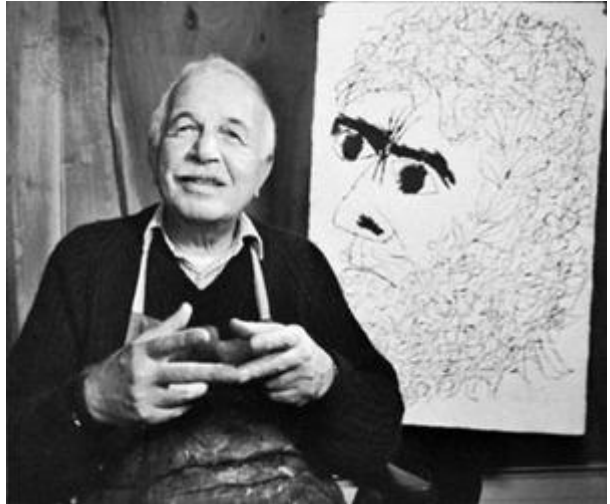


#65 October 2021 Cameraderie
Ben Shahn (1898-1969)



Ben Shahn was a prominent New Deal artist, but who also worked as a photographer for New Deal offices, the Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA), documenting human conditions in rural America during the Great Depression. I find him interesting because he was an artist who also did photography, as well as taking inspiration from poetry. Here are some extracts from the Wikipedia article:

... in 1935, Shahn was recommended by Walker Evans [#14, Oct. 2014], a friend and former roommate, to Roy Stryker to join the photographic group at the Resettlement Administration (RA). As a member of the group, Shahn roamed and documented the American south together with his colleagues Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange [#4, March 2013]. Like his earlier photography of New York City, Shahn's photography for the RA and its successor, the Farm Security Administration, can be viewed as social-documentary.

Edward Steichen [#9, Sept. 2013] selected Shahn's work, including his October 1935 photograph The family of a Resettlement Administration client in the doorway of their home, Boone County, Arkansas, for MoMA's world-touring The Family of Man [#22, Sept. 2017] which was seen by 9 million visitors. Only the huddled figure of the woman on the right hand half of Shahn's 35mm frame was blown up for the display. [see below]

Here is the link to the Wikipedia article—it is fascinating reading:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Shahn

Shahn's photographic work appears to be limited to documenting for the RA and FSA, but it is first class work, and he made it into The Family of Man—see the first image below.

Here is Shahn's original RA photograph.



This is good, but it does not hold together compositionally. See below.

Here is how it appeared in *The Family of Man* exhibit, and on page 150 of the 1955 book version of *The Family of Man*.



The view is limited now, and the image remembered forever as one of the icons of the period.

Here are a couple more of Shahn's striking documentary images.

Sharecroppers, Arkansas, 1935



Sam Nichols, tenant farmer, Boone County, Arkansas, 1935



Footnote Article—A few extra words about Richard Avedon
#3 February 2013 *Cameraderie*
Richard Avedon (1923-2004)

I said and quoted the following in my original article on Richard Avedon:

The Wikipedia article on Avedon accurately sums up his trademark style as follows:

“His portraits are easily distinguished by their minimalist style, where the person is looking squarely in the camera, posed in front of a sheer white background. Avedon would at times evoke reactions from his portrait subjects by guiding them into uncomfortable areas of discussion or asking them psychologically probing questions. Through these means he would produce images revealing aspects of his subject’s character and personality that were not typically captured by others.”

Recently doing some reading about the poet Ezra Pound, I found a reference to Avedon. Here is the story below, quoted from the Wikipedia article on Pound, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ezra_Pound . What you need to know about Pound is that he had a long history of sympathy and support for Nazism and Fascism before and during WWII. Shortly after the war, he was charged with treason against the USA.

External image

[Ezra Pound, 30 June 1958](#), photographed by [Richard Avedon](#) at the home of [William Carlos Williams](#), Rutherford, New Jersey.

"The photograph has a legend behind it. Avedon, they say, stepped up close and raised the camera, and said, 'You know I'm Jewish?' and before Pound could reply he clicked the shutter and froze him like this."

— Daniel Swift, *The Bughouse*, 2018.

You can see the image by following the link in this short article, but I have also copied it below. This story gives some flesh to Avedon’s reputation for drawing out his subjects through “psychologically probing questions.”

