

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.

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.

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.

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.”

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.

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.

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."