

# Anger and form in the work of Ben Shahn

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*Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn*, a retrospective organized by the Jewish Museum in New York City, is now on display at its third and final location, the Detroit Institute of Arts, through October 31. The exhibit consists of 43 of Shahn's works painted between 1936 and 1965, focusing on the artist's post-World War II evolution.

Benjamin Zwi Shahn was born on September 12, 1898 in Kovno, Lithuania. Shahn's father, Joshua, escaped czarist persecution of his socialist activities and traveled to Sweden, England and finally the United States, where he was reunited with his family and settled in Brooklyn, New York. At the age of 14, Ben was taken out of school by his mother to become a lithographer's apprentice. World War I interrupted his plans to study art in Europe. Between 1919 and 1921, he attended New York University, the City College of New York and the National Academy of Design, and from 1925 to 1929 traveled throughout Europe and North Africa and studied in Paris. Inevitably, as a sympathizer of the Russian Revolution and the cause of socialism, Shahn came under the influence of the Communist Party, already firmly Stalinized. This was to have considerable consequences for his subsequent development, a subject about which the exhibit's catalogue is entirely silent.

As an artist, though deeply influenced by French Impressionism, Shahn's training in lithography ("lithography shaped my whole attitude toward art") and work in photography after 1929 instinctively fueled a revolt against the School of Paris. This rebellion took the form of his adopting a narrative mode, whose central thrust he viewed as being opposed to the aims of modernism: "I'm a raconteur, but I'd been taught right down the line that art does not tell stories."

Shahn created an artistic style that owed something to the harsh grotesqueries of George Grosz (German painter, 1893-1959), and the long-established tradition of newspaper caricature. Photography was of interest to Shahn not only for its direct access to reality, but for its ability to distort. The art critic Clement Greenberg in a grudging 1947 review noted: "It was the monocular photograph, with its sudden telescoping of planes, its abrupt leaps from solid foreground to flat distance, that in the early 1930s gave him [Shahn] the formula for the most successful pictures he has painted since then: the flat, dark, exact silhouette placed upstage against a receding empty, flat plane that is uptilted sharply to close the back of the picture and contradict the indication of deep space" (review in the *Nation*, reprinted in *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, edited by David Shapiro).

These stylistic elements are present in the work of his best-known period: his narrative compositions of the 1930s. Shahn's first political series, completed in 1931, consisted of watercolor portraits of the major protagonists of the Dreyfuss Affair, an anti-Semitic frame-up of a French military officer in the 1890s. Shahn gained public recognition with a series of 23 paintings in gouache devoted to the trial and execution of the Italian-American anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, exhibited in 1932 under the title *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*. This remains probably his most popular work.

In this period Shahn enlisted in the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal art programs, which funded, among other works, the production of

public murals. Among the best known of the 1930s muralists who worked in the US were the native-born Thomas Hart Benton and Mexico's Diego Rivera. Shahn was Rivera's assistant on the ill-fated Rockefeller Center fresco *Man at the Crossroads*. The mural featured a likeness of Lenin and was destroyed in 1933 after Rivera refused to remove it. Shahn's other projects included a fresco for the Jersey Homesteads development, founded by the Resettlement Administration to house Jewish garment workers from New York City. The artist worked as a photographer for the administration from 1935 to 1938.

None of Shahn's major works from his social realist period are included in the current exhibit. The few early works on display chronicle the lives of America's poor during the Great Depression, executed in the style of political cartoons. "[S]ocial realism in America emerged, not from the painterly tradition of nineteenth-century French realism [i.e., Courbet, Daumier] ... but directly from the graphic tradition of magazine illustration and poster art. Often the paintings of the social realists were little more than stylized drawing in which paint was merely a fill between contours.... The 'realism' of painters such as Shahn ... saw art primarily as a means of communicating a social message" (*American Art Since 1900: A Critical History* by Barbara Rose). For Shahn and other artists who shared his outlook, their work represented a relatively unmediated response to the Depression and the social upheavals it produced.

The DIA exhibit focuses on the phase of Shahn's career that began shortly before World War II, which saw a change in mood and style to what the artist described as "personal realism." In contrast to his overtly political works with their depictions of masses of humanity, Shahn now generated social critique allegorically through the medium of the universal Everyman. Shahn's second wife, Bernarda Bryson Shahn, observed in her book *Ben Shahn*: "Shahn's art stood somewhere between the abstract and what is called figurative, borrowing from the one its material riches of color, shape, and texture, its explorations in form, its preference for inner organization as against outer verisimilitude, from the other its focus upon man as the center of value and as the most interesting object on earth."

*Sunday Painting* (1938), for instance, shows a lone man with gigantic, laborer's hands, pensively walking in a desolate field, almost a quagmire. His head jutting forward, his back hunched under the weight of unknown psychic burdens.

Shahn's turn to a more introspective format signified simultaneously his maturing as an artist and his increasing political disillusionment. (He also came under direct political attack as the target of red-baiting by Michigan Senator George Dondero, who claimed in a 1949 speech in Congress that the painter was one of the Communists maneuvering "to control the arts.") Shahn wrote: "I was not the only artist who had been entranced by the social dream, and who could no longer reconcile that view with the private and inner objectives of art" (*The Biography of a Painting*, 1957). In truth, Shahn's social dream and art could not be reconciled with the politics and perspective of Stalinism, from which he broke organizationally but whose significance he never fully understood.

His style had "become much more private and more inward-looking," seeking a "deeper source of meaning in art, a constant spring that would not run dry with the next change in political weather" (Shahn quoted in

the exhibit catalogue).

Deeply affected by the rise of fascism and the world war, Shahn moved from New York to Washington, DC, where he worked as a graphic designer, creating posters for both the Office of War Information (OWI) from 1942 to 1943 and for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) from 1944 to 1946, working for Roosevelt's reelection in 1944.

A powerful painting, "1943, A.D." c. 1943 transcends the limits of his political conceptions. It addresses the Holocaust through the representation of an isolated victim, standing inside a barbed wire barrier, wearing a barbed wire crown. The man's eyes, at once bewildered and distraught, seem to penetrate into some indescribable darkness responsible for the heinous imprisonment, while his calm, oversized hands cover his mouth. One is in the presence of horror beyond words.

Another striking work from this period is *Italian Landscape*, 1943-44. Imposing black-garbed women wandering through ruined aqueducts and a far-off funeral procession symbolize the aftermath of war. A child is the only colorful object. Most remarkable is the intricate and formidable line work of the undamaged part of the structure, as if man's creations are more powerful than his destructive agents. Shahn wanted to "formulate the sense of emptiness and waste that the war gave me, and the sense of the littleness of people trying to live on through the enormity of war."

The strongest pieces come from the 1950s. Figurative, yet with the juxtapositions and distortions of Surrealism, their restlessness and disquiet are most unsettling. The artist explains that the emotional intensity of his images increased as he "became most conscious then [from the 1940s onward] that the emotional image is not necessarily of that event in the outside world which prompts our feeling; the emotional image is rather made up of the inner vestiges of many events" (exhibit catalogue).

*Age of Anxiety* (1953), as its title suggests, depicts—through allegory—the fears of the postwar years and their oppressive political climate. Named after a 1947 W.H. Auden poem, the work was painted in the year of the Rosenberg executions. A female figure in the far left, seated with a tray of bread and water, is purported to be Ethel Rosenberg. Perhaps her last meal? Circus-like arches form a kind of support within the painting and over the heads of its enigmatic figures. Surrounded by color, the three foreground figures appear to be beguiled by the apparently underground and tunneled enclosure. The painting has a claustrophobic and suffocating feel to it. Execution may not be the only death sentence.

*The Blind Botanist* (1954) is an intriguing and paradoxical work. A blind scientist manipulates a thorny bush. Science contains duality—its discoveries are not always beneficial to mankind. This painting in the context of other works, such as *Man* (1952) and *Second Allegory* (1953), both concerned with nuclear destruction, elicits a chilling response. Shahn comments: "My own concern with *The Blind Botanist*, was to express a curious quality of irrational hope that man seems to carry around with him, and then along with that to suggest the unpredictable miraculous vocation which he pursues."

Two works convey the artist's views about artistic creation. The first, *Song* (1950), shows two singers in performance. They offer themselves tentatively and without joy. The exhibit cites Shahn: "Song, I observe, does not issue from an untroubled face; quite the contrary, the beautiful sounds, the subtleties and delicacies; the minors, the accidentals, all require an intense concentration on the part of the singer. That concentration produces a facial expression nearing agony."

Thematically similar, *Composition for Clarinets and Tin Horn* (1951) reveals an anguished musician imprisoned by his instruments. In many of Shahn's works, hands are the conveyor of mood and meaning. Upright clarinets encircle the tortured artist, buried behind clenched and clawing hands. A solo tin horn, with a clown's face, is both mocking and pained. Artists are driven to create, sometimes as prisoners of their art. Perhaps the tools and forms of their art are desperately limiting.

Much of Shahn's work on exhibit from his two final decades make visual reference to the dangers of nuclear holocaust. The exhibit ends with selections from Shahn's last series of drawings and paintings, *The Saga of the Lucky Dragon* (1960-1962). The work refers to a highly publicized incident in which a Japanese fishing boat, with 23 fishermen on board, strayed within the range of American hydrogen-bomb testing near the Bikini atoll in the Pacific in March 1954. One of the fisherman, Aikichi Kuboyama, died of disease caused by the fallout. The ink painting, *Kuboyama* (1961), bears the likeness of a Japanese warrior. Barely perceptible between the brow and the ear is a beast, symbol of nuclear explosion. Speaking about the series, Bernarda Bryson Shahn notes: "More than any other of his works, grouped or singly, they established him in his world, expressed his relationship to it, told the role that he wanted to play in it." *The Saga of the Lucky Dragon* was shown in New York City in the fall of 1961, only months after the failed American invasion of Cuba, the Bay of Pigs.

In an interview published in April 1944 in *Magazine of Art* 37, Shahn succinctly summed up his outlook on life and art: "I hate injustice. I guess that's about the only thing I really do hate. I've hated injustice ever since I read a story in school, and I hope I go on hating it all my life." Over the course of several decades and a variety of transitions, both external and artistic, Shahn remained faithful to his inner self.

Shahn's life-long dedication to exposing terrible social ills through his art informs what is most positive in the DIA retrospective. However, while his body of work cannot fail to impact and impress the viewer, at the same time a certain "poverty of culture and resources" (Greenberg) limits the resonance and durability of the experience. The relative lack of complexity in his art—stemming perhaps from the artist's desire for a direct response or immediate acceptance—has a restricting character. Decades spent in the Stalinist milieu, as well as a series of political tragedies and disappointments, had a good deal to do most likely with imparting this quality to his work, but it prevents the artist from entering the realm of truly great artistic endeavor.

Nonetheless, artistically and historically, there is an important place for Ben Shahn's contribution. In 1950 Shahn articulated the irrepressible optimism which saturates his work: "The artist must operate on the assumption that the public consists in the highest order of individual; that he is civilized, cultured, and highly sensitive both to emotional and intellectual contexts. And while the whole public most certainly does not consist in that sort of individual, still the tendency of art is to create such a public—to lift the level of perceptivity, to increase and enrich the average individual's store of values ... I believe that it is in a certain *devotion to concepts of truth* that we discover values" (*Social Realism—Art as a Weapon*).



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