## 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 midtwentieth-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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