

Seminar on “*The Shape of Content*” by Ben Shahn

Each of the six chapters in Shahn’s book was originally delivered as an individual lecture at Harvard in a six-part series. As such, they each have a distinct theme or driving force behind them; and you can assume that his intended audience was a group of highly educated folks. As part of your group’s seminar, you should try to answer the questions that follow. Keep notes on your discussion, and when we come together as a large group, be prepared to give an account of what you’ve come up with as answers. Be prepared also to point to specific passages in the text which you can use to support your answers.

1. What is the theme of your particular chapter?
 2. What arguments does Shahn give to support his theme? What do you think is his strongest argument? His weakest?
 3. Do you agree with his ideas or not? Why, or why not?
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In addition to the above questions, answer the one pertaining to your chapter:

Chapter 1: Artists in College

On page 19, Shahn tells the story of a young poet who gave up writing. He notes that “...form is an instrument, not a tyrant”. What does he mean here?

Chapter 2: The Biography of a Painting

On page 32, Shahn read the paragraph which begins “The image that I sought to create was not one of a disaster . . .” On page 35, read the one which begins “The question is, ‘Is that enough’..” And on page 41 read the one which starts “Personal realism, personal observation...” In the context of these three paragraphs in particular (and the rest of the chapter in general), what is the point of the long quotation by Rilke at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 3: The Shape of Content

What does Shahn mean by “Abstraction is perhaps the most classic of the contemporary points of view.” (page 63). How do you relate that to what he says in the paragraph which begins on the bottom of page 67 and extends to the top of page 68?

Chapter 4: On Nonconformity

Explain the story that Shahn’s father told of the three men wheeling wheelbarrows in light of the rest of the chapter.

Chapter 5: Modern Evaluations

In the discussion of Picasso and Dali, Shahn notes a number of things which do not separate the two artists. What, finally, does he say is “the criterion of judgment” by which the two can be evaluated?

Chapter 6: The Education of an Artist

What is Shahn’s philosophy behind his “course of education” for an artist? (pg 113)