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**Ben Shahn's *Mine Building*:
A Symbol Of Disaster**

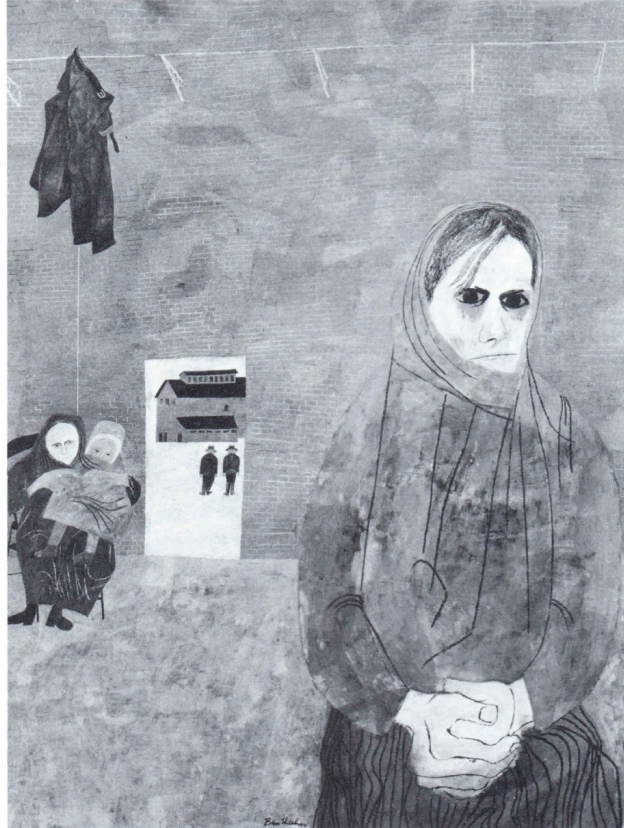
Figure 1. Ben Shahn, *Mine Building*, 1948, tempera, Arizona State University Art Museum. Gift of Oliver B. James.

Ben Shahn's painting, *Mine Building* (1948)¹ (Figure 1), is a powerful, complex symbol of the Centralia, Illinois, mine disaster of March 25, 1947. It is one of four paintings and nearly one hundred drawings created by Shahn in response to that catastrophe, which claimed the lives of one hundred and eleven miners and brought devastation to their families. The event, widely reported by the national news media, inspired the artist first to accept the assignment to illustrate a magazine article, "The Blast in Centralia No. 5, a Mine Disaster No One Stopped," written by John Bartlow Martin for *Harper's Magazine* in 1948. The incident then prompted Shahn to execute a series of paintings: *Mine Building* (1948) (Figure 1), *Miners' Wives* (1948) (Figure 2), *Mine Disaster* (1948) (Figure 3), and *Death of a Miner* (1949) (Figure 4). The media avidly reported details of recovery efforts for entombed miners and published photographs of the scene, which were to influence Shahn; it also covered a Senate investigation which ensued.

Shahn's mine disaster paintings have never been analyzed within the context of his earlier sketches, nor have they been discussed in relation to news photographs of the event or the specific circumstances of the disaster. Such an analysis reveals that much of Shahn's imagery emerges from his illustrations and from contemporary news media photographs.² Shahn relied on personal experiences with miners, as well as photographs he took of them twelve years earlier while working for the Farm Securities Administration. In examining the paintings and considering the artist's comments about the purpose of his art, it becomes evident that this series of paintings is symbolic of the appalling conditions in our nation's mining industry in the late 1940s and the disaster which occurred because of those conditions.

Mine Building, executed in tempera on masonite, has affinities with Precisionism in subject matter and style. Consisting of a single, large industrial edifice centrally placed within an ambiguous setting, the work has no atmospheric perspective and lacks any sense of

Figure 2. Ben Shahn, *Miner's Wives*. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Given by Wright S. Ludington.



depth. Instead, the emphasis is on its planar forms. It is a simplified, stark composition devoid of any human activity or landscape. Shahn's painting, however, rebukes the aesthetics of Precisionism. The Precisionists, in depicting their pristine subjects with crisp lines, clear colors, elimination of surface detailing, and removal of all evidence of man's physical presence, celebrate America's power and self-sufficiency through its industrialism.³ Shahn, however, presents the negative effects of industrialization. Shahn's mine building is encrusted with grime and soot, evidence of man's labor. The black-roofed structure with darkened windows and doors stands starkly against a light ground subtly enriched with a variety of hues. The walls have mottled effect of red, red-orange, gold, green and sooty-grey pigment. Closely spaced striations cut into the paint to simulate the appearance of brickwork. As in Precisionism, an overall flattened perspective creates a two-dimensional effect. Instead of addressing purely formal interests, however, Shahn's painting speaks of social concerns. *Mine Building*, with its grimy, textured surface, loudly proclaims human drama and suffering, and urges a symbolic interpretation.

The symbolism in *Mine Building* reveals Shahn's liberal ideology. Shahn's concern for the oppressed and sympathy for the causes of organized labor had been demonstrated previously in the Tom Mooney series



Figure 3. Ben Shahn, *Mine Disaster*. Courtesy of the Chicago Art Institute.

(1932) and in his posters for the Political Action Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (1944 and 1946). The grave circumstances which led to the Centralia disaster stirred Shahn's ideological sensibilities.

Although a State inspector had repeatedly cited violations of mine safety laws at Centralia, those responsible for enforcement and correction of the dangerous conditions did virtually nothing.⁴ In March, 1946, four top officers of the local union had written a letter to the governor of Illinois begging for enforcement by the Department of Mines and Minerals. They were terrified of coal-dust explosions such as had occurred in Kentucky and West Virginia. The letter included the phrase, "Please save our lives."⁵ One year later, three of those four men died in the Centralia coal-dust disaster.⁶

The inhabitants of Centralia were more than justified in their fear. Mine safety records in this country were dreadful. Statistics from 1977 indicate that for a one hundred year period of record-keeping, over 120,000 coal miners suffered violent deaths. That is an average of one hundred per month for one hundred years.⁷ Health and death benefits were terribly inadequate and pension benefits were non-existent. Some measure of relief began in 1947, when the miner's Welfare and Retirement Fund was established, after a two-year battle for its creation by John L. Lewis.⁸ It did not, however, make up for past omissions. Josephine Roche, admin-



Figure 4. Ben Shahn, *Death of a Miner*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur H. Hearn Fund, 1950.

istrator of the Fund, described “a backlog of human misery” in testimony before a Senate subcommittee in 1949:

No less shocking than the record of mine killings and deaths resulting from the hardships of mining existence is the record of those who linger on, maimed, broken, disabled, daily tortured by their helplessness, their pain and the constant realization of the burden their dependents carry. A backlog of human misery has been rolled up through the decades by the destruction of human bodies, health, of human values, as well as human life.

Excessively high rates for tuberculosis, silicosis, arthritis and many other chronic diseases prevail among miners. Unbelievably poor medical and hospital facilities – or none at all – have been the lot of the mining population for decades.⁹

Ben Shahn, well aware of such human misery, expressed an intense compassion for mankind long before the creation of his mine disaster paintings. This is evident in his Sacco and Vanzetti series (1932), and much later in his famous war paintings, such as *The Red Stairway* (1944) and *Liberation* (1945). The following statement also reveals his concerns:

I don't really care that much about art. I'm interested in life, and only in art in so far as it enables me to express what I feel about life. . . . But for me painting had to be a way of arriving at the truth about life – our life here and now.¹⁰

The Centralia mine disaster enabled the artist to examine the realities of life and to reveal them in his paintings and magazine illustrations.

A year after the mine disaster, Shahn began his project by accepting a *Harper's Magazine* commission to illustrate John Bartlow Martin's article. The editors provided Shahn with a copy of the essay, informing him there was no stipulation as to the number of illustrations. Four days later Shahn presented the editors with sixty-four drawings of the ninety-nine he had executed. Twenty-four of these were chosen for the article.¹¹ The large number of illustrations Shahn created in a short period of time indicates the profoundness of his response to the event. That Shahn next proceeded to execute four paintings further attests to the artist's intense interest in the subject.¹² This reflects his belief that drawings fail to adequately express what he called "the content of feeling." He explains:

One cannot, I think, crowd into drawings a really towering content of feeling. Drawings may be small intimate revelations; they may be witty or biting, they may be fragmentary glimpses of great feelings or awesome situations, but I feel that the immense idea asks for a full orchestration of color, depth, texture and form.¹³

Nevertheless, the sketches often formed the bases for Shahn's paintings. Indeed, five of the magazine illustrations (Figure 5a,b,c,d,e) are compositionally incorporated into Shahn's paintings. For example *Death of a Miner* (Figure 4) contains a man in the upper left corner fleeing from a great fiery explosion; although the position of the arms is reversed, the rushing figure illustrating the article (Figure 5a) is nearly identical to that in the painting. In the foreground, two mine officials towering over the inert form of a fallen miner are direct quotations of two illustrations found on separate pages in the essay; the officials with backs turned to the viewer (Figure 5c) and a prostrate worker (Figure 5b). Moreover, the figures in *Miners' Wives* (Figure 2) directly relate to a sketch of women in the mine washhouse seated beneath the suspended clothing of their husbands (Figure 5d). The woman holding a child in her lap, in the painting, is particularly reminiscent of the drawing. A pair of hands clenched in agony created for the *Harper's* article (Figure 5e) reappears on the wife in the foreground. In addition, the same two sketched images of mine officials in business suits and hats found in *Harper's* (Figure 5c) and in *Death of a Miner* (Figure 4) recede beyond the door of the washhouse in the painting. *Mine Disaster* (Figure 3) also includes images of women reminiscent of those in the washhouse sketch (Figure 5d). In the painting, however, they stand with heads bowed, mutely waiting. Although Martin's article does not contain a



Figure 5. Ben Shahn, *The Blast in Centralia No. 5*, illustrations from John Bartlow Martin's article, *Harper's Magazine*, March, 1948. Courtesy Bernarda.

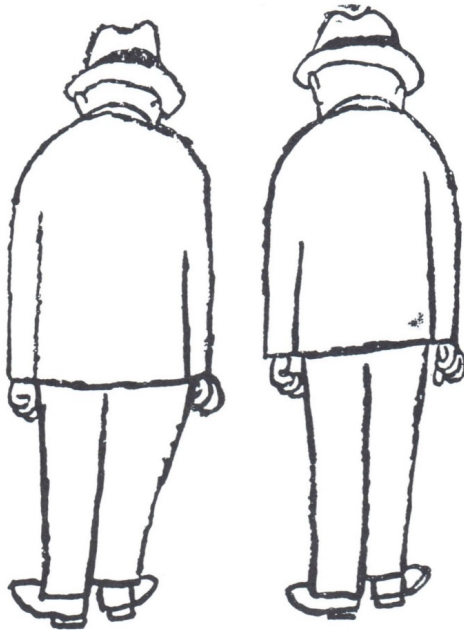
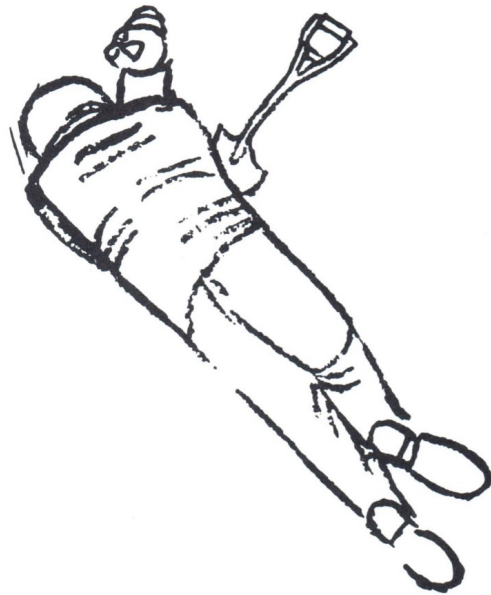






Figure 6. Photograph, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 27, 1947.

separate sketch of the mine building, that image repeatedly reappears in the paintings, as do the mine officials. The structure in the Arizona painting is a near replica of that in the background of *Mine Disaster*, as well as the one glimpsed through the door in *Miners' Wives*. Shahn, in all probability, executed an illustration of the building which was not included in Martin's essay. The artist's wife, Bernarda Bryson Shahn, published such a sketch in her 1949 article on Shahn's drawings.¹⁴

Miners' Wives pierces to the heart of this industrial disaster: the needless waste of lives caused by uncorrected, dangerous conditions; the conflicting interests of wage earners and mine operators; and the helplessness and grief of the women and children. Ashen-faced and wrapped in cloaks and scarves against the freezing weather, the wives await news of their husbands. This depiction relates to Martin's description of the women waiting in the mine washhouse. It also recalls contemporary newspaper and magazine photographs, such as one from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* which graphically illustrates the long vigil of the wives (Figure 6).

Traditionally, the workers came to the company washhouse on their way to the mine, put on their work clothes, hooked their clean, street clothes to a chain and hoisted them up to the ceiling. After a day's work, they returned to the washhouse, showered, then retrieved their clean clothes before going home. So, the women of Centralia kept their vigil in the washhouse, the first



Figure 7. Photograph, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 27, 1947.

place a miner would come, if he exited the mine.¹⁵ A comparison of *Miners' Wives* (Figure 2) with the *Tribune* photograph (Figure 6) reveals similarities: women wearing coats and scarves, clothes hanging from the ceiling, a bare floor and a brick wall. Another photograph from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Figure 7) pictures three individuals in the washhouse. The woman seated to the right, seemingly in a state of shock, is remarkably close to the widow depicted by Shahn in facial structure, dark eyes, hairdo and clothing. Although Shahn executed the paintings a year after these photographs were taken, it is clear that these or similar photographs inspired the imagery in his paintings and sketches.

The social and political issues of this industrial disaster were not only alluded to in paintings such as Shahn's but were openly and hotly debated publicly. A reporter for *Life* magazine recalled the vociferous reaction of John L. Lewis to the tragedy and simultaneously described the behavior of the women:

...while Lewis used their grief to make noisy political capital, the women of Centralia were silent. They were the silent ones when it happened. Through the long night of March 25 they waited in the mine washhouse quietly and dry-eyed. Some of them slowly paced up and down the room. But they did not even sob. When their husbands' bodies were finally brought up and taken away, the widows, without a word, gathered up their men's belongings and left. Then they walked alone down the slushy roads to their homes. They made no sound but the clink-clink of their open galoshes. They have been silent ever since.¹⁶

In particular, the circumstance of Joe Bryant's widow reported by Martin embodies the kind of tragedy Shahn alludes to in *Miners' Wives*. According to Martin's account, Mrs Bryant, forty-four years old at the time of the explosion, had borne eleven children to Joe Bryant and was pregnant with the twelfth. The family lived in a humble four-room house. While trapped in an air pocket in the mine, Joe Bryant had written a note to his wife, cautioning against signing away compensation money upon his imminent death. He asked that his wife name the baby after him "so she would have a Joe." Three months later a baby girl was born; and Mrs Bryant named her Joey.¹⁷

In *Miners' Wives* (Figure 2), Shahn captures the sense of cold, silent helplessness that wives such as Mrs Bryant must have experienced in waiting to learn of the fate of their husbands. A comparison of this painting

with a *Life* magazine photograph (Figure 8) picturing a group of vigilant women demonstrates to what extent the artist simplified the composition, restricted the number of figures, and exaggerated their physical aspects for expressive purposes. One widow hovers and dominates the foreground. Her dark-circled eyes and ghostly face, seemingly frozen in anger, together with her enlarged, clenched hands, reveal the woman's distress and agony. Other elements in Shahn's simplified, tight composition invite a more penetrating interpretation. His depiction reveals much more than the stoicism described in *Life* magazine. Shahn formally created a sense of ambiguity and set up tension by utilizing a series of contrasts, such as the play back and forth between large figures and small ones, inside and outside, working class citizens and company officials, and women who face the viewer while the industry representatives do not. The compressed space between the wives inside and the officials outside creates added tension which emphasizes the physical and mental alienation of the two social groups. The Centralia women, stoic and enduring in the midst of disaster, clearly evoke the solidarity of the working class, subject to exploitation by or neglect of the big business interests. The two mine officials, seemingly indifferent to the women, stride toward the mine building, which is a symbol of power.¹⁸ That impersonal structure, which reveals no life through its blackened windows and doors, presents a mysterious air as if concealing something from the viewer. In a sense the building represents the contradiction of a miner as a wage earner because of the income it provides, while at the same time it threatens destruction of the workers. It stands as a visible and psychological barrier between the women and their husbands beneath the ground.

Shahn's creation of an image critical of industrial interests while championing disadvantaged workers is in character with his political ideology. His verbal statements, moreover, clarify this group of paintings as a call for reform:

(One) rankles at broad injustices, and one ardently hopes for and works toward mass improvements; but that is only because whatever mass there may be is made up of individuals, and each one of them is able to feel and have hopes and dreams.¹⁹

Shahn's interest in issues of social concern, often clearly translated into his art, has long been acknowledged, even by our government. Frances Pohl has amply demonstrated the extent to which the U.S. govern-



Figure 8. Photograph, *Life*, April 7, 1947, p. 40.

ment used Shahn and his art, during the Cold War, to try to improve America's image throughout the world. The Museum of Modern Art chose Shahn as one of two artists whose paintings would be shown at the 1954 Venice Biennale. Pohl asserts that at the Biennale the United States presented Shahn as "an honest, humanitarian, socially-conscious, liberal American artist."²⁰

Mine Disaster (Figure 3) depicts a group of grim-faced individuals juxtaposed against the mine building, now quite large, looming menacingly behind them. Pale faces and somber attitudes reveal the dire situation. Photographs of the scene on the days following the explosion, such as one taken by *Life* magazine (Figure 9), reveal a mine building very similar to that portrayed by Shahn. A tippie stands adjacent to the building; automobiles are clustered in the yard, and activity of rescue crews and crowds of onlookers is evident. Again Shahn eliminated everything but the basic elements – the people and the building – symbols of the victims and the perpetrator of disaster. Three women and two men stand behind a rope barrier, erected by the police to keep them back from the shaft. The rope separates them from the trapped miners and links them physically and psychologically to the mine building. They are inextric-

ably bound. The women are typically dressed in head scarves, dark clothing and galoshes; their pale faces reveal large, sorrowful eyes. One man, clutching his hat, looks purposefully, even painfully, toward the viewer. When this painting was shown in the 1949 Downtown Gallery exhibition, a visitor cited the dour faces as characteristic of Shahn's view of human nature, and the factor which kept him from being really popular with the masses. Shahn quickly responded:

...for the smiling face, doesn't that depend on how you approach people? The coal miner who grins when you tell him a dirty joke or discuss baseball with him isn't grinning when I ask him about living conditions or the recent strike. But the strike and the living conditions are his very life; the other aspects are his escape from life. I'll leave the painting of those to others; to the copy writers, to the slicks, to Hollywood.²¹

The faces in *Mine Disaster* are those of long-frightened men and women whose worst fears have come true.

Shahn knew about miners; he had seen them, talked to them and photographed them twelve years earlier while employed as a photographer for the Farm Securities Administration. One of his photographs from 1935 (Figure 10) depicts a group of Kentucky miners on lunch break, dirty, tired and dejected. Shahn borrowed compositionally from this photograph for another *Harper's Magazine* illustration on Centralia which depicted a group of seated miners with lunch pails.²² Shahn's interpretation of the individuals in *Mine Disaster* reflects the sober demeanor and unsmiling faces seen in his earlier photograph.

Ben Shahn, undoubtedly aware of the "backlog of human misery" and inspired by the Centralia explosion, unleashed his full expressive powers in these paintings. He could have elected to depict the force of the explosion or horribly mangled bodies. He did not. Rather, his images are subtle and psychologically penetrating. Shahn's comments regarding illustrations which he executed for a later article by Martin based on a Chicago tenement fire clarify his approach:

The image that I sought to create was not one of a disaster; that somehow doesn't interest me. I wanted instead to create the emotional tone that surrounds disaster; you might call it the inner disaster.²³



Figure 9. Photograph, *Life*, April 7, 1947, p. 41.

That inner disaster is clearly evident in his haunting images of fearful, suffering, helpless people; and the cause of their distress is symbolically embodied in the image of the mine building.

The appearance of the mine structure in *Mine Disaster* and *Miners' Wives* and its existence as a separate work in *Mine Building* strongly suggest symbolic intent. Shahn clearly set forth his belief in the use of symbols:

Value is communicated in works of art by means of symbols which may be highly communicative or abstruse . . . such symbols may be – on the most completely communicative level – only reproductions of existing things, as are photographs. On the next level of obviousness, they may be slightly selective, eliminating some unnecessary details. On a still less obvious level the art symbols may be extreme simplifications, a sort of short-hand, still representing objects but now requiring an advanced ability on the part of the viewer to read or decipher.²⁴

In Shahn's work, every element has significance and its placement within the composition is critical. Nadya Aisenberg's interview of Shahn reveals difficulties he had in the creation of *Miners' Wives*. Shahn confessed:

Now, I change my mind a great deal in working. I remember one painting that I called *Miners' Widows* or *Miners' Wives*, which I started and carried along for several weeks with the idea of having two figures right in the foreground almost next to each other. After two or three weeks of that I realized there was something wrong with it. At first I didn't dare face it, and then I had to face it. One of the figures had to go way back and become a little thing. And that meant that two weeks of work had to be scraped off and abandoned.²⁵

Shahn recognized the cryptic nature of his symbolism which began with his war paintings and is reflected in the Centralia paintings.²⁶ Surely, the stark, soot-stained building void of life speaks to the unsavory aspects of life in a coal mining town. As Bernarda Bryson Shahn has observed, Ben Shahn undoubtedly demonstrated in *Mine Building* an interest in the surprising color effects on industrial buildings encrusted with grime and soot.²⁷ Her contention that *Mine Building* is divorced from the disaster, however, must be questioned. Shahn's ability to reveal the fortunes of people by his depiction of the structures in which they live and work has been noted by James Soby.²⁸ Soby specifically refers to a silkscreen and gouache version of the mine building executed in 1956. Clearly, Shahn's painting embodies much deeper, more human concern.

The recurrence of the mine building in the Centralia paintings signals its symbolic importance. In *Miners' Wives* it is seen through the doorway, small yet potent in its implications. In *Mine Disaster* it occupies a much larger area, as it looms behind a forlorn group, bound to it by a rope barrier. Finally, in *Mine Building*, it stands isolated, a subject unto itself, full of impact. Shahn once observed:

I feel that each work of art – each serious work – has an innate value. . . . The work of art is the created image and symbol of a specific value; it was made to contain permanently something that was felt and thought and believed. It contains that feeling and nothing else. All other things have been excluded.²⁹



Figure 10. Ben Shahn, *Coal Miners*, photograph, Williamson, West Virginia, 1935. Harvard University Art Museum, The Fogg Museum. Gift of Bernarda B. Shahn.

On the surface, *Mine Building* may appear to be nothing more than the depiction of an architectural structure. It cannot, however, be divorced from its related paintings nor from the tragedy which inspired it. *Mine Building* contains Shahn's humanistic concerns about the Centralia mine explosion. The structure and its empty surroundings form a sparse, cryptic composition. The blood-red tonalities of the soot-stained walls contrast with the gloom of blackened windows, doors and roof. It stands starkly in a field of snow in the cold of winter. It represents the mining industry and its powerful, controlling officials; it alludes to the social and political issues surrounding preventable, industrial disasters; it suggests separation of grieving women from their husbands trapped in the earth below; and it symbolizes for miners hardship, disease, danger and death. These paintings distinctly recall the conditions of our nation's mining industry in the late 1940s and are clearly symbols of disaster – a disaster which occurred on March 25, 1947 – and impending disaster which hovers, even today, over the lives of miners and their families.

