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Archives of American Art

Celebrating 175: Ben Shahn, Subject File, Shahn, Ben, 1947-1959

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[[image - drawing of a horse]]

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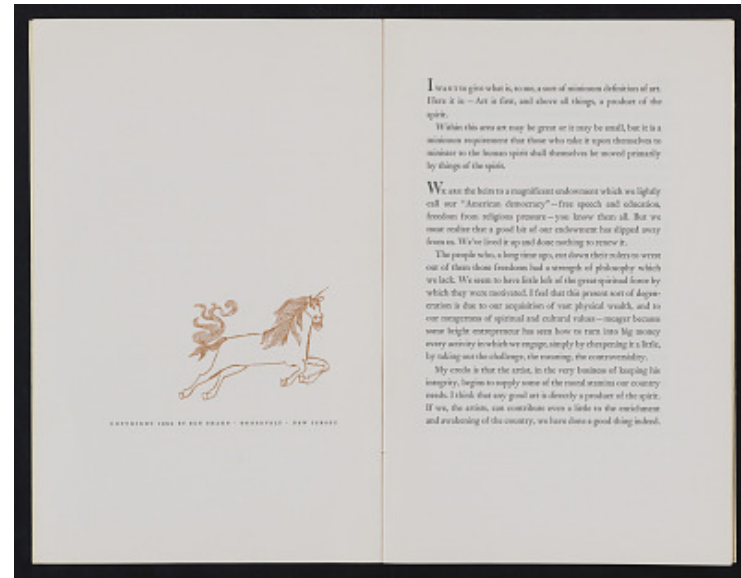
I want to give what is, to me, a sort of minimum definition of art. Here it is: - Art is first, and above all things, a product of the spirit.

Within this area art may be great or it may be small, but it is a minimum requirement that those who take it upon themselves to minister to the human spirit shall themselves be moved primarily by things of the spirit.

WE are the heirs to a magnificent endowment which we lightly call our "American democracy"-free speech and education, freedom from religious pressure-you know them all. But we must realize that a good bit of our endowment has slipped away from us. We've lived it up and done nothing to renew it.

The people who, a long time ago, cut down their rulers to wrest out of them those freedoms had a strength of philosophy which we lack. We seem to have little left of the great spiritual force by which they were motivated. I feel that this present sort of degeneration is due to our acquisition of vast physical wealth, and to our meagerness of spiritual and cultural values-meager because some bright entrepreneur has seen how to turn into big money every activity which we engage, simply by cheapening it a little, by taking out the challenge, the meaning, the controversiality.

My Credo is that the artist, in the very business of keeping his integrity, begins to supply some of the moral stamina our country needs. I think that any good art is directly a product of the spirit. If we, the artists, can contribute even a little to the enrichment and awakening of the country, we have done a good thing indeed.



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