

## *BEN SHAHN: PASSION FOR JUSTICE* LESSON PLAN

### Lesson II: Visual Politics

Research 1930s America through photographs taken by the Farm Security Administration. The FSA photographic unit included Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Gordon Parks among others. The FSA file contains over 160,000 images that in many ways now define our collective memory of Depression-era America. Many of the most important images are available online; many are also reproduced in books.

### CIVICS STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

What is Government and What Should it Do?

Standard 1: Understands ideas about civic life, politics, and government

What are the Basic Values and Principles of American Democracy?

Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life

What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?

Standard 29: Understands the importance of political leadership, public service, and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy

### U.S. HISTORY STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)

Standard 24: Understands how the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state

### HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING STANDARD & BENCHMARKS

Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective

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### OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will

- Review the seminal period of Depression era U.S. history.
- Conduct original research using the FSA photo files.
- Produce a written and visually documented final project.
- Discuss the role visuals play in the media, from propaganda to exposé.

## **TEACHING:**

### **Step 1: Introduction**

Give an overview of the development of the FSA's photographic unit. Encourage students to consider the difference between the glut of images we are confronted with on a daily basis today and the relative scarcity of images in the 1930s. Look at books of photographs by some of the major FSA photographers, including Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Gordon Parks. Give reading and research project assignments:

- Background reading including the establishment of the FSA photographic unit by economist Roy Stryker, the length of the project, how assignments were given to the photographers, how their photographs were used in publications
- Choose a FSA photographer or subject area from the FSA files to research (e.g., Gordon Parks or working conditions in Southern cotton fields)
- Final report guidelines, including number of pages and number and type of images to include. Review citation guidelines for both written and visual materials.

### **Step 2: Production**

Assist students as they identify and refine their research papers. Include guidelines as to image copying (or downloading) and presentation. In class, continue discussion on the differences and similarities between propaganda and news coverage. Question whether topics that are not visually interesting are adequately covered by the media. Discuss the effect that the repetition of images has, including the possibility of over saturation — are we all becoming immune to death, disease, and destruction?

### **Step 3: Assessment/Review**

Have the students discuss their findings and observations. Class discussions will focus on how visual information alters the public's perception of events (possible topics range from news black-outs in repressive societies to the limited access the news media had in the Gulf War). Go on to consider the implications this has for public policy. Students will be evaluated on their individual progress and on how well they fulfilled each step of the project, including research, original thinking, effort, presentation, time management, and grasp of concepts.

### **Extension Activity**

Have students create a power-point presentation using FSA photographs in conjunction with a verbal presentation of their research papers.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY/ REFERENCES**

### **To be completed...**

Library of Congress FSA/OWI files website

[http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/052\\_fsa.html](http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/052_fsa.html) (check)

Shape of Content, chapter:

Documentary Expression in America

FSA book

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Gordon Parks

Dorothea Lange

Diego Rivera

Goya