



THE SHAPE OF CONTENT

BY BEN SHAHN

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In his 1956-57 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, the Russian-born American painter Ben Shahn sets down his personal views of the relationship of the artist--painter, writer, composer--to his material, his craft, and his society. He talks of the creation of the work of art, the importance of the community, the problem of communication, and the critical theories governing the artist and his audience.

The Shape of Content Details

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From Reader Review The Shape of Content for online ebook

Tessa says

I adored this book. The only reason it didn't give it 5 stars is because I reserve honor that for the life changing books, which this isn't— at least not for me.

If you are not an artist or are not interested in the conversations surrounding art, don't read this.

If you ARE an artist— especially one who has ever felt limited by labels that feel arbitrary or never quite right, one who has felt invalidated by art critics, one who has ever wondered WHAT to do or HOW to do, especially how to do in the face of society, read this.

To me, this felt like a book of affirmations. It was educational, of course, and I was exposed to a few ideas that I had never considered before. But more importantly, Shaun's words pulse with encouragement. I felt like I had gone to the office hours of a friendly professor after a rough semester and been told all the things I desperately needed to hear.

If you need inspiration, education, and a little kick in the butt, this book is perfect.

Also, it's a very quick read; I finished it one day! So why not give it a go?

Joe says

I just finished this book last week on the recommendation of a friend. It's a book that I really enjoyed reading. I have a soft-spot for essays, which I consider one of the purest literary forms. Having a book full of essays by someone so likable and immediate as Ben Shahn makes this an easy read. Hearing someone accomplished talk about their craft with love and conviction is always enjoyable, especially when they can do so with a compelling narrative style (as Shahn does). His thoughts are wide-reaching and open up questions on the value/nature of criticism, the relationship between art and academia, and the process of creation. I haven't read too much on art, but this book makes me want to read more. There are some excellent thoughts in here, but even in the plainer moments the essays evoke that milky-nostalgia of the creative process. Anyone who has tried to create will appreciate *The Shape of Content* and should give it a read.

kimberly says

If nonartists read only one book by or about art, this should be it. It's short and elegant and Shahn makes an irrefutable case that all artists have an unavoidable responsibility to society, and gets in enough fundamentals to give those uninitiated in arts a solid vocabulary to start from. Good for artists, too, of course.

Chris says

I first read "The Shape of Content" as an undergraduate painting student when I was reading everything about art and artmaking that I could get my hands on, trying to figure out what (and why, and how) I was doing. At that time I found it inspiring, especially the last essay on "The Education of the Artist".

Re-reading the book 22 years later, I am struck by what a deeply thoughtful person Shahn was, how articulately he described what goes into the making of art in "Biography of a Painting", and how well it matches my own experience.

Michael says

This is a short book of essays based on lectures delivered by the artist at Harvard in 1957. I found it refreshing and pragmatic window into a great artist's accumulated wisdom about art, suitable for an average reader like me. I am always a sucker for attempts to elucidate the mystery of artistic creation and identify how much art may be bound up with the core of human nature. Fuel against Pinker's notion that art and music are just lucky collateral benefits of other talents with key adaptive value for fitness. While we wait for any convincing account by sociobiologists that art matters for our biological evolution, it is reassuring to get an angle on its importance for our cultural evolution. But we don't need biology or even psychology or to get on board with the liberal arts mission to nurture the arts:

I have always believed that the character of a society is largely shaped and unified by its great creative works, that a society is molded upon its epics, and that it imagines in terms of its created things—its cathedrals, its works of art, its musical treasures, its literary and philosophical works.

Shahn spends some time on the struggle to assure the embrace of arts included immersion creative practice and not just art history and scholarly analysis. In my own experience as a biology major at a liberal arts college, I feel I benefitted greatly from taking elective courses on sculpture and playing table. Thus, he is preaching to the choir for me on the essay on art in education. Similarly, his essay of advice on prospective artists pursuing an education might be of more value to someone in that camp. Instead, I appreciated most his title essay "The Shape of Content" on the aesthetic debate over form versus content, and next in line one on the career of nonconformity most successful artists must forge and another on the beginnings of a universal standard for judging art.

The major thrust of the title essay is that form and content are inseparable, that "form is the very shape of content". I see that as comparable to the inseparability of nature and nurture in biology. Regardless, there is much history of playing one against the other and minimalizing one of the other as primal impulse. Despite all the movements in art toward the plane of the abstract, Shahn argues for the ideas embodied in art as retaining a supreme value. The very denial of content in the drippings of Pollock or boxes of Albers stands in context of all that preceded them And that the particular content of a great work of art has its special impact by walking the line between the particular and the universal.

For form is not just the intention of content; it is the embodiment of content. Form is based, first, upon a supposition, a theme. Form is, second, a marshaling of materials, the inert matter in which the theme is to be cast. Form is, third, a setting of boundaries, of limits, the whole extent of idea, but no more, an outer shape

of an idea. Form is, next, the relating of inner shapes to the outer limits, the initial establishing of harmonies. Form is, further, the abolishing of excessive content, of content that falls outside the true limits of the theme. ...Form is thus a discipline, an ordering, according to the needs of content.

Against this thesis, Shahn has to contend with the pervasive school of criticism which he identifies in this credo of Clive Bell:

The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful, but it is always irrelevant. For to appreciate a work of art, we must bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its affairs and ideas, no familiarity with its emotions.

Shahn is the type of artist who puts a lot of political perspectives into his own art. He is treated to the personal paths and artistic insights that infuses his own work. For example, he describes how he was led to subjects of the Dreyfus Affair, the Sacco-Vanzetti case, and atrocities of World War 2 for some of his work. I can't help but think of Picasso's "Guernica", which captures the terror of a bombing during the Spanish Civil War, when I read of his regret in the movement away from such humanistic concerns:

Many of those names that, during the thirties, had been affixed to paintings of hypothetical tyrannies and theoretical cures were now affixed to cubes and cones and threads and swirls of paint. Part of that work was—and is—beautiful and meaningful; part of it does indeed constitute private experience. A great part of it also represents only the rejection, only the absence of self-commitment.

His essay, "Biography of a Painting", was a boon for me to read because of his sharing as much as possible the origins and pathways of his creative decisions for a particular work from 1948. As seen below, this work, "Allegory" features a red Chimerical creature with its lion-like head full of flames hulking over a pile of four children. The work was inspired by and used for illustration of a magazine story about a Chicago tenement fire that killed a poor black man's four children.

Imagine his shock when a critic whom he deemed a friend railed against the work as pro-communist and calling for Shahn's deportation. In fact, he wanted to capture in as simple way as possible the monstrous horror of fire to a family. An overall form in the painting he later identified as subconscious is that of the Roman she-wolf that instead of suckling Romulus and Remus holds danger of devouring them instead, linked perhaps to fears of wolves inculcated into him from folktales from his Lithuanian childhood. The work portrays not a general horror, but a particular case of injustice revealed as what he calls "inner disaster" and bearing universal overtones. The interchange of unique individual experience and communal values among the viewers is captured nicely in the following:

One has sympathy with a hurt person, not because he is a generality, but precisely because he is not. Only the individual can imagine, invent, or create. The whole audience of art is an audience of individuals. ...In the work of art he finds his uniqueness affirmed.

I found a lot of common sense to his piece on evaluating art. He admits that "to criticize criticism is the irresistible sport of artists" and gives into that urge by this quote of a critic asked to compare the worth of Picasso and Dali:

"Oh, the answer is very simple. Picasso is an artist, and Dali is not."

He takes the position that personal values and emotional responses are core foundations to critical assessment. After all, as he notes, "The critic with no values would be about as useful as an editorial writer

with no opinions.” Still, there are quasi-objective standards he finds himself using in judging merit of art for himself. Aside from children’s paintings or the cases where the artist strives to remove it from the equation, competence and craft remain values that usually come into play. No one can deny supreme skills at work are at play even in Pollock and Albers. Conveying an idea or theme, even if it is an anti-idea bound in abstract minimalism, is a value he also appreciates, but ease of communication is not necessarily a virtue. A great example is the work of Turner, who strove to portray the essence of chaos and entropy free of standard forms and perspective, or Munch whose “The Scream” made a unique vision of a crying figure, neither of which lends itself to easy translation into concepts. Unfortunately, an important value for most critics (including the inner critic artists must nurture) is that of novelty and innovation:

Under such necessity art can be pushed to meaningless extremes. And it is a constant struggle to wrench out of the paint tube something that is still newer than new. Of course, when such work becomes dated, its emptiness emerges, for nothing is so hard to look at as the stylish, out of date.

Other values used in assessing artistic worth are more variable:

They are fortuitous values; they may be within the work or they may be within the viewer. Such values are the passing vagaries of taste; they are sometimes the principles deduced by art historians, such as the authenticity of the work; or they may be concerned with the curious accumulation of money value, but they are not innate. Then there are the formal values, inseparable from the work, but sometimes amenable to objective or comparative evaluations.

I particularly appreciated the way Shahn spoke of the value of freedom in art:

The concept of freedom in art takes interesting forms: freedom of execution, for instance, is a basis for evaluation. How often do we read the critical comment that this or that work appears “labored.” ... Extreme care is “tight” and not good; extreme freedom is “loose” and considered desirable. Art becomes increasingly free; it has freed itself of craft, freed itself from academic discipline, freed itself from meaning in many cases, and freed itself of responsibility.

I too cherish the word freedom. But I want to be free to be painstaking if I want to, to be responsible, to be involved; to be free to exercise whatever intellect I may have, and I consider both discipline and craft indispensable to freedom.

I find the pleasure of Shahn’s collection as a clear and accessible framework for appreciating art on more dimensions than I have tended to. The experience was somewhat on the order of John Chardis’s “How Does a Poem Mean” for someone like me with very limited study of poetry. Most of all I liked getting a good dose of Shahn’s drawings, which provide background illustrations throughout the narrative. As I have been reading Homer and related readings on the Ancient Greeks, I was intrigued and pleased that his first illustration was this one, called “Homeric Struggle”, which to me speaks to the balance of beast and hero in human nature.

Sharon Bautista says

How do we, as people living in the United States, regard artists, and how are those hopes reflected (or not) in universities, art criticism, and the canon? These are the questions Shahn sets out to answer in his famous lectures. The title lecture seems to get the most attention, but I enjoyed more his thoughts on non-conformity--the celebration of and its discontents--which is a matter of form in its own sense.

Russell says

Lucid account of a variety questions in the practice of painting and developing yourself and ideas.

Enjoyed the first chapter of questions and responses regarding a university education and the role of art.

Zach Erdmann says

A Biography of a Painting is one the best essays about art-making I have ever read. Buy a copy for anyone you know who is making art.

secondwomn says

3.5

Jay McNair says

Thought-provoking, enjoyable lectures about what it means to be an artist.

Most important takeaway for me was encapsulated here:

“This may be art, but is it my own art?” And then I began to realize that however professional my work might appear, even however original it might be, it still did not contain the central person which, for good or ill, was myself.

I also enjoyed, as did Shahn, the “crispness” of these lines from Francis Bacon:

At this point I cannot resist a few somewhat crisper lines in this direction from Francis Bacon: “Some there have been,” says the philosopher, “who have made a passage for themselves and their own opinions by pulling down and demolishing former ones; and yet all their stir has but little advanced the matter, since their aim has been not to extend philosophy and the arts in substance and value, but only to ... transfer the kingdom of opinion to themselves.”

Transfer the kingdom of opinion!

Pete says

worth acquisition for the drawings alone but also a pretty great, thoughtful, immediate essay about the nature of art and its relationship to wider life by Ben Shahn, who knew some things re those topics.

Andrew Martin says

As much love as I have for Ben Shahn

Farewell to New York

Handball.

Shape of Content does not have 1.0 books worth of ideas, length adjusted. The last essay, "Education of an Artist," has some choice excerpts destined to be rebloggable tumblr directives

Go to an art school, or two, or three, or take art courses at night if necessary. And paint and paint and draw and draw. Know all that you can, both curricular and noncurricular – mathematics and physics and economics, logic, and particularly history.

but few of the other essays felt particularly essential.

LemontreeLime says

Worth finding, worth reading, and most of all worth reading the last essay "the education of the artist" several times to catch different things at different times. I forsee rereading this whole book again this year.

Stephanie says

I read some of it years ago but never finished it until today. I keep seeing the word Renaissance community everywhere. "Our values are prsumably those things which we hold most dear. They are those matters which call fourth our most enthusiastic participation, or towards which we are most compassionate about. Beliefs that light the way we behave.

<http://www.career-iq.com/mbti/enfp>

<http://www.eiconsortium.org/reports/t...>

Bringing Emotional Intelligence to the Workplace: A Technical Report Issued by the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations
By: Cary Cherniss, Daniel Goleman, Robert Emmerling, Kim Cowan, & Michel Adler

<http://www.rand.org/qatar/about/appro...>

3 measurable quantities of light are:

- * Luminous intensity-- which refers to the brightness of a light source
- * Luminous flux-- is the rate at which light is emitted from a source and strikes the surface of a whole sphere
- * Illumination-- is the deliberate application of light to achieve some aesthetic or practical effect

<http://www.the-friendship-cafe.com/Qu...>

Laurie Holding says

One of my favorite human beings recommended this book to me back in the late 70's and I only grazed upon it then, too busy with the reading and writing of academic obligations. Now, on the cusp of retirement, I find it on my library's shelf, and it turns out to be his book, not given to me, but actually and personally inscribed by his mother, who is/was/will always be, way, way smarter than me. And a true artist, to boot. I thank them both, for letting me house this little volume in my house for the past, what, FOUR decades. It made me think again. I will mail it to him right away, but in the meanwhile, here's my favorite quote from *The Shape of Content*:

"Without the person of outspoken opinion, however, without the critic, without the visionary, without the nonconformist, any society of whatever degree of perfection must fall into decay."

Here's hoping that our society will not decay, but will stand true and strong because of our nonconformists, our visionaries, our critics.
