 for allegedly attacking two white women on a train near Chattanooga, Tennessee, was reviewed as a result of the verdict being overturned by the Supreme Court. The result was that one of the nine, Heywood Patterson, was condemned to die. Shahn kept vivid clippings on this example of socially condemned death, but never created the paintings. [17]

Instead, Shahn's own life was drawn into contemporary political events and he himself became involved with social injustice. The first incident to directly affect him was an effort to withhold his large Sacco and Vanzetti painting from the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1932.[18]

Much more profound was the censorship that developed as he was assisting Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center to create the now infamous fresco "Man at the Crossroads Looking with Uncertainty, but Hope and High Vision toward a New and Better Future". The mural had a large anonymous worker at the center. Decadent capitalism was to his right and socialism to his left. In the center were references to science and technology as liberating forces. As a result of the inclusion of a portrait of Lenin, the work was ordered suspended, the mural covered. Ten months later it was destroyed.

Shahn was a leader in organizing protests about the original work stoppage. He went on to assist Rivera from July to December 1933 with the creation of a cycle at the New Workers School based on the history of the United States according to the radical Marxist-Lovestonite analysis of class struggle, labor struggle, and revolutionary rebellion. One panel included depictions of Sacco and Vanzetti, Tom Mooney and the Scottsboro boys. The murals were crowded with clusters of numerous identifiable portraits, a typical Rivera technique for the

depiction of history. As first installed, it partnered earlier and later historical figures on opposite walls, such as the imprisoned Thoreau and the imprisoned Tom Mooney. [19]

The importance of these murals within Shahn's development as a history painter is fundamental. Although according to Lucienne Bloch who also assisted Rivera, [20] Shahn was mainly in charge of the historical research for the murals, he would also have learned by observation the complex process of fresco painting, as well as the idea of organizing large historical events in terms of groups that represent a revolutionary process. In Rivera's mural at the New Workers School the structure of the paintings is entirely static. The figures pile up one above the other in a quotation of the type of space and time used in pre-Columbian art: history proceeds not in linear progression, but in repetitive events. Rivera's murals include numerous portraits of historically notable leaders, but those leaders do not stand out above the crowd, they are embedded within it.

Between 1933 and 1935 Shahn created two proposals for large scale murals, both related to historical issues that were less about individual martyrs and more about changing systems of injustice: the first focused on demonstrations both for and against Prohibition, the second on Prisons with a focus on contrasting old and new methods of correction. Both series were rejected for execution by the Municipal Arts Council in New York, but in their structural and pictorial differences they suggest the changes in Shahn’s approach to history painting as a result of his contact with Rivera, changes that are central to the Roosevelt, New Jersey mural.

The Prohibition series of gouaches are, like the Sacco and Vanzetti, separate, static images. Frontal facing rows of demonstrators are the primary composition. The Prison series, created in collaboration with Lou Bloch and with the assistance of Lydia Nadajena, who drew the perspective, is far more complex. Intended for the Riker's Island Penitentiary, it was based on exhaustive research. The perspective used deep space projections in alternation with flat shallow spaces, in a way that would be adopted in a modified form at Jersey Homesteads. The alternating deep and flat space suggested a pairing of old and new methods of penology on opposite sides of

a narrow corridor. Shahn began to work in terms of a film-like sequencing of images connected with formal devices, particularly the alternation of the deep shot and the close up.

As a record of contemporary history, these murals were intended to be the history and theory of penology. Shahn and Bloch visited prisons, made sketches, took photographs and had conversations with prisoners, officials and theorists. A focal point of the murals was the looming figure of a pioneer prison reformer who put himself into prison in order to discover what it was like. The Municipal Arts Commission in New York refused to allow the murals to be executed in the prison.[21] From a psychological perspective, these prison murals are conceived at the moment that Shahn was beginning to break away from the traditional Jewish community of which he was a part and increasingly engage the radical activities in New York with the support of his new friendship with Bernarda Bryson.

He first met Bryson in the summer of 1933 when she came from Ohio as a newspaper reporter to interview Diego Rivera. An active advocate of social causes in the early 1930s, Bryson was profoundly concerned with the injustices of the Depression. Bryson was such an articulate thinker and speaker that on moving to New York in the early fall of 1933 she immediately became a leader of radical causes in New York, particularly the Unemployed Artists Association and the Artists Union. Her contact with Shahn developed most prominently during the summer of 1934 when they began to work together on the newspaper Art Front, the newspaper of the Artist Union. [22] Ben Shahn provided layout, promotion, and editorial suggestions, such as filmic sequences of photographs of the artists' demonstrations. Both his involvement with Bernarda and the newspaper work deeply engaged him in the mass labor and economic issues of the Depression, as well as in the artists' particular plight. Bernarda has stated about the idea of collaboration with Ben Shahn that "our relationship went deep into theory. Both in art and in life. I am sure that I had great impact upon Ben's thinking- even upon his writing, but not upon his art. " [23]

Also providing a new perspective was Shahn's use of the Leica camera. As an instrument to record the depression in New York City streets it provided more intimate and personal views

that newspaper mug shots. Although his photographs were primarily taken in public streets and parks, or as views of people through windows and on city stoops, they begin to confront the human face of deprivation, in contrast to large publicized examples of social injustice symbolized by such figures as the Scottsboro Boys. This more intimate look at deprivation may be in part a response to Bernarda's deep seated concerns about individual deprivation. The Leica opened Shahn's perspective both psychologically and physically, allowing informal images (albeit often taken with a right angle lens without the subject's knowledge). In his early photography, he functioned without programmatic intent or a self-conscious, unified agenda, at a time of the dissolution of social mechanisms. Independent of a government ideology, he collected images of the Jewish ghetto, of poverty, of the life of the streets of New York, of artists' demonstrations. [24]

In the fall of 1935 Bernarda Bryson and Ben Shahn both went to work for the Resettlement Administration of the New Deal in Washington, D.C. It was through this program that they created the Jersey Homesteads mural almost two years later. The Resettlement Administration provided them with conceptual and artistic agendas as well as the political contacts that led to the creation of the mural. First developed under the leadership of Rex Tugwell, an idealistic economics professor from Columbia University, the Resettlement programs were intended to provide new housing and a better standard of living for impoverished workers in both urban and rural areas. The larger goals were relief of suffering, development of self-sufficiency, and maintenance of the family. [25] Shahn and Bryson were part of a close knit group of radical thinkers that provided creative ideas for using art in the new programs.

Initially, Ben Shahn was hired to publicize the programs of the Resettlement Administration with posters and graphics. As research for this activity, he began with the idea of visiting the mining areas of Pennsylvania and Appalachia. He and Bernarda Bryson took an epic two month driving trip (with Bryson doing all the driving) intended for the purpose of photographing resettlement clients. They ended up driving through Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. From September to October 1935,

Shahn and Bryson approached impoverished rural workers. Bryson would often engage people in conversation, while Shahn would capture them informally with a right angle lens. Although they were working with the support of the government, their photographic journey was not made simply to create propaganda. Bryson and Shahn engaged serendipitously with the South, with the people they met, with its life. [26]

The images that came out of this particular mid-Depression journey were fundamental to the development of the more famous Farm Security Administration images. These later photographs were more obviously symmetrical and posed, ordered by references to Renaissance painting in their foregrounded figures. They gave humble individuals the stature of leaders of society. Shahn and Bryson, later to be followed by Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and many others, together created an image of the many individuals who collectively made up the large historical and social concerns of poverty and resettlement. Later Depression photographers were, however, more programmatic in their intentions and more edited by the ideology of the government to project a sense of the role of the government in creating a new stability. [27]

While these photographs are often quoted in his murals, another project for the Resettlement Administration, led Shahn, in collaboration with Walker Evans, to begin thinking in a cinematic scale and sequence. The film requested by the Resettlement Administration was a promotion for a new greenbelt community just outside Washington, D.C. The Shahn/Evans film was never created, but its form as well as its conceptualization is revealing:

We propose to make a film, the subject matter of which will be people - the greater half of our nation. We want to show how they live now, and to show a way of life in planned communities such as the greenbelt town offers. To do this we will employ a device of flash-backs [sic] into the histories of five typical American workmen who apply for work on a greenbelt project. . . . For some of the material we will rely upon stock or news shots. For the rest we

will rely upon the actual conditions and people as we find them. . . .Through such a film we hope, first to build up a public sympathy and understanding of the need of housing for some 40,000,000 Americans; second to popularize the idea of the planned community. We wish not

only to awaken in our audience some feeling of responsibility and concern for the great segments of population shunted into the cast-off segments of our cities, the worked out farms of our country; but we wish to articulate for our audience their own needs in housing, to spread some understanding of what housing can and ought to be for people of low income." [28]
Although the film addressed Greenbelt, Maryland, its techniques and concepts could also describe the program of Jersey Homesteads and its mural. The idea of using the history in flashback suggests the concept that probably underlay the immigration scene at Jersey Homesteads.

During these same months Bernarda Bryson was involved with creating historical images. She was asked to set up a lithography workshop as part of the Special Skills division of the Resettlement Administration which encouraged the idea of crafts such as furniture design, ceramics and printmaking. She began work on a "Frontier Book' inspired by a Roosevelt speech that the new frontier was that of the social frontier. The book was to have covered the importation of immigrants, the middle passage, as well as the movement west and the vanishing frontier. She also created lithographs and watercolors based on the history of the Underground Railroad, a topic in which she was intrigued not only because of her social principles, but also because her own grandparents' home was a stop on the Underground Railroad in Athens, Ohio. [29] Bernarda Bryson's historical images in these prints, though on a much smaller scale than murals, also mediated between memory, personal experience and the national narrative discourse.

It was at this point, following several years of working on a small scale with lithography and photography that Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson took on the commission to create a mural for Jersey Homesteads, Shahn's first executed mural scaled fresco. The first anonymous statement about the mural read:

Mr. Shahn is to work out a script for the mural with a number of variations to same. The theme is to center about contemporary life to the Jewish emigrant, to touch on immigration and emigration, his assimilation into the country, industrialism and unionism with contrapointal adoption of programs elsewhere, and immigration to Palestine. [30]

Initially the mural was conceived by Shahn entirely as a narrative that invoked Jewish history, hopes, and memories. His narrative about the mural is filled with intimate characterizations of Jewish life, most of which do not emerge in the final mural. On the other hand, as a passionate narrative written at a time when Shahn was leaving Jewish life behind, it clearly demonstrates his personal relationship to the mural's subjects, particularly with respect to his place as a Jewish immigrant who aspired to be free of the bonds of tradition and to assimilate into the life of the United States:

" . . . The mural should begin with the life of the Jews in [a] Russian Ghetto. They are seen living in humbleness and fear, caring for their own as best they can, keeping up homes for their aged and schools for their young. They are deeply buried in their religion, finding there some compensation for their exclusion from the civil life about them. A fragment of a dream of return to the Holy Land is shown, and the nostalgic prayer: "On the coming year let us all hope that we will be reunited in Jerusalem."

Around a table the Jews sit at the feast of the Passover. Behind them rages a pogrom. An inflammatory anti-Semitic myth often spread among the Russian peasants holds that at the Passover the Jews must have the blood of a Christian child. Because of this, pogroms sometimes begin at this time. The tragic conclusion of the pogrom is seen in a coffin, surrounded by a mournful family.

The Passover symbolizes the departure of the Jews from Egypt, the land of bondage. So, with the feast of the Passover, and out of the background of Ghettos and pogroms comes a stream of immigrants to America with hope in their faces. Above them hovers the dream of America - a land of fruit and flowers, big cities with streets paved with gold, the Statue of Liberty - symbol of a new life to the immigrant.

Looking away from the stream of immigrants is shown a dim loft in a New York sweatshop, where Jewish workers bend over long lines of machines straining to see in the dim lights. Other workers bend over gas irons smothered in clouds of steam. Others laboriously operate antiquated and back-breaking machinery. Here the Jews, disillusioned in their dream of

America, again dream of the return to Zion. Or some think longingly of the open fields which they have seen in America, and yearn for the soil and the ancient agricultural pursuits of their race. A scene in the New York ghetto is shown. The older immigrant Jews, cast in a mould by generations of fear, are found living in segregated groups, carrying on their traditional trades and customs, not venturing into fields which were forbidden.

Out of this scene of the New York ghetto and the older Jews surges a new generation - the young American Jews. Free from fear and oppression, they are now fully assimilated into their surroundings. They take part in the life of the country, its culture, its sports, its business, politics, and professions. Many of them work in the needle trades, but these are no longer sweatshop workers. They are meeting in unions of the needle trades, they are addressing crowds of workers, they picket in a strike. . . .

A young Jewish worker stands with his two children where a pathway divides. Over him hangs a dark reddish cloud in which the horrors of Jewish persecution in Hitler Germany are shown. The cloud hangs low with a suggestion of imminence. Before him one path leads toward the Holy land, toward Tel Aviv, and the New Jewish settlements in Palestine. He looks longingly - shall he return to the homeland? But he seems rooted to the ground. He is an American, his children are Americans.... A second branch of the path leads in the direction of another old dream of the Jews - a return to the land. Here is shown the co-operative community with its various aspects of communal living. . . . There is seen here an adding to and an enriching of the group, without sacrifice of the racial and cultural treasures. The Jew is shown able to realize his potential growth... practicing his trade and living on the land." [31]

As first characterized by Shahn in this narrative, in the spring of 1936, the entire Jersey Homesteads mural would have focused on Jewish oppression, immigration, and dreams. His narrative speaks of the history of a generation of wish immigrants whose parents arrived in the early part of the twentieth century. The narrative could easily have been based not on research but on the conversations in his home of the conditions in Russia, and the hopes in the new country.

The conflation of personal memory, personal experience, and received history parallels that of the images of the completed mural. A significant percentage of the avant-garde radical left of the 1930s had their roots in this history. Besides Shahn, other well-known intellectuals include Meyer Schapiro and Joseph Freeman. The key issue which appeared in the mural was the breaking free of the restrictions of the ghetto by the second generation.

A directive of a year later significantly altered this original plan, upon which Shahn had based two sketches. [32] The memo of April 15, 1937 reflective of the ideology of the now well-established government art programs sponsored by the Treasury Departments and the Works Progress Administration read that:

> The theme of the picture may be described as the 'American Scene.' Its dominating composition shall show the arrival of the immigrants at the left, acclimatization and organization into the American community in the center and the revitalized pursuit of human observations [sic] under the newly acquired democratic technique at the right.
>
> The time, dress and incidents used are characteristics of today and their application shall be without prejudice against race, creed, or color. [33]

The compromise for Jersey Homesteads was that Shahn was permitted to present a specifically ethnic history, as long as he showed it blending into the American scene and was not seen as disruptive or lacking in decorum. As finally completed, the mural met the approval of the authorities in Washington, D.C., all enthusiastic about Shahn personally in spite of his radical apprenticeship with Rivera, with only a few changes. The approval stressed the fact that "the mural emphasized the human side of the story as against political or religious. Its presentation is quiet and it deliberately avoids the portrait of struggle or conflict or any other sensational matter as not befitting the dignity of the theme." [34]

Without showing any sign of the extensive strife of the labor movement, Shahn, with great subtlety, made one theme a clear reference to the Marxist interpretation of history in terms of economic forces driving social change and the power of the worker. Shahn legitimizes his

radical interpretation through devices that link the mural to traditional history painting. Not only does he structurally quote the spatial relationships of the Renaissance murals, he also invokes a biblical allegory of Moses leading the Jews into the Promised Land, with Einstein performing the sage role of Moses in the biblical emigration. The prominent female with covered head at the foreground of the painting may subtly refer to the Madonna. This conjunction of a Marxist view of historical process with traditional concepts, paired with Shahn's close rapport with the New Deal administrators provides the basis for Shahn's success in bypassing the potentially heavy censorship of the American Scene theme.

The themes themselves are not entirely unique among New Deal murals. Another example of sweatshops appears in George Biddle's murals for the Justice Department, completed in 1935. [35] In squares of space that structurally parallel Renaissance murals, Biddle creates static tableaux that become symbols of deprivation. Despite his deep concern for the subject, he makes whimsical errors: in the sweatshop he put himself at a sewing machine, although nothing could have been further from the experience of the wealthy scion of a Philadelphia family that dated back to before the revolution. Shahn was closer to the subject matter. While his own family was not part of the textile sweat shops, his understanding of the psychological conditions gives his three sections of sweat shop workers an intensity through his brilliant use of compressed space. The figures are physically jammed together or lined up on a long deep narrow table. As suggested in his outline, the narrowness of life and mind in New York was as oppressive as the ghetto of the Russian pale. Biddle's images suggest emotional despair and isolation from the rewards of society; Shahn's scenes project resignation and claustrophobia.

Finally, Biddle's dénouement is the secure, happy family, in a panel titled, "Life Ordered with Justice," a third image physically separated from the two segments of despairing workers which face across a stairwell. His happy family also has portraits of New Deal administrators, like Shahn's final scene of the New Deal, but Biddle's are not involved in a planning process, but embedded in a scene of domestic tranquility. In short, Biddle presents three unrelated static images while Shahn provides a sense of historical process.

Another thematic comparison can be made with Edward Laning's Ellis Island cycle of murals completed in the spring of 1937, just before Shahn commenced work. Although the overall theme "The Role of the Immigrant in the Development of America " is entirely different, the arrival scene is similar. A close comparison reveals again the immediacy of Shahn's mural. . The arriving group faces us more directly, and includes specific people. It also suggests the tightness of a compact community, whereas Laning's immigrants are more isolated. Laning includes a reunion scene of husband and wife, rather than Shahn's accurate "holding pen" of the Registry Hall at Ellis Island. Laning suggests the symbol of the holy family with a mother/father/child as the prominent cluster in the foreground, whereas Shahn's central figure beside Einstein is a powerful mother figure without child, a reference to the fact that families were frequently separated in the immigration process.

Laning, a more academic painter than Shahn, emphasized the human figure as the active force in his paintings, sequencing his scenes with gesture and pose. His academic approach is also reflected in his use of a single (distinctly unmuscular) model for all the activities, a model who was actually a New York painter. [36] Laning's use of large half naked figures draws not only from the academic tradition but also from the symbols of American work, as seen in the pioneering murals of Thomas Hart Benton. Benton's murals were, in fact, a fundamental reference point for many of the murals of the 1930s . The extent to which Laning's work on "The Role of the Immigrant" borrows from Benton and the extent to which Shahn's does not is a pivotal issue in understanding Shahn's more radical place (both pictorially and politically) as a history painter in the 1930s.

Benton's painting, above all his extraordinary series called "America Today " accessible throughout the 1930s in the New School for Social Research in downtown New York, was a fundamental reference for artists of American scene murals. Benton had been a pioneer among New York painters in the 1920s in the development of a mural-scaled modern painting based on American history. In "America Today" completed in 1930, Benton provided a template for what would become the epidemic of the "American Scene" subject

throughout the decade. [37]In a series of nine active scenes that branched out from an energizing gyro engine he presented America from farm to city, including such industrial subjects as “Coal Mining” and “Steel”. These panels were dominated and unified by huge foreground male bodies (often posed for by Jackson Pollock) with a background of smaller scaled details. They interrelated in sequences based on the early Western sets that Benton himself had worked on in the teens. Significantly his film set source was more oriented toward the traditional tableau than those of Shahn who was familiar with the more avant-garde techniques of Eisenstein's Potemkin. Benton transformed the academic formula of the heroic leader by monumentalizing America with different types of workers and activities, in front of the "set," very much like the stars of early Hollywood movies. While the pervasive reference to the glorification of the worker links him to Marxism, Benton emphasized specific activities and individuals, rather than groups and process. His other widely studied mural “The Arts of Life in America,” a commission by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1932 focused on more stereotyped vignettes of the City, the South, the West, and the Indians, omitting the industrial theme entirely. [38]

The importance of Benton's painting cannot be overemphasized. The New Deal art program’s overall theme of the ”American Scene” was inspired in part by Benton’s painting. His formula for the mural, an updating of the traditional academic approach, but still dominated by foreground figures, is seen everywhere. Laning uses this formula. But, importantly, Shahn does not. Laning borrowed dominating half naked workers, as a unifying motif. Shahn’s use of dense communal groups rather than heroically scaled foreground figures are devices he borrowed from Rivera not Benton. He looks at textiles an industry omitted by Benton. Laning’s Immigrant series includes similar themes to Benton such as Steel Workers and Miners.

Although no other New Deal murals are known to refer to the idea of union organizing, the murals of Philip Evergood and Marion Greenwood did address urban resettlement. Evergood’s oil rendition of The Story of Richmond Hill refers to a utopian greenbelt town that dated back to the 1870s. Begun in the spring of 1936 in a public library in the community, Evergood contrasts the crowded life in a dark and smoky city of tenement housing in contrast to a

brightly lighted "ideal rural community" characterized by a gleefully dancing circle of workers. The mural like Linings, uses large individual figures as the organizational device as did Laning. [39]

Marion Greenwood's fresco Blueprint for Living in the Community Center of the Redhook Housing Project in Brooklyn, like Shahn's, did address a New Deal Resettlement program. Completed in 1940, the mural also contrasts the old and new and like Shahn's, depicts the actual building of the new town. Greenwood had worked in Mexico as a fresco painter, and was highly regarded by Diego Rivera. Her monumental, workers are simplified and modernized, with the emphasis on the act of building. The image was integrated with the architecture of the room. She is also conforming to government ideology in showing the men working and the woman as a mother. Evergood's more satirical and entertaining workers of 1936 have less stereotyped sex roles, but are far less monumental in their presence.[40]

Lucienne Bloch's fresco, The Cycle of a Woman's Life, 1936 for the House of Detention for Women, New York City was completed before Shahn's. Bloch, like Shahn, had been a Rivera assistant at Rockefeller Center and the New Worker's school. Nonetheless her own mural style makes effective use of a deep linear perspective. She, like Rivera and Shahn, was deeply committed to engagement with the audience and the community in the creation of her mural. As with part of Shahn's painting, Bloch's is a utopian image of a new community, although its placement in a black woman's prison makes it more obviously and poignantly mythic: a large sunny integrated playground in the midst of a slum housing project. Bloch created the subject of the mural by talking with the inmates. A favorite pushcart peddler in the foreground, the most prominent figure in the painting, was a specific request. Her focus on children happily playing in interracial harmony, and her use of a bright palette in contrast to the drab surroundings, were both intended as part of the healing process for the prisoners. Structurally, it bears a closer resemblance to the "Living Newspaper" tableaux of the federal theatre than to traditional murals or to Rivera's approach. The mural itself was censored soon after it was installed. [41]

Placing the Jersey Homesteads mural next to Shahn's own later mural cycles also underlines its unique attributes. During 1938-1939 Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson worked together on a second major mural cycle. "Resources of America," at the Bronx Post Office, which consisted of thirteen paintings created in egg tempera rather than fresco. Much less an integral part of a specific community than the Jersey Homesteads Project, and sponsored by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, a more established group of art sponsors than by then defunct Resettlement Administration, the cycle of thirteen paintings was tied to the ideology of the New Deal and American workers as emblems, rather than to a narrative about the inhabitants of the community itself.

Bryson and Shahn won the commission jointly. Bryson's conception, as it survives in sketches was linked directly to New Deal programs although her original plan was apparently to present a theme on the history of the post office, with a reference to women. [42] Her surviving sketches include a mother and child in front of slum housing, a destitute city dweller, the building of new housing and parks; she also included a rancher, a miner, a farmer, a railroad foreman, and dam builders. The focal point of the cycle was Franklin Roosevelt, framed by an artist and a teacher (both women). The murals as executed for the Bronx Post Office followed Ben Shahn's proposals rather than Bryson's, as Bryson felt that "Either set of original designs would have been a complete concept in itself. To break up either would have been destructive to it. I chose to follow Ben's designs. "[43] Walt Whitman appears in place of Roosevelt with the quote "We support all, fuse all. / After the rest is done and gone we remain./There is no final reliance but upon us Democracy rests finally upon us/ I my brethren begin and our visions Sweep through eternity. "[44] Two large scaled single panels focused on workers who were cotton picking and bailing based on Shahn's photographs taken in 1935-1937. Other panels depict textile factory workers including a girl spooling and a man weaving, an electrical engineer holding a plan, an agricultural scene of a thresher and worker, and a hydroelectric dam.

In both the sketches and completed mural, the imagery is segmented in many separate panels, the result of the post office design. The imagery is symbolic, rather than narrative.

Shahn's handwritten notes on a letter authorizing the murals comment "Ideal situation would be simplicity of symbol and integrity of artist."[45] The relationship of the viewer in the Post Office to the murals' subject matter was remote, except in so far as the Bronx had a working class population and the mural depicted workers. As history painting, the Bronx imagery presents isolated symbols of American industry, several of which are the same as those presented by Benton in his New School murals (agriculture, mining, hydroelectricity,). Furthermore, the subjects are less connected to Shahn himself, except in relationship to his photographic trips sponsored by the Resettlement Administration.

In the following year, 1939, Shahn returned to the theme of immigration in a proposal for a post office in St. Louis. While these sketches also encompassed several other themes such as the Four Freedoms, and the History of the Frontier and River Life, the immigration images are a striking contrast to the subtle understatement of the Jersey Homestead painting. In the two immigration designs dramatic images of Nazi guns, concentration camps and desperately fleeing Jews unequivocally present the violent destruction of the compact Jewish community seen in the earlier painting. The murals were not accepted. [46] Another mural executed in 1939 was based on "The First Amendment" and included a dramatic diagonal organization and a dialectical relationship of the capitalist and the worker to left and right, both quotations from Rivera's format at Rockefeller Center in Man at the Crossroads..

Shahn's final painted mural completed in fresco in 1940-1942 was the "Meanings and Benefits of Social Security." In this painting, he returned to Rivera's dialectical model by pairing images. In this case, one wall showed conditions before Social Security, and the other, after Social Security. Using several of his own earliest New York photographs as well as other sources, Shahn depicted no famous people, only ordinary people. He contrasted the handicapped, unemployed, old, young, mothers, children with, on the facing wall, people enjoying sports and building buildings. The images are clearly symbols of the conditions of life now presented in a more simplified color and space relationship. The" Meanings and Benefits of Social Security " is by a loyalist to the New Deal who avidly believes in the programs about which he is painting.

Shahn as a history painter, with the frequent assistance of Bernarda Bryson, created through his several murals a variety of images that present both the history of the dreams of the New Deal and its specific programs. Yet, only in the Jersey Homestead murals, with its layered density of personal and political references, did he fully develop the many aspects of history that constantly interact and reinforce each other, particularly the intersection of the symbolic historical tableau and the hieroglyphs of his personal memory. In his innovative spatial relationships and his experiment with the intersection of narrative history and personal memory, he created one of the most complex images of the entire New Deal. Yet, Shahn presented, above all, the dreams and hopes of all people to have a better life. Such a dream was a central animating principle of life in the United States and the basis for the New Deal.

Yet, in the end, the mural depicts a myth. In spite of Shahn's optimistic image of stabilization, Jersey Homesteads, because of economic forces beyond its control, was already failing as an industrial and agricultural cooperative by the time that Shahn and Bryson completed the mural. By January of 1938 there was a tenant crises, problems with organized labor and the idea of the cooperatives, a lack of jobs, and a break with the Resettlement Administration. Anti-Semitism from nearby communities such as Hightstown, a center for the Ku Klux Klan, was also painfully isolating for the original Jewish residents. In addition, many of them found living in the country unpleasant and even frightening compared to the urban life to which they were accustomed.

The houses were put up for private occupancy. Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson moved into the community. Today, only a few descendants of the garment workers remain. The town is predominantly writers and artists, or academics from nearby institutions. Today, Jersey Homesteads, renamed Roosevelt, has no industry or cooperative agricultural programs supporting the community, the result certainly of current economic and political forces, as powerful as those that drove the creation of the community in the first place. Ben Shahn is not available to paint this contemporary chapter, but the economics that drive suburbia would probably not particularly inspire him.

[1]Bernarda Bryson Shahn has described her role as follows: “The conception was Ben’s; I did a lot of the painting, of course, under his instructions and/or guidance.” Letter to the author, July 5, 1992.

[2]Victor Burgin, The End of Art Theory, (Humanities Press International, Inc, Atlantic Highlands, NJ,1986), pp.112-121, 129, Burgin argues for a separation of hieroglyph and peripateia, but states that Barthes "conflates" them. Barthes approach is then more accurate for Shahn who also conflates them. See also Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," A Barthes Reader (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp.317-333 and Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981)

[3]For the artist's description of this process see Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 29-30.

[4]Bernarda Bryson Shahn, letter to the author, July 5, 1992

[5] Ann Novotny, .Strangers at the Door, (Riverside, N.Y. : Chatham Press, 1971), p. 15. A photograph of Steinman with Einstein appears on this page.

[6] Seldon Rodman, Portrait of the Artist as an American, Ben Shahn, A Biography with Pictures (New York: Harper and Bros, 1951), pp. 156-159. Photograph of Shahn’s father, mother and great grandmother appear in this text.

[7]Interview Bernarda Bryson Shahn, July 16,1993.

[8]Shahn had a pamphlet on the history of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union that outlined the dramas of the early years of the union, dramas that frequently centered around young girls . Educational Department, The Story of the I.L.G.W.U. (New York: Abco Press, 1935). Shahn chose to focus on the more publicly recognizable male leaders.

[9]Speech by John Lewis at closing CIO conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Oct. 15, 1937, letter Ben Shahn to Adrian Dornbush, Feb. 15, 1938, Ben Shahn Papers, 1991 , Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, unfilmed. This archival source will subsequently be identified as Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.

[10] The two unions were still sensitively separate as indicated in a letter that documents Shahn being asked to avoid suggesting a sequential relationship between the two groups in his diagram in the background of the painting. Adrian Dornbush to Milo Perkins, n.d. Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.

[11]Letter to the author, September 7, 1993. Edwin Rosskam, Roosevelt, New Jersey, Big Dreams in a Small Town and What Time Did to Them (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), pp 19-29. See also Memorandum, Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.

[12]"Two other architects preceded Kastner -- one wanted to build tamped earth houses -- he was let go. The second designed pre-fab houses and a huge factory was erected off the edge of town for the purpose of manufacturing the slabs. It was badly designed, was stopped and for a number of years stood at the edge of town, empty. Next a contractor made off with four million dollars worth of supplies." Letter to the author from Bernarda Bryson Shahn, September 7, 1993

[13]Rodman, op.cit., pp. 136-140 provides a sensitive analysis of the possibility of the death of his brother as a reference point for several images in Shahn's career.

[14]Gardner Jackson to Ben Shahn, Oct 13, 1931. Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA

[15]Jean Charlot,"Ben Shahn," Hound and Horn, vol. 6, no. 4, July- Sept. 1933, p. 633. Jean Charlot was a close friend of the Mexican mural painters, and a participant in the mural renaissance in Mexico. Another reviewer referred to the works as part of our "modern revolutionary mythology." (Matthew Josephson, "The Passion of Sacco-Vanzetti," The New Republic, April 20, 1932, p. 275.),

[16] Diego Rivera," Foreword," The Mooney Case by Ben Shahn, New York, Downtown Gallery, 1933. See file "Tom Mooney," clipping Nov. 29., 1931, Shahn Papers 1991, AAA.Mooney also was linked to Sacco and Vanzetti in contemporary political literature.

[17]See file "Scottsboro Boys," Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA

[18]Lincoln Kirstein, Mural Painting in America, (New York: Museum of Modern Art , 1932) . On the censorship incident see Hugo Gellert, "We Capture the Walls! " Art Front, November 1934, p. 8.

[19]Rivera, Diego, Portrait of America, with an explanatory note by Bertram Wolff, (New York: Covici Friede, 1934). see especially panel XII, pp. 183-191 "The New Freedom," ill. p. 185. Lawrence Hurlburt, The Mexican Muralists in the United States. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), pp. 175-193. See also Ida Rodriguez-Prampolini, "Rivera's Concept of History," in Diego Rivera, A Retrospective (New York: Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Art and in conjunction with W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), pp. 131-137.

[20]Interview with Lucienne Bloch, November 2,3,1992.

[21] Letter Lou Block and Ben Shahn to Audrey McMahon , May 28, 1935, Bernard Bryson Shahn Papers, 1962-1983 AAA. Philippa Whiting, "Speaking About Art, "The American Magazine of Art, August 1935, pp. 492-496 . Stuart Davis, "We Reject- The Art Commission," Art Front, July 1935, pp. 2-3 .

[22]Interviews with Bernarda Bryson, August 2, 1991 and March 16, 1992. See also interview with Lisa Kirwin, April 29, 1983 AAA. Bryson mentioned here that she was actually able to get her phoned-in reports included in the New York Times by knowing how to sound like one their reporters.

[23]Letter to the author, July 5, 1992.

[24]Laura Katzman is examining in depth Ben Shahn's relationship to photography. See her article "The Politics of Media-Painting and Photography in the Art of Ben Shahn," American Art, vol. VII, no. 1, Winter 1993, pp. 61-87.

[25]Sidney Baldwin, Poverty and Politics, The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1968), pp. 107-118. See also Eleanor Roosevelt, This I Remember, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1949) pp. 125-133. Eleanor Roosevelt was instrumental in urging help for these workers. The programs were also an outgrowth of activities first developed by the Quakers. (There were three programs: rural rehabilitation, land reform and the community program which was to combine industry with subsistence farming in a cooperative
community.)

[26]Interview July 16, 1993. Bryson spoke of going to towns simply because they liked their names, such as Freeze Fork, Kentucky and Sweet Home, Georgia.

[27]F. Jack Hurley, Portrait of a Decade, Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1972), p. 50. “In those early days, when Stryker was still groping for directions, talk, critique, endless sessions of looking at pictures, and personal growth were the order of the day. . . . Shahn enjoyed these sessions and contributed to them as often as he could. Once he became involved in a discussion concerning a picture of eroded soil. Stryker liked the photograph. It was nice and sharp and it really did show what water could do to the land. Shahn was not so sure about the picture. “Look Roy,” he said,” You’re not going to move anybody with this eroded soil - but the effect this eroded soil has on a kid who looks starved, this is going to move people. “ See also John Tagg. "The Currency of the Photograph: New Deal Reformism and Documentary Rhetoric," The Burden of Representation (London: MacMillan , 1988), pp. 153-183.

[28]“We are the People.” typescript, Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.

[29]Interview July 16, 1993.

[30] Inter-Office Communication to Mr. Adrian Dornbush from Alfred Kastner, March 2, 1936, Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA

[31] Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.

[32]These sketches are illustrated in Bernarda Bryson Shahn, Ben Shahn, (New York: Abrams, 1972), 147-148.

[33] Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.

[34]Letter Adrian Dornbush to Milo Perkins, January 1937, Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.

[35]Illustrations of the murals by other artists discussed can be found in the following books: Francis O'Connor, ed., The New Deal Art Projects, An Anthology of Memoirs, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972) George Biddle, p. 33; Edward Laning, pp. 84-85;96-97; Francis V. O'Connor, Art for the Millions (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), Philip Evergood, p. 46; Marion Greenwood, p. 51; Lucienne Bloch, p. 77; Richard McKinzie, The New Deal for Artists (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 1973), Biddle's final scene of "Life Ordered with Justice,"p. 59.

[36]Edward Laning, "The New Deal Art Projects,"The Deal Art Projects, An Anthology of Memoirs, Francis O'Connor, ed., (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian 1972), pp.79-113.

[37] For illustrations of the mural see Henry Adams, Thomas Hart Benton, (New York:Knopf, 1989), pp. 157-167, 185-191.

[38] Erica Doss, Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), has the most recent and useful discussion of Benton's murals.

[39] Edward Alden Jewell," Queens Accepts Evergood Mural," The New York Times, May 21, 1938.

[40]On the theme of sexual stereotyping in New Deal murals see Barbara Melosh, Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Art and Theatre

(Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992). Melosh errs in not distinguishing the changes during the course of the New Deal in gender images, but focuses in painting only on the late Treasury Section Post Office murals.

[41]Lucienne Bloch, "Murals for Use," WPA Art for the Millions, Essays from the 1930s, ed by Francis V. O'Connor, (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1973, pp. 76-77.

[42]In April 13,1938 she received a letter which stated that "the first civil service examination ... was given in June or July 1883 in New Orleans, Louisiana, for carriers and porters. The first woman postmaster under the Continental Congress was Mary K. Goddard in 1799. "(letter to Bernarda Bryson from Harold F. Ambrose . Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA)

[43]Letter to the author July 5, 1992.

[44]A controversy developed about the original Walt Whitman quote chosen for the mural, as it was seen to be anti-clerical by a local priest. A controversy developed generating much supportive mail for Shahn from various eccentric people. Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.

[45]Undated handwritten note, Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.

[46]One other unexecuted immigration series had been proposed earlier for Greenhills, Wisconsin that related to the history of the "progressive-liberal movement" and the "major immigrant groups , the Germans, refugees from the unsuccessful German Socialist uprising of 1848, bringing with them great social idealism; the Scandinavians with their fine farming tradition; the Irish, always politically gifted; the New Englanders with their rigid beliefs in personal liberty, free speech, and free education." Undated typescript, Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA.