

LARGE PRINT

BEN SHAHN

ON NONCONFORMITY

Please return to this box.



Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity is supported by Centennial Fund, Horace W. Goldsmith Exhibitions Endowment Fund, Skirball Fund for American Jewish Life Exhibitions, Sudarsky Family Foundation, and other generous donors.

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The companion volume to the exhibition is on sale in
the Cooper Shop.

Ben Shahn On Nonconformity

Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity reappraises the multifaceted work of Ben Shahn (Kovno, the Russian Empire, now Kaunas, Lithuania, 1898–1969, New York), a pioneering figure in American social realism. Social realist art, which flourished widely between World War I and World War II, used naturalistic styles to critique the social conditions of ordinary people. Shahn was a working-class Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe who became one of the most prominent and compelling progressive artists in the United States from the time of the New Deal (1933–39) to the height of the Vietnam War (1954–75).

This timely retrospective highlights Shahn's enduring relevance, focusing on his commitment to social justice. Shahn championed the rights of workers and immigrants and denounced abuses of power and privilege at home and abroad. He engaged critically with the most pressing issues of his time, interpreting crucial aspects of twentieth-century history. His subjects encompass miscarriages of justice; the Great Depression (1929–39); the rise of fascism; efforts of the organized labor movement; World War II (1939–45) and its atrocities; anticommunist crusades and the proliferation of atomic weapons during the Cold

War (1947–91); and postwar struggles for civil and human rights.


Shahn's ability to communicate with broad audiences—through painting, mural art, printmaking, drawing, and photography, as well as graphic design—was a singular achievement. Our exhibition explores Shahn's complex aesthetic, including his use of photography and mass media, inventive repurposing of imagery across media, and unique talent for layering art within art and word and image. The presentation also illuminates Shahn's response to the mid-twentieth-century rise of abstract art and the repressive political atmosphere of the early Cold War in the United States. Over time the artist shifted from documentary and representational approaches to more poetic and lyrical visual languages, employing allegory, symbolism, and mythology—secular and sacred—in search of universal expression.

Shahn was committed to what he called the “human prospect,” never abandoning figuration or social content. He asserted his credo of “nonconformity,” which proposed that the precondition for all great art and historical change is dissent—from tradition, the status quo, and passing trends. In the postwar art scene of the United States, he remained pertinent,

popular, and successful on his own terms. Shahn's belief that art can stir the conscience, elicit empathy, and envision a more just future resonates powerfully today.

All works are by Ben Shahn unless otherwise noted.

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IN THE NEXT ROOM

Art and Activism

Ben Shahn was the son of an anti-czarist activist from Russian-controlled Lithuania. Shahn immigrated to the United States in 1906 with his Orthodox Jewish family and grew up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Trained as a lithographer in New York, he made extended trips in the 1920s to North Africa and Western Europe, embracing modern abstract art in Paris. Reacting to the 1929 Great Depression, Shahn turned to what was called “social viewpoint” art and stories of struggle. Social themes resonated with his immigrant experience and contemporary conditions.

Through his art, Shahn denounced travesties of justice, exemplified by the global scandal around the 1927 execution in Massachusetts of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. These Italian immigrants many believe were unjustly convicted of murder. A series on Tom Mooney—an Irish American labor leader wrongfully imprisoned for a 1916 bombing—followed immediately after.

Shahn assisted the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera with his 1933 Rockefeller Center fresco (now destroyed), which was censored for its controversial contrast of capitalist greed with communist utopia. This censorship, in the context of the dire unemployment crisis at home and the alarming rise of fascism before World War II in Europe, further fueled Shahn's commitment to social justice causes.

The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti, 1931–32
Tempera on canvas mounted on composition board
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
Gift of Edith and Milton Lowenthal in memory of
Juliana Force

The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti is part of a mural design Shahn submitted to the fraught 1932 exhibition Murals by American Painters and Photographers at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The scene pictured is the funeral of the Italian immigrant anarchists who were executed for a murder many believe they did not commit. The Lowell Committee—a retired judge and two university presidents tasked with reviewing the convictions—stand over the men’s coffins with awkwardness and utter indifference. This representation outraged some MoMA trustees because of its satirical treatment of their powerful, wealthy friends. The work was ultimately exhibited, but the scandal gave Shahn his first brush with art-world censorship.

The foregrounding of the open coffins, and Shahn’s signature on one of them, reveal his sympathies with the persecuted men as modern-day martyrs. Their tragedy signaled for him a failure of the American legal system—the nation falling short of its democratic ideals.

ON THIS WALL AND THE OPPOSITE WALL

The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti, 1931–32

Ever since I could remember I'd wished that I'd been lucky enough to be alive at a great time—when something big was going on, like the Crucifixion. And suddenly realized I was! Here I was living through another crucifixion. Here was something to paint!
—Ben Shahn, 1944

The controversial trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti generated public outcry and worldwide protest. Shahn saw these working-class Italian anarchist immigrants—a poor shoemaker and a fish peddler executed in 1927 for a robbery and murder in a Braintree, Massachusetts, shoe factory—as victims of anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, and especially antianarchist prejudices. The artist produced a series of twenty-three gouaches based on news photographs and political pamphlets. His flattened forms, humble details, and serial approach evoke a deadpan news story, while his incisive line creates penetrating caricature. With this work, which brought him significant art-world attention at Edith Halpert's

Downtown Gallery, Shahn solidified his unique aesthetic formula for social critique.

Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco, from
The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti series, 1931–32
Gouache on paper on board
Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Abby
Aldrich Rockefeller, 1935

Vanzetti and Sacco and Their Guards, from
The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti series, 1931–32
Gouache and pen and ink on paper
Collection of Lawrence and Elyse Benenson,
New York

The Lowell Committee, from The Passion of Sacco
and Vanzetti series, 1931–32
Gouache and pen and ink on paper
Collection of Lawrence and Elyse Benenson,
New York

Judge Webster Thayer, from The Passion of Sacco and
Vanzetti series, 1931–32
Gouache and pen and ink on paper
Collection of Lawrence and Elyse Benenson,
New York

ON THE OPPOSITE WALL

Sacco's Family after the Verdict, from The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti series, 1931–32

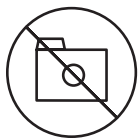
Gouache and pen and ink on paper

Spiro Family, courtesy of Debra Force Fine Art,
New York

Three Witnesses, from The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti series, 1931–32

Watercolor on paper

Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey, Bequest in the
memory of Moses and Ida Soyer



Nicola Sacco's Mother and Father, from The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti series, 1931–32

Watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper mounted on
Masonite

Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

ON THIS WALL AND THE OPPOSITE WALL

The Mooney Case, 1932–33

Shahn produced sixteen paintings on the case of Tom Mooney, an Irish American labor leader believed to be wrongly convicted for a 1916 bombing at a World War I Preparedness Day parade in San Francisco. In light of witness perjury and Mooney's strong alibi, the case gained international attention through the mass media and generated widespread protest. Mooney was a pawn in a power struggle among politicians, union workers, and factory owners.

Shahn's series supported the campaign to free Mooney from prison. Adapting documentary details from newspaper images and political pamphlets and using brilliant color and sharp technique, Shahn presented the key victims, accusers, and supporters. The Mexican muralist Diego Rivera wrote that Shahn created powerful worker-oriented art—"revolutionary" pictures that were "even stronger" than the Sacco and Vanzetti series, his assessment helping to advance Shahn's career.

My Son Is Innocent, 1932, from The Mooney Case series, 1932–33

Gouache on paper mounted on Masonite
Collection of Bruce and Robbi Toll, Rydal,
Pennsylvania

Tom Mooney Handcuffed, from The Mooney Case series, 1932–33

Gouache on paper
New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, The Governor
of New Jersey Purchase Award, The Association for
the Arts of the New Jersey State Museum Purchase
Award, Art from New Jersey Four

Two Witnesses, Mellie Edeau and Sadie Edeau, 1932,
from The Mooney Case series, 1932–33

Tempera on paper on board
Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase, 1946

Rena and Tom Mooney, 1933, from The Mooney Case series, 1932–33

Tempera on paper mounted on Masonite
Collection of Bruce and Robbi Toll, Rydal,
Pennsylvania

Governor James Rolph Jr. of California, from
The Mooney Case series, 1932–33
Gouache on board
Collection of Sally Kay and Scott Hochhauser,
New York

Father Coughlin, 1939

Watercolor and ink on paper

Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, Museum Purchase,
Derby Fund, from the Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller
Collection of American Social Commentary Art,
1930–1970

Shahn and fellow leftists condemned the rise of fascism and expansionist militarism of Adolf Hitler's Germany, Benito Mussolini's Italy, and Hirohito's Japan. They nevertheless knew that ultranationalist, authoritarian, and antisemitic tendencies were not confined to foreign countries and called them out at home, as in this scathing portrait of Father Charles Edward Coughlin.

Coughlin was a profascist and antisemitic Irish Catholic radio priest with millions of followers. Appealing to the masses, he played on American fears and stoked prejudices. Shahn likely based this depiction of Coughlin on press photographs of Hitler giving a hate-mongering speech in Berlin in 1932.

East Side Soap Box, 1936

Gouache on paper

Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Deana Bezark Fund in memory of Leslie Bezark; Mrs. Jack N. Berkman, Susan and Arthur Fleischer, Dr. Jack Allen and Shirley Kapland, Hanni and Peter Kaufmann, Hyman L. and Joan C. Sall Funds, and Margaret Goldstein Bequest, 1995-61

Translation of the Yiddish

Nature has given every [worker] an appetite, but our bosses took away from us the key [to our sustenance].

IN THE CASE, TOP ROW

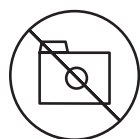
Unknown photographer

“Two Blood-Hunting Vultures, Mellie Edeau and Sadie Edeau, Self-Confessed Perjurers,” Justice and Labor in the Mooney Case, January 1919

Exhibition copy of a pamphlet page

Published by the International Workers’ Defense League, San Francisco

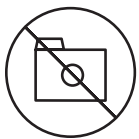
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers



Unknown photographer, International News
Photograph Service

“‘Mother’ Mooney, 84, as She Waited with Miss Anna
Mooney, Daughter, in the Corridors of the California
Capitol at Sacramento for Governor James Rolph Jr.’s
Decision in the Motion Plea of Her Son, Thomas J.
Mooney,” c. 1931–32

Exhibition copy of newspaper clipping
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers



Paul Thompson, "The Soap-Box Orator and His Auditors," National Geographic magazine, July 1918
Private collection, United States

Unknown photographer
Sacco and Vanzetti, 1927
Gelatin silver print press photograph
Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

Unknown photographer

Nicola Sacco's Father and Mother, Are They
Doomed?, 1920

Exhibition copy of a pamphlet page

Published by the Workers Defense Union, New York
Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives,
New York University



IN THE CASE, BOTTOM ROW

Ben Shahn: The Mooney Case, 1933

Exhibition brochure

**Published by the Downtown Gallery, New York
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers**



George Maurer, "Amnesty! On Sacco-Vanzetti Day!,"
Labor Defender magazine, August 1931
Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives,
New York University



The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti: Written during the
Seven Years [1920–27] of Their Imprisonment, 1929
Edited by Marion D. Frankfurter and Gardner Jackson
Published by Constable and Company, London
Private collection, United States

E. E. Cummings, Tom, 1935
Frontispiece by Ben Shahn Published by Arrow
Editions, New York
Private collection, United States

Tom is the American poet E. E. Cummings's unrealized modernist ballet based on Uncle Tom's Cabin from 1852. This popular and controversial novel by the abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe exposed the horrors and anti-Christian values of slavery in the Southern United States. The book was seen as progressive in its day but spawned "Tom shows" that distorted Stowe's Black protagonist hero: Uncle Tom, a brave martyr in her story, became a comical, submissive caricature.

Shahn was commissioned to make stage sets and costumes for the radical ballet. This frontispiece for the script is likely the only surviving design for the project. Shahn's monumental Tom, towering above the plantation mansion, counters the racist version in minstrel shows—a stereotype that endured well into the twentieth century.

IN THE NEXT ROOM

A New Deal for Art

The cataclysmic stock market crash of October 1929 compelled many leftists, including Shahn, to question capitalism, which they believed had failed the common man. Shahn used his art as a weapon in the class struggle, inspired by his new companion Bernarda Bryson. He joined the Artists' Union; edited its journal, Art Front; and became a fellow traveler—an activist sympathetic to the ideology of communism. Shahn used photography to capture New Yorkers enduring the Great Depression, producing a body of images that he drew on throughout his career.

By the mid-1930s, Shahn had joined Popular Front coalitions to protest fascism abroad. He supported the New Deal of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose unprecedented social programs put millions of unemployed Americans back to work. Shahn and Bryson moved to Washington, DC, in September 1935 to work for the Resettlement Administration (later renamed the Farm Security Administration). This New Deal agency tackled the devastation wrought by the drastic economic downturn in American agriculture

and the Dust Bowl—severe drought and dust storms in the Great Plains region that destroyed crops and livelihoods. Shahn’s government posters and photographs raised public awareness to justify federal relief programs and promote New Deal policies.

Shahn’s documentary photographs, and his revelatory travels throughout the South and the Midwest, informed his paintings and government mural commissions. Despite some censorship, Shahn later said he was “completely in harmony with the times,” noting his “total commitment” to this far-reaching experiment in federally sponsored public art.

Untitled [Artists' Union demonstrators, Division IX,
May Day Parade, Communist Party Route, Fifth
Avenue and Madison Square, New York City], 1935
Gelatin silver print

Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Photography
Acquisitions Committee Fund, 2002-34

Untitled [Bleecker Street, Greenwich Village,
New York City], 1932–35
Gelatin silver print
Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Photography
Acquisitions Committee Fund, 2002–33

TOP ROW

6th Avenue [New York City], 1932–35
Gelatin silver print mounted
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Greenwich Village [New York City], 1932–34
Gelatin silver print mounted
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

BOTTOM ROW

Untitled [Jewish Children, between First and Second
Avenues, Lower East Side, New York City], c. 1931–32
Gelatin silver print mounted

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Greenwich Village [New York City], 1932–35

Gelatin silver print mounted

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

In the depths of the Great Depression, Shahn took up candid street photography with a brief lesson from his Greenwich Village studio mate, the photographer Walker Evans. Armed with a 35 mm Leica camera and a right-angle viewfinder, Shahn was able to capture his subjects unawares. He first used the camera as an efficient sketch pad to record details for his paintings, but he quickly became an innovator in documentary photography.

Everyday people of various ethnicities and races—often waiting—populate Shahn's pictures of Lower Manhattan. In preparation for an unrealized and contentious mural commission on prison reform at Rikers Island, he photographed incarcerated young men in prison yards. Most dynamically, he documented artist-activists demonstrating for relief jobs, agitating

for a municipal art gallery, and marching with fellow workers in May Day parades.



MIDDLE

Untitled [New York City Reformatory, New Hampton, New York], 1934

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

TOP ROW

Untitled [Lower East Side, New York City], 1936

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

East Side Merchants [Lower East Side, New York City], 1936

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

BOTTOM ROW

Bowery [New York City], 1936

Gelatin silver print mounted

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Untitled [Bowery, New York City], 1936, printed 1995

Gelatin silver print from original 35 mm negative;

made with permission of Bernarda Bryson Shahn

Private collection, United States

Untitled [Lower East Side, New York City], 1936

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

In 1935 Shahn moved from New York to Washington, DC, with his new partner, Bernarda Bryson, to work for the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration). He had left his wife, Tillie Goldstein, and their two young children—a devastating split that caused the family enduring turmoil.

Visiting New York to research Jewish immigration and the labor movement for his Jersey Homesteads mural, Shahn took his children to his old haunts on the Lower East Side. He photographed Jewish storefronts and old-world food traditions at a time when upwardly mobile Jewish immigrants were leaving the area. Shahn used witty and poignant pairings of images and vernacular texts, including Yiddish signs, to suggest hard times. Most iconic is his picture of a person down on his luck on the Bowery. Ironically, the man is crouched next to advertisements for Hollywood movies—a popular escape in the Depression-era United States.



Ben Shahn

Years of Dust, 1936

Lithograph

Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the
designer, 1947

Bernarda Bryson Shahn

American, 1903–2004

A Mule and a Plow, 1936

Offset lithograph

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of
Jake Milgram Wien in honor of the 95th birthday of
Bernarda Bryson Shahn

Ben Shahn's Years of Dust and Bernarda Bryson's
A Mule and a Plow were made for the Resettlement
Administration's Special Skills Division. Both
feature worried workers in bleak landscapes with
documentary details derived from Shahn's
photographs. One addresses the severe dust storms
and droughts that forced farmers to migrate
westward; the other underscores the Southern
farmers' hard manual labor working with mule-
driven plows.

The posters convey the artists' shared sensibilities,
despite their differing backgrounds. Bryson hailed

from a privileged Scottish Christian family in Ohio. As president, then secretary, of the Artists' Union and a one-time communist, she influenced Shahn's political radicalization. They both had a passion for Russian newsreels, socialist literature, labor causes, and activist art. Bryson moved with Shahn in 1939 to Jersey Homesteads (now Roosevelt, New Jersey) to raise a family, nonetheless continuing her art and activism.

IN THE CASE

Untitled [Houston Street Playground, East Houston Street, New York City], 1932–35

Exhibition print; original: gelatin silver print

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Gift of Bernarda Bryson Shahn

© President and Fellows of Harvard College

Houston St. Playground [East Houston Street,
New York City], 1932–35

Exhibition print; original: gelatin silver print

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge,
Massachusetts, Gift of Bernarda Bryson Shahn

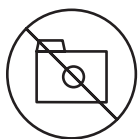
© President and Fellows of Harvard College

“Scenes from the Living Theatre,” *New Theatre* magazine, November 1934

Photographs by Ben Shahn Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University

Shahn’s New York street photographs were first published in *New Theatre*, the organ of the League of Workers Theatres, Workers Film and Photo League, and Workers Dance League. An ideal venue for his Leica snapshots, the magazine links Shahn to the use of documentary photography to create revolutionary public art. *New Theatre* was originally released (as Workers Theater) by the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) to combat fascism, militarism, and capitalism.

As a fellow traveler—a person sympathetic to communist goals—Shahn worked briefly for the CPUSA, but he soon rejected the dogmatism and infighting of communist circles. While Shahn never abandoned his leftist political ideals, over time these merged with his credo of individualism, freedom of expression, and nonconformity.



Untitled [Welfare Hospital, Welfare Island, New York City], 1934–35

Exhibition print; original: gelatin silver print

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Gift of Bernarda Bryson Shahn

© President and Fellows of Harvard College

Cecil Beaton, Portrait of New York, 1948
Published by B. T. Batsford, London
Private collection, United States

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CASE

Art Front magazine, November 1934

Published by the Artists' Union

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Hugo Gellert papers



**“Jonas ‘Patrick Henry’ Lie,” Art Front magazine,
April 1935**

Illustration by Ben Shahn

Published by the Artists’ Union

**Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Art Front collection**



Art Front magazine, January 1935

Photographs by Lou Block (American, 1895– 1969),
Lucienne Bloch (American, born in Switzerland, 1909–
1999), and Ben Shahn

Published by the Artists' Union

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Art Front collection



Untitled [Artists' Union and Artists' Committee of
Action Demonstrations, New York City], 1934–35

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Bernarda Bryson Shahn papers



Scotts Run, West Virginia, 1937

Tempera on paper mounted on wood

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
Purchase

Puddlers' Sunday, 1937 or 1938
Tempera on paper mounted to board
Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College,
Poughkeepsie, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert
Hackett (Frances Goodrich, class of 1912)

Unemployed, c. 1938
Tempera on board
Schoen Collection

ON THE WALL, LEFT SIDE

TOP ROW

Family of Rehabilitation Client, Boone County,
Arkansas, 1935

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Rehabilitation Clients, Boone County, Arkansas, 1935

Digital exhibition print from 35 mm negative

Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and
Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection

Music for the Square Dance, Skyline Farms,
Alabama, 1937

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

BOTTOM ROW

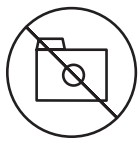
Children of Sharecropper, Little Rock, Arkansas, 1935
Gelatin silver print
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Cotton Pickers, Pulaski County, Arkansas, 1935
Digital exhibition print from 35 mm negative
Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and
Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection

Son of Destitute Ozark Family, Arkansas, 1935
Gelatin silver print
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Elizabeth McCausland papers

Shahn was a photographer, adviser, and exhibit designer, which positioned him at the forefront of the Special Skills Division and the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration). His compelling photographs of sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and coal miners in the South and Midwest epitomize the plainspoken and compassionate social documentary style of the 1930s United States.

Shahn's dynamic, candid images are an extraordinary record of a country in crisis, showing hardship and endurance. They indirectly critique the racial discrimination and segregation in the Jim Crow South that challenged the nation's democratic ideals. The photographs also provided Shahn raw material for his art in other media for the rest of his life.



ON THE WALL, RIGHT SIDE

TOP ROW

Citizens of Camden, Tennessee, 1935

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Bank in Smithland, Kentucky, 1935

Gelatin silver print mounted

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Untitled [Steel Strike, Warren, Ohio], 1937

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

BOTTOM ROW

Watching Medicine Show, Huntingdon,
Tennessee, 1935

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Child of Fortuna Family, Hammond, Louisiana, 1935
Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Elizabeth McCausland papers

Untitled [Steel Strike, Warren, Ohio], 1937
Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Shahn acknowledged that before his travels for the Resettlement Administration–Farm Security Administration, he knew very little of the United States. In his 1957 book The Shape of Content (on view in a case nearby), he expressed the transformative impact of witnessing firsthand the nation’s vast diversity and the contradictions within individuals:

Theories [of the masses] melted before [my] experience. . . . There was the South and its storytelling art, stories of snakes and storms and haunted houses, enchanting; and yet such talent

thriving in the same human shell with hopeless prejudices, bigotry, and ignorance.



Handball, 1939

Gouache on paper on board

Museum of Modern Art, New York, Abby Aldrich

Rockefeller Fund, 1940

Contemporary American Sculpture, 1940

Tempera on paper mounted on hardboard

Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois, Arts of the Americas Discretionary Fund; Wesley M. Dixon Jr., Roger and J. Peter McCormick, Goodman, and Mr. and Mrs. Frederick G. Wacker Jr. endowment funds; through prior gift of Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson; Ada Turnbull Hertle, Stan and Polly Stone, Mr. and Mrs. John W. Puth, and Jay W. McGreevy endowment funds; Luella Thomas Fund; Delphine G. Schoen Trust and Dr. Julian Archie endowment funds

Contemporary American Sculpture depicts a room in a 1940 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Art (January to February) at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. With biting wit, Shahn interrupted this pristine installation of modernist sculptures with his paintings of a West Virginia mining town, a destitute Arkansas farmer, and Black women at New York's Welfare Hospital. Using the strategy of art within art, Shahn exposed museumgoers to the hardships of marginalized people while critiquing the sculpture that ignored such harsh realities. The artist may have also called out his exclusion from this annual presentation.

These pictures, along with Handball and Puddlers' Sunday (both on view in this room), are what Shahn called his "Sunday paintings," works that dignify the ordinariness of everyday people and their activities. They represent Shahn's "personal realism," a shift in his art toward illuminating individual experiences. He attributed this change to his eye-opening travels taking photographs for the New Deal government.

IN THE CASE

**Payoff at Pursglove Mine, Scotts Run, West
Virginia, 1935**

**Digital exhibition print from 35 mm negative
Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and
Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection**

Striking Miners, Scotts Run, West Virginia, 1935
Digital exhibition print from 35 mm negative
Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and
Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection

Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free*, 1938
Published by Harcourt, Brace and Company,
New York
Private collection, United States

Edward Steichen, The Family of Man: The Greatest
Photographic Exhibition of All Time—503 Pictures
from 68 Countries—Created by Edward Steichen for
the Museum of Modern Art, 1955
Published by Maco Magazine Corporation, New York
Private collection, United States

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CASE

Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, Twelve Million
Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the
United States, 1941

Published by Viking Press, New York

Private collection, United States

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Cotton Pickers, Pulaski County, Arkansas, 1935

Cotton Pickers, Pulaski County, Arkansas, 1935

Untitled [possibly related to Cotton Pickers, Pulaski County, Arkansas], 1935

Cotton Pickers, 6:30 a.m., Alexander Plantation, Pulaski County, Arkansas, 1935

**Digital exhibition prints from 35 mm negatives
Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and
Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection**

IN THE NEXT ROOM

The Labor Movement

Shahn's posters from the mid-1940s exemplify his commitment to organized labor. He designed these works while he was chief artist and director of the Graphic Arts Division of the Congress of Industrial Organizations–Political Action Committee (CIO–PAC). Featuring figures with massive, hard-worked hands, Shahn's posters skillfully integrate text and image. The compositions convey the dignity of manual labor and a respect for craftsmanship that Shahn had absorbed from his family of woodcarvers and potters.

The graphics Shahn created for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1944 reelection campaign portray the president as a friend of labor unions. They also promote interracial cooperation in the postwar workforce, while commenting on the marginalization of Black people in the Jim Crow South. Shahn highlighted the persistent discrimination that plagued the CIO push for racial integration in unions.

By 1946, given President Harry S. Truman's ambivalent support of labor unions, Shahn's posters express

heightened anxiety. The struggle had become fraught between business interests and workers demanding basic human and economic rights. The labor movement experienced crisis as well. Passed in 1947, the Taft-Hartley Act restricted the power of labor unions. Influenced by this legislation, the CIO expelled suspected communists from its ranks.

Although Shahn severed ties with the CIO, he continued to support labor in his political art. He also privileged workers over industry in his cover illustrations for business magazines such as Fortune. These periodicals notably gave a platform to reformers, including Shahn, who critiqued capitalism. The commissions enabled the artist to both supplement his income and reach broad audiences.

Study for Great State of Wisconsin mural, c. 1937
Gouache, ink, and pencil on illustration board
Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael
Rosenfeld, New York, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld
Gallery, New York

Carpenter's Helper #2, c. 1940–42

Gouache on cardboard

Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, Museum Purchase,
Howald Fund

Steel Worker [study for The Meaning of Social
Security mural, Washington, DC], 1940–42
Gouache on paper
Collection of Adam and Erika Berg, Washington, DC

Harvesting Wheat [study for the west wall of The Meaning of Social Security mural, Washington, DC], 1941

Assisted by John Ormai (American, born in Hungary, 1919–1972)

Buon fresco on wallboard

D. Wigmore Fine Art, New York

Devoted to public art, Shahn completed several New Deal murals. The most prestigious is the Federal Works Agency's The Meaning of Social Security, a fresco secco (tempera paint on dry plaster) in the former Social Security Building in Washington, DC. The fresco supports Social Security, which Shahn called "one of the real fruits of democracy."

The mural's east wall shows vulnerable citizens whom the Social Security Act assists. The west wall, for which Harvesting Wheat is a study, shows the benefits the act promised—productive work, family security, and leisure. Farmers were left out of the original 1935 legislation, so Shahn included them here to highlight the act's limitations. A tribute to fruitful rural labor and the dignity of work, the west wall offered an uplifting message in the late Depression.



Ben Shahn, Housing [from the west wall of The Meaning of Social Security mural], 1940–42. Fresco secco, 105 × 184 in. (266.7 × 467.4 cm). Wilbur J. Cohen Federal Building, Washington, DC

Study for Jersey Homesteads mural, c. 1936
Tempera on paper on Masonite
Collection of Marlene and Alan Gilbert, Greenwich,
Connecticut

Shahn's Jersey Homesteads mural presents European Jewish immigration to the United States as a secular, modern-day exodus. Commissioned by the Resettlement Administration, the mural commemorates labor unionization and the agro-industrial planned community of Jersey Homesteads (later Roosevelt), New Jersey. The cooperative town was intended to house Jewish garment workers, relocating them from New York sweatshops and tenements; Shahn also settled in Jersey Homesteads in 1939.

In this study, somber immigrants leave the oppressive, antisemitic conditions of Europe for an unknown American future, symbolized by the Statue of Liberty looming in the distance. Jews pray in Jerusalem, another refuge for them outside Europe.

In the final mural (below), Shahn notably changed the location from Jerusalem to New York City. He added a figure of the world's leading physicist, Albert Einstein, who fled to the United States in 1933. Shahn

thereby merged the first wave of Eastern European immigration (1880s–early 1900s) with Nazi-era emigration from Germany.



Ben Shahn, Jersey Homesteads mural, 1936–38. Buon fresco, 144 × 540 in. (365.8 × 1371.6 cm). Roosevelt Public School, New Jersey. Photo: © Ricardo Barros.com, 2019

Organize . . . Steel Workers Organizing
Committee, 1930s
Gouache on illustration board
New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, Museum
Purchase

You're Stronger than Steel, 1937
Gouache on board
D. Wigmore Fine Art, New York

Man, 1946

Tempera on board

**Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs.
E. Powis Jones, 1958**

Bricklayers, c. 1951

Tempera on paper

Collection of Debra and Michael Skolnick, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania

Shahn created Bricklayers for a 1951 cover of Fortune magazine, basing the composition on a Resettlement Administration photograph by Carl Mydans (on view in the case below). The painting pictures two stonemasons practicing their trade with delicacy and focus. The work epitomizes Shahn's practice of creating an original artwork as the basis for a commissioned commercial design.

Shahn gained not only great popularity through his commercial work, but also art-world criticism, as this type of illustration was not considered high art. He nonetheless continued to embrace all media. Shahn undertook commercial assignments if he believed in the company's mission and received complete artistic freedom. Collaborating with forward-looking corporate art directors such as William Golden of CBS, who used fine art to elevate advertising, Shahn exerted a towering influence on the field of modern commercial design.

IN THE CASE

Ronny Jaques

British, 1910–2008

Ben Shahn [CIO-PAC Office, New York City], c. 1945

Exhibition print; original: gelatin silver print

Private collection, United States; original: National
Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC

Unknown photographer

Untitled [Ben Shahn's CIO Poster on Wall, East Harlem, New York City], c. 1944

Gelatin silver print Archives of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Ben
Shahn papers



Sam Nichols, Tenant Farmer, Boone County,
Arkansas, 1935

Digital exhibition print from 35 mm negative
Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and
Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection

Alfred T. Palmer

American, 1906–1993

Their Helmets Hoisted Back on Their Heads, These
Two Welders Take Time Out for a Smoke and Breath of
Fresh Air; Hundreds of Welders Are Employed in the
Building of Uncle Sam's New Navy Craft, Newport
News, Va., 1941

Gelatin silver print

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers



Ben Shahn and
Muriel Rukeyser
American, 1913–1980

Our Manpower, c. 1943

Exhibition copy of poster

New York Public Library, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg
Collection of English and American Literature, Muriel
Rukeyser papers

Shahn and the progressive writer Muriel Rukeyser designed Our Manpower for the Office of War Information (OWI) to mobilize American support for the Allied fight against fascism in World War II. In this poster—derived from an OWI photograph of two white welders—Shahn replaced one of the white figures with a Black figure. Made in response to racial conflicts in United States factories, the poster touts the racial, ethnic, and religious diversity of the United States labor force as its strength. OWI rejected the poster, possibly because the message—noting racial discrimination at home—did not advance conventional notions of patriotism.

Fortune magazine, August 1947
Cover image by Ben Shahn
Private collection, United States

Fortune magazine, January 1951
Cover image by Ben Shahn
Private collection, United States

Carl Mydans

American, 1907–2004

Stone Masons at Work at Hightstown,
New Jersey, 1935

Digital exhibition print from negative

Private collection, United States; original: Library of
Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and Photographs
Division, FSA/OWI Collection

Our Friend, 1944

Offset lithograph

Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

For All These Rights We've Just Begun to Fight, 1946
Offset lithograph

Maier Museum of Art, Randolph College, founded as
Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Lynchburg,
Virginia

Break Reaction's Grip, 1946

Offset lithograph

**Maier Museum of Art, Randolph College, founded as
Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Lynchburg,
Virginia**

For Full Employment after the War, Register, Vote
[Welders], 1944
Offset lithograph
Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

In For Full Employment after the War, Register, Vote, Shahn repurposed the imagery of Our Manpower (on view in the case nearby) to promote interracial cooperation in the postwar workforce. In this labor poster, a Black welder and a white welder work together. Yet the Black man, with an anxious look on his face, occupies a secondary position in relation to his white counterpart, who has an upward, determined gaze. Shahn's work may have reflected the continued marginalization of Black people at this time, especially in the Jim Crow South.

IN THE NEXT ROOM

War and Its Aftermath

During World War II (1939–45), Shahn worked for the Bureau of Publications and Graphics of the Office of War Information (OWI). The agency was established in 1942 after the United States joined the side of the Allies in December 1941. In its domestic operations, OWI hired artists to design graphics to persuade isolationist Americans to support the war effort.

Shahn designed many posters, but only two were likely to have been circulated by the OWI; most were criticized as harsh or unappealing. The artist uniquely focused on victims rather than perpetrators, avoided menacing fascist symbols, and used complex textual layering. Shahn was gripped by the photographs streaming into the OWI—as he put it, the “secret confidential horrible facts of the cartloads of dead” in bombed-out cities and other devastation.

Such images informed Shahn’s sorrowful paintings about destruction, liberation, reconstruction, and the indestructible human spirit. He lamented “the churches destroyed, the villages, the monasteries,”

as seen in his Italian landscapes, where widows walk among the ruins of war. Shahn sought a universal symbolism built on particularities to express the “sense of emptiness and waste that the war gave [him] and the sense of littleness of people trying to live on through the enormity of war.”

We Fight for a Free World!, c. 1942
Gouache and tempera on board
Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael
Rosenfeld, New York, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld
Gallery, New York

We Fight for a Free World! presents one of Shahn's rejected antifascist poster series for the Office of War Information (OWI) during World War II. The painting foregrounds proposed posters by artists of German, Japanese, and Jewish descent: Edward Millman (Suppression), Käthe Kollwitz (Starvation), Yasuo Kuniyoshi (Torture), Bernard Perlin (Murder), and Shahn (Slavery).

The posters target not the enemy as a people but the "methods of the enemy." This provocative approach intended to warn the American population of the dangers of Nazism and strengthen domestic support for the war effort. Shahn's effective conceptual strategy—art within art—uses wartime propaganda to comment on the medium's very nature. His declarative "we" implicates the viewer's moral conscience.

The artist and curator Jonathan Horowitz placed this painting at the heart of the Jewish Museum's group

exhibition We Fight to Build a Free World in 2020–21. In this way he underscored Shahn's urgent relevance to twenty-first-century art of resistance.

This Is Nazi Brutality, 1942

Offset lithograph

Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg, 2013

This Is Nazi Brutality addresses the horrific actions the Nazis took in the village of Lidice, Czechoslovakia. The city was destroyed and most of its inhabitants were murdered or deported to retaliate for the assassination by Czech resistance fighters of a high-ranking SS official. Focusing on an individual with defiantly clenched hands in his final moments of life, Shahn cogently conveyed the collective experience of wartime terror. He strategically layered texts and images as expressive partners to create what is his most recognized antifascist poster. It is likely one of only two of his posters that the Office of War Information (OWI) circulated.

We French Workers Warn You . . . Defeat Means
Slavery, Starvation, Death, 1942
Offset lithograph
Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg, 2013

We French Workers Warn You is one of two Shahn posters known to have been circulated by the Office of War Information (OWI). The poster condemns the Vichy government's decree of forced labor for French workers (many of them deported to Germany), issued in collaboration with the Nazis during their 1940–44 occupation of France.

Shahn based this image on his own painting—a practice that enabled him to retain the look of hand-applied brushwork. The message is less clear than that of This Is Nazi Brutality (on view nearby). For example, the workers' raised hands here may suggest surrender and defeat or, alternatively, solidarity and resistance.

The complex messaging, dense textual layering, and intense aesthetic of many of Shahn's poster designs were ultimately incompatible with the needs of wartime propaganda. Frustrated and enraged, Shahn left the OWI in 1943. His division was taken over by

commercial advertising executives who preferred a slick rather than a sincere and informational approach.

New York, 1947

Tempera on paper mounted on canvas and panel
Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Oscar and
Regina Gruss Charitable and Educational Foundation
Fund, 1996-23

Shahn grappled in largely allegorical ways with the horrors and existential threats unleashed by World War II. New York exhibits a melancholic new symbolism Shahn brought to his art during this period.

In this evocative painting Shahn reflected on his ethnic identity in the United States at a time when the full scope of Holocaust atrocities was being revealed. He extracted the bony boy, scale, empty tenement and factory, pike fish, and religious Jewish man from his Lower East Side photographs. Enigmatically floating as if collaged, these elements suggest Shahn's memories of his impoverished immigrant and Orthodox Jewish childhood. Such remembrances—fraught with loneliness and nostalgia—weighed heavily on his mind in these years.

1943 AD, c. 1943

Tempera on pressboard

Syracuse University Art Museum, New York, Gift of
Chancellor William Pearson Tolley '22

Italian Landscape, 1943–44

Tempera on paper

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Gift of the T. B.

Walker Foundation, Gilbert M. Walker Fund, 1944

Liberation, 1945

Gouache on board

Museum of Modern Art, New York, James Thrall Soby
Bequest, 1980

Shahn's paintings about World War II contrast its sorrow and destruction with subsequent renewal. According to Shahn's early biographer James Thrall Soby, the artist executed the work "after he had seen children swinging wildly in his yard, half in pleasure and half in pop-eyed fear, when it was announced that France was free" from Nazi occupation. The rubble was based on gravel from Shahn's backyard. The picture nonetheless transcends its particularities, speaking at once to a universal exhilaration of freedom and the lasting psychic trauma of war. The latter is expressed by the children's haunted eyes and precarious positions and the gutted apartments signifying lost lives. Shahn avoided nationalistic celebrations of Allied victory, instead conveying the sobering message that there are no victors in war.

Blind Accordion Player, 1945

Tempera on board

**Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State
University of New York, Gift of Roy R. Neuberger**

IN THE CASE

14th St. [New York City], 1932–34

Gelatin silver print mounted

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers



Unknown photographer

His Victory, Her Loss, c. 1935–36

Newspaper clipping

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

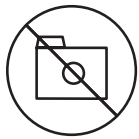


Unknown photographer

"Spanish Refugees on Their Way to Madrid," New York Times, November 3, 1936

Newspaper clipping

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers



Unknown photographer, Times Wide World Photos,
Paris Bureau

Where the Horrors of War Go On: Women and
Children of Jaen, near Granada . . . Air Raids and
Bombardments Which Destroyed Their Homes,
c. 1936–37

Newspaper clipping

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Unknown photographer, ACME Newspictures
Parade of Jeeps through Cisterna Castle, Italy,
June 9, 1944
Gelatin silver print with paper label
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers



Spread from Conditions in Greece: Confidential
Photographic Record, 1942
Pamphlet edited and published by the Royal Hellenic
Government
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

The photographs that came through the Office of War Information (OWI) left an indelible impression on Shahn. One such horrifying document, from a classified Greek government publication, shows a pile of dead children in an unidentified ghetto—victims of Nazi crimes.

Shahn incorporated this image into a powerful yet mysterious painting, Allegory. Its fiery leonine beast looms over a mass of immobile children. The composition exemplifies Shahn's use of allegory and symbolism to refer to the Holocaust. The painting may allude to the founding of the state of Israel, given that it was made in 1948, the year of Israel's creation. The beast also resembles the mythological she-wolf who suckled the human twins Romulus and Remus, later the fathers of Rome.



Ben Shahn, Allegory, 1948. Tempera on panel, 36 × 48 in. (91.8 × 122.2 cm). Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of William P. Bomar, Jr. in memory of Mrs. Jewel Nail Bomar and Mr. Andrew Chilton Phillips



IN THE NEXT ROOM

Age of Anxiety The Cold War

Shahn garnered widespread acclaim after World War II. In 1947 the Museum of Modern Art honored him with a retrospective, and in 1954 the museum selected him (along with the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning) to represent American painting at the Venice Biennale. In spite of Shahn's popularity, his socially engaged figurative realism fell out of favor with critics. The bold gestures and improvisational techniques of Abstract Expressionism had taken center stage in the United States by the late 1950s.

Shahn's art and politics were also subject to reactionary attacks in the early Cold War era. At this time Senator Joseph McCarthy and his allies began to persecute government employees they deemed subversive or disloyal to the United States. They stoked American fears of Soviet Communism and the nuclear arms race. Shahn was followed by the FBI, blacklisted by CBS Broadcasting, and interrogated by the House of Representatives' Un-American Activities Committee. His antinuclear work, which allied him

with global peace movements, placed another target on his back.

Shahn created an allegorical language—cryptic masks, accusatory fingers, inexplicable object combinations, crystalline structures, and swirling flames—to speak to the terrifying communist witch-hunts and looming dangers of the atomic age. He experimented with gestural abstraction and palimpsest (overlapping layers of texts and images) that he developed at the innovative Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1951. Shahn began to formulate his credo of “nonconformity” against the standardization of society. He staunchly defended individualism, civil liberties, and humanism in art.

Vandenberg, Dewey, and Taft, 1941

Screenprint

Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

In Vandenberg, Dewey, and Taft Shahn satirized the nominees for the Republican candidate in the 1940 United States presidential election. They appear with toothy grins and sickly green complexions that do not engender public trust. Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg Sr., Thomas E. Dewey, and Senator Robert A. Taft attacked Roosevelt's New Deal. Taft later sponsored the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, greatly restricting powers of labor unions that had been enshrined in the 1935 National Labor Relations Act. Shahn's unflattering portrayals align with his own values as a staunch supporter of the New Deal and organized labor.

A Good Man Is Hard to Find, 1948

Lithograph

Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

A Good Man Is Hard to Find addresses the early Cold War era—marked by the anticommunist hysteria of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his allies. Shahn created this campaign poster to support the 1948 Progressive Party presidential candidate, Henry Wallace, who was Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s former vice president and promoted freedom and global peace.

The artist, however, did not picture Wallace; instead he caricatured the other nominees, Democratic President Harry S. Truman (playing the piano) and Republican Thomas E. Dewey (sitting atop the piano), as grinning, ill-proportioned, untrustworthy politicians. The titles of the songs Truman plays, including “Little White Lies,” further indicate their unsuitability.

In the end, Truman won the election. While he protected and expanded New Deal policies at home, his administration adopted aggressive interventionist policies to thwart communism abroad.

Conversations, 1958

Opaque watercolor and brush and ink on paper
mounted on board

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney
Museum of American Art

Conversations typifies Shahn's enigmatic subjects and cryptic pictorial language of the 1950s. Two officials covertly exchange black papers, speaking to the atmosphere of surveillance and suspicion that permeated the Cold War era. These shadowy figures with masks allude to political duplicity and hypocrisy.

Shahn may have been criticizing democratic leaders of this period who compromised their principles to stop the spread of communism. At this time, for example, President Dwight D. Eisenhower thawed relations with Spain's brutal dictator, Francisco Franco, who had sided with Germany in World War II. Along with the Pentagon, Eisenhower saw Spain as strategically useful to combat Soviet influence in Europe.

Everyman, 1954

**Tempera and oil on canvas mounted on
composition board**

**Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
Purchase**

Existentialists, 1957

Watercolor on heavy paperboard

Brooklyn Museum, New York, Dick S. Ramsay Fund

Second Allegory, 1953

Tempera on canvas mounted on Masonite

Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois

Urbana Champaign, Purchase through the Festival of Arts fund

Second Allegory—featuring a cowering figure under attack—speaks to Shahn’s urgent concerns in the early Cold War era: the repression of civil liberties and the looming threat of nuclear annihilation. In this haunting painting the artist used the loose, linear, and improvisational gestures of Abstract Expressionism and the palimpsest techniques (overlapping layers of texts and images) that he experimented with at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. In this way Shahn created a complex and dynamic symbolic language to comment on the most pressing issues of his time.

Artist and Politicians, 1953

Ink on paper

New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Sidney Merians

Shahn used a barbed-wire line here to create a skeletal yet strong figure that represents the artist under threat. Two politicians point at the artist while he grips his brushes—his truth-telling tools of resistance. His worried, hand-on-chin expression evokes Shahn's photograph of the Arkansas farmer Sam Nichols (on view in a nearby case), one of the most iconic from his time with the Resettlement Administration–Farm Security Administration.

The image addresses Shahn's concept of the "two malignant forces" endangering "the great American liberal tradition": Stalinist communism on the left and the anticommunist crusade on the right. A social democrat by 1953, Shahn rejected absolute or extremist principles in all spheres of life and defended individualism—central to his credo of nonconformity. In Shahn's view, the nonconformist prevents a society's "fall into decay" and "presses for change, experiment, and venture into new ways."

Blind Botanist #2, 1954

Tempera on canvas mounted on board

**Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State
University of New York, Gift from the Dina and
Alexander E. Racolin Collection**

Lute and Molecule #2, 1958
Screenprint with hand coloring
Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

IN THE CASE

Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, 1957

Illustrations by Ben Shahn

Published by Harvard University Press, Cambridge,
Massachusetts

Private collection, United States

Untitled [Portrait of Roy M. Cohn], c. 1954

Ink on paper

Private collection, United States

Edgar Kemler, "Will Joe Bolt the G.O.P.? Ike Would Be Delighted," Nation magazine, May 1954

Illustrations by Ben Shahn

Private collection, United States

Shahn deplored the witch-hunts of liberals and progressives led by Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy and his associates. In the name of national security during the Cold War, they rooted out suspected communists as well as homosexuals—those in the government of President Dwight D. Eisenhower whom they deemed subversive or disloyal to the United States.

Shahn illustrated a 1954 article for the progressive Nation journal on the Army-McCarthy Senate hearings, which investigated conflicting accusations McCarthy and the U.S. Army leveled at each other. His incisive caricatures of the major players include McCarthy and his unscrupulous chief counsel, Roy M. Cohn. These congressional hearings were among the first to be televised, exposing millions to McCarthy's hostile style and unsavory methods. The publicity weakened the senator's popular support and, along with his Senate censure in December 1954, contributed to his downfall.

Ben Shahn, "Nonconformity," Atlantic Monthly
magazine, September 1957
Cover image by Ben Shahn
Private collection, United States

**“You Have Not Converted a Man Because You Have
Silenced Him,” Time magazine, April 1960**

Illustration by Ben Shahn

Private collection, United States

Untitled [Portrait of J. Robert Oppenheimer], c. 1954
Pencil on paper
Private collection, United States

Fallout [advertisement for CBS], part 2 of the series
Atomic Timetable, 1958

Illustration by Ben Shahn

Lithograph on paper

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dolores S. Taller in
memory of Stephen Lee Taller, 2001-1

Ralph E. Lapp, "The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon,"
Harper's Magazine, December 1957
Cover design and illustrations by Ben Shahn
Private collection, United States

Richard Hudson, Kuboyama and the Saga of the Lucky Dragon, 1965

Cover design and illustrations by Ben Shahn

Published by Thomas Yoseloff, New York

Private collection, United States

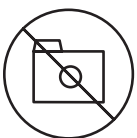
ON THE WALL

We Did Not Know What Happened to Us, c. 1960,
from the Saga of the Lucky Dragon series, 1960–62
Tempera on wood

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC,
Gift of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc.

Shahn feared the dangers of nuclear weapons, living, as he said, “in a time when civilization has become highly expert in the art of destroying human beings.” He believed the humanities, not blind, uncritical faith in science, must guide scientific advances.

We Did Not Know What Happened to Us is a moving and far-reaching antinuclear statement. Shahn depicted the Japanese fishermen contaminated by the 1954 United States hydrogen bomb test in the Bikini Atoll. This apocalyptic painting features a clawed, mythic dragon that dominates a darkened sky, wreaking havoc on the desperate fishermen struggling below. Their suffering bodies are foreboding symbols of the world’s first hydrogen-bomb victims.



Head of Oppenheimer, c. 1954
Ink and brush drawing on paper
Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Amy Madden and
Griffin Taylor in memory of Joseph Devernay, 2024-21

Shahn portrayed the celebrated theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the leader of the American government's top-secret project to create atomic bombs. The United States ultimately dropped these bombs on Japan in 1945, aiming to end World War II.

Head of Oppenheimer relates to a Shahn illustration for a 1954 Nation article about the scientist's downfall. Oppenheimer had earlier ties to communism and was opposed to the development of the hydrogen bomb after the war, which led the Atomic Energy Commission to investigate him in 1954. As a result of this inquiry his security clearance was revoked, effectively ending his premier role in advising the government.

Shahn's Oppenheimer has dark, hypnotic eyes, a furrowed brow, and sunken cheeks. The artist captured the anguish of this tragic figure—tormented not only by his role in unleashing a weapon of mass destruction but also by the anticommunist crusades of the McCarthy era, which ironically victimized him.

Stop H Bomb Tests, 1960

Color screenprint

**Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg, 2020**

IN THE NEXT ROOM

The Struggle for Civil Rights

Shahn ardently supported civil rights in the United States and the resistance efforts against international colonialism in the 1950s and 1960s. As a Jewish immigrant Shahn knew antisemitic persecution firsthand, so he strove to combat racism and other forms of discrimination. His commitments exemplify the alliance between Jewish and Black people in the American civil rights movement—a partnership with a fertile yet complicated history.

Shahn depicted individuals who, in spite of great personal danger, stood up for racial equality. He created several portraits of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as an icon of nonviolence and a spellbinding civil rights and labor activist. He mourned, in concert with many Americans, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and pictured trailblazing Supreme Court justices who ruled against racial segregation.

Shahn's art additionally bolstered decolonization movements that swept through Asia and Africa in the

post–World War II era, touching on the empires established there by Belgium, France, and Great Britain. During the last stage of India’s independence campaign, Shahn memorialized the devastation suffered under British colonial rule. He focused on Gandhi, an Indian nationalist leader whom both he and Dr. King saw as a spiritual inspiration and a profound influence on American civil disobedience strategies. Shahn also created commercial advertisements that illuminated the plight of Black South Africans under apartheid, a system of extreme racial segregation and discrimination. As an activist Shahn understood that the struggles of oppressed peoples around the world were inextricably linked in a global fight for freedom.

Martin Luther King, 1965
Ink and ink wash on paper
Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort
Worth, Texas

Shahn depicted the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a powerful activist delivering a stirring oration in preparation for a Time magazine cover commission (on view in the case nearby). Shahn's image contrasts with the deradicalized version of King touted today.

Dr. King's speech took place shortly after March 7, 1965, "Bloody Sunday," when police and white residents brutally beat activists peacefully marching from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Images of the violent encounter, widely disseminated in national and international news, swayed many Americans to support key voting rights legislation.

Ben Shahn and
Stefan Martin
American, 1936–1994
Martin Luther King, 1965
Wood engraving
Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg, 2014

Ben Shahn and
Stefan Martin
American, 1936–1994
Martin Luther King, 1968
Offset lithograph
Collection of Adam and Erika Berg, Washington, DC

After the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968, Shahn repurposed the image from his ink drawing Martin Luther King (1965, on view nearby) for a lithograph. Here Shahn added his own hand-scripted excerpt from the civil rights leader's last speech. In the oration known as "I've Been to the Mountaintop," Dr. King called for economic actions and nonviolent protest, challenging the United States to live up to its ideals. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which King founded in 1957, used Shahn's lithograph in a fund-raising campaign.

The Church Is the Union Hall, 1946

Tempera on board

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Purchase with funds from Sherri and Jess Crawford, High Museum of Art Enhancement Fund, the American Art Collectors, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Schwob, and Mr. and Mrs. John L. Huber

ABOVE THE CASE

James Chaney

Andrew Goodman

Michael Schwerner

From the Human Relations Portfolio, 1965

Screenprints on paper

Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Kristie A. Jayne Fund, 19 99-169.1-.3

They didn't set out to be heroes. They had no ambitions to become martyrs or symbols. There was an ulcer in their time, and they couldn't stand it. And for this they ought to be remembered.

—Edwin Rosskam, 1965

The Human Relations Council of Greater New Haven, Connecticut, used these simple and haunting line portraits of three slain civil rights workers to raise funds. The faces of a Black college student, James Chaney; and two white Jewish men, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, appear under their names, rendered in Shahn's powerful folk lettering.

The Ku Klux Klan murdered these young activists on June 21, 1964, during the "Freedom Summer"

campaign to register Black voters in Mississippi. The men's interracial cooperation and consequent murders helped the United States Congress pass the landmark Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965).

We Shall Overcome, from the Nine Drawings
Portfolio, 1965
Offset lithograph
Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg, 2018

IN THE CASE

Time magazine, March 1965
Cover illustration by Ben Shahn
Private collection, United States

Wendell Berry, November Twenty Six Nineteen
Hundred Sixty Three, 1964
Cover design and illustrations by Ben Shahn
Published by George Braziller, New York
Private collection, United States

Shahn shared in the collective shock and grief over the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963. He was deeply moved by Wendell Berry's sorrowful poem "November 26, 1963," named for the day after Kennedy's funeral and published in the Nation. Shahn wanted to illustrate the poem because of its modesty and unpretentiousness. The artist mirrored these qualities in the cover's folk lettering, which had become ubiquitous in commercial art. He sought "to monumentalize those days so that we may not so soon become inured to an unacceptable violence, a failure, a profound sadness."

One of Shahn's images showing the profiles of a Black man and a white man—"the bearers of the light"—may allude to Kennedy's efforts to unite the nation around civil rights legislation. Kennedy saw passing these laws as both a constitutional and moral issue.

Leo Rosten, "They Made Our World . . . Gandhi,"
Look magazine, August 1964
Illustration by Ben Shahn
Private collection, United States

Untitled [study for Gandhi's Hand], c. 1964

Pencil on paper

Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Ben Shahn Estate, 2015

Unknown photographer

"Victims of India's Worst Famine in Decades; In Calcutta, a Family, Ravaged by Starvation, Lies Helpless in the Streets," New York Times, October 1943

Newspaper clipping

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Ben Shahn papers

Report on South Africa [advertisement for CBS],
December 1954

Report from Africa [advertisement for CBS],
April 1956

Report from Africa [advertisement for CBS], April and
May 1956

Illustrations by Ben Shahn

Exhibition prints; originals: offset lithographs

Fine Arts Library, Harvard University, Cambridge,
Massachusetts, Stephen Lee Taller Ben Shahn Archive

Shahn illustrated advertisements for “Reports from Africa,” a See It Now CBS television series (cocreated by one of the most renowned broadcast journalists of his day, Edward R. Murrow) featuring the growing resistance to colonialism around the world.

One drawing includes stylized images of faceless African porters carrying baskets on their heads—exoticized and abstracted figures that unfortunately reveal little cultural insight into the peoples depicted. Others show more individualized and incisive portraits: a pensive unidentified African man and a somber Black South African family paired with overt signs of apartheid-era discrimination.

Integration, Supreme Court, 1963
Tempera on paper mounted on Masonite
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections,
Purchased with funds from the Edmundson Art
Foundation, Inc.

Integration, Supreme Court commemorates the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education, which deemed public school segregation unconstitutional. Shahn pictured the nine justices of the highest court in the land, small and seated along the bottom of the painting. Chief Justice Earl Warren, the leader of what has been considered the most liberal Supreme Court in United States history, is at center.

Rather than celebrating the justices, however, the work focuses on the institution of the court and the lofty ideals of democracy. Classical columns dominate the vast, hallowed setting, symbolizing the monumental task before the panel of judges and aspirational goals yet to be met. Shahn likely recognized the irony that legal justice for Black Americans was in the hands of a small group of privileged white men.

India, 1943

Tempera on board

Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, Gift of Roy R. Neuberger

India shows victims of the 1943 Bengal famine in British India (present-day Bangladesh), bringing to the fore those who suffered under British colonial wartime policies. Shahn adapted its imagery from a New York Times photograph (shown in the case nearby) of a starving Bengali family. The artist transformed the source photograph's horizontal staircase into a diagonal one to activate and underline the urgency of the tragedy. These stairs span Shahn's composition and emphasize the emaciated, angular bodies of the ravaged family.

Such inhumane conditions fueled the civil disobedience of the Indian nationalist Mahatma Gandhi, who played a leading role in India freeing itself from British rule in 1947. This was just five months before a Hindu extremist assassinated Gandhi on January 30, 1948, in retribution for his tolerance of Muslims and his ultimate acceptance of the traumatic partition of the British Indian Empire into India and Pakistan.

Gandhi, 1965

Screenprint

Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg, 2017

Shahn created this monumental portrait of Mahatma Gandhi based on his Look magazine illustration of the Indian nationalist leader (in a case nearby). The image accompanies Look's 1954 tribute to the man whose earlier hunger strikes served as bloodless weapons against British colonial rule. Shahn used his barbed wire line—rendering an emaciated Gandhi in an erect meditative position—to express the spiritual icon's moral severity and steady vision. Gandhi's passive resistance inspired civil rights activists to use their bodies as instruments of nonviolent protest—such as sit-ins, marches, and boycotts—in their struggle for dignity and freedom.

IN THE NEXT ROOM

Spirituality and Identity

Biblical and Talmudic studies shaped Shahn's early education in Eastern Europe. While he absorbed prayers, psalms, and stories from the Hebrew Bible, from a young age he questioned the existence of an almighty God. Nurtured in working-class, Yiddish-speaking New York neighborhoods, the artist saw his Jewishness as an ethnic rather than religious identity.

In later years, according to his partner Bernarda Bryson Shahn, Shahn returned to the religious traditions of his youth "without the sense of moral burden and entrapment." He used texts from the Hebrew Bible, such as the Book of Job, to comment on the eternal problem of undeserved suffering. Using abstraction to convey radiant constellations and divine whirlwinds, Shahn endeavored to visualize the mysteries of the universe.

Shahn's Judaism is best expressed by the words of the ancient sage Hillel the Elder: "If I am not for myself, who is for me? If I care only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" The artist wrote this passage

by hand in key late works, including one seen here from 1968. This was the year before Shahn died, at the height of the Vietnam War, which he strongly protested. The works link him to a cherished tradition of social justice within observant and secular Judaism and reveal an ever-questioning mind. Indeed, in his last interview, Shahn described himself as “more of an anarchist, more of a perpetual radical than a visionary utopian.”

Etrog, Lulav, and Menorah, 1967

Gouache on board

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Stanley M. Mark
and Miriam Gordon Mark, 1996–20

Etrog, Lulav, and Menorah is a study for a twenty-foot-wide stained-glass mural—Menorah, Lulov, and Esrog, 1968—that Shahn created for the Menorah Park Jewish Home for the Aged in Beachwood, Ohio. In Hebrew/Yiddish, lulav/lulov is a frond of palm, willow, or myrtle; etrog/esrog is a citron fruit; both are meant as reminders of ancient Jewish life being tied to the land. These objects are essential to the blessings for Sukkot, a celebration of the autumn harvest. The holiday also commemorates the forty years during which, according to the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites wandered in the desert after escaping slavery in Egypt.

The seven-branched menorah is not directly linked to Sukkot but nonetheless shares the symbolism of light and connects to the Temple in Jerusalem. The ancient candelabra alludes to the name of the retirement home and also reflects the playful artistic freedom Shahn took with Jewish ritual imagery.

Decalogue (The Ten Commandments), 1961
Gouache and gold leaf on paper
Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Albert A. List Family, JM 136-72

Shahn used the first Hebrew letter of the first word of each of the Ten Commandments. Although he delighted in inventive and whimsical Hebrew writing, the artist felt the need for this and other works to consult on its accuracy. Shahn conferred with his dear friend and Roosevelt, New Jersey, neighbor Morris (Moishe) Bressler, a Hebrew scholar and singer of Yiddish and Russian folk songs. He also communed with Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, a renowned Talmud scholar, a dominant leader in Conservative Judaism, and the president of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Finkelstein was a central figure in the founding of the Jewish Museum in New York.

Pleiades, 1959

Gouache and gold leaf on paper

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Albert A. List, JM 135-72a

Translation of the Hebrew

Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can you
loosen Orion's belt?

Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons
or lead out the Bear with its cubs?

Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up
God's dominion over the Earth?

Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover
yourself with a flood of water?

Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they
report to you, "Here we are"?

Who gives the ibis wisdom or gives the rooster
understanding?

Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? Who can
tip over the water jars of the heavens

When the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth
stick together?

—Hebrew Bible, Ketuvim, Job 38:31–38

Where Wast Thou?, 1964

Opaque watercolor and gold leaf on paper mounted
on Masonite

Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort
Worth, Texas

Translation of the Hebrew

Where were you when I laid the Earth's foundations?

Speak, if you have understanding.

Do you know who fixed its dimensions? Or who
measured it with a line?

Onto what were its bases sunk? Or who set its
cornerstone;

When the morning stars sang together, and all the
sons of God shouted for joy?

—Hebrew Bible, Ketuvim, Job 38:4–7

The radiant constellation in Where Wast Thou?
represents science and mythology; its kaleidoscopic
whirlwind emanating linear flames symbolizes divinity.
The Hebrew text from the Book of Job is God's
thundering response to the ever-struggling Job, who
questions why God does not punish the wicked and
allows the suffering of the needy, helpless, and
innocent. Shahn used abstraction, in rich purple-blue
hues and gold leaf, to grapple with the mysteries of
the universe. The work's linear rhythms, gestural

surfaces, and structural scaffolding evoke techniques used by Abstract Expressionist painters such as Robert Motherwell, with whom Shahn engaged in fiery public debates about the state of American art.



Robert Motherwell (American, 1915–1991), Study for Mural for Temple B’nai Israel in Millburn, New Jersey, 1951. Gouache and ink on paper, $8\frac{5}{8} \times 16\frac{15}{16}$ in. (21.9 × 43 cm). Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Gifts of Hyman L. and Joan C. Sall and Abraham and Mayer Mitchell, 1989–78

ABOVE THE CASE

How Many Are God's Goodnesses to Us
The Reckoning of the Miracles
In Every Generation Men Rise Up against Us
The Bread of Affliction

From The Haggadah Series, 1931
Watercolor and ink on paper
Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Edward M. M.
Warburg, JM 153-47.9; JM 153-47.8; JM 153-47.4;
JM 153-47.1

Struggling financially in summer 1931, Shahn sought projects that could generate income and resonate with his own experience. He illustrated a Haggadah, the prayer book for the Passover feast that narrates the ancient Israelites' Exodus from bondage in Egypt. Shahn drew on childhood memories of the celebration and recent experiences from his time on the Tunisian island of Djerba, where a unique Arabic-speaking Jewish minority lived in relative harmony with Muslims for centuries.

In the style of a medieval illuminated manuscript, Shahn hand-lettered the Hebrew text on each

page and decorated the sides with vibrant figures resembling bearded and turbaned Jewish men from Tunisia. When a publisher refused to print the illustrations in color, Shahn aborted the project and did not complete a Haggadah until 1965. The 1966 deluxe edition is on view in the case below.

IN THE CASE

Ben Shahn and
Stefan Martin

American, 1936–1994

Maimonides with Calligraphy [Ecclesiastes], 1965

Wood engraving

Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg, 2014

Alphabet of Creation: An Ancient Legend from the Zohar, 1954

Adapted and illustrated by Ben Shahn

Published by Pantheon, New York

Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Gift of Lenore Klein, 1996-40

Shahn was fascinated by the golden age of Jewry in medieval Spain, when Jews and Christians lived in relative peace under Muslim rule. He rendered a turbaned Maimonides, an esteemed Sephardic philosopher of this epoch who codified Jewish law. Above him is a text from the Book of Ecclesiastes about the fleeting nature of worldly pursuits—a reason to seize life's enjoyments on Earth.

Shahn also embraced key Kabbalists, or Jewish mystics, in medieval Spain. Abraham Abulafia elevated the mysterious powers of Hebrew letters, which he proposed as a transcendent gateway to the divine. Moses de León is the presumed writer of The Alphabet of Creation, a tale around which Shahn created the delightful children's book seen here. The story, which recounts the rivalry among Hebrew letters in God's creation of the world, comes from the foundational Zohar text of the Kabbalah.

Alan W. Miller, *God of Daniel S.: In Search of the American Jew*, 1969

Cover and jacket design by Ben Shahn

Published by Collier-Macmillan, London

Private collection, United States

Hallelujah Suite [Psalm 150], 1970
Lithographs and illustrations by Ben Shahn
Published by Kennedy Graphics, New York
Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg and
Dr. Laura Katzman, 2023

Ecclesiastes, or, The Preacher, 1971 and 1967
Handwritten and illuminated by Ben Shahn
Published by Grossman Publishers, New York
Private collection, United States
Published by Trianon Press, Paris
Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

Haggadah, 1966
Copied and illustrated by Ben Shahn
Published by Trianon Press, Paris and London
Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

Shahn's love of lettering and typography originated in his lithographer's training as a teenager. He painstakingly mastered the expressive shapes and characters of letters for commercial printing. In later years, using a potent yet poetic line, Shahn brilliantly combined Hebrew letters with images in his hand-lettered books.

His majestic Hallelujah Suite illuminates Psalm 150 of the Hebrew Bible. Pages of Hebrew calligraphy face lyrical lithographs of musicians praising God by playing their instruments. Ecclesiastes, or, The Preacher is Shahn's pictorial re-creation of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Its author, conveying the futility of grasping life's meaning, imparted the practical wisdom of enjoying God's gifts on Earth.

Shahn illustrated a Haggadah, the Passover prayer book that narrates the ancient Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt. Graced with goat skin and gold lettering, this book completed his unrealized 1931 Haggadah, for which he rendered evocative watercolors (on view above this case).

ON THE WALL

Flowering Brushes, 1968

Lithograph on paper

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Mrs. Norma Green,
JM 51-76

Translation of the Hebrew

[Rabbi Hillel] used to say: "If I am not for myself, who
is for me? If I care only for myself, what am I? If not
now, when?"

—Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot)

Flowering Brushes is one of Shahn's last works. The composition features a pensive painter, stylized and highly abstracted from its source image of the Arkansas tenant farmer Sam Nichols (on view in a case nearby). Nichols's distressed expression inspired more than three decades of Shahn's images of stoic individuals suffering through economic hardship, war, and political repression.

Above the artist here appear the words of the ancient sage Hillel the Elder that stress commitment of the individual to self and others. The empty eye sockets of the masklike face suggest inward reflection, while

the bursting brushes signify external engagement. Indeed, Shahn's treatise on nonconformity asserts that dissent from conformity requires creators to be, paradoxically, both involved in and detached from society. Flowering Brushes thus embodies the eternal struggle of the artist on the cusp of creation—reaching within and without to make meaning of and for the world.

Today Is the Birthday of the World, 1955

Ink on paper

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Albert A. List, JM 88-72

Translation of the Hebrew

Today the world is born; today shall stand before You.

All the

beings of the cosmos, whether as Your children or

as Your

servants. If as Your children, show them mercy, like a
mother

toward her children. If as Your servants, then our

eyes are

turned toward You in great anticipation. That You

may be

gracious, rendering judgment for good, on our behalf,
as clear

as light of day.

—Poem recited on Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year),
origin unknown

Alphabet of Creation, 1957

Screenprint

Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia

Translation of the Hebrew

Twenty-two foundation letters: He ordained them,

He hewed

them, He combined them, He weighed them, He

interchanged

them. And He created with them the whole

creation and

everything to be created in the future.

—The Book of Formation (Sefer Yetzirah)

The Alphabet of Creation is a story about how God created the world through the Hebrew alphabet.

The narrative derives from the Sefer ha-Zohar, or The Book of Splendor—a text central to Jewish mysticism, presumably written by the thirteenth-century Kabbalist Moses de León.

In Shahn's print, the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, all jumbled up, evoke the ideas of the medieval Sephardic mystic Abraham Abulafia. The mystic's beliefs that Hebrew letters offer a pathway to higher spiritual states inspired Shahn's 1963 book

Love and Joy about Letters, an homage to the letters of many alphabets.

The artist's Hebrew alphabet design seen here became his literal signature: he had the alphabet made into a Japanese-style chop, which he stamped onto many works from his last decade of life.

Warsaw 1943, 1963

Screenprint on Japon paper

Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg, 2016

Translation of the Hebrew

These I will remember and my soul overflows
with sorrow.

For evil people have swallowed us, like a cake,
unturned, for

during the days of Caesar there was no reprieve for
the ten martyrs,

put to death by the [Roman] government.

—Prayer said on Yom Kippur (Jewish Day of
Atonement)

Following World War II Shahn searched for a way to grapple with incomprehensible acts of evil. In Warsaw, 1943 he commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto Jews against their Nazi occupiers.

Shahn turned to symbolic motifs and ancient and medieval Hebrew texts to respond to history and contemporary life. The opening lines of a prayer said on Yom Kippur—a thirteenth-century poem on the legend of the Ten Martyrs (rabbis) who the ancient

Romans executed—appears in this composition. Shahn repurposed the figure of the anguished man from a news photograph of a criminal anticipating trial. He recognized the iconic power of the image to transcend its original context, repurposing it for one of his few direct references to the Holocaust.

Arnold Newman

American, 1918–2006

Ben Shahn, Roosevelt, NJ, 1951

Gelatin silver print

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Augusta and Arnold Newman, 2004–69

A serious Ben Shahn appears in his studio at home in Roosevelt, New Jersey, originally founded as the New Deal cooperative town Jersey Homesteads. The agro-industrial community was planned and built for New York garment workers of Eastern European Jewish heritage. By the time of this photograph, however, the town had attracted writers, artists, and folk musicians. Many, like Shahn, had become targets of anticomunist crusades and FBI surveillance.

Arnold Newman captured Shahn at midlife and a decisive moment. The year 1951 was also a time of great experimentation in Shahn's art. He taught and collaborated with cutting-edge dancers, poets, and musicians at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Shahn defended his convictions in a repressive political climate while striving to remain relevant in an art world that increasingly championed abstract art—work he deemed divorced from human

values. Such were the conditions that shaped the content of his nonconformity.

