

Jewish Centrality in Ben Shahn's Murals: An American Leftist Artist in the New Deal Era

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Abstract

Ben Shahn was a Lithuanian-born American artist of Jewish descent during the early to mid-20th century. Shahn was known for his impressive technicality, vast knowledge pool, and acute sense of socio-political contextual awareness, which he utilized extensively throughout his illustrious career. This paper examines Shahn's Jersey Homesteads Mural and the importance of his Jewish identity as reflected in this mural. It delves into the dominance of his Jewishness in his art production by comparing the final Jersey Homesteads Mural with the preliminary documents he made for the mural. They focus on the distressing experiences of the Jews in Europe, reflecting Shahn's Jewishness to a striking extent that was not as accessible to the audience of the final mural. The paper also analyzes the final mural's Jewish-related elements, as a narrative and his choices of subjects – the uncommon lack of heroic figures, which presents the momentum in Jewish Americans' history and the design of character's bodies, gestures, and poses. Taken together, they emphasize the sordid process, the trials, and tribulations of the hard-working populace, instead of glorifying their success story of rapidly integrating into American society. The analysis aims to offer a multi-faceted understanding of the complexity of Jewish American history that Shahn's murals rendered, along with the reasons and impacts on his art and, thus, his strong connection with his Jewish heritage.

Introduction

Ben Shahn was a 20th-century American artist who was born in Lithuania and immigrated to America with his Jewish parents at age eight. Though Shahn was known as one of the greatest masters of the century, he is best known for his works of social realism and his political views, which were actively expressed throughout his illustrious career. It is important to study Shahn's role as a New Deal muralist as he once publicly claimed that he "wouldn't be interested in an exhibit of Jewish artists," has a Jewish identity that is as important as, if not more important than, his American identity in his art production.¹ While most scholars are inclined to take Shahn at his word, this paper examines his art, specifically the Jersey Homesteads Mural, in the context of his Jewish identity, thus showing the Jewish centrality in the mural.

In 1906, Shahn and his other family members joined the large-scale Russian Jewish immigration to the United States due to the growing anti-Semitic climate in Europe. During the New Deal era, Shahn encountered many artists who shared the same social, political, and artistic views as him. Shahn claimed that he felt "completely in harmony with the times" and never thought he "had felt that way before or since."² In 1935, Shahn joined the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration, which then assigned him to roam southwards and document the American South photographically. This working experience gave Shahn a new perspective of the United States: a less idealized but more realistic one, displacing his abstract ideology of the American dream with the privation after the Great Depression. In 1936, Shahn started the Jersey Homesteads Mural as the architect Alfred Kastner invited him to create a fresco.³ The mural's location, the Jersey Homesteads, was a government's experiment on the decentralization of industry and crucial in understanding its Jewish motif. The residents who relocated to Jersey Homesteads were mainly garment workers who served in needle trades in New York. According to the proposal for the community by the U.S. Department of the Interior, Jersey Homestead provided a "semi-rural life" in which "neighbors and community [are]

¹ Ben Shahn and Frances Kathryn Pohl, *Ben Shahn: With Ben Shahn's Writings* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1993), 28.

² Ben Shahn, interview with Richard K. Doud, April 14, 1964. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. As cited in Diana L. Linden and Ben Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals: Jewish Identity in the American Scene* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 19.

³ Ben Shahn. *Jersey Homesteads Mural*, 1936-1938, fresco mural, 36 feet x 45 feet. New Jersey.

strongly emphasized.”⁴ The Jersey Homesteads mural was Shahn’s artistic project that most mobilized his Jewishness. It rendered the strong ties between Shahn and the Jewish community, enabling audiences to explore his understanding and expression of the modern Jewish American experience.

Preliminary Documents

Shahn made several preparatory documents for the Homesteads mural, including a list of ideas, a manuscript, and a study, which, after pieced together, presented a panorama of the modifications he made in the whole process and helped viewers develop a better understanding of Shahn’s connection with his Jewish cultural heritage. All the pre-established documents reflected Shahn’s Jewishness to a striking extent that was not as accessible to the audience in the final mural. For the mural’s subject, Shahn initially focused on the distressing experiences of the Jewish population in Europe instead of their lives after emigration to the United States, as shown in the final mural. One could infer that the ultimate dissipation of those Jewish Europeanness resulted from censorship and intervention of American government officials who only desired America-related elements.

In 1936, Shahn created a list of preliminary ideas for the Homesteads mural, with the structure of three subdivision themes: ‘background,’ ‘immigration,’ and ‘unionization.’⁵ Although the tripartite narrative structure did remain in the final mural, the contents within the narrative did not. According to the list, Shahn tried to include many details of the trials and tribulations of the Jewish people in Europe; he wrote down the Menachem Mendel Beilis case and Dreyfus affair in the list, representing the anti-Semitic miscarriage of justice in Europe. Terms such as “Ghetto in Russian,” “Poland,” “persecution,” and “the accusation of blood ritual” were also listed in the ‘background’ section. In the ‘immigration’ section, Shahn then focused on the tension between the old and new generations of Jewish immigrants, notably how the older generation refused to assimilate, whereas the new generation welcomed changes. Finally, he included scenes of garment strikes that he had witnessed in his childhood and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 in the section on ‘Unionization.’ Shahn advanced his idea further

⁴ United States Department of the Interior, Press Release, March 10, 1935, Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn’s New Deal Murals*, 38.

⁵ Ben Shahn, notations (verso of list), c. 1936. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn’s New Deal Murals*, 48.

with a longer description in an undated manuscript, starting with “The mural should begin with the life of the Jews in [a] Russian Ghetto...”⁶ The domination in Shahn’s analysis of the Jewish experience in Europe over that in the United States was even more evident in the manuscript, where Shahn discussed adding the disparities between the old and new generations as the central theme. Shahn’s study for the Homesteads mural also suggested this domination.⁷ Worth noting is that all three documentary sources did not mention any elements regarding the New Deal, contrary to the final version. Shahn’s strong inclination to present both the tension between two Jewish generations and their experience in Europe instead of the New Deal emphasized his Jewishness over his Americanness.

Art historian Diana Linde believes that Shahn’s connection with the United States was more potent for his artistic process than his Jewish heritage, a contrary argument to the one in this paper. As one of the scholars who discusses his preparatory documents, Linde provides a close visual analysis that points out shifts Shahn made between his initial concepts and the final mural. She suggests that Shahn was initially inclined to present more of Jewish vulnerability to bloodshed by depicting pogroms during the arrival of the holiday Passover instead of the actual practice of prayer.⁸ However, Linde leaves us with fragments of factual analysis instead of an explanation of why Shahn shifted the content and the meaning of his artistic changes. On the other hand, historian Susan Noyes Platt interprets those preliminary documents, especially the long manuscript, as exposing Shahn’s desire to separate from Jewish tradition and embrace American culture. She interprets Shahn’s inclusion of the contradiction between the old and new generations of Jewish immigrants to show his great expectation of “leaving Jewish life behind.”⁹

However, those factual elements regarding the theme of old and new Jewish immigrant generations in the preliminary documents could also indicate Shahn’s deep investigation into Jewish identity and history. Through the discussion in the manuscript and list regarding the

⁶ “We are the People.” typescript, Shahn Papers, 1991, Archives of American Art. As cited in Susan Noyes Platt, “The Jersey Homesteads Mural: Ben Shahn, Bernarda Bryson, and History Painting in the 1930s,” in *Redefining American History Painting*, ed. Patricia M. Burnham and Lucretia Hoover Giese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 30.

⁷ Ben Shahn, study for the Jersey Homesteads fresco, 1936, tempera, 20 inches x 29 inches. Private collection. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn’s New Deal Murals*, figure 22.

⁸ Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn’s New Deal Murals*, 3, 47-51.

⁹ Platt, “The Jersey Homesteads Mural,” 17.

distinction between the two generations, Shahn tried to build his definition of Jewish-Americanness and analyze both advantages and disadvantages of assimilation, guiding his audience to delve deeper into the topic of Jewishness. For instance, according to his notes on the list, Shahn suggests that the idea of union-organizing practices had not yet solidified across the new generation in the 1930s, perhaps because Americanization had weakened the new generation's radical spirits to fight against injustice. Shahn's examination within the Jewish community, instead of between the Jewish community and the larger American society, gives scholars an even more comprehensive iconography of Jewish American history.

First Panel

The final 45-foot mural was divided into three panels: immigration, unionization, and the New Deal planned community. The most prominent element in the first panel is a pastiche of a group of immigrants, all wearing badges that represented their identities on the ship and walking toward the audience through a red steel bridge.¹⁰ The identifiable characters within the group all came to the United States in different periods. Shahn's mother, Gittel, the leading figure, immigrated to the United States in 1906. With a blue cloak that represented the Virgin's purity in a traditional Catholic context, her figure has been interpreted as the Virgin Mary.¹¹ Then on the right, Albert Einstein, perhaps the most well-known character on the mural, came to the United States in 1933. Echoing Gittel's Madonna figure, Einstein represents Moses among the group. Some scholars have proposed that the man standing at Gittel's right was the Jewish artist Raphael Soyer, while others suggested it was his identical twin Moses Soyer who was also an intellectual artist. Shahn might have purposefully used the singular figure in the mural to symbolize Raphael and Moses, demonstrating his respect toward the artistic pursuits of these two brothers, who focused on working-class struggles and worked with the Federal Art Project in the 1930s. As Shahn was interested in physics, Charles Proteus Steinmetz, a German American mathematician, and socialist, is also depicted amid the group. However, Shahn's background location for this entrance depicted in the mural, Ellis Island, was not built when Steinmetz immigrated in 1889. Intermixing with the identifiable leading characters is an anonymous crowd of Jewish immigrants. Shahn intentionally overlapped the different eras of

¹⁰ Ben Shahn, left-hand panel of the *Jersey Homesteads Mural*, 1936-1938, fresco mural, 12 feet x 15 feet. New Jersey. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, figure 12.

¹¹ Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, 56.

immigration to address how “immigrants made major contributions to the society to which they came,” according to his wife Bernarda Bryson, and thus to represent the broader community of all Jewish refugees who came to the United States for a better life.¹²

On the crowd’s left was the Registry Hall at Ellis Island, with several men on the benches and one isolated family, accurately depicting that most male immigrants were separated from their families when entering the United States. An American flag and a miniature Statue of Liberty were also painted inside the Registry Hall episode, hanging on the back of the hall elusively. The way Shahn placed them at such a distance from the immigrants could be interpreted as a reflection of the closure of the American immigration system after the Johnson-Reed Act of 1921. The statue’s and the flag’s inaccessibility were Shahn’s analogy to the inaccessibility of the United States, which intensified around the time the mural was created. On the upper left and right of the immigrant crowd in the final mural are two small vignettes that changed most compared to Shahn’s initial study. The original sketch, as the list and manuscript mentioned before, indicates that Shahn’s connection toward Jewish culture in the initial version was greater than that in the final version.¹³

Three main changes were made in the first panel. First, on the uppermost left corner of the mural is a Nazi holding a sign in German which reads: “Germans beware: don’t buy from Jews.” Next to this Nazi standing in front of a dress shop window is another sign in German hanging on the brick wall, warning: “Attention Jews, visit forbidden (verboden).”¹⁴ Although this was the only mural in the New Deal Art program that used the figure of a Nazi, it is still reasonable to infer that the artist intentionally made the artistic choice to minimize the figure to an unnoticeable size, blended within the dark, and mainly covered by his sign. Whether Shahn had purposely blurred it or not, this figure was not in the original plan of the study.¹⁵ Instead, it was replaced by a pogrom that arose in the Pale of Settlement in Europe, which would have been

¹² Bernarda Bryson Shahn, interview by Susan Noyes Platt, July 16, 1993. As quoted in Platt, “The Jersey Homesteads Mural,” 27.

¹³ Ben Shahn, study for the Jersey Homesteads fresco, 1936, tempera, 20 inches x 29 inches. Private collection. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn’s New Deal Murals*, figure 22.

¹⁴ Ben Shahn, detail of the Nazi soldier in the Jersey Homesteads mural, 1936-1938, fresco. Roosevelt, New Jersey. Photograph by Gabrielle Louise Balon. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn’s New Deal Murals*, figure 25.

¹⁵ Ben Shahn, study for the Jersey Homesteads fresco, 1936, tempera, 20 inches x 29 inches. Private collection. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn’s New Deal Murals*, figure 22.

marked as inappropriate by the New Deal Art program's officials due to its violent elements.¹⁶

Second, in the study under the pogrom in Pale of Settlement were two Jewish men slaughtered during the tsarist pogrom, lying inside caskets, and two mourning women standing beside them. However, as the final mural was made, Shahn displaced the two memorial figures from two Jews into martyrs Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian American anarchists. Shahn had made and exhibited a series on Sacco and Vanzetti at Edith Halpert's gallery around 1931.¹⁷ The death of these two martyrs represented America's fallacious justice system due to the nation's anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiment. His choice of Italian Americans as subjects also emphasized the idea of unity's significance between different immigrant groups, especially under the prevalent systematic oppression. Shahn detached the Jewish identities of the corpses and gave them more Americanized identities to echo more prominent themes of the importance of unification between minorities against racial discrimination in America. However, as the mural's only direct critique of American society, the scene of those two coffins is again hidden in the dark, fading out of the frame to a certain degree. The subtle presentations of both this and the Nazi scene indicate Shahn's nuanced expression when conveying his critical attitude toward his adopted nation or the larger world, perhaps to refrain from inciting public controversy or censorship.

Third, in the final mural, on the upper right of the immigrant crowd is a vignette of immigrant families sleeping in the park outside New York City's tenements. However, this section was filled with much more purposeful Jewish scenes in the study. It was originally divided into two small sets: people praying in front of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Israel, and people gathering around a table for a Passover seder, a Jewish holiday. In Shahn's manuscript, he connected the term Western Wall with the 1929 Palestine riots in which Arabs attacked Jews over access to the Western Wall. The man at the head of the table in the study reclines on his pillow, a posture indicating the traditional practice required during the Passover seder. Yet when making the final mural, Shahn removed the motifs that lacked strong connections with the agenda of America and could be unfamiliar to American audiences. He shifted the vignette from several religious or memorial ceremonies gatherings to a comparative unintentional and objectless gathering. Nonetheless, the

¹⁶ Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, 50.

¹⁷ Ben Shahn, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 1932, tempera on canvas, 84 1/2 inches x 48 inches. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, figure 8.

original inclusion of Jewish elements validates how Shahn mobilized his Jewishness in depicting history.

Central Panel

Turning to the central panel of the final mural, Shahn depicted several small thematic vignettes that narrated the story of unionization, starting with a garment factory filled with working immigrant needleworkers on the assembly line.¹⁸ Next to them are a group of pressers, and above are three home piece workers. In the middle of those sweatshop workers, who uniformly expressed a sense of dullness, is a line of workers walking toward the union hall on the right, in contrast to the stasis of those sweatshop workers. Across the door, this line of workers queued is dominated by a crowd of pensive people gathering and listening to the union leader's speech, as a leader carries signage quoted from activist John Lewis' speech that says, "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."¹⁹ The quotation was in Yiddish instead of English in the original study of the unionization section, named *East Side Soapbox*.²⁰ The translated message of the quote said: "Nature has given everyone an appetite, but our bosses have stolen the bowl."²¹ Again, this initial version presents Shahn's strong connection to Jewish culture by using a West Germanic language that Ashkenazi Jews historically spoke. The linguistic switch could be interpreted as a compromise for his patrons, New Deal officials, or Americanized audiences. In the background of this union practice are buildings where past sweatshop workers' tragic events took place, marked with signs of businesses who fought against unionization, including but not limited to the manufacturers in the Asch Building, where the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire occurred.

Next to the crowd is a doorway, similar to the one connecting the queue and speech, representing a transition to prospects on the right,

¹⁸ Ben Shahn, center panel of the Jersey Homesteads mural, 1936-1938, fresco, 12 feet x 15 feet. Roosevelt, New Jersey. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, figure 13.

¹⁹ 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, unfiled. As cited in Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural," 28.

²⁰ Ben Shahn, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 1932, tempera on canvas, 84 1/2 inches x 48 inches. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art.

²¹ Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 81.

separated into scenes of a classroom and a utopian agricultural cooperative. Immigrants gathered in the room, which was most likely a reference to Veblen College – a college that Shahn had also created a montage brochure on – are learning American labor history based on the mind map on the blackboard presenting the relationship between specific labor movements and various organizations. Below them is a group of workers doing agricultural work, echoing the location of this mural, the agricultural planned community Jersey Homesteads.

Final Panel

Shahn concluded the mural and his depiction of contemporary Jewish American history with a New Deal panel. The New Deal officials in formal dress gather around the table, working on the blueprints of the Jersey Homesteads community with vivid white lines.²² Among the group are John Brophy, Sidney Hillman, and David Dubinsky, all leaders of different garment or industrial worker union organizations.²³ New York senator Robert F. Wagner, journalist Heywood Bound, and assistant of Secretary of Agriculture Rexford Tugwell are the other three characters in the group. The table with their plan is rendered as askew and unrealistic, enabling the audience to censor the content simultaneously. Around the men is a family, standing next to the blueprint and witnessing the plan with the men, and a thriving background with factories and fertile land. After the oppressive immigration panel and invigorating unionization panel, the mural ends here with a hopeful prospect.

No matter when comparing the difference between the final mural and the study, the manuscript, or the preparatory list, one can see the tweaks that Shahn made to his content. The editing of the pogrom in Eastern Europe, the two Jewish descendants, the Western Wall, the Passover seder gathering, the Yiddish signage, the ‘background’ section, the tension between the old and new generations of Jewish immigrants, other elements of Jewishness and the newly added panel of New Deal all bring out a more Americanized final version, a version that Shahn’s patrons wanted. Censorship from the Federal Art Project’s officials was likely the leading cause of Shahn’s rapid removal of those Jewish elements. Investigation of Shahn’s preliminary documents indicates that deeper connections between him and his cultural heritage are hidden under the final mural. I will introduce how and where these Jewish

²² Ben Shahn, right-hand panel of the Jersey Homesteads mural, 1936-1938, fresco, 12 feet x 15 feet. Roosevelt, New Jersey. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, figure 14.

²³ Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics*, 81.

connections were employed and showcased in the final mural through Shahn's technical skills, composition, and choices of objects.

The Spatial Design

The spatial design of the Jersey Homesteads mural, in a subtle way that audiences might not consciously notice, automatically pushes the audience into a world brimming with both dynamicity and staticity. Under the three main panels were the more miniature scenes of Jewish Americans' experiences. Shahn used montage to maximize the visual effects of each of those subordinate spaces. According to Platt, besides utilizing Renaissance's linear perspective, Shahn also combined "the shallow space of some photographic portraits, the three-dimensionality of theatrical sets, and the arrested action of film frames."²⁴ All of these represented the momentum and dramatic shift, both geographically and temporally, in Jewish Americans' experiences, which contrasted with what is represented by other New Deal murals. For example, Shahn's designs of the postures of the immigrants who walk through the bridges make the figures look as if captured in the middle of their action. Elements such as Albert Einstein's leg in the air and the suitcase carried up on the shoulders by the man with the blue hat among the crowd all deliver the message of dynamism. In the last mural scene, however, Shahn changed to the traditional narrative approach without using montage but with a sense of spatial stasis, indicating his longing for crafting stability of the new community with the New Deal Administration.

Shahn had used the art of montage to represent the idea of mobility numerous times in the 1930s, including in his brochure *Veblen College: a cooperative school dealing with problems of social change* of 1937, established during the middle of his creation of the Jersey Homesteads mural. This brochure was for a homestead's proposed college and depicted a young student walking with hope toward the bigger world from college.²⁵ Besides conveying a sense of rapid change, Shahn's use of dynamism also encouraged the audience to actively participate in interacting with the mural and thus create positive social change. Because the mural deviated from the chronological, conventional narrative order, Shahn compelled audiences to think deeply through each scene instead of passively receiving the messages.

²⁴ Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural," 1.

²⁵ Ben Shahn, *Veblen College: a cooperative school dealing with problems of social change* (1937), brochure, 19 cm x 26 cm. In Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. As cited in Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, figure 24.

The Narrative of Passover Haggadah

Another strategy that Shahn used also contributed to his goal of awakening the spectators from an indolent acceptant perspective: the analogy of Haggadah, the religious text read at the beginning of the Jewish Passover seder dinner.²⁶ This parallelism with the Haggadah, again, emphasized the Jewish culture and identity that pervaded the Homesteads mural. As a central Jewish tradition, the Haggadah recounts the story of God's redemption of Israelites from enslavement in Biblical Egypt and commemorates the Exodus. The Passover seder is subdivided into three parts, corresponding to Shahn's contemporary tripartite narrative: 'slavery' matched with the first panel of immigration, 'deliverance' matched with the second panel of unionization, and 'redemption' matched with the last panel of utopian New Deal housing communities.²⁷

Shahn's manuscript of the preliminary content of the Homesteads mural, in which he intended to include a feast of Passover scene, displayed his understanding of this religious holiday: "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"²⁸ Shahn used metaphor to connect the darkness of ancient Egypt and modern tsarist Russia, as well as of monopolistic trusts' wage-slaves system. Redemption, as Shahn painted in the mural, was found in the transition from urban wage workers to farmers in the newly-established Jersey Homesteads. Here again, Shahn forced the spectators to actively decipher the corresponding new characters and new settings in the biblical history of Exodus under the context of modernity in his mural.

Both by using the montage technique and the metaphor as a secularized Haggadah, Shahn created an experiential mural that encouraged audiences to actively join the conversation of the mural and thus demanded their involvement in social reform efforts to confront the reemerged oppression in the 1930s.²⁹ The analogy of two exoduses, one away from the despotic pharaohs and one away from the tyrannic tsars, connected the past and the present, presented a mirror of the

²⁶ Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, 61-62.

²⁷ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 44-45.

²⁸ "We are the People." typescript, Shahn Papers, 1991, AAA. As cited in Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural," 30.

²⁹ Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, 63.

ancient religious text pictorially and should be marked as evidence of Shahn's expression of his Jewishness due to his delicate design of the parallelism. Shahn used the Passover Haggadah – a traditional and central Jewish religious narrative – as the guiding structure for his mural, leading his viewers to decipher his narrative founded on the relationship between him and his Jewish identity.

Choices of Objects

Shahn's avant-garde approach toward the figures of the Homesteads mural could be interpreted as a mode to censor the dominance of his Jewish cultural heritage over Americanized identity in his art production. Contrary to most New Deal murals, Shahn's mural did not have a heroic figure or leader that dominated the scene. Shahn's characters all functioned to narrate an ongoing process rather than a decisive moment with heroic images that others applied. All the characters in the mural, even those identifiable like Albert Einstein and those New Deal Administration officials, emerged from groups. They did not appear isolated nor symbolize a sense of individuality. Their specificities were not designed to commemorate their great hardships or accomplishments but to better represent the group they were in, consummating to depict the history of Jewish Americans. One might argue that the Union leader is outstanding and heroic because of his figure's comparatively large scale. However, he remains unidentified. With so many other renowned characters in the mural, it was reasonable to infer that the artist intentionally filled this seat of designated character with an anonymous figure, creating a sense that he had emerged from the group and was a part of the extended public. By fusing the objects with the bigger frame of showing the 'process,' the artist presented the momentum in Jewish Americans' history from Europe to the new world, from oppression to the hopeful prospect.³⁰

Shahn also arranged his characters' bodies, gestures, and poses in a way that contradicted the artistic ideology of 1930s America. The most representative artist he stood against was the pioneer of Regionalist Thomas Hart Benton. Although Benton and Shahn were contemporaneous, Benton already stood as a representative figure of American murals in the 1930s and declared that he was dedicated to creating the truly-American art form. The title of the New Deal Federal Art Project, "American Scene," was even inspired by Benton. In his well-known artwork *America Today*, created in 1931, Benton used "heroically scaled foreground figures," representing individuality.³¹ His murals had

³⁰ Platt, "The Jersey Homesteads Mural," 20.

³¹ Ibid.

the specialty of their optimistic hues and the clarity of the characters' muscles' outlines, underscoring the power of modern American citizens. Benton's romanticized images greatly contrasted with Shahn's characters which exposed the authentic reality and thus necessitated the audiences' critical censorship of the content, both in the mural and in the course of American history. Besides Benton's mural, other New Deal murals typically promoted the singular imagery of motivational Americans, especially its past heroes, in the 1930s.³² Shahn ran counter to those agendas by capturing his characters in less idealized and romanticized ways. While other New Deal muralists provided idealized frames, the consummate conclusion gained by process, Shahn emphasized the sordid process before that grateful conclusion – the life of hard-working Jewish laborers.³³ His distinction with others under the discussion of objects and content was established because of his cultural heritage of Jews and his special access toward the unpublicized or hidden side of authentic Jewish experiences. Here again, Shahn stood on the opposite side of the “Americanized” on the balance of self-identity, manifesting his strong ties with his Jewishness.

Shahn's unidealized approach strongly used his memories, exposing the connection between his Jewishness and the mural's realism. Many portraits in the mural were from the anonymous images of others photographs such as the new arrivals within the crowds in the first scene of Ellis Island, and others were from his photographs, such as the figure of the outstanding union leader, who was based on a “soapbox orator” from his Lower East Side photographs and eventually “metamorphosed into a union leader.”³⁴ Shahn also designed his characters from his family albums and his memory, such as the figure of his mother. His original intention to focus on the persecution of Jews in Russia could also indicate the essentiality of Shahn's continuous recollection of his Jewish experiences in the past. Murals, as Shahn explained, could be artists' “intimate revelations.”³⁵ When creating the Homesteads mural that chronicled Jewish history, Shahn depended on his memories regarding his Jewishness. In turn, the mural became a part of his Jewishness in the end and a strong piece of evidence for his Jewish identity.

³² Linden and Shahn, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, 52.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Platt, “The Jersey Homesteads Mural,” 6; Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 29.

³⁵ Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, 34.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, when an audience asked Shahn during a speech at a New Jersey synagogue if he considered himself a Jewish artist, Shahn resolutely tore off the Jewish tag that had long been attached to him: “I am a human artist. I don’t like categorization into groups. I wouldn’t be interested in an exhibit of Jewish artists.”³⁶ Although many scholars interpret this as a sign of Shahn’s refusal to admit or embrace his Jewish identity, I suggest that Shahn’s dismissal of the label as a Jewish artist should not be misunderstood as proof of the repudiation of his Jewish identity. Shahn’s denial of his Jewish label could be a way of emphasizing his universalism instead of a specific definition. In his book *Shape of Content*, Shahn further showed his dislike toward the phenomenon of labeling artists: “If it were left to artists to choose their labels, most would choose none.”³⁷ Shahn saw accepting labels as a way of relinquishing the interpretation of one’s art to the hand of the other and saw labels as limitations instead of categorization. As evidenced throughout this paper, elements of Jewishness blended into every single edge of his art production, from his choice of subject matter to his artistic composition and narratives. While some scholars proclaim that the late-1930s was a period in which Shahn broke away from the Jewish community, this paper argues that the agenda of Jewishness was still the main element in his artistic production during this period, according to the potent symbols and complex narratives in his mural.

³⁶ Shahn and Pohl, *Ben Shahn*, 28.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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