Information on
Ben Shahn
American, 1898-1969
Sing Sorrow, 1946
Tempera on panel, 26 x 39 in.
Mary and Sylvan Lang Collection
1975.50

Subject Matter
In Sing Sorrow, the dominant element is a man holding a guitar with his right hand, and covering his face with his left arm in a pose of grief or sorrow. Behind him is a turbulent sky, high-tension wires, and a traffic signal that simultaneously blinks red and green.

The symbolism of the scene is explained in a correspondence between Mrs. Ben Shahn and Mr. Sylvan Lang, then owner of the painting in the 1970s. Mr. Lang writes to Mrs. Shahn, “ten or twelve years after my purchase of the picture, Mr. Shahn advised me of the circumstances which stimulated him to paint it...that at the time of the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the train bearing his casket passed through New Jersey en route to Hyde Park, New York. Mr. Shahn told me he drove to a nearby city to see the funeral cortège pass through and that the colored lights were in the freight yards of the railroad. Mr. Shahn said he saw someone with a banjo weeping as the train passed by; and that this was his inspiration. Sing Sorrow was the title of an old Kentucky hillbilly tune.” Mrs. Shahn replied, “of course I remember acutely the incident of the funeral train’s passing through Trenton, and that Ben took our young son Jonathan to watch it pass.”

The primary emotion in Sing Sorrow is the undisguised grief of the man. His sorrow is not only communicated by the gesture of covering his face, but his eyes and forehead are also contorted in grief. The horizontal lines of force are also conveyed by the high-tension wires and the strings of the instrument. The hat band, brim, the wrinkles around the eyes, and the eyebrows themselves also communicate a strong sense of emotion. Vertical accents are the hanging arc lamps, repeated in guitar keys and fingernails.

About the Artist
Ben Shahn was born in Lithuania to a family of craftsmen: woodcarvers on his father’s side, potters on his mother’s. The family had strong Socialist leanings. Exiled to Siberia, Ben’s father later escaped and fled to South Africa, and then came to the United States. Ben, his mother, and his brothers followed in the fall of 1906, settling in Brooklyn, New York.

At the age of 13, Ben was taken out of school to learn a trade. He became an apprentice at Hessenberg’s Lithography Shop and completed his high school education in evening classes. Subsequently, he studied at the Art Students’ League, New York University, City College of New York, and the National Academy of Design in New York. In 1920, he moved to Paris to study painting and experienced an artistic and cultural crisis as he realized that he could not dedicate his art to form alone. He needed to express content as well.

While Shahn was in Paris, he became fascinated by the infamous Dreyfus case. Dreyfus, the first Jewish officer appointed to the Ministry of War, had been falsely accused of treason and sentenced to die, but subsequently was found innocent and restored to rank in the army. Shahn’s watercolors of the Dreyfus series, in terms of both theme and simplicity of style, signaled an important direction in his artistic career. Shortly after his return from Europe, Shahn began a series of paintings on the theme of the 1920s trial and subsequent execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a cause celebre that allowed him to combine his talent with personal and social statement. During the depression of the 30s he worked for the WPA’s (the Works Project Administration, a government subsidized work program created by Roosevelt during the Depression that created thousands of jobs) Public Works of Art Project. Shahn’s compassion for the human condition became even more evident, first in his mural projects with Diego Rivera and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and then in his work for the Farm Security Administration. During World War II, he designed posters for the Office of War information, and the threat of an atomic holocaust planted a seed that haunted him during the last years of his life.
Ben Shahn

*Sing Sorrow, 1946*

**About the Artist** continued

His experiences during the 1930s and 40s had two important and interrelated effects on Shahn’s art. First, his socially aware subject matter asserted itself onto the American creative consciousness, not only in painting but most effectively in writing, theatre, and cinema. Second, through the federal art programs that provided work for thousands of professional artists, Shahn worked as a muralist, an experience that affected the scale and style of his easel paintings.

Ben Shahn is probably the leading painter of the American movement known as Social Realism, which emerged as a definite school during the Depression. Social Realism focused on extraordinary events in the lives of ordinary people. Shahn also excelled as a photographer, draftsman, illustrator, designer, writer, and teacher. A special quality to his work was a refusal to preach; he was impelled to tell a story, to draw the picture, but to leave conclusions to others.

**Quote from the Artist**

> Never be afraid to become embroiled in art or life or politics; never be afraid to learn to draw or paint better than you already do, and never be afraid to undertake any kind of art at all, however exulted or however common, but do it with distinction.

> The image that I sought to create was not one of a disaster, that somehow doesn’t interest me. I wanted instead to create the emotional tone that surrounds disaster, you might call it the inner disaster.

**Strategies for Tours**

**Primary Grades (ages 6–8):** What is the person doing? How do you think he is feeling? What kinds of things make people cry? What colors do you see? Which kinds of lines do you see, are there more horizontal/straight lines than curved lines? Which is the most important part of the painting; what makes you say that?

**Upper Elementary (ages 9–11):** What are the colors? (Primary, secondary?) Are they pure hues, pastel tints, or dark shades of the colors? What emotional tone do the colors communicate—the red and green of the traffic signals the color of the man’s shirt and hat? What lines dominate the painting? Where are these lines repeated? What is unusual about the use of space? Is the size of the man and guitar balanced in relation to the background? Which occupies more space—the man with his guitar or the background?

**Adolescents and Adults:** [This is a good work to initiate a discussion on aesthetics and the question “What is art?”] Many will require that art must be beautiful or deal with pleasant subjects. Yet some of the most moving works of art, music, theatre, and literature deal with tragedy, war, or pain. [Ask your group how this work fits with the idea that art must be beautiful or deal with pleasing subject matter. Do they think this is a work of art? Is it a successful one?]

**Sources Worth Consulting**

