

Jewish Artists and the Power of Social Realism

GUIDING QUESTION: How did Jewish American artists in the Social Realism movement (1930s–1940s) use their art to respond to and influence social issues in the United States?

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OVERVIEW

Students will explore the artwork of Jewish American artists associated with the American Social Realism tradition, along with selected primary and secondary source readings. They will analyze and discuss the societal issues highlighted by these artists. Each student will be assigned a specific work of art to research, focusing on both the artist and the Social Realism genre, and will create a presentation to share with the class.

OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to

- › Explain how art, religious belief, and tradition connected for Jewish American artists in the 1930s and 1940s through the American Social Realism tradition;
- › Use secondary and primary sources to prepare a presentation about a work of art; and
- › Lead a discussion about a work of art with an audience.

DOCUMENTS USED

PRIMARY SOURCES

Painting, Abraham Rattner, *Place of Darkness*, 1943

Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University (58.42)

<https://collections.artmuseum.indiana.edu/browse/object.php?number=58.42>

Painting, Ben Shahn, *Miner's Wives*, 1948

Philadelphia Museum of Art (1951-3-1)

<https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/52275>

Painting, Mitchell Siporin, *Let America Be America Again*, c.1936

Modernism in the New City

<https://www.chicagomodern.org/art/let-america-be-america-again>

Painting, Raphael Sawyer, *Dancing Lesson*, 1926

The Jewish Museum (2008-225)

<https://collections.thejewishmuseum.org/collection/27833-dancing-lesson>

Painting, Theresa Bernstein, *The Immigrants*, 1923

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

<https://crystalbridges.org/blog/theresa-bernsteins-the-immigrants-paints-a-picture-of-twentieth-century-us-immigration-at-sea/>

Painting, Todros Geller, *Strange Worlds*, 1928

Art Institute of Chicago (1949.27)

<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/64385/strange-worlds>

SECONDARY SOURCES

Article, “Social Realism”

The Art Story

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/social-realism/>

Article, Matthew Baigell, “Social Concern and *Tikkun Olam* in Jewish American Art” (excerpt)
Ars Judaica: The Bar-Ilan Journal of Jewish Art, 2012

Book, Matthew Baigell, *Social Concern and Left Politics in Jewish American Art* (excerpt)

Video clip, *America after the Fall: Paintings from the 1930s* [2:27]

The Art Institute of Chicago

<https://youtu.be/CrE5K5sS-Vo?feature=shared>

Video clip, *A Mine Disaster and Those Left Behind: Ben Shahn’s Miners’ Wives* [5:08]

Smarthistory

<https://youtu.be/PEmpUQzkvMc?feature=shared>

TEACHER-CREATED MATERIALS

- › SEEI Activity: Introduction to Social Realism
- › First Look Worksheet
- › Social Realism and Jewish Artists Presentation

ACTIVITY PREPARATION

- › Make one copy of the SEEI Activity: Introduction to Social Realism for each student.
- › Make two copies of the First Look Worksheet for each student.
- › Print one copy of the Social Realism and Jewish Artists Presentation for each group (duplicate in larger classes if needed).
- › Organize students into groups of three to five students each.

PROCEDURE

ACTIVITY ONE: INTRODUCING SOCIAL REALISM AND ART IN THE 1930S (30 MINUTES)

- › Show the video clip, *America after the Fall: Paintings from the 1930s* [2:27].
- › Help students place the topic in historical context by asking:
 - » *Why does the curator argue that the 1930s were the most important decade of the twentieth century?*
 - » *How were artists affected by the Great Depression?*
- › Distribute one copy of the Introduction to Social Realism handout to each student. Ask students to read the introduction and work with a partner to complete the SEEI Activity.
- › Finally, have students read the excerpts from art historian Matthew Baigell and answer the questions.

ACTIVITY TWO: MODELING ART ANALYSIS (20 MINUTES)

- › Distribute one copy of the First Look Worksheet to each student.
- › Project Ben Shahn's painting, *Miner's Wives* to the class.
- › Instruct students to fill out a First Look Worksheet quietly for four or five minutes. They should work on their own for the first few minutes, then share observations with a partner.
 - » **Teacher Tip:** The First Look Worksheet is designed to be straightforward and encourages students to write down everything they see, NOT to engage in analysis. The extended "look" time might seem like a long time, but the extended period of time spent just looking helps them to engage in deeper observation and thinking.
- › Show the video clip, *A Mine Disaster and Those Left Behind: Ben Shahn's Miners' Wives* [5:08].
- › Lead a short discussion:
 - » *Did you see some or most of the details of the painting that are pointed out in the film when you took your first look at the painting?*
 - » *Did the film change the way you looked at the painting? Why or why not?*
 - » *What effect might Shahn's painting have had on a viewer at the time?*

ACTIVITY THREE: COMPARING IMMIGRATION STORIES (15 MINUTES)

- › Organize students into groups of three to five students each and assign each student a painting:
 - » *Dancing Lesson* by Raphael Soyer, 1926
 - » *Strange Worlds* by Todros Geller, 1928
 - » *Back of the Yards* by Mitchell Siporin, 1938
 - » *The Immigrants* by Theresa Bernstein, 1938
 - » *Place of Darkness* by Abraham Rattner, 1942
- › Distribute one First Look Worksheet to each group and ask students to complete the task based on their piece of art.
- › Explain that each group of students will present their piece of art to the class.
- › Distribute one copy of the Social Realism and Jewish Artists Presentation handout to each group (there is one page for each artist).

- › Instruct students to select a role within each group:
 - » The biographer will research the artists and summarize their story.
 - » The historian will research and present on the social issue that is being addressed.
 - » The curator will prepare a set of questions to lead other students to analyze the piece of art.
- › Give students time to research and prepare their segments. Circulate and assist as needed.

ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

- › Students can present their work to the whole class or to another group.
- › Teachers can lead a class discussion with the following questions:
 - » *Which of the works of art that were presented do you think had the strongest elements of social commentary? Explain why you chose the work of art and what elements of the painting made it strong.*
 - » *Based on what you have learned in the presentations, what do you think were the main issues facing Jewish Americans in the 1930s and 1940s? Explain why you chose these issues. Use examples from the sources you looked at as examples.*
 - » *Do you think art is an effective way to learn about historical events and eras? Why or why not?*

Students interested in this topic might be interested in researching the following for an NHD project:

- › **The Federal Arts Project (1935–1943)**
- › **The Harlem Renaissance (1920s–1930s)**
- › **Diego Rivera and the American Labor Movement**
- › **Jacob Lawrence**
- › **Dorthea Lange**
- › **Elizabeth Catlett**

SEEI ACTIVITY: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL REALISM

The Social Realist political movement and artistic explorations (the art genre is referred to as “American Social Realism”) flourished primarily during the 1920s and 1930s. This was a period of global economic depression, heightened racial conflict, and the rise of fascist regimes. Some were encouraged after successful revolutions in Mexico and the Soviet Union. Artists making work within the American Social Realism genre created figurative and realistic images of the “masses,” a term that encompassed the lower and working classes, labor unionists, and people with little or no political power. American artists began to use art to fight for the rights of workers and stem the advance of fascism.

Social Realists envisioned themselves to be workers and laborers, similar to those who toiled in the fields and factories. They wore overalls to symbolize unity with the working classes.

While there were a variety of styles and subjects within Social Realism, the artists were united in their attack on the status quo and social power structure. The artists were realists who focused on the human figure and human condition. Social Realists presented art that was politically charged and included radical social critiques.¹

<p>S = State Define <i>social realism</i>:</p>	<p>E = Elaborate Clarify and expand on concept</p>
<p>E = Exemplify Give a concrete example</p>	<p>I = Illustrate Draw a picture, chart, or graph</p>

¹ Adapted from “Social Realism,” The Art Story, accessed May 31, 2025, theartstory.org/movement/social-realism/.

SEEI ACTIVITY: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL REALISM

MAKE CONNECTIONS

Read the excerpts by art historian Matthew Baigell. Reflect on how Baigell connects art created in the Social Realism art genre to Judaism. Answer the questions below the excerpts.

Excerpt One: “In recent years, the **Hebrew** phrase, **tikkun olam**, has become a catch-all term used by Jews and non-Jews in America to describe both religious and secular activities that contribute to the betterment of humankind. It connotes notions of repair, mending, and restoration, and includes performing and good deeds, giving to charity and engaging in religious activities and practices . . . The concept of responsibility to others has been an integral part of Jewish culture for millenia and that is the way the concept of *tikkun olam* has been largely interpreted in America. Despite the fact that Jews live in all parts of the country and are not bound to or by any central religious authority, the deeply rooted notion concerning responsibility to others whatever their needs or ethnic or religious backgrounds, is paramount.”

Based on the excerpt above, why might Jewish artists in the early twentieth century have been interested in creating paintings in the Social Realism tradition?

Excerpt Two: “This book is about those artists, illustrators, and writers whose intentions were to help the poor, the needy, and the downtrodden. My premise is that their sense of social concern and communal responsibility that they absorbed as youngsters influenced their political choices. They were born in eastern European communities or heavily Jewish neighborhoods in America, where they learned about and absorbed community and religious values while growing up. They knew who they were and where they came from . . . In that sense they never left home. Their Jewish particularism and their universalist intentions, to greater or lesser extent, reinforced each other.”

Question: How does Baigell connect the artists’ Jewish heritage with the subjects of their artwork?

FIRST LOOK WORKSHEET¹

When you first look at a work of art, write down everything you see *without* analyzing it or trying to figure out what it is about.

What do you see? Look for people, objects, activities, colors, shapes, etc.	What questions do you have? What would you like to know more about that you see in the artwork? What questions would you like to ask the artist if you could?
Write one sentence summarizing this work of art:	

¹ Adapted from the Art Institute of Chicago.

SOCIAL REALISM AND JEWISH ARTISTS PRESENTATION GROUP ONE

ISSUE: JEWISH IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Artwork:

Painting, Theresa Bernstein, *The Immigrants*, 1923

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

<https://crystalbridges.org/blog/theresa-bernsteins-the-immigrants-paints-a-picture-of-twentieth-century-us-immigration-at-sea/>

After completing your First Look Worksheet as a group, select one of the three roles:

- › The **biographer** will research the artist, summarize the artist's story, and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **historian** will research historical context about the social issue addressed in the painting and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **curator** will prepare a set of five to eight questions to lead other students in an analysis of the work of art.

Starter Research Resources:

Booklet, *Etchings and Paintings*, William Meyerowitz and Theresa Bernstein, 1984

The Patterson Public Library

https://theresabernstein.newmedialab.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/Patterson%20Library%20show_1984.pdf

"Theresa Bernstein"

Smithsonian's American Art Museum

<https://theresabernstein.newmedialab.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/OnehundredJewishArtists.pdf>

SOCIAL REALISM PRESENTATION GROUP ONE (CONT.)

Prompts to help the biographer:

- › Where was the artist born, and where did they live?
- › What were some major events in the artist's life, and what impact did they have on the artist's work?
- › In what way(s) did the artist's Jewish heritage play a part in their work?
- › What else should we know about the artist to better understand them?
- › What were the artist's major interests or subjects?
- › Why do you think the artist was interested in this topic?

Prompts to help the historian:

- › Describe the societal issue that the artist is commenting on in their work.
- › Why was this a major issue at this time? How did this issue affect people? Were some groups of people more affected than others?
- › What does the artist seem to believe about this issue based on the artwork?

Prompts to help the curator:

- › What do you want your classmates to notice or think more deeply about when they look at the artwork?
- › What parts of the artwork might spark different opinions or interpretations?
- › How can you ask a question that connects the artwork to the social issue it represents?
- › What kind of question would help your classmates connect the artist's choices (like color, figures, or setting) to the message of the piece?

SOCIAL REALISM AND JEWISH ARTISTS PRESENTATION GROUP TWO

ISSUE: IMMIGRATION IN CHICAGO IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Artwork:

Painting, Raphael Soyer, *Dancing Lesson*, 1926

The Jewish Museum (2008-225)

<https://collections.thejewishmuseum.org/collection/27833-dancing-lesson>

After completing your First Look Worksheet as a group, select one of the three roles:

- › The **biographer** will research the artist, summarize the artist's story, and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **historian** will research historical context about the social issue addressed in the painting and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **curator** will prepare a set of five to eight questions to lead other students in an analysis of the work of art.

Starter Research Resources:

Article, Raphael Soyer, *Dancing Lesson*

Smart History

<https://smarthistory.org/raphael-soyer-dancing/>

SOCIAL REALISM PRESENTATION GROUP TWO (CONT.)

Prompts to help the biographer:

- › Where was the artist born, and where did they live?
- › What were some major events in the artist's life, and what impact did they have on the artist's work?
- › In what way(s) did the artist's Jewish heritage play a part in their work?
- › What else should we know about the artist to better understand them?
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SOCIAL REALISM AND JEWISH ARTISTS PRESENTATION GROUP THREE

ISSUE: IMMIGRATION IN CHICAGO IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Artwork:

Painting, Todros Geller, *Strange Worlds*, 1928

Art Institute of Chicago (1949.27)

<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/64385/strange-worlds>

After completing your First Look Worksheet as a group, select one of the three roles:

- › The **biographer** will research the artist, summarize the artist's story, and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **historian** will research historical context about the social issue addressed in the painting and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **curator** will prepare a set of five to eight questions to lead other students in an analysis of the work of art.

Starter Research Resources:

Article, "Todors Geller"

Modernism in the New City

<https://www.chicagomodern.org/artists/todros-geller>

SOCIAL REALISM PRESENTATION GROUP THREE (CONT.)

Prompts to help the biographer:

- › Where was the artist born, and where did they live?
- › What were some major events in the artist's life, and what impact did they have on the artist's work?
- › In what way(s) did the artist's Jewish heritage play a part in their work?
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SOCIAL REALISM AND JEWISH ARTISTS PRESENTATION GROUP FOUR

ISSUE: WORKERS AND LABOR UNIONS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Artwork:

Painting, Mitchell Siporin, *Let America Be America Again*, c.1936

Modernism in the New City

<https://www.chicagomodern.org/art/let-america-be-america-again>

After completing your First Look Worksheet as a group, select one of the three roles:

- › The **biographer** will research the artist, summarize the artist's story, and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **historian** will research historical context about the social issue addressed in the painting and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **curator** will prepare a set of five to eight questions to lead other students in an analysis of the work of art.

Starter Research Resources:

Article, "Mitchell Siporin"

Smithsonian's American Art Museum

<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/mitchell-siporin-4467>

Article, Brianna Dang, "The Man Behind the Murals," *The Lane Tech Champion*, December 22, 2016

<https://lanetechchampion.org/6029/a-e/the-man-behind-the-murals/>

Article, "Mitchell Siporin"

Modernism in the New City

<https://www.chicagomodern.org/artists/mitchell-siporin>

Poem, Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again"

All Poetry

<https://allpoetry.com/Let-America-Be-America-Again>

SOCIAL REALISM PRESENTATION GROUP FOUR (CONT.)

Prompts to help the biographer:

- › Where was the artist born, and where did they live?
- › What were some major events in the artist's life, and what impact did they have on the artist's work?
- › In what way(s) did the artist's Jewish heritage play a part in their work?
- › What else should we know about the artist to better understand them?
- › What were the artist's major interests or subjects?
- › Why do you think the artist was interested in this topic?

Prompts to help the historian:

- › Describe the societal issue that the artist is commenting on in their work.
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- › What kind of question would help your classmates connect the artist's choices (like color, figures, or setting) to the message of the piece?

SOCIAL REALISM AND JEWISH ARTISTS PRESENTATION GROUP FIVE

ISSUE: WORKERS AND LABOR UNIONS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Artwork:

Painting, Abraham Rattner, *Place of Darkness*, 1943

Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University (58.42)

<https://collections.artmuseum.indiana.edu/browse/object.php?number=58.42>

After completing your First Look Worksheet as a group, select one of the three roles:

- › The **biographer** will research the artist, summarize the artist's story, and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **historian** will research historical context about the social issue addressed in the painting and create a 90-second oral presentation to share with the class.
- › The **curator** will prepare a set of five to eight questions to lead other students in an analysis of the work of art.

Starter Research Resources:

Article, "Abraham Rattner"

Sacred Art Pilgrim

<http://sacredartpilgrim.com/collection/view/107>

Article, "Abraham Rattner"

Smithsonian's American Art Museum

<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/abraham-rattner-3946>

SOCIAL REALISM PRESENTATION GROUP FIVE (CONT.)

Prompts to help the biographer:

- › Where was the artist born, and where did they live?
- › What were some major events in the artist's life, and what impact did they have on the artist's work?
- › In what way(s) did the artist's Jewish heritage play a part in their work?
- › What else should we know about the artist to better understand them?
- › What were the artist's major interests or subjects?
- › Why do you think the artist was interested in this topic?

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- › Describe the societal issue that the artist is commenting on in their work.
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- › How can you ask a question that connects the artwork to the social issue it represents?
- › What kind of question would help your classmates connect the artist's choices (like color, figures, or setting) to the message of the piece?