

IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

Ben Shahn

Target Age: High School
Time Period: 20th Century
Featured County: Monmouth
NJ 350th Theme: Innovation

NJ Common Core Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.D.10.d, 6.3.12.B.1
Social Studies Skills: Critical Thinking, Presentational Skills
Language Arts Literacy: 3.1 Reading, 3.3 Speaking



Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USF34-026327D.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: Is art a reflection of societal values and ideals?

BACKGROUND:

After the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, the new administration ushered in innovative and creative ways to combat the Great Depression and bring about a return to economic security, stability and prosperity. One such program was the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Managed by the Department of Agriculture, the program was designed to combat poverty in rural areas of the nation. One such project, found in the Garden State, was the resettlement of a community in western Monmouth County that became known as Jersey Homesteads. The small town, which was only two square miles, became a farming and industrial cooperative. Eventually two hundred homes were built on the site for the workers of the town, who were mostly immigrants from Eastern Europe.

One such resident of Jersey Homesteads was artist Ben Shahn. Born in Russian-controlled Lithuania in 1898, Shahn's parents uprooted the Jewish family and settled in New York City in 1906 seeking political and religious freedom. After attending New York University as a biology major, Shahn pursued his true passion for the arts. The prolific Shahn produced many works using a wide variety of mediums, including lithography, paintings, and photography. Most of his work was commissioned through various New Deal programs and Shahn focused on exposing the working and living conditions of those suffering during the Great Depression. This style became known as Social Realism. After Franklin Roosevelt died, the community was renamed in his honor. The community has changed, but Ben Shahn's art lives on. His mural can still be seen today in what is now Roosevelt, New Jersey's elementary school.

ACTIVITY:

After having a discussion on the various programs of the New Deal, discuss with the students the FSA's artists and resettlement programs. Introduce the background information on Jersey Homesteads, the objectives for the program, Ben Shahn, and the Social Realism movement.

Next, split the students into three groups. Each group will be responsible for analyzing and interpreting one of the three panels of Shahn's mural. After answering and discussing the questions, each group will present their findings to the class. Use the questions below to direct the small group discussion.

Group 1:

- What hardships did immigrants face in Europe and in the United States?
- What famous landmarks and immigrants are depicted in this panel?

Group 2:

- What challenges and hardships did the immigrants of the late 1800s and early 1900s overcome in the United States?
- What famous people and events are depicted in this panel?

Group 3:

- What advancements and innovations were created during the New Deal?
- What famous people and events are depicted in this panel?

FOLLOW-UP:

For homework, each group will create a blue print for a three panel mural that reflects the norms, ideals, and challenges of today. Ask the students to make a list of what would be included, how it would be depicted, what message it would send, and where it would be displayed. Each group will present their creation to the class.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places You Can Visit

The Living New Deal: Locations of New Deal Projects in New Jersey
<http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/us/nj/>

Additional Teaching Resources

New Jersey Digital Highway: New Jersey and the New Deal
http://www.njdigitalhighway.org/enj/lessons/jersey_homesteads/
http://www.njdigitalhighway.org/enj/themes/new_jersey_and_the_new_deal/

For More Information

The Great Depression in New Jersey
http://www.nj.gov/state/historical/topical_great_depression.html

The WPA Guide to 1930's New Jersey
<http://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/1743/>

Symbolism in Murals

Left:

- Totalitarian governments in Europe (Fascism and Communism)
- Oppression of people (Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia)
- Immigrants coming to the United States (Led by Einstein and his mother)
- Difficulties immigrants faced in United States (Ellis Island, Quotas, Sacco and Vanzetti)

Center:

- Challenging working conditions (Sweatshops)
- Tragedies endured by immigrants (Triangle Shirt Waist Factory Fire)
- Rise of unions and the labor movement (John L. Lewis)

Right:

- New Deal programs and unions creating the Jersey Homesteads
- Social and economic progress to address the Great Depression
- Co-operative farms and factories

Left Mural



Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Center Mural



Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Right Mural



Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

CREDIT INFORMATION:

In Classroom Activity:

Pg. 1: Homestead Mural by Ben Shahn. LC-USF34-026327D. Library of Congress.

Pg.3: Homestead Mural, left panel. Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Pg. 4 (top): Homestead Mural, center panel. Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Pg. 4 (bottom): Homestead Mural, center panel. Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

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