

*Ben Shahn's American Scene
Photographs 1938*

By John Raeburn

(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010. Pp. xvi, 190. Illustrations, notes, index. Paperbound, \$30.00.)

During the summer of 1938, the artist Ben Shahn photographed in a dozen small towns in central Ohio for the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration. Shahn was already known for his 1932 painting, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, a visual indictment of the establishment for the trial and execution of the two Italian anarchists. Although Shahn's photographs were more subtle, John Raeburn convincingly argues in *Ben Shahn's American Scene* that his commitment to social justice informed this work as well.

What appears, at first glance, to be another collection of FSA photographs quickly reveals itself as perceptive cultural and economic history grounded in visual documents. Raeburn's close reading of the photographs and his analysis of what Shahn excluded offer a model for how historians can use photographs as primary documents. As he analyzes individual photographs and sequences, Raeburn reveals Shahn's decision-making process within the context of the Great Depression's later years.

The book holds that Shahn was out of sync with the assumptions of his boss, Roy Stryker, director of the Historical Section. Stryker believed that small towns represented "the

strength and durability of American democratic traditions" (p. 3), and that they offered an effective response to the threat of fascism in Europe. In a shooting script listing positive subjects, he commissioned his photographers to prove this. Shahn shared Stryker's anti-Nazism, but he refused to modify his perceptions to match his supervisor's expectations. Considering the small town to be in decline, he frequently showed its streets and public spaces empty of people; they are replaced by the ubiquitous automobile, which Raeburn likens to "a Trojan horse that would be among the causes of the small town's decline" (p. 94).

Most FSA photographers worked in rural regions of the South and West, rarely staying in one place more than a few days. Shahn's extended stay resulted in a deep examination of social relations. His most revealing images show Ohioans lined up outside the Urbana City Hall waiting for food handouts. In these and similar images, Raeburn argues, Shahn strongly indicts "the humiliating, mean-spirited treatment [these recipients] receive at the hands of public officials" (p. 144). Shahn's most poignant photos—including the book's cover image of a barefoot, dirty-faced girl, gazing forlornly into

the distance—show impoverished children. Some eight percent of his project shows African Americans, a considerably higher figure than their ratio in the national population and in the FSA collection. His indignation flashes most brightly in a picture of a circus billboard replete with performers in blackface and in a sign at a Lancaster restaurant, reading “We Cater to White Trade Only.”

Despite his recognition of modernity’s encroachment, Shahn pointed his camera away from its overt signs. Raeburn draws on supporting documents, including the WPA Federal Writers’ Project’s *The Ohio Guide* (1940), Robert and Helen Lynd’s pioneering sociological study *Middletown* (1929), and his own visits to the sites to disclose what Shahn left

out of his pictures. He focused on locally owned businesses instead of chain department and grocery stores, and he generally ignored “movies, mass media and consumer culture” (p. 179).

Raeburn lauds the multivalence of Shahn’s project, which contrasts democratic values with racism, and balances seemingly vibrant downtowns with dole lines and shanty towns. “Shahn’s reception to ambiguity—his portrayal of small-town culture as made up of a complex admixture of divergent tendencies—is his survey’s most distinguishing hallmark,” he concludes (p. 179).

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American Nations A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America

By Colin Woodard

(New York: Viking, 2011. Pp. xii, 371. Illustrations, notes, index. \$30.00.)

Americans pledge that they are “one nation under God, indivisible.” In reality, Colin Woodard argues, the United States is a federation of ten nations—the Deep South, Greater Appalachia, the Left Coast, the Midlands, New France, New Netherland, El Norte, Tidewater, the Far West, and Yankeedom—highly divisible, with highly varying views of God. These nations’ territories do

not correspond to U.S. state boundaries, and six of the ten cross international borders into Canada or Mexico. The eleventh nation of Woodard’s title, First Nation, is located entirely within Canada. Woodard explains his unconventional designations as the result of a study of patterns of European colonial settlement, migration within the continent, and conquest.