



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Bernarda Bryson
Shahn, 1995 July 3**

**Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a
grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National
Park Service.**

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Bernarda Bryson Shahn on July 3, 1995. The interview was conducted by Pam Meechum for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: You'll have to repeat that, I think.

PAM MEECHUM: Right. I wondered if you could first of all recount your travels across America in the thirties, when you traveled with your husband, Ben Shahn. And recount your impressions of America outside New York, because of course we all know pretty much New York, that's all documented, but less so, life outside.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: It is indeed. The reason why I traveled with Ben was that he could not drive and he asked me to go, that I would drive for him. And of course I said, "Yes, I would." Actually I think I'll start a little earlier. I had left the Artists Union in a big degree of indignation and despair, gone to Woodstock, where I was working with _____ Brown who was in those days the leading lithographer in this country and I'd been watching him at work and that sort of thing and I got a call from Washington, and it was Ben, who said that, he asked me whether I would like to set up a lithographic shop in the Special Skills Section of the Agriculture Department and the Resettlement Administration, and of course I did want to. I went down and I'll start it this way. Ben had gotten a call from Dr. Stryker who was the head of the Historical Section of Resettlement Administration. Dr. Stryker had been given the obligation, I guess you'd call it, the job, of doing a contemporary history of America, by the president, by the administration, who felt that the circumstances were so grim and what they were trying to do to remedy the situation was important. So that Stryker was given simply the overall job with no description of how to..., of giving a contemporary history of the United States. So he had gotten together about ten or eleven eminent photographers, all of them very well experienced, including Walker Evans, and had given them carte blanche. Whatever your interest is, however you feel, go out and look at the country and see what's going on and do it photographically. It was Stryker's idea. Actually, his two first photographers were Carl Mydans and Arthur Rothstein, who were less eminent as photographers but much more experienced in the business of photographic journalism. And so Roy had learned from them more about what photography can do and so he..., in fact Walker took a part in it, and a number of other wonderful photographers, all of them well known, and they had started working and Walker, I think, now I don't know that this was Walker's idea, I don't know how else Roy would have known, Stryker, would have known about Ben. But I think that Walker suggested that Ben Shahn ought to be on that, that you know, that group, with that group of people. And so Ben was, so Ben and I went over to see Dr. Stryker, who had asked him to come. And Dr. Stryker had a guest in his office when we arrived so we had to wait in his office. On a table in the office, were two black, ring bound notebooks that had Dorothea Lange's first photographs that had come in from the Dust Bowl, and Ben looked at these photographs and he was so excited about them. And he said, "If I could get into a program like this, I would drop everything. That's just what I would like to do." And of course that is why Stryker had called him. So he immediately accepted this assignment. And Stryker said, "Now I'm not going to tell you where to go, you decide what parts of the country interest you most." And Ben said, "Well I'm interested in the mining areas, I'm interested in the sharecropping areas, and so on." And so that was, so the people who formed itineraries for the various artists set

up Ben an itinerary. He started in Pennsylvania and went south all the way to New Orleans and..., but it was still optional, Ben could make any changes he wanted to. And then went west into Arkansas. That was the first trip. And Ben as a New Yorker, was very oriented toward Europe, you know, loving France, had lived there and so on and so forth. Ben had read a great deal of socialistic, social theory about this country, here in New Bedlam? as I did. And he, so he had read, you know, Calay and Marcus and Malcolm Calay and all the people who had written about this country and he knew the literature very well. He had also read the theoretical writings, you know even Marx had written about the United States, Western Electric and so on. So Ben, really, I think, this is a little bit guessing, but I'm pretty sure that he had a picture of a vast wasteland of boss men and subordinate workers who, you know, came with their hat in their hand and said "yes, sir." and so on and so forth. And, you know, I believe that this was his picture. On the first day, I must say this, on the first day when we went into Pennsylvania, we were driving along a highway and there were four young men walking along, you know, just young looking guys. They had musical instruments and Ben said to me, "Would you slow the car down, I want to talk to these guys." So he asked them directions. And they started telling him how to get to where we were going, Westmoreland Farms. And Ben said, "You play those things?" And they said, "Sure we do." Well one of, the little kid didn't have an instrument, but the three boys..., there were two guitars a banjo and a mouth organ and so on. So Ben talked them into playing. And we sat on a leafy bank, and these guys played songs. I hadn't even heard them before, but Ben had never heard them at all, and he was just absolutely fascinated. And these young people were delightful, he found them just wonderful, you know, full of stories. They were all unemployed miners. Except the little boy, they were all unemployed miners. So this, they were the Musgrove, three Musgrove brothers, four Musgrove brothers. And that was the first painting that Ben made that was based on that trip, on all those trips. And he started by painting all of them sitting on the bank. He kept cutting it down, and finally it became one person playing the harmonica. I don't whether you know that painting.

PAM MEECHUM: Yes, I know the painting.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And it's called Pretty Maid Milking a Cow, which unfortunately is my title. I got him into trouble with that. That was the title of one of their harmonica tunes.

PAM MEECHUM: Did he photograph them?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, yes, indeed he did.

PAM MEECHUM: Did he do drawings at the time?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: They were the first photographs he took.

PAM MEECHUM: They were the first.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: He took no... He made no drawings. He drew all that from memory or else looking at his photographs. Then, so this then to me, to him, this was just this wonderful experience. And then we went on to Westmoreland Farms and the first person we met there was another musician. This was Mr. William Wilson, and he was a fiddle player, and he was the most gracious man and he invited us to his house. His wife had died. His house was immaculate. He had..., just was absolutely wonderful. And his violin was hanging on the wall and so Ben told him about these boys we had met and he said, he told us that music is very big among the miners. He was also a coal miner. You want me to go on?

PAM MEECHUM: Umm hmm.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: He was also a coal miner, so he organized a concert for Ben. And so he got his friends and one group was three musicians. One of them played two instruments. He had a mouth organ roped to himself so he would play the mouth organ at the same time he played a stringed instrument, and so Ben made a painting called Four Piece Orchestra.

PAM MEECHUM: Yes. I had heard of known about that one too.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And then he made another one, he made two paintings of that. But it's very interesting because his painting started, he didn't do the paintings until much later, but you know, the feeling of them began to grow in him. So after we met, this, I'll just take you through these first two or three days. After we left Mr. William Wilson, and we stayed overnight at Westmoreland Farms, we went to a Republic coal, a Republic steel mill where there was an enormous strike. There was an eleven mile picket line. And this was very exciting. I was driving, you know. Ben wouldn't let me get out of the car. There were box cars along a railroad track which was around this enormous mill and there were machine guns sticking out of the tops of these cars. And so Ben said, "You have to stay in the car, you won't get out." So he walked around and he talked to all the pickets. And he asked them you know what the strike was all about and so on and so forth. So he got this wonderful story of their conflict with the owners of Republic Steel. And the..., so he made a couple of paintings from that too. Several paintings from that. But the very interesting thing is then we went on from the Republic Steel mill place, and the next morning we bought a newspaper and on the front page was a photograph of all these people he'd been talking to being beaten up by company goons. So this was a very established, powerful paper then. So from there we went on from one town to another to another to another, and every place we went Ben's eyes were opened. He just thought it was... You know it simply was for anybody, you know, I knew the country very well but it was an eye opening experience for me too.

PAM MEECHUM: So up to this point Ben had really been very New York orientated. [sic] New York and Washington.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: New York, no not even, he didn't know Washington either. He had been to Philadelphia, aside from that he knew all New England very well, but West of the Hudson River, I used to tease him and say the world ends at the Yanksy River. But literally so, everyday was an eye opening thing. I remember when we got clear into Arkansas, this is much later, he got, he started this talking about the town. He said, "You know the thing that amazes me about this town, everything in this town is somebody's idea. There is nothing that is, you know, pre..., that they've just handed to somebody, every building has its own peculiarities and so forth, every fence, every sign in the town." And so he was very fascinated by, just by the individualities of towns and then if you started keeping names, we both did. There was Freezefork, Kentucky, there was Sweet Home, Georgia, and there were just towns with these wonderful, wonderful names. And one I knew because I knew it from before was a town along the Ohio River in Kentucky, it was called "A Lot of Good Looking Women Landing." But anyway we just came, we came upon one after another and this was, I just told you these few incidents to give you a sense of the impact that this country had on Ben's senses. And he was extremely political as you well know and very left wing. Now his left wing sentiments came from the fact that both his father and his grandfather were Socialists in Russia and he had actually witnessed, in Russia, some pretty grim circumstances. I don't know whether you know about any of that or not.

PAM MEECHUM: I do know some of it, yes, but please, give some...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, I'll tell you about one of them. He said he was about eight years old, no, no, he was less than that, he came here... He must have been very young, he must have

been five or six when a man came to his grandfather's house. His grandfather and his father were both woodcarvers. And the man came rushing to their house and pleaded, who was also a socialist, and pleaded for asylum. Would his grandfather take this man in. So his grandfather hid him back of what Ben called the Cocklehoven and it was a certain kind of a stove that was in these houses. And so Ben was warned that if the gendarmes or whatever they called them, the Cossaks, came that he knew nothing, he'd never seen anybody like that or anything of the sort. And he was part of this thing. And so the Cossacks did come and he said they teased him, they kidded him, they offered him you know, stuff and he said they threatened him a little bit and scared him and he said that they searched the place. Did not find this man who was hidden and he said when he... Ben said that when they left he said everybody hugged him and praised him, you know, for not having revealed that and so you can see that his partisanship was formed at a very early age. Then his father was exiled to Siberia, and you know of that.

PAM MEECHUM: Yes, I do as a matter of fact.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And so I don't know, I'm not going to tell you anymore of that but this is a little part of Ben's very early life, and to my mind, when I wrote about Ben, I wrote about this because I felt that it established in him a certain sense of loyalty towards social causes. That is something he never abandoned no matter what his other interests were, that remained with him always.

PAM MEECHUM: Your sense of social commitment came from a different area, didn't it? From your family background.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: My sense of social commitment came from growing up with my parents. Who lived in a... See my mother taught in University, she taught Latin in University and my father had a newspaper, they were perfectly comfortable, you know, at that point. And the town was just the type of town that you would imagine, a middle American, you know, a pleasant agreeable, kindly, in every sense, but totally prejudiced kind of town. And now I've told you that my father had black friends and he had dinner with them, he went hunting with them and when he got one of the first two cars in Athens, one of his friends, Sam Stevens, who was a black man, he said "If you have a car you have to have a chauffeur." So he learned to drive the car, and for nothing he would be my father's chauffeur. And this kind of thing went on. And so that was my background. And then my father was, had been, for Taft and then he switched to Teddy Roosevelt.

PAM MEECHUM: Yes.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And he was condemned for that. But he was always on that edge where he was for social justice, we called it that, though he didn't use those words. He was for social justice and the rest of the world was for literal... For progress and commerce and things of that sort and for living a respectable, uninvolved, uncontroversial life. Which is what everybody did. On our street, my father and Dr. McVeigh who was head of the Music Department at the university, those two were the only two people who had any kind of social commitment at all.

PAM MEECHUM: They were quite idealistic too. Or were your parents quite idealistic...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, absolutely. When I say idealistic, I mean that was their idealism. But then in other respects too the..., you know they had, my mother always said, that philosophically, she used the word elitist, but what she meant was that, or the way she explained it, which to me is a bad word, but the way she explained it she said that she believed that the government should be run by people who are skilled, who are educated in the skills of government.

And that's what she meant by elitist. And she probably got it from Plato, but a different kind of point of view. But nevertheless, you know, anybody who had employment with us, my mother was, you know, my mother was the most generous and understanding person in the world. There was nobody who couldn't sit down at the table with us, or anything like that. Which was not common in those days.

PAM MEECHUM: No.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: So that was my own background, and I grew up that way and I had, I never lost it at all. And the people with whom I associated many of them, many of them had no sense of any social involvement, but I guess I always did have, I don't know.

PAM MEECHUM: Yes. I read earlier that you were a member of the Communist Party and that you were one of the few later who didn't repudiate that position.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, what I did was this. No, this was very interesting, I have to... I don't know whether you have time for this kind of thing.

PAM MEECHUM: Oh, no, please.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, when I was working on The Ohio State Journal, my closest friend was Mary Dougherty. She worked on the Columbus Citizen. And the..., 1929 had happened, and the social situation, if I can call it that, was grime. Unemployment was everywhere. Nobody..., You know people were just being evicted from their homes all over the place. And Mary and I used to sit around and talk about what to do. And she favored being socialist. She liked Norman Thomas. And I said, and I really didn't know the Communist philosophy quite so well as I came to know it a little later, and I said that I thought that it needed something more powerful, that Norman Thomas had been a socialist for a long time and that I didn't see any perceptible changes and so on. And at that time, Roosevelt was running, my father was very much for Roosevelt, and I myself had this cynicism toward anybody who was that involved in politics...And I shuttled back and forth between Cleveland and Columbus. I had been married and had been divorced. And so I had two very close friends, one of them a writer and one of them an artist, and they, and so I went to a com..., they asked me to come to a Communist meeting with them. I went to the Communist meeting, which was actually pretty funny, you know it, to me it was more, it was almost like a circus in a certain way. And there was one girl who lisped. And she got up, she rose to her feet in the middle of this meeting and thrust her fist in the air and said "_____ Comrades!" And, you know, I didn't laugh. You weren't going to, nobody did, but then my friend Al, this writer, he came from one of the most aristocratic families in Cleveland, and, but, he was a dedicated Communist at that point, but he was the financial secretary, and so Al sat beside me and he said, so when he was asked to give his report, he said, "From where I sit I can study the eyes of ten comrades who haven't paid their dues." So he took the whole thing, very, very lightly, and teased about all sorts of things and he didn't last too long in the Communist party, but he stayed in it for the same reason that I did, and that is that he thought that there was a principle underneath it which justified the ludicrousness of a lot of the performances. And I don't know whether - I guess Al ultimately found out that the principle underneath it- that was the thing that was shocking,-when we found that the principle underneath it was not trying to help the people but it was trying to get power for the people, but "the people" in the name of the several people who wanted to be heads of the people. And when we, when it finally began to be clear that a situation of hardship had no interest, no human interest for them at all, but only in so far as it could be exploited to get them, to get people to join the Communist party and to become active in a cause. And it was very hard to face that for me.

PAM MEECHUM: Yeah.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: At first I thought well, that is only Columbus or only Cleveland, but when I got to New York, I thought it was going to be different. Then I had a very bad experience, this was fairly early and there was a hunger march in Columbus, which is the capitol of the state, and people marched in from all, working people, marched in from all sides of the state to protest to the governor, you know, what their plight was. And there had already been some moves, but now Roosevelt was already, I believe in office, that must have been 1932, to protest the fact that the governor of the state had vetoed a bill that would have that had gone through the legislature and would have helped people. And so Mary Dougherty, she had three jobs, I had only two. And one of her jobs was statistician for the state, and she had statistics on starvation and the kinds of, name under which it would be listed. So she said, I'll provide the statistics if you will draw the map. So I made a map of the state of Ohio, and she gave, for every county she gave the statistics of various kind of hardship and so and so. It was a very nice looking map. While we were doing that, when that big march on Columbus came about, a lot of us made banners, so we were on a _____ making these banners for this big conference of unemployed people in Columbus. And a man named Isreal Ampter who was part of the central committee of the Communist party came through, and I had already joined the Communist Party, and he came through and so Mary and I, first we tried to give both of our two newspapers this map, neither paper would touch it. And then we gave it to Mr. Ampter, we thought now, as a Communist, he would make the utmost use of it. He put it in his pocket, that was the end of it. Never saw it again, never heard of it again. And then he criticized, then we were working with some group called the Unemployed Leagues. It was under the leadership of a minister, and the Communist group is Unemployed Councils and the Unemployed Leagues were just another group of unemployed people under the leadership of this minister. Now they were all going to work together to try to get this bill through to help the unemployed. Ampter criticized us for working with the Unemployed Leagues. He said you don't need to do that. So he left and we ignored him and worked with them anyway. But then I thought well, in New York it's going to be different, but it wasn't. It wasn't. And then I went to, when I decided I would go to New York to live, I had already had this interview with the Rivera. I went to New York, and the first night I was there I stayed with my friend Lucy Tempton who was an editor, and she said, "You know there's a meeting of unemployed artists down at the Church of all Nations on Second Avenue. I thought maybe you'd like to go." And I said, "Where's Second Avenue?" I didn't know New York at all. And she said, "Well, I'll take you down there." So we went. It was very interesting. And they were talking about various methods, all of these unemployed artists, and there was, it was a _____ place, it was called the Unemployed Artists Organization. And they were talking about all kinds of methods, you know, to do things. And so, I made a couple of suggestions, and lo and behold, somebody nominated me for, to be the secretary of the organization. And I said, "I don't even know my way around in New York!" But they voted for me and I became head of the organization. And then the fun began. But it was very delightful, they were wonderful people, most, they were all artists. And so we found the headquarters on Seventeenth Street and we cleaned it all up and washed the windows, and then had a Dada ball, and started it that way, then we found, then we had so many members.

PAM MEECHUM: What was a Dada ball like in those days?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well it was bare electric bulbs and funny decorations and so on and so forth. It was lots of fun. And then we found a place on the corner of Seventh Ave. and Seventeenth Street and that became our really permanent headquarters, and where we'd meet for an enormous membership and you know, everybody joined.

PAM MEECHUM: Yeah.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: People from the sculptors, from the stone carvers union joined it and so on and so forth.

PAM MEECHUM: This wasn't a fine arts group. This was right across the board, the Unemployed Artists.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, absolutely. The Unemployed Artists, oh, I counted the Artist Union and the Unemployed Artists Organization. There were many people in New York who were art lovers, art collectors, and wealthy people who were deeply concerned about the plight of artists. Artists didn't have any money and they didn't have any way of getting any money. So they, this group of people which called themselves the Committee of One Hundred, or sometimes called the Gibson Committee, they were setting up projects for artists, you know, to just give them jobs. And one of them was redecorating St. Marks Church and repainting it and things of that sort. They were mostly pretty menial jobs. And one of the reasons why the artists were organized, they thought that maybe they could get better jobs by organizing. And so that was the basis of the Unemployed Artists Organization. So then when we became a union, it was, that was the biggest, the union.

PAM MEECHUM: Yeah.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And then, oh, all sorts, everybody joined, and you know very wealthy artists and very prominent artists, including Ben joined.

PAM MEECHUM: Can we go back just a little bit, to your interview with Rivera, because that's still much discussed and much hotly debated.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Why? What's debatable about it?

PAM MEECHUM: I think the suggestion at the moment is that Rivera might have engineered this kind of publicity stunt. That was the latest that I heard, And there's also...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Which kind of a publicity stunt?

PAM MEECHUM: To have the mural removed.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: No, no, no.

PAM MEECHUM: That this head of Lenin was part of a ...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: In the first place, in the first place it happened long before I had the interview. I told you that the scandal, and there was a scandal, had died down to some extent. Now what happened there was this. That Rivera had done this thing. He had made this great cartoon, a cartoon, you know, is what the mural is patterned on.

PAM MEECHUM: Yes.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: He made the great cartoon for the big mural in Rockefeller Center. And wherever there were faces- there were to be people- he had made drawings, because you know, the actual concentration on the likeness is a tough job, so to say what your going to do, to do the overall pattern, is perfectly, perfectly legitimate. Whether Rivera intended to deceive the Rockefellers or not, I do not know. He may have. I don't know. But so when he began to execute the mural and it appeared that Marx and Lenin were both part of this design, then Ivan, I think this man's name was Ivan Lee, I'm not sure, but he was a public relations director of Rockefeller Center

and he was responsible for the renting of the offices. Now the story that Ben told me, and I may be, this may be wrong, I don't know. The story that Ben told me was that the that the space in Rockefeller Center was not renting, mostly because of the depression.

PAM MEECHUM: Hum.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And that, Ivan Lee, that's what this man's name was, it may be a different Lee, I don't know. But that he told Rockefeller that the reason why it wasn't renting, was that the people who would have ordinarily have rented these expensive spaces did not want to be in a building where there were Marx and Lenin shown on the wall, and that therefore they, that you know, that must be removed. Well of course Rivera refused to remove anything. And so Ben said he was standing with Rivera on the scaffold when they began the removal on the wall. Pretty amazing. But, uh, now, Nelson Rockefeller was a very peculiar fellow. He was quite a nice man. And I think, I feel all things being equal, he would have been as liberal as anybody. But he had, you know, he was part of a great big financial concern, and he was responsible for what happened with it, so he had to, I think, go through, go along with this claim that the mural was interfering with the renting of Rockefeller Center.

PAM MEECHUM: I did read a letter from him recently, in an archive, that suggested that Rivera had misrepresented the project.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: From Nelson.

PAM MEECHUM: Yeah, yeah.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, I think, I think that he believed that he had. I think that he believed that he had. I honestly don't think that Nelson, Nelson Rockefeller was a very sweet guy but he was a bit, he was a part of this family and a part of that enormous Rockefeller holdings, but once Ben and I had lunch with Nelson, and so I, having no compunction about saying whatever I want to say, I said to him, "You know, Mr. Rockefeller," I don't know whether I called him that or his first name, but I said, "You know there's still wonderful, wonderful puzzlement about what really happened to the mural. Was it removed, was it covered over or what?" And his answer was [Shahn must make a gesture of some sort, then laughs]

PAM MEECHUM: [laughs]

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: So that was it. But he was nice, you know. He always thanked Ben for everything that, for every picture that the Modern Museum bought, and things of that sort. He was a gracious man. I liked him. I thought even when he ran for the presidency, I thought that had he been able to be free of the people that so controlled him that he would have been a very liberal, I believe he would have been a liberal president.

PAM MEECHUM: Probably. I've seen quite a lot of Ben Shahn's work at MOMA. And in fact they have quite a large holding of his. And have had major exhibitions there...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, I think they have twenty paintings, not to mention drawings, I don't know how many drawings they have.

PAM MEECHUM: In fact throughout this period, right up until at least the early '60s I would say, they...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, you know...

PAM MEECHUM: ...were very supportive.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Indeed they were, indeed they were. But after he died and they put up..., they had _____ room and put up a show of Ben's work. That's the last show that they did, that I know of.

PAM MEECHUM: This was '69.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: That was '69, yeah.

PAM MEECHUM: Hmm.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yeah. It may have been as late '70. Because you know, that's right, Ben died early in the year, so I think it was still '69 when they put that..., and they left it up, I don't know how long, for months.

PAM MEECHUM: Who was that curated by? Can you remember? Was Sotheby still involved in that?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I would guess if Rene was still alive, I would guess it would be. Now Monroe Wheeler adored Ben and would have done anything for him. They remained friends long after, after, you know things had gotten cooled down a bit. But Rene D'Harnoncourt was a great friend of Ben's. And Andrew Ritchie was, Andrew was really becoming infatuated with abstract art and he had been friends with Ben and I think he cooled toward Ben a lot. And...

PAM MEECHUM: Can you date this? At what point was this? In the late '50's early '60's?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, no, that would have been...

PAM MEECHUM: Or was it later?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: That would have been middle or late '60's, just before Ben died, that. Ben really didn't live to see his name dragged down the way it was later, after his death. He was, in the first place he didn't care very much. But in the second place, he was really very much touted and very much, you know people were devoted to him. For his funeral, you know, this house was just absolutely packed with people after his death.

PAM MEECHUM: I've read the reviews for the 1954 biennial when he went with de Kooning...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes.

PAM MEECHUM: ...as the two painters,

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: You told me that.

PAM MEECHUM: ...and the reviews were outstanding, from across Europe.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: That, I would, that, I would, if you have any copies of them, I certainly would like to have them.

PAM MEECHUM: Um hmm.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh! There is a man you ought to know. His name is Dr. Steven B.

Toller, he's a medical doctor, and he became interested in Ben's work. And he started doing a little archive. And the little archive got bigger and bigger and bigger. And he has a list of everything that Ben ever wrote, everything that's ever been written about him, if he has any contact with it, and then he told me that he is going to try and find the pictures and list where that are, because I had a corps of people looking for things when I did the big Ben Shahn book. And he wants to be in contact with any... So, you know what? This year he's given up his medical practice and he is devoting himself completely to that archive.

PAM MEECHUM: Oh, my...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Can you imagine?

PAM MEECHUM: Can we just go back to the thirties and forties and bringing up children? You worked as an artist and a writer in that period, but then you started, you had a family. It must have been quite a difficult period to bring a family up in...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: It was...

PAM MEECHUM: Especially with a husband who's an artist as well.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, I think actually, I think it's good for artists to be married to artists. You see, I wasn't ambitious to have a big name, I like to paint and I like to draw and I wouldn't, you know, I wasn't, I didn't have the ambition for headlines and things of that sort. And was very happy about all of the glamour that was attracted to Ben. So often we would have, we'd have awful fights about pieces of work. I would have to tell him "I know you are a better artist than I am, but I'm making this one!" I'm making this drawing and so on and so on, but some of it was jolly, and we had some very fierce fights about the children and so on, because Ben's idea of bringing up children was still pretty European. And my idea of bringing up children, of course was the way I was brought up, so I was being awfully nice to them! [laughs] So, but that was a main source of conflict, that we did have conflict on that score.

PAM MEECHUM: But you actually worked together as well didn't you? Because you both submitted designs for the Bronx mural?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes we... The first mural that I worked with, in the first place in Special Skills, Ben was the head of the artists group in Washington, so I did all kinds of drawings having to do, you know, with the projects that they were doing in Special Skills, and I don't know where they are now. But I was doing a kind of cartooning which I find rather insufferable right now. But then, let's see, then for the Office of War Information, I started, I'm trying to remember, the succession of things, there was one point though, bringing up what you asked about the difficulty in bringing up children, I was doing drawings, mostly for myself, writing a couple of kids books. I think that I never even tried to publish those, but I wrote them and illustrated them, when Johnnie and Susie were little, and then when Abbey, then after Abbey was born, I really, she was, I really began to feel cut off from civilization. And I wrote to Harper's magazine, in my own name not Ben's, and told them that I liked the drawings that they made, and I'd like to make drawings for them if that was agreeable to them. I got a delightful letter from Russell Lynes who was the editor of Harper's saying that he was glad that Harper's was a magazine to which I could subscribe, and would I bring in drawings, which I did. And he said, "I'd like to give you a story and if I like the drawings, I'll take them, and if I don't, I won't, is that all right with you?" And I said, "That's fine." So I made eight drawings, all of which they used, and from that time on I had regular employment with Harper's. So after I started working for Harper's, then The Scientific American called me and then Fortune called

me, so I had three steady magazines, and I loved to draw. And I did this, I always made a drawing as though it were a painting, I didn't do it in the commercial..., with a sense of the money involved at all. And the editors seemed to like that very much, so that I really enjoyed my career as an illustrator.

PAM MEECHUM: And as an illustrator, you presumably found that easier to fit in around a family life.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, I had some, I'm not a very orderly person, but I would get the children up and get them to school, and be out to the studio by 9:30. In fact, not out at the studio in those days, that was before I had a studio upstairs even. Oh, I'll tell you what I did. We slept in the front bedroom, and I had my drawing table in the front bedroom, and I would take the things, I would make the bed and take the things off the drawing table, put them on the bed. Work on the drawing table. When night came I would take them off them bed and put them back on the drawing table. Then we built this addition here and then I decided I would build a studio and I did. And, actually the first studio, I did two books in this thing, which I now use as sort of, as a cabinet, a closet, and I found it very satisfactory because by this time I knew how to get the kids to school and things were working out very well. And Ben was working and so on and so and it was all right.

PAM MEECHUM: And by that time you'd move to what was then Jersey Homesteads.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, no we were already, we moved here and added, in...

PAM MEECHUM: '39.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: In '39, yes.

PAM MEECHUM: Could you talk a little bit, do you think, about the formation about what's now Roosevelt...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes I could. I just want to be clear about one thing. About these dates. You know I'm very bad about dates, except that I just wanted you to know that I read that headline that I saw in the newspaper about "The Dream Town Goes Bust." That was when we were working with the Bronx mural and living in New York, and that must have been...

PAM MEECHUM: '37? No, '38.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: It must have been '38, yes.

PAM MEECHUM: The time went fairly quickly, it was started in '37 wasn't it?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And so then, we had come out here. And here as I told you for a while it was quite grim, because I really had no communication with anybody, and Ben was commuting, he was leaving at 6 am in the morning to go to, he was working with The Office of War Information in those days and...

PAM MEECHUM: But when you arrived the first time, you arrived with Ben to work on the mural in the school.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, yes. First when Alfred Kesner brought us to this town that he was still building. Yes, that was the first arrival here, and then of course we came, then we came to do the mural, then we had to leave, and then when I saw that advertisement then we did come out, and after that stayed here. Then in 1940 we moved to Washington again and took the kids with us, but now, this isn't answering your questions.

PAM MEECHUM: [Laughs] Well.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: What is it you wanted me to tell you? I forget.

PAM MEECHUM: Just about the formation of the town to start with. The formation of the Jersey Homesteads.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, yes.

PAM MEECHUM: Because you actually did come out...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Do you want me to repeat what I said to you?

PAM MEECHUM: Please, would you mind?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: It's such a... I love this story. It's a delightful story. There's a group of garment workers, very highly skilled, expert in their trade, in New York. And they faced the kind of situation in which there would be a period of work and then there would be an off period when they weren't even making money and they were living in New York in a pretty slummy area. And so they dreamed of a factory that would be in the country side and that they would all have houses in the country side. And during that period of off work, they could be gardening and so on and so forth. This is a crazy dream obviously. And so they got so serious about their dream that they raised five hundred dollars each. I don't know how many, there must have been twelve or fifteen families involved in that. The daughter of one of them still lives here, and probably more. But, so they saved that money, and they came to know Mr. Benjamin Brown who had been an organizer of cooperative projects and they told him what their dream was. And now Mr. Brown, he really is a wonderful man but he took them to, he took a delegation of them to Washington to meet Harold Aikers, who was the secretary of the Interior. And Aikers just absolutely loved it. He was a funny, imaginative man anyway, he just loved the idea, and he took it over. And started it. Now, as I told you the first two architects who were hired were not kept. The first one as I told you wanted to build ten topped arc houses? Tom Himen, I think his name was. And the second one was called The Duke, I think that was his name, and he made off with the millions of money of stuff that he ordered, I guess for another project of his. Anyway, so by this time, Aikers had had enough of Roosevelt of the Jersey Homesteads and he Rexford Tugwell had been brought down by Dr. Stryker, had been brought down from Columbia to head the Resettlement Project.

PAM MEECHUM: Um. Hmm.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And Tugwell was a great theorist and he designed one after another of these communities, all of which are extremely interesting. And...

PAM MEECHUM: But this one's unique isn't it?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: This one is unique. Well, they were all in their certain sense, unique. But, so he knew Alfred Kesner, who was a Bauhaus architect, German, thick accent, didn't know this country at all. And he said to Kesner, "You wanted to build a town?" and he said, well he didn't say it that way. I think he said, "Would you like to build this town?" He said the things that had happened and that there was so much money left, what can you do with that amount of money? And Kesner began to design the town and he said he would not ordinarily have made it of cinder block, but it was the cheapest material. The town is made of cinder block. But it was very handsomely designed.

PAM MEECHUM: I think so, yeah.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And of course when I first saw the houses, you know, with ceiling to floor windows and parquet floors and all contemporary plumbing! In those days absolutely contemporary. And I just wanted to move in right away but we weren't able to because we were not garment workers.

PAM MEECHUM: It must have been quite a change from Brooklyn though, for most of these garment workers when they came out here.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, indeed it was. It was not only a change, not only Brooklyn but lower Manhattan, you know Division St. and so on. And they really didn't know what to make of these houses. They did not like the designs at all, and they would fill in the lower parts of the windows with bricks. It was not, so we laughed about it, first we regretted.... And even Kesner laughed about it, he didn't care. Well, once the place was built...

TAPE OFF/ON

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: It is very interesting in that respect. Now I do forget what on earth we were talking about.

PAM MEECHUM: Could we go back to the changes that people were making in the houses?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I think so. Yes. I said that people who came here were quite unfamiliar with this kind of architecture. And I must say, however, that the people who came here were not ignorant, they were rather cultured. They had all read a great deal. They knew music very well, almost all of them, and if you could speak Yiddish or if you could speak, you know, Russian or Polish you might have been able, one might have been able to have a good conversation. But I really, since Ben was away so much of the time, I was, I found it very grim and that's why I wrote to Harper's to tell them I'd like to work for them and then from that time on, I was really, you know, I had a very easy nice kind of career, I enjoyed it very much.

PAM MEECHUM: The town was built as a Utopian project, in fact wasn't it?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: The town, it was called Utopian, not by the people who, not by anyone who was directly connected with it. But it inevitably, you know, acquired that title from you know, news people who knew the name of Utopia and so on and so forth. It had no Thomas Moore principles. [laughs] I don't know just what to tell you about Roosevelt, except that I think that if it were a project in itself, it's an exceedingly interesting one because it was founded upon, the first principles that I told you, that these people wanted this out of the city factory and that kind of life. Then the injection of a German, very sophisticated architect. Then the way it evolved as a community became very interesting because there was so much rapport among people who were here, and then of course there was a great deal of dreadful fighting. But even so, there was a culture that developed here. The stories were quite wonderful. A few people have collected early funny stories, that you know, were born in this town. Then other generations came along and outside people drifted in a few of them, but the people who were attracted to this town, were attracted to it for reasons that are pretty good reasons. People who wanted to be alone, people who wanted to do their own work, people who were interested, first in Ben and then in the other artists that came here. And then the musicians, and then there were poets here, we have a dramatist or two, and their children were born here sometimes or came here, grew up went away and have come back. Johnnie came back, Jonathan Margolas just came back, and one after

another, it's very interesting, we had the most amazing collection of young lawyers, physicists and various, and writers and artists, who have, who come, who've left and come back. And I think that if Kesner were alive and could see what has happened to his town he would be rather pleased.

PAM MEECHUM: Oh, good.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Because he wouldn't have minded the changes. I remember when we were talking about the, one of the other projects was Morgantown, West Virginia, and that was done in a, sort of a country house, charming country cottage style. It was Mrs. Roosevelt's favorite project, and I remember Alfred saying, "Oh, you know, who cares what the design is like so long as it is comfortable to live in. Which was really his attitude.

PAM MEECHUM: He had a famous assistant I understand.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, yes, he had a very famous assistant named Louis Kahn! I have, I have sort of a one man campaign to protect Kesner from the fame of Louis Kahn. Because Kesner did design the town, and there was such an enormous effort to attribute this town to Louis Kahn. The school, in two or three things that I read the school has been attributed to him, but I remember Kesner saying to Ben, oh, you know, "I will design the library with a glass wall so that it will look onto the mural." You know, and things of that sort and it's amazing how a famous name will accumulate all kinds of things.

PAM MEECHUM: You came here originally then to work on the mural in the school.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes. Yes that's right.

PAM MEECHUM: You worked as Ben's assistant.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes, I did.

PAM MEECHUM: And the mural itself has a kind of Utopian end to it, doesn't it? If you could just take us through the beginning to the end...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes.

PAM MEECHUM: ...of the mural, reading it from left to right.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, that's rather a big order, but I suppose I can! [laughs]

PAM MEECHUM: Could you please?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: It was based upon, in this sense it's rather simple, it was based upon the experience of the people who were going to live here, and who had already begun to settle, and also who founded the town. And it begins with home work in an Old Country, let's say either Poland, probably, or Russia. People sitting on the floor in the dark doing hand sewing, and then there are two coffins reminiscent of the pogroms that they've endured. And then there is a..., there is a bridge, and the bridge had many people walking across the bridge and that symbolizes the immigration into this country, I believe. And on the bridge are not only people of all sorts, but Einstein, and Ben's mother and he put in one artist, he put in Raphael Soyer. And Steinbeck is back in the crowd somewhere. It's a motley crowd, but with this people scattered about in them because the thing that Ben wanted to say with that was that the immigrants did not just come to live on the wealth of

the country, but they'd brought a great deal with them. And that was a nice point. And then there is, to the left there is a waiting room at Ellis Island. And then the next scene is a park with people sleeping in the park. Ben said when they were first in a slum, you know in a, I don't know what kind of a high rise thing, not a high rise, some kind of a slum building in Brooklyn, was that it? Yeah, it was so hot that at night they would go out and sleep in the park. And then there is a long line of people working in a factory, that would have been a contemporary factory in those days, with machines and so on and so forth. But, you know, you get the sense of pretty arduous labor. One person right after the other. And there is a scene also of home work. Because that was a way of exploiting those new immigrants, to give them piece work so that they would be paid less. And there's that, and then there is a line of people waiting for a paycheck. And people and pressers with the tools that they would have used before this community was founded. And then, let me see, and then um, oh, in the middle, of that scene, there is a group of people which are characteristic Roosevelt dwellers in those days. They're of course Jersey Homesteads dwellers, so he used some of the local people, including the mayor, who has a funny face. And then he had a labor leader who is the central figure of the entire mural and he said to me, "I tried my damndest not to make it look like John L. Lewis." But it came out looking so much like him that everybody thinks it is. Which it is I guess. And in this panel there is a corner of the triangle building which was the scene of the famous Shirtwaist factory fire, that you know about, I'm sure. In which I think a hundred and twenty-five women were burned to death because the boss had locked the doors in order to keep the union organizers out of the building. So that to Ben was an important point. Then beyond that scene, with the labor leader being the center, in the group down below, there was a...the successive doorways of the ILGWU, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Of the successive doors from a very simple one in the form of a house to a rather elaborate one, which was the contemporary quarters at the time that Ben painted the mural. And then above that there is a very interesting scene of people sitting at desk and a picture of Goffers on the wall. Goffers was the first labor organizer to have introduced educ..., worker education, labor education to laborers. And so this classroom, Ben considered that a very important point in the mural. Then from then, from this period, from that point where there is the labor teaching and so on, the next is a figure of Tugwell himself and along a structural thing, which might have suggested the beginning of the factory, but it's a suggestion of building, and Tugwell has his back to you, but that's the figure, and other workmen digging up. And also beside the structural thing there is a scene of an orchard with people picking apples and so on and so forth, and that gives the sense of having moved to the, labor, or industry having moved to the country side and so on. And then above that there is a scene of a city development, the way they were being built in those days with one house right on top of another and everyone exactly like and so on. And so that you see sort of through an archway and then down below that scene is a scene of, I think there were six men sitting in chairs, and the architect with his back to the audience and a map of Jersey Homesteads in blue and the people in this row of people, are in this row, the people sitting at the table, are Haywood Bloom, who was a great supporter of this project and then there's Sidney Hillman and Dubinkski and Robert Wagner who was the originator of the Labor Relations Act and then one other person who is the head, I think of the hatters union, and of course, there is a picture of Roosevelt on the wall, there. Did you see the mural yet?

PAM MEECHUM: Yes, I have.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: So, now, I think I've covered the territory pretty well.

PAM MEECHUM: I was pleased when I went to see it a few weeks ago to find that the children in school were still writing, working and drawing, not just from the mural but also from the head of Roosevelt which you son Jonathan did.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes, yes that. Oh, did you see that?

PAM MEECHUM: Yes, I saw the drawings.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I loved it that those..., They were third grade children. And they did not, nobody told them how to do those. Every one of those little paintings was different. And I just love them! I thought they were simply great.

PAM MEECHUM: So that mural, in fact which was a focal point for the community still serves that function.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes.

PAM MEECHUM: In some senses.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, I think so. I think so.

PAM MEECHUM: It was a true fresco wasn't it?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, yes.

PAM MEECHUM: And you worked on the figure of Tugwell.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes.

PAM MEECHUM: And various other...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes, you're right.

PAM MEECHUM: Why don't you tell me about them?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, that was the only figure that I did, but I did whatever Ben told me to otherwise.

PAM MEECHUM: But it had problems with being attached to the wall so I understand recently it's been taken off.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, it didn't have any problems of being attached to the wall, what happened was, that the building was new and the building began to settle. The building was parting the wall, I think the mural was parting the wall, and you know the, the way it's built is this, first the lathe which is behind any plastered wall, the lathe and then on top of the lathe is what you call a brown coat, it's very rough brown plaster, and then over that there's what is known as the rough coat, that is snow white plaster, and that's fifty feet of this snow white plaster. And so you mix the..., you do the drawing in black and white on this entire, black and white, on that white plaster and then you have a tracing of that drawing on the kraft paper, and with a perforating knife, a perforating wheel, you go through your drawing on kraft paper, so that the whole drawing is perforating so that as, each day you the finished coat is what's called the entonico, in other words, the color, and you do as much as you can finish in one day because as it begins to dry out, you have to stop working. So you plaster the entonico and trowel it until it is into the right position, the right texture, and then you dropped the kraft paper with the perforations on it and just tap in with blue chalk, tap the part that you're going to do that day, and you work, so you work really from the two things you had, you had your first mock up that you made of the mural, and then you work on what you have done with your chalk. And it's, so it's really a beautiful process, but it is part of the building it's literally part of it. So that is why you know, why it was very difficult to remove it and when the building began to

settle, the wall cracked and the cracks went in the mural, it really is surprising that it didn't crack more than it did, because the building, you know buildings usually will have settled for a while before any kind of fresco is put on them.

PAM MEECHUM: So it's recently been taken off the wall, so...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: After Ben died a lot of money was raised and this fine Italian restorer Anonfromalli, Atalrino Anonfromalli, came over, with a crew, and they took off, they took the fresco off the wall by a method called strappado that was invented in the thirteenth century. And it's amazing that they can still remove that fresco coat from the coat beneath it.

PAM MEECHUM: Extraordinary.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: It's unbelievable, that they can...

PAM MEECHUM: It's a large mural, not a small piece to take away.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes, well when they took it off the wall they took off the sinopia, which, the big drawing in black and white is called the sinopia. They took that off too. The entonica they rolled in a great big drum, and it was attached to the paper with which they took it off. A very tricky business. And they rolled it onto a drum and took it to Italy. The..., the sin..., I'm getting tired. The sinopia they took off in three pieces and that's in storage in Maryland and it's a fantastically beautiful thing. It's just black on white. And two or three people have wanted to use it, well there was a new library built and they had all their measurements made and so on and so forth and the architect said that this thing which is that thick, was too heavy for the wall, that they couldn't... And, sometime, I think it is in storage in Maryland, I'm not sure. I tried so hard to keep in touch with it but it's very hard to do.

PAM MEECHUM: The links with Italy, have been quite strong, haven't they, for your family?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes, very much so.

PAM MEECHUM: I remember the, reading the reviews of the biennial, that people were not surprised to find that Ben's work was so popular in Italy because it had such strong links stylistically and in terms of subject matter.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I think so. And Ben's own, Ben had absolute affection for, I have too, I adore Italy and I adore Italians. I like Italians you know, good, bad or indifferent. But we both of us simply enjoyed it, we used to go sometimes twice a year. In one instance, our friend Bruno Curoseo... We were going to go through Sicily, and our friend Bruno Corusoe who's an Italian artist said that he would guide us, and I was driving. We'd gotten a Volkswagen and we were driving through Sicily and we stopped one day at noon in a little restaurant, and Bruno had warned us, this is dangerous territory, this is where Juliano's people operate and that's where he comes from. I think we were in Al Camo. And so we were in this restaurant and six Italian men came in and they sat down at the table next to us and took off their hats and put them under the chairs like that. And so Bruno said, now don't look, please don't look, they're talking about us. He said, Bernarda, Ben and I will go over and pay the cashier and we will, just all of us walk out quietly, don't pay any attention to them or anything. And you know, he was terrified because... But as we passed these six Italian men I said, "Bon journo Seniors," and they all got up and bowed and said, "Bon jurno Senora" and Bruno was frightened. But it was, you just have that sense of affection for Italians. I don't know whether other people have it or not, but I do have it. Isn't that strange?

PAM MEECHUM: But also in the work, there's been, Ben's work has been more allied in fact to the Italian model...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, indeed it has.

PAM MEECHUM: ...than the French model.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I think so. I think so. For instance things like, Italian landscape is one of his most loved painting, and he's done a great deal that, you know, reverberates from Italy. And of course his love of Italian art, my god. He's you know, he just, some of the cathedrals and so on, he just loved it. I remember when we first went to Montriali, I could hardly get Ben out, and the most wonderful thing happened. Have you ever been in Motnriali?

PAM MEECHUM: No.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well it's just glorious, it's all mosaics and gold and brilliant colors and so on. And we went there during a mass or I don't know whether it was a mass or what kind of a thing it was, but there were priests behind this little gate thing that they have. And the church was full of people. There were two people there with a little girl, she was about so high, and the music, the music just fills you, and this little girl opened the gate where the priests were doing the service and she began dancing and throwing her arms around like this and it was just incredible. She was dancing to the music. And Ben said to me, "That's religion!" And so he just loved it. But we would find things like that, but we both of us, we both come from just different parts of the world and different kinds of backgrounds and so on, but mutually just love Italy and love Italians.

PAM MEECHUM: The other country that seems to come up most often in my readings around this period is Japan.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes, well when we first went to Japan, Ben said, you see Ben had gone to Paris when he was young, quite young, and then he lived there and so on and so forth. And when we first went to Kyoto Ben said, "This is Paris of the days when I first went there." And he loved Kyoto. And, but, the Japanese, I must say that I love and admire the Japanese myself. They are entirely different people. You don't have that sense of flesh and blood warmth that you have in Italy, but the elegance of the Japanese and the wonderful art and the brilliance of their minds and you know, everywhere you look you'll see some inventive thing that is, I don't know whether you've been in Japan or...

PAM MEECHUM: No. No unfortunately not. No. But I do know the Lucky Dragon Series. And saw, heard somewhere that Ben thought that this was one of his best pieces of work or best series of work.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, I think...

PAM MEECHUM: Which is quite late isn't it?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes, to me I think that, I believe he considered it more or less his crowning work in a certain sense. Of course, Sacco and Vanzetti, he is very much better known for that, but he said some things in the course of doing the Lucky Dragon paintings that I found very significant. He said there is no people in the world that have the right to destroy any part of the earth, because he said the earth really belongs to the human race, and that it is a crime against humanity no matter what the purpose of it is to make any part of the earth unlivable. I agreed with him, I thought that he was right about that, but I think that was the sentiment that was behind the

Lucky Dragon pictures. But he did first the illustrations, You've seen the illustrations.

PAM MEECHUM: Yes.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Then he did the paintings, then I think his name was Richard Hudson, did a book in which he used the paintings of that. But I, Ben felt very, what I'd say, felt very fulfilled for having done The Lucky Dragon Series because he was deeply disturbed about the atom, the whole progress of atomic energy. He felt that in the hands of people who have no cultural depth, who have no depth of feeling so that they would realize the enormity of what they're doing, that this thing could just, you know, demolish populations everywhere, which I think it may do, I don't know.

PAM MEECHUM: The Lucky Dragon Series was in response to Bikini.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes, basically to Bikini, sure.

TAPE ON/OFF

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I'll just say that over again. I think there were two or three factors that entered into the rise of Abstract Expressionism in this country. It was a period in which almost all artists managed to spend some time in France. Or, France or Italy or Germany, but mainly because of Nazism not very many went to Germany at that period. But France, of course, had enormous influence and art in France, all the "isms" were going in many, many directions and complete abstraction, pure non objective art was one of the big issues and no artist can live in that kind of an environment without being excited by it. So that there was a very, very genuine interest in how much you could do with just, how much you could do with color, texture, form and motion. And you know so things would go toward _____ or would go toward various other forms of abstract art. And so that was very genuine and so it came back to this country with the artists and of course with all the notoriety and big shows and so on. And I think every artist was touched by it in some direction or another. So the..., at the same time Abstract Expressionist, I mean, Social Realism had become a very big thing because of the Depression and it was almost, it was a trend, there was some very, very genuine and sincere Socialism and there was a lot of Socialism, Social Realism that was because that was what people were doing, you know, the same is true with abstract art too. I mean those things happened and artists, some of them, some of them are devoted to their own personalities, their own feeling about art and others are devoted to be successful as an artist and they want to do that which is in the news and that which is in people's minds. So I think that, so there was a very genuine interest in Abstract Expressionism, no doubt about it, and it's very interesting, no reason why not, it was extremely interesting movement. And then, the first attacks against art, oddly enough were against Abstract Expressionism. You know about Dondero doing a toe dance down the aisle and considering Abstract Expressionism a plot against American Art, American government.

PAM MEECHUM: Yep.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: But then it came to be that Social Realism was also, tended to attack government tactics and was uncomfortable for the powers that be, the government. And now I'm analyzing as I go along, but then the artists who were protesting about many, many things that they objected to, tended to be Social Realists, who tend to be Socialists and there was a lot of Communism around, there was a lot of Socialism around and a little bit of Reactionaryism around too, and now I think that in addition to the genuine interest in abstract art there was a..., I think that maybe that there was a move on the part of the secret police, the secret police in the guise of the

CIA, the guise of FBI and so on and so forth to interfere in what was going in the museum. Now I don't want to emphasize that over much, because there was another thing that happened, and that is that there were, there were these organizations, not unlike some of these Christian things that, I hate to compare them, that isn't fair, but in the same direction as these organizations that are being formed today. There was something called Red Networks and they really, they were very powerful because they persuaded the advertisers to withdraw their advertising from various magazines, from various companies and so on and even their... And even persuaded wealthy people to use their influence in the museums to discourage the artists who were doing, who were doing Social Realist work. Particularly Ben, because Ben was very much the target of that kind of thing. Philip Evergood was and a few other people. So these things all work together, but I can sort of clinch this with an incident. The Democratic, I don't know what year it is, but if you would look up whenever the Democratic National Convention was in Philadelphia, that would have been the year that this happened. Ben was asked by CBERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN, his friend Bill Golden, to make a drawing, celebrate general, the double page for the New York Times announcing the coming of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. And Ben made a great big drawing of television aerals. And took it in and it was accepted and then we forgot all about. We were here and the telephone call came from Bill Golden of CBERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN saying "Ben, I have a problem, can you come into town?" And Ben and I both went in and we had lunch with Bill, and he said this terrible thing has happened that the red networks had written to CBERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN and warned them, "If you use the work of Ben Shahn, this advertiser will withdraw, that advertiser will withdraw, this advertiser will withdraw and so on and so forth. So Bill said I've been told that I cannot use, I cannot use this drawing of yours for this Democratic National Convention. And Ben was pretty shocked. Not as much as I was, oddly enough. I was furious because..., so Bill said, he said, "You know Ben, I could resign for this thing," but he said, " I think I can do more good staying where I am than I could by resigning." He didn't resign, he not only didn't resign, but he got another artist to copy Ben's drawing. Which I thought was absolutely unforgivable, I never forgave him for it. Ben did forgive him, Ben liked him and forgave him, but I thought that was an unforgivable thing. But the Red Networks group, that's how they were working. And they were successful, and I think that they threatened the museums, I think they threatened, and then besides that, they had the cooperation of the few critics who really hated, who really honestly hated Ben and so all these things worked together, but I...

PAM MEECHUM: There were some people who remained loyal, weren't they? Sotheby seems to have...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, yes indeed. Well one of the most wonderful things happened. The week after when Leo Lionni, who was the art editor of Fortune Magazine, which in those days was the most important magazine in the country, when Leo heard what Bill had done, he called Ben and said, "Will you please make the next cover for Fortune Magazine." Because he wanted to advertise that he was using Ben. That's the difference between two people. But and I felt very sorry for Bill Golden, I couldn't believe that he would have done anything like that. But he yielded to it, and people do yield when they are threatened. Especially if they are threatened in their pocketbook apparently. But then I think that with that kind of backing, people who are kind of nincompoops, as I think that Ken Wheedler was, I don't feel that way about some of the other critics, but they really exploited, exploited that. They loved to have that happen. Now, I may be wrong about it but I think that I'm in the right direction of what happened because Ben's work dropped like that. Soon after his death. While he was still alive he never really felt it himself, felt the drop. I did, but, but it was easy to know. The other thing is that Ben himself was, like Johnnie, very humorous had a very sharp tongue and he, he was sometimes very devastating with people. And that didn't do him any good in a case like that. But the people who abandoned him were the people who shouldn't have. Now in

the Modern Museum, Rene never, never did, Monroe Wheeler never abandoned Ben, and a couple of other people. I think Alfred, Alfred was so religiously correct, I think he didn't want to, but he was genuinely interested in non-objective art, but I don't know I think he was a little weak, I really don't know. But with Dorothy Miller, Dorothy really never liked Ben's work so with her, it didn't really make a difference but Alfred actually had liked Ben's work very much. But it just happened, but I think one could see those forces working, but the big thing was the Red Networks, there's no doubt about it, and how they worked. And I don't think that they're, I think that they are working the same way today through a different type of organization.

PAM MEECHUM: Clem Greenberg's criticisms of Ben's work, ostensibly, at any rate were on aesthetic grounds weren't they?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, yes, on aesthetic grounds indeed, but then I have one, one piece of his in which he said regretfully that..., he told about certain scenes, and he objected to the content of them. And he said, "The very people...", he could not understand that the very people who should be outraged by the content of Ben's work have it hanging on their walls." [laughs]

PAM MEECHUM: [laughs] No.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: So that's true. Now Hilton Kramer I think didn't like Ben's work, but he is the, he is a dedicated anti-social person, but he has taste in art at least, and I kind of like Hilton Kramer. I don't think he's a totally bad guy. I think Greenberg is. And as for Tom Hess, he's inexcusable because he had been such a really sycophant about Ben at first, and some other people too, but um...

PAM MEECHUM: How did you feel personally about Abstract Expressionist work as it was being done?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well I love a lot of it. You mean how did I... When I was in art school, I started out being an abstract artist. Not abstract, I'm sorry, but kind of Modernist, and then I, I just loved the figure so I became a different..., but I myself, like a great deal of abstract work, it depends on who does it, and I like Rothko very much, and I love Jackson Pollock. And I don't like de Kooning. I liked his early work. And Franz Kline I think is a wonderful painter. You know his work?

PAM MEECHUM: Yes, oh, yes.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: And Soulange and if you want European artists Malevich, I never, I thought that was more a trick, I couldn't, I haven't been able to relate to that. Do you know Malevich's work?

PAM MEECHUM: Oh, yes.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I'm trying to think of the most extreme abstractionists. But some are good and some are not, it just depends on, on what they do with it.

PAM MEECHUM: Some of these abstract artists actually show a great deal in common with Ben Shahn's work in...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, yes.

PAM MEECHUM: ...the sense of subject matter.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, Ben himself said, I'm sure you must have read that, he said that all art is abstract and he said it is a matter of degree, and his work had, actually if you look at his work, it's much more pattern than it is realist, the content, the meaning of it is realist but the actual impact of pattern in the work is closer in a way to abstract art than it is to realist work.

PAM MEECHUM: The charge against it in fact by people like Greenberg was that it was merely illustrative, and derivative. The...

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I didn't know that they thought it was derivative. I know, I remember one thing...

PAM MEECHUM: This is out... That's a Greenberg review of the '54 exhibition in Venice.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I probably didn't even read it. But I was going to... Oh, say one thing, what was it? I forget. I don't know I'm too tired today, I'm sorry.

TAPE OFF/ON

PAM MEECHUM: Perhaps I could ask you what Ben's attitude was towards abstract art in that period.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: The first thing I would tell is that when he was in the company of people who attacked abstract art violently, he was a defender, a very vociferous defender. That's one thing. Now, the other thing is that Ben often had the reputation of being anti-abstract art, which is rather interesting, because that would have been a deduction, an assumption, on the part of people that saw his work and assumed that because his work was so figurative that he must hate abstract art and so they would speak and work on that assumption. Which wasn't right. He disliked it, he disliked any art that he felt was false. That he felt was trying to be in the trend and so on and so forth. And he sometimes, I remember that he had a very sad falling out with Ad Reinhardt because Ad Reinhardt had been so effective as a content artist. And Ben just sheer regretted that he had become what he did. Now Ad Reinhardt is a good person to talk about. Ben did not like Ad Reinhardt's work. He's another artist whom I did like very much. And I felt, well I won't tell you what I felt, I'll tell you what Ben felt. He felt that abstract art can be a wonderful, wonderful kind of invention. That it had, that everything that it should and does and did explore everything that can happen with color, with texture, with form and so on and so forth. With emotion particularly. But then, he said, after you've done all that, what have you said about yourself, about anything. And he felt that it lacked the human quality which he felt was essential to art. That would have been his objection to it, but he defended it as much as he criticized it. But he never criticized it as such. He had this philosophy which he voiced more than once, that any artist, that in any field, in any kind of art, can be great art. It depends on the artist himself. And I think he was right about that. And he didn't like Rothko, he didn't like, he didn't like Ad Reinhardt, because he felt that Ad Reinhardt had abandoned something that he was capable of doing very well. The thing that Ben didn't understand about Ad Reinhardt was that he was a person of such intensity, of such tight emotions, that, you know, he was on the verge of exploding a lot of the time. And, you know He and Ben once had a frightful fight at, not a physical fight, but verbal, at a New Year's party at someone's house. C.B. Penelisis' house. And for years, you know, if anybody said anything about Ben, Ad had something bad to say about it and vice versa. And Ben once, Ad came to Skowhegan, and we were there, it was actually not a lecture? There was a reunion. We drove around together, we were friends again and Ben, this was just heartbreaking. And Ben and Ad became old friends again, and he died the next week. We felt so terrible about it. But, you know, he was a person who was just, I don't know, was on the verge of a nervous breakdown all the time, like that. I may be wrong, but that's the way

he affects me. And he was a very lovable person too.

PAM MEECHUM: People talk about Ben's later work in terms of a more personal content.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Whose?

PAM MEECHUM: Ben's work. About it being more personal in content than his earlier work like the Sacco and Vanzetti series.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Well, every artist, every artist goes through, you know, changes. I think, let me see. I think of the Sacco and Vanzetti work as being very personal. Very personal. But the content of Ben's work changed. I'd say for one thing the whole period of Roosevelt, the Roosevelt reforms in which he was so active and in which he took so great a part, I think he felt a little bit of pressure off the human race, not knowing how it was going to go from that time on because it may be going back again in that way. No I think he felt that he had actually accomplished something. I remember one thing that he said, when he was first a photographer, he photographed because he loved to look at people and he loved to look at people and look at things, buildings, everything. And that was his attitude all the way through the south. But after the first trip he said "You know something? I never thought..." He said, "I had sometimes thought of painting as being possibly a weapon," but he said, "You know that photography is really a political thing." That's it's effective politically and so he really began to think of his photographs as having a political, a definite political effect, and I think they did.

PAM MEECHUM: Because they can reach a wide audience?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Because they reached any audience, because of what they were. Especially because they reached the Congress of the United States. And they did. You know, I think, I don't suppose any bills could be attributed to the photographic project, but the influence of them, people saw, people who didn't want to know about poverty, saw how people were living. Have you ever, have you seen the pictures...

PAM MEECHUM: Yes. Yes I have. I've seen a lot of them. Yes. I thought some of the text as well was quite interesting, when text is put with the photographs.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: I think so too.

PAM MEECHUM: They do change dramatically when a different text is put with them.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Yes. But we just, we saw things that we wouldn't have believed, even I who, in America, I think of Americans as being generally pretty prosperous, not wealthy but very prosperous people, but I remember but we came on, in, I don't know where we were, in Arkansas, I guess. We came on this kind of a cottage, but it was made of poles, just forced together...

TAPE OFF/ON

PAM MEECHUM: Ok?

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: We would, it may have been in the Ozark mountains, I don't know where, but it was a very mountainous area. And this house was made, you know, of poles that people had picked up in different places, they weren't matched in any way and there were branches of trees and all kinds of things. Pieces of tin and so on. And this was a house, and I remember there

was a wash pail there and there was a line of rope with some clothes hanging on it. And there was a young woman, and I have never seen anyone in such rags in all my life. She had two little children, and they were literally in tatters. And, you know, you felt as though you ought to stop and give them something but you knew it wouldn't do any good. They were far away from anyplace that they could have gotten help. I'm sure they did get help, sooner or later but that picture reminded..., Ben did photograph it. Then there was another. There was the Mulhall family and, oh, God, that was the most sad thing. This was in the Ozarks and it was a little cabin, dirt floor, and the sweetest man and the sweetest woman. They were a little simple minded but they were just so angelic. And they had two children of such beauty. You know, blonde curls in rags, and the little girl was hugging a doll and the little boy was hugging two kittens when Ben photographed them. And these people were so sweet, they just wanted to help us if they could, and the man told us, he said they had no water at the house so he had a mule and a bell and he would go three or four miles to bring water for them to drink and use. But you know it's unbelievable how people were living. We found one family after another like that.

PAM MEECHUM: And you feel these photographs had a major impact.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Oh, no doubt about it. You couldn't see those things, without... I'll tell you another type of thing. One thing. Ben fell, we came upon a kind of a chain gang of prisoners working on a levy. And they were wheeling wheelbarrows and there was a boss man telling them what to do. And Ben stopped to talk to one of them, and this man was very tall, black man, he was very tall and he was incredibly handsome, very dignified. So Ben, I was you know, talking to somebody else and Ben came back and he said, "You know, this man could have been a college president." He could have been, he could have been, he was so soft spoken, he was so elegant to speak to and wonderful to look at. And here he was wheeling a wheelbarrow with a chain gang, a prisoner's chain gang. And you know of course, the black thing was still very, very prominent in the south at that time. I think it's improved some.

PAM MEECHUM: I hope so.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: Kelly told me, my maid, told me that she went to Florida, and she said that the bus driver said, "Can I help you madame?" And helped her off the bus. And she said this couldn't have happened, you know, a few years ago. Which is interesting.

PAM MEECHUM: Well, I think we ought to wind up rather _____. Thank you very much.

BERNARDA BRYSON SHAHN: You know, I haven't been very good today, I'm really tired.

PAM MEECHUM: But thank you very much, I've enjoyed talking to you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... December 28, 2004