

**Ben Shahn:**  
**A Painter's Photographs**  
**by A. D. Coleman**

Ben Shahn was a gift from from Kaunas, Lithuania, to the world -- and especially to the United States, where he made his home, and to the visual arts, which he made his life's work.

Born in Kaunas in in 1898, Shahn emigrated to America in 1904 when his father, a rabbi and a socialist, fled political persecution by the Russian czar. Once he finished high school Shahn became a lithographer's apprentice. But he continued his education at night school, eventually attending both New York University and the National Academy of Design. In the 1920s Shahn came under the influence of Social Realism, with current events often inspiring his work, and text and lettering becoming central to many of his designs.

Photography was not Shahn's primary medium, though for a brief period, 1935-38, he thought it might be, and pursued it exclusively during those years. It had infiltrated his art before that; his potent images of protest against the execution in the U.S. of the Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco & Bartolomeo Vanzetti, made several years after their deaths in 1927, were based on photographs, and other of his works of graphic art drew on photographs in various ways. At the time, it was considered somehow shameful for a painter to work in any way derived from a photograph -- though, as we have learned since, many great visual artists have done so from the invention of photography through the present.

Shahn understood the iconic potency of photographs, and did not let that art-world prejudice against the medium deter him. Certainly, in much of the visual art he

produced after putting photography aside, we can see the medium's influence on him in his choice of framing, perspective, point of view, and structuring of visual space. He learned about documentary photography directly from the source, when, in New York City in 1931, he began sharing a studio with Walker Evans, who -- along with Lewis Hine, Paul Strand, Dorothea Lange, and others -- was busy inventing the modernist U.S. version of that mode. Shahn began photographing at that time, and Evans had a strong influence on him, though Shahn's own way of seeing soon emerged.

A lifelong socialist (like his father before him), with a deep commitment to the labor movement and other progressive causes, Shahn saw the then-U.S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Roosevelt administration's "New Deal" policies as the only hope for the working class in a nation ravaged by the Great Depression. Moving from New York to Washington, D.C., in 1935, Shahn went to work as a graphic artist for the government's Resettlement Administration (R.A.). The R.A. was established to help small farmers and agricultural workers whose livelihoods had been wiped out by the Depression and the ecological disaster known as the "Dust Bowl" in the U.S. midwest -- where the agricultural practice of non-rotational single-crop farming (mostly cotton) had created widespread soil erosion that destroyed vast areas of formerly productive land.

The Resettlement Administration was shortly thereafter renamed the Farm Security Administration. Photographs that Shahn took for his own use as substitute sketches in his graphic-arts assignments came to the attention of Roy Stryker, who was assembling the team that would become legendary as the Farm Security Administration's photographic unit. Stryker invited Shahn to join a group that included, at various times, his friend Evans, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Gordon Parks, and other luminaries. For three years, 1935-38, Shahn photographed at white heat, to the exclusion of all other media he'd mastered -- mostly in coal-mining regions

(Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky) or the Cotton Belt of the south (Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana). The final body of his F.S.A. photographs was made in Ohio in 1938.

These images of Shahn's -- there are over 1600 of them -- became part of one of the great photographic projects of the twentieth century: the Farm Security Administration Archives, now permanently housed in the U.S. Library of Congress, available for research and reproduction to all, copyright-free. (To view the collection, go to <http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>.) Never before and never since, to my knowledge, has any branch of any national government anywhere endorsed the creation of such a coordinated photographic assessment, through diverse eyes, of itself and its country in crisis. The fact that we still contemplate that model, and the approaches to documentary that Stryker and his team developed, and still use many of them today, measures the accomplishment in which Shahn took part.

Shahn photographed off and on thereafter, sometimes quite well, but he himself said that, for him, that particular fire had burned out. He went on to continue his work in the graphic arts, first for the U.S. government through World War II and then as an independent printmaker, painter, and sculptor. His contribution to the F.S.A. project became commingled with the images of his co-workers, and rarely got considered in its own right. Yet those images have now influenced generations of young photographers without their knowing it, just as the book published by Harvard University of Shahn's Norton Lectures there, *The Shape of Content* (1957) was a standard text in art and photography courses for decades and is still widely read. He died in 1969.

On September 15, 2004 I had the privilege of attending the very first exhibition of Ben Shahn's photographic work in Lithuania. (This text is based on comments I made during the opening ceremony.) The show was held in Kaunas, the town of his

birth, as part of Kaunas Photo Days, a small new photo festival making its debut that month. This was in fact the first showing of any of Shahn's work in Lithuania, so it was an auspicious occasion, from an historical standpoint.

Photo Days operated on a tiny budget, so to make this show they borrowed a dozen Shahn prints from the American Center in Vilnius, Lithuania's capital -- not exhibition-quality prints that Shahn made himself, but the same kind of inexpensive prints that anyone can order from the Library of Congress, where the negatives are housed, for a few dollars U.S. Not particularly impressive by some standards. But the prints were presented respectfully, complete with captions, and celebrated with a formal reception (including short talks and a lovely dinner) in the former palace of the former president of Lithuania. I think that Shahn, never an artistic snob, would have felt himself properly honored by all with this belated homecoming.

I ended the short talk I gave on this occasion with these words: "We in the States think of Ben Shahn as an American artist -- just like Marcel Duchamp, and Robert Frank, and others from all over who came to our country from elsewhere -- but of course he belongs to you, to Kaunas, and to Lithuania also. So something of this town, and this country, is in his photographs. As an American I thank you for that, and for letting us have him, and I'm glad that we could send him back to you in this way."

One final note: As a result of my mentioning *The Shape of Content* during my presentation that night, Mindaugas Kavaliauskas, organizer of Kaunas Photo Days, has begun translating this book into Lithuanian. The festival committee plans to publish it themselves. So Shahn's thought, as well as his visual creativity, has begun to find its way home.