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*Archives of American Art*

## **Celebrating 175: Ben Shahn, Social Security Building Mural, Washington DC, 1940-1941**

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A LETTER TO EDWARD BRUCE FROM HENRY VARNUM POOR  
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Dear Ned:

Since you asked me to serve on the committee to discuss the ideology for the Social Security Building and since I'm puzzling over this business of ideology in the mural I'm starting for Penn. State, I thought I would write down some of the conclusions which seem sound to me, as a sort of statement of belief and experience from the painters' point of view and if you think it has anything helpful to your particular problem you can use it if you want.

I think that the basis of any great mural, as of all great painting, is a sense of pictorial necessity, a visual freshness and reality, which speaks more clearly than any other thing. So complicated or highly intellectual idea, is a great drawback- something to surmount rather than a real help.

Examine the purely intellectual content of any great mural and you'll find it almost nil. Or a truer way to put it would be to say that what the artists contributes to the original story is something which could not ahead of time, be expressed in words or conceived in words. When it is accomplished, it may be the result of the finest wisdom, so endless in words. When it is accomplished, it may be the result of the finest wisdom, so endless words and ideas can play over it, but they could not help in its creation.

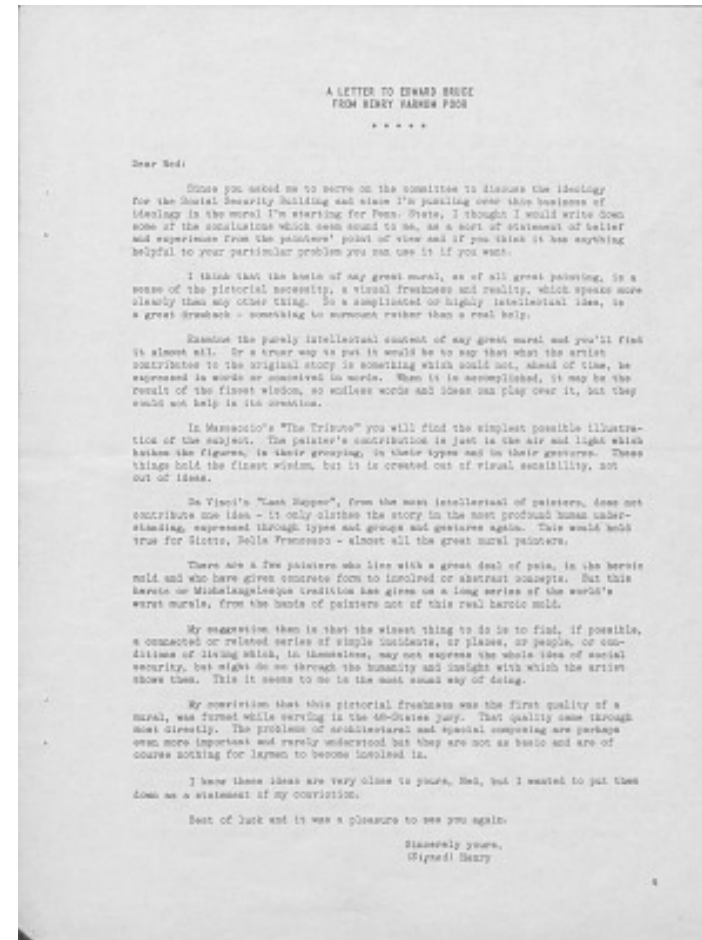
In Masaccio's "The Tribute" you will find the simplest possible illustration of the subject. The painter's contribution is just in the air and light which bathes the figures, in their grouping, in their types and in their gestures. These things hold the finest wisdom, but it is created out of visual sensibility, not out of ideas.

Da Vinci's "Last Supper", from the most intellectual of painters, does not contribute one idea - it only clothes the story in the most profound human understanding expressed through types and group and gestures again. This would hold true for Giotto, Della Francesca - almost all the great mural painters.

There are a few painter who live with a great deal of pain, in the heroic mold and who have given concrete form to involved or abstract concepts. But this heroic of Michelangulesque tradition has give us a long series of the world's worst murals, from the hands of the painters not of this real heroic mold.

My suggestion then is that the wisest thing to do is find, if possible, a connected or related series of simple incidents, or places, or people, or conditions of living which, in themselves, may not express the whole idea of social security, but might do so through the humanity and insight with which the artist shows them. This it seems to me is the most sound way of doing.

My conviction that this pictorial freshness was the first quality of a mural was formed while serving in the 48 States jury. The quality came through most directly. The problem of the architectural and special composing are perhaps even more important and rarely understood but they are not



as basic and are of course nothing for laymen to become involved in.

I know these ideas are very close to yours, Ned, but I wanted to put them down as a statement of my conviction.

Best of luck and it was my pleasure to see yo uagain.

Sincerely yours,  
(Signed) Henry

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