

## 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.

[13]

**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**

[14]

**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**

[309]

**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**

[opposite wall] [10]

**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**

**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**

# 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



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**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 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.

[16]

**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

[29]

**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**

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**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**

[opposite wall] [20]

**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].*

**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**



**[DISPLAY CASE 1: 211]**

**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**

**[DISPLAY CASE 1: 310]**

**Unknown photographer**

**Sacco and Vanzetti, 1927**

**Gelatin silver print press photograph**

**Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia**

[DISPLAY CASE 1: 242]

# 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



[DISPLAY CASE 1: 235]

**Paul Thompson, “The Soap-Box  
Orator and His Auditors,” National  
Geographic magazine, July 1918**

Private collection, United States

[DISPLAY CASE 1: 239]

# George Maurer, “Amnesty! On Sacco-Vanzetti Day!,” Labor Defender magazine, August 1931

Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives,  
New York University



## 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**



## **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.

[282]

**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**

RIGHT TO LEFT, STARTING AT CENTER

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

Gelatin silver print

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

## Greenwich Village [New York City], 1932–35

Gelatin silver print mounted

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

## 6th Avenue [New York City], 1932–35

Gelatin silver print mounted

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

## 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

## Untitled [Bleecker Street, Greenwich Village, New York City], 1932–35

Gelatin silver print

Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Photography Acquisitions Committee Fund, 2002-33

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.



LEFT TO RIGHT, STARTING AT CENTER

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

Gelatin silver print

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

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

Gelatin silver print

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

## Bowery [New York City], 1936

Gelatin silver print mounted

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

## 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.

**[DISPLAY CASE 2: 220]**

# **Cecil Beaton, Portrait of New York, 1948**

**Published by B. T. Batsford, London**

**Private collection, United States**

**[DISPLAY CASE 2: 43]**

**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**

# “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.



**[DISPLAY CASE 2: 26]**

**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**

**[DISPLAY CASE 2: 27]**

**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**

**[DISPLAY CASE 2: 244]**

# **Art Front magazine, November 1934**

**Published by the Artists' Union**

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



[DISPLAY CASE 2: 246]

# **“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**



[DISPLAY CASE 2: 245]

# 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



[DISPLAY CASE 2: 37, 40, 41, 42]

**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**



[98]

# 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)



[103]

**Unemployed, c. 1938**

**Tempera on board**

**Schoen Collection**

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.



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.*



[112]

# 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 the 1940 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art (now the Biennial) 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 the 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.

**[DISPLAY CASE 3: 222]**

**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**

**[DISPLAY CASE 3: 217]**

# **Archibald MacLeish, Land of the Free, 1938**

**Published by Harcourt, Brace and Company,  
New York**

**Private collection, United States**

**[DISPLAY CASE 3: 77]**

# **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**

**[DISPLAY CASE 3: 305]**

# **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**

[DISPLAY CASE 3: 219, closed; 313, open]

**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

[96]

# **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**

# 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.

[118]

# **Carpenter's Helper #2, c. 1940-42**

**Gouache on cardboard**

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

[119]

**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

[02]

**Organize . . . Steel Workers  
Organizing Committee, 1930s**

**Gouache on illustration board**

**New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, Museum Purchase**

[290]

# **You're Stronger than Steel, 1937**

**Gouache on board**

**D. Wigmore Fine Art, New York**

[146]

# Man, 1946

Tempera on board

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

**[DISPLAY CASE 4: 138]**

**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



**[DISPLAY CASE 4: 72]**

# **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.

**[DISPLAY CASE 4: 261]**

# **Fortune magazine, August 1947**

**Cover image by Ben Shahn**

**Private collection, United States**

**[DISPLAY CASE 4: 263]**

# **Fortune magazine, January 1951**

**Cover image by Ben Shahn**

**Private collection, United States**

[DISPLAY CASE 4: 319]

# **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

[135]

# **Our Friend, 1944**

**Offset lithograph**

**Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia**

[143]

# Break Reaction's Grip, 1946

Offset lithograph

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

[145]

# 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

## 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.

[148]

# **Warning! Inflation Means Depression, 1946**

**Offset lithograph**

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

## 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.

[139]

# Blind Accordion Player, 1945

Tempera on board

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

# 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.

[130]

# Italian Landscape, 1943–44

Tempera on paper

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Gift of the T. B. Walker  
Foundation, Gilbert M. Walker Fund, 1944



[125]

**1943 AD, c. 1943**

**Tempera on pressboard**

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

[DISPLAY CASE 5: 21]

# 14th St. [New York City], 1932–34

Gelatin silver print mounted

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



[DISPLAY CASE 5: 249]

# 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**



**[DISPLAY CASE 5: 259]**

# **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**



ABOVE

## 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



# 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.

[175]

# Existentialists, 1957

Watercolor on heavy paperboard

Brooklyn Museum, New York, Dick S. Ramsay Fund

[166]

## Everyman, 1954

Tempera and oil on canvas mounted on  
composition board

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase

## 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.

## 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.

[165]

## **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**

## 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.

## 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."

[179]

# **Lute and Molecule #2, 1958**

**Screenprint with hand coloring**

**Collection of Michael Berg, Fairfax Station, Virginia**

**[DISPLAY CASE 6: 223]**

# **Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content, 1957**

**Illustrations by Ben Shahn**

**Published by Harvard University Press,  
Cambridge, Massachusetts**

**Private collection, United States**

**[DISPLAY CASE 6: 164]**

**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.

**[DISPLAY CASE 6: 270]**

**Ben Shahn, “Nonconformity,”  
Atlantic Monthly magazine,  
September 1957**

**Cover image by Ben Shahn**

**Private collection, United States**

**[DISPLAY CASE 6: 273]**

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

**Illustration by Ben Shahn**

**Private collection, United States**

**[DISPLAY CASE 6: 163]**

**Untitled [Portrait of J. Robert  
Oppenheimer], c. 1954**

**Pencil on paper**

**Private collection, United States**

**[DISPLAY CASE 6: 272]**

**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**

[DISPLAY CASE 6: 271]

**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**

**[DISPLAY CASE 6: 228]**

# **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**

# 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.



[184]

# Stop H Bomb Tests, 1960

Color screenprint

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

## 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.

[193]

# 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.

[286]

# 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

James Chaney  
Andrew Goodman  
Michael Schwerner

## From the Human Relations Portfolio, 1965

Screenprints on paper

Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Kristie A. Jayne  
Fund, 1999-169.1-.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).

[196]

# **We Shall Overcome, from the Nine Drawings Portfolio, 1965**

**Offset lithograph**

**Madison Art Collection, James Madison University,  
Harrisonburg, Virginia, Gift of Michael Berg, 2018**

**[DISPLAY CASE 7: 277, closed; 302, open]**

# **Time magazine, March 1965**

**Cover illustration by Ben Shahn**

**Private collection, United States**

AT LEFT

## 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.

**[DISPLAY CASE 7: 276]**

**Leo Rosten, “They Made Our World  
... Gandhi,” Look magazine, August  
1964**

**Illustration by Ben Shahn**

**Private collection, United States**

## 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



**[DISPLAY CASE 7: 189]**

**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**

## 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.

## 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<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 16<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> 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

# 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.

LEFT TO RIGHT, STARTING AT CENTER

## **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).

## **Ben Shahn and Stefan Martin**

American, 1936–1994

NEAR RIGHT

### **Maimonides with Calligraphy [Ecclesiastes], 1965**

Wood engraving

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

FAR RIGHT

### **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.

**[DISPLAY CASE 8: 231]**

**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**

## 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 anticommunist 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.