

**FIRST MAJOR U.S. CAREER-SPANNING RETROSPECTIVE DEVOTED TO BEN SHAHN IN NEARLY 50 YEARS DEBUTS AT THE JEWISH MUSEUM IN MAY 2025**

***Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity* Examines Artist's Lifelong Commitment to Social Justice and the Enduring Resonance of His Work Today**

New York, NY, March 18, 2025—This spring, the Jewish Museum presents the first U.S. retrospective in nearly half a century dedicated to social realist artist and activist Ben Shahn (1898-1969). *Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity* examines the prolific and progressive artist's commitment to chronicling and confronting crucial issues of his era, spanning from the Great Depression to the Vietnam War, as well as his exploration of spirituality and Jewish texts. Featuring 175 artworks and objects from the 1930s to the 1960s, including paintings, mural studies, prints, photographs, commercial designs, and ephemera, the exhibition highlights the enduring relevance of Shahn's art across media, while revealing new insights into the complexity of his aesthetic and his decisive shift from documentary to allegorical and poetic styles in pursuit of a visual language that would resonate widely.

On view from May 23 through October 12, 2025, *Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity* extends the Jewish Museum's history of exploring Shahn's far-reaching ideas and deep impact of the artist. The exhibition is organized by Dr. Laura Katzman, guest curator, in collaboration with Dr. Stephen Brown, Jewish Museum curator, and is drawn from the recent retrospective curated by Dr. Katzman at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

"*Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity* showcases the extraordinary work of a pioneering artist whose commitment to social justice across ethnic, class, and racial divides could not have greater relevance today," said **James S. Snyder**, Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director. "There is no better place for this timely exhibition than the Jewish Museum, which presented Shahn's last U.S. retrospective in 1976. The affirmation of shared universal humanity in his art parallels the Jewish Museum's own mandate to explore the cross-cultural connectedness of Jewish experience throughout the global diaspora over 3,500 years."

The exhibition draws its title from Ben Shahn's credo of "nonconformity," which the artist asserted as an indispensable precondition for both significant artistic production and all great societal change. This philosophy is centered in the exhibition as the foundational thread that runs through the artist's oeuvre, which investigates issues such as unemployment, discrimination, authoritarianism, and threats to freedom of expression, while championing labor, civil, and human rights. Shahn's later spiritual work, which embraces the Hebrew language and biblical stories, also reflects his exploration of a tradition of social justice activism within Jewish culture.

Born to a Jewish family in Russian-controlled Lithuania, Shahn immigrated to the United States with his family in 1906. He began his career as a lithographer, mastering drawing, engraving, and typography, before expanding and

experimenting across a vast array of mediums. The exhibition demonstrates Shahn's rejection of a strict hierarchy among mediums, based on a belief in the power of images in all forms to stir the conscience of the public.

"*Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity* offers a reappraisal of the artist through a contemporary lens," said Dr. Laura Katzman, guest curator. "Shahn's understanding of art's critical role in the perpetual struggle for a more just future resonates powerfully today. The exhibition invites visitors to examine the issues that were important to Shahn through our modern understanding of social justice. It also uplifts the richness and complexity of his aesthetic, which drew inspiration from various artistic movements in the postwar era—from abstract expressionism to conceptual art—and capitalized on the reach of mass media, raising commercial production to a high art."

"Ben Shahn is one of the great American artists of the twentieth century who believed in the value of dissent and the essential function of art in the life of a democratic society," said Dr. Stephen Brown, Jewish Museum curator. "The first major presentation of his work in the U.S. in decades, the Jewish Museum exhibition is something of a homecoming for Shahn, who has been part of our collection since 1947 and who was educated and politicized in New York City."

#### About the Exhibition

The exhibition includes artwork and ephemera from throughout Shahn's career, on loan from more than 30 museums, galleries, and private collections. Across seven sections, *Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity* explores the artist's multifaceted use of photography and mass media, his inventive re-purposing of imagery across media, and his layered interrelations of word and image. The sections are organized thematically around the most pressing issues of Shahn's time, including:

- **Art and Activism** encompasses Shahn's earliest social realist work from the 1930s, highlighting the artist's response to high-profile injustices perpetrated by the American judicial system;
- **A New Deal for Art** presents Shahn's powerful photographs, posters, and mural studies made for U.S. government art projects that championed programs aimed at alleviating the devastation wrought by the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Also on view are Shahn's "personal realist" paintings, which dignify the ordinariness of everyday life that he encountered on his photographic travels for New Deal agencies;
- **The Labor Movement** features Shahn's mass-produced posters and graphics that speak to his commitment to the cause of labor and to promoting the dignity of manual labor, executed in the mid-1940s when he led the Graphic Arts Division of the Congress of Industrial Organizations' Political Action Committee;



- **War and Its Aftermath** explores Shahn's work created both during and after World War II: propagandistic posters commissioned by the Office of War Information, which confront the horrors of war, and more reflective paintings that grapple with wartime destruction and postwar liberation;
- **Age of Anxiety: The Cold War** includes the works Shahn made during the era of McCarthyism and the emergent Atomic Age, which both protest America's anti-communist hysteria and warn of the looming nuclear threat both at home and abroad;
- **The Struggle for Civil Rights** reflects Shahn's fervent support of the nonviolent movements for civil rights in the U.S. and for the broader resistance movements against colonialism that were rising up around the world in the 1950s and 1960s;
- **Spirituality and Identity**—the final section of the exhibition showcases Shahn's return to the biblical stories and Hebrew texts he grew up with as a child, illuminating how re-engagement with his Jewish roots was yet another lens through which he commented critically on history and society.

*Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity* builds on the Jewish Museum's long history of presenting Shahn's work to American audiences. In 1976, the Museum hosted a major Shahn retrospective, and in 1998, to mark Shahn's centenary, organized *Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn*, focusing on the role of allegory in the artist's later, lesser-known paintings. Twenty-two years later, in 2020, the conceptual artist Jonathan Horowitz curated *We Fight to Build a Free World*, which situated Shahn's work at the heart of an exhibition that examined how artists responded to cultural and political challenges with art primarily from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to 2020.

### Publication

The exhibition will be accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue, published by the Jewish Museum, New York, and the Museo Nacional Centro Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, in association with Princeton University Press. Drawing on media studies, cultural studies, and museological approaches, the catalogue brings international perspectives and new insights to the work of artist Ben Shahn. With a foreword by James S. Snyder, the book is authored by Laura Katzman, Professor of Art History at James Madison University, with contributions by Beatriz Cordero Martín, Professor of Art History at Saint Louis University, Madrid; Christof Decker, Professor of American Studies at Ludwig-Maximilian University, Munich, Germany; and John Fagg, Senior Lecturer in American Literature and Cultures at the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. It will be available for \$45.00 from the Jewish Museum Shop and booksellers worldwide.

### Exhibition Organization

*Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity* was organized by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte



Reina Sofía, Madrid, and adapted by the Jewish Museum, New York. The New York exhibition is curated by Dr. Laura Katzman, Professor of Art History at James Madison University, in collaboration with Dr. Stephen Brown, Curator at the Jewish Museum. Dr. Katzman also served as guest curator of the recent Ben Shahn exhibition in Madrid. The exhibition at the Jewish Museum is designed by Chelsea Garunay with graphic design by Poliana Duarte.

### **Exhibition Support**

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

### **About the Jewish Museum**

The Jewish Museum is an art museum committed to illuminating the complexity and vibrancy of Jewish culture for a global audience. Located on New York City's famed Museum Mile, in the landmarked Warburg Mansion, the Jewish Museum was the first institution of its kind in the United States and is one of the oldest Jewish museums in the world. The Museum offers diverse exhibitions and programs and maintains a unique collection of nearly 30,000 works of art, ceremonial objects, and other mediums reflecting the global Jewish experience over more than 3,500 years. The public may call 212.423.3200 or visit [TheJewishMuseum.org](http://TheJewishMuseum.org) for more information.

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