Contents

> *[William] Blake, in "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," said that righteous indignation over injustice was the truest worship of God. And I guess I am filled with righteous indignation most of the time.... [M]y fear of absolutism, whether in religion, science, politics, or in art.... is the strongest fear I have. And then I feel I must make a statement. I feel that every direction has its right.... but the danger immediately becomes apparent when a particular direction is recognized as the only direction. Then I will raise my voice, as Blake said, at the injustice of this kind of absolutism.*—Ben Shahn, 1966 [1]

INTRODUCTION

Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity / Ben Shahn. De la no conformidad, hosted by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, proposes a fresh and wide-ranging look at Ben Shahn (1898–1969) on the 125th anniversary of the artist's birth. The exhibition examines the multifaceted art of this Jewish immigrant from Russian-controlled Lithuania and his endurance as one of the most prominent, prolific, and progressive of the "social viewpoint" artists in the United States from the 1930s through the 1960s.[2] Shahn was celebrated in his lifetime and has been the subject of many exhibitions, television programs, and publications. His centenary generated multiple thematic exhibitions, including those at New York's Jewish Museum, the Harvard Art Museums, and the Jersey City Museum.[3] This "renewed art historical scrutiny" constituted a constellation of influential scholarship—a "collaborative enterprise" deemed the Shahn "project."[4] Yet Shahn's art has not been explored in a career-spanning retrospective in an art museum in the Western world since 1978, nor has his work been seen on a large scale in Europe since 1963.[5] No Shahn retrospective has previously been mounted in Spain. Such a project is thus long overdue and, as this essay discusses, particularly timely in our current sociopolitical and cultural moment.

Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity highlights the currency of Shahn's art and its continued relevance by focusing on the artist's commitment to social justice, through the lens of contemporary diversity and equity perspectives. In so doing, the exhibition presents Shahn as a champion of the underdog, a promoter of the rights of workers and immigrants, among other marginalized or persecuted people, and a critic of the abuses of the powerful and the privileged. The exhibition opens with Shahn's emergence as a radical artist on the left in the dark days of the Great Depression and charts the evolution of, and challenges faced by, his art and politics from the New Deal through the height of the Vietnam War era. The show demonstrates how Shahn interpreted—with compassion and purpose—the most pressing issues of his day, illuminating critical aspects of twentieth-century history, domestic and foreign: the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing economic crisis; the Dust Bowl; Jim Crow racism; the rise of European fascism; World War II atrocities; Cold War repression of individual liberties; threats of nuclear annihilation in the atomic age; and the postwar struggles for labor, civil, and human rights when decolonization movements were sweeping the globe. This, in turn, reveals the values of Shahn and other leftists of his generation, such as universal humanism—an ideal that has "come under intense scrutiny for its Western bias and neglect of cultural and historical difference."[6] What did social justice look like to Shahn? What remains relevant today?

Given the broad scope of this thematic retrospective, audiences will be able to trace Shahn's social justice concerns as incisive threads that weave through the fabric of his art—concerns that are detailed in the catalogue's focused essays by Christof Decker, John Fagg, and Beatriz Cordero Martín, who examine Shahn's World War II poster art, labor-related work, and engagement in postwar aesthetic debates, respectively. Drawing on media studies, cultural studies, and art-historical approaches, each text brings new insights to Shahn's

1. Albert Christ-Janer, "What Moves You, Ben Shahn," *Response* 8, no, 2 (1966): 82.

2. Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 4–5.

3. Susan Chevlowe et al., *Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn* (New York: The Jewish Museum and Princeton University Press, 1998); Deborah Martin Kao, Laura Katzman, and Jenna Webster, *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Alejandro Anreus et al., *Ben Shahn: The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (Jersey City: Jersey City Museum and Rutgers University Press, 2001).

4. John Davis, "The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (September 2003): 568–69, 579, note 109.

5. The Jewish Museum in New York hosted a traveling retrospective (1976–78). The Museum of Modern Art's International Circulating Exhibitions Program hosted a retrospective and a graphics exhibition (1961–63). Japanese museums have mounted large solo exhibitions in 1970, 1991, 1996, 2011–12, and 2015–16, among other years.

6. Megan Cole Paustian, "A Postcolonial Theory of Universal Humanity: Bessie Head's Ethics of the Margins," *Humanity* 9, no. 3 (January 15, 2019): abstract, 343–62.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Bernarda Bryson Shahn, Jonathan Shahn, Ezra Shahn, and to all Shahn family members and friends in Roosevelt, New Jersey, who for over thirty years have encouraged and aided my research. Special thanks to Jasper Shahn and Zachary Shahn for giving permissions from the Ben Shahn Estate and to Nicholas Acker, Mary Jane Appel, Michael Berg, Beatriz Cordero Martín, Jessica Davidson, Christof Decker, John Fagg, Olmo Masa, Ani Rosskam, Jeb (Jean) Shahn, and Abby Shahn for offering invaluable insights. Frances K. Pohl generously contributed her immense expertise on Shahn.

progressive vision and to his fight against injustice and inequality, which formed the core of his practice. This remained true even as he shifted from documentary, representational styles to more poetic, lyrical, and elegiac idioms that employed allegory, symbolism, and myth—secular and religious—in search of universal expression. Such changes came in part from Shahn's own disillusionment with Marxist theories and the limitations of "art for the masses" and from his response to the Cold War climate. Social realist styles and overt engagement in radical politics fell out of favor in avant-garde art circles after the war, as certain critics, curators, and gallerists began to promote abstraction and as reactionary politicians persecuted artists for leftist activities and affiliations.

The exhibition shows how Shahn attempted to stay true to his own vision but also remain relevant. Even as his harshest critics denigrated his art as mere propaganda, as "illustration" or "journalism" (and hence, not "high art"), his postwar work was in demand with private collectors and major museums and appreciated by noted critics as well as by particular sectors of the public in the U.S. and Europe. (Abstract expressionism was not "codified" until the later 1950s.) Shahn won accolades, such as the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship at Harvard University in 1956 and honorary degrees in the 1960s. He continued to make meaningful art in the midst of attacks from right-wing politicians and publications like *Counterattack*, as well as interrogation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the House Un-American Activities Committee. What remains fascinating, as Frances Pohl has so cogently detailed, is how Shahn was able to appeal artistically to the pro-labor left and the business-oriented or moderate right.[7] Equally intriguing is how Shahn engaged with artists far from his own aesthetic ideology, such as conceptual composer John Cage, abstract expressionists Robert Motherwell and Barnett Newman, and the younger abstractionist Cy Twombly, the latter of whom Shahn mentored. This happened despite his protestations against abstract and non-objective art as noncommittal and divorced from human values and his mocking comments on pop art, happenings, and minimalism.[8] Conversely, Dada-inspired pop artists like Andy Warhol, in his early commercial work, emulated Shahn's trademark "blotted line." Pop art has even been linked to the populist folk and graphic design of Shahn's generation.[9] (Shahn admired the whimsically irreverent abstraction of Paul Klee and Alexander Calder as much as the trenchant realism of Francisco de Goya and Honoré Daumier.)

Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity also looks at how Shahn shaped his social justice content. Shahn adapted the stylistic formalism of modern European art to U.S. subject matter in his social realist work (i.e., School of Paris modernism, French and Italian surrealism, and German expressionism), affirming, as Jody Patterson has argued, that realism and modernism were not as polarized in the 1930s as canonical narratives have suggested. Shahn's postwar palimpsest techniques and allegorical subject matter align with the gestural styles and mythic, existential themes of abstract expressionism.[10] Yet his layered visual language and adoption of modernist conceptual strategies—often linked to his use of photography—remain underappreciated by a wide swath of the public. Current scholars have laid the foundation for such exploration, by considering Shahn's use of montage techniques, framing devices (art within art), multiple temporalities, and storefront reflections and commercial signage (as in his photographs), among other reflexive elements that offer metacommentary on the process of the work's creation or the nature of representation itself.[11] While Shahn's narrative approach may seem anti-modernist, his innovative use of lettering and integration of word and image tie his art to the experimental, modernist poets with whom he connected or collaborated, such as E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Mirella Bentivoglio.[12]

7. Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947–1954* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

8. For debates on abstract art and humanism, see "Contemporary Documents: Modern Art—1950," *College Art Journal* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1950): 339–40. On Shahn's views of avant-garde art, see Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 55–67; Interview with Ben Shahn by Forrest Selvig, September 27, 1968, transcript, 13–19, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

9. Blake Stimson, "Ben Shahn," in *Citizen Warhol* (London: Routledge, 2014), 124–45; Thomas Crow, *The Long March of Pop: Art, Music, and Design, 1930–1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

10. Jody Patterson, *Painters, Politics, and Public Murals in 1930s New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Stephen Polcari, "Ben Shahn and Postwar American Art: Shared Visions," in Chevlowe et al., *Common Man, Mythic Vision*, 67–109.

11. Examples are Katzman, "Deconstructing Documentary: Ben Shahn's *Contemporary American Photography*," in Joseph C. Schöpp and Martin Klepper, eds., *Transatlantic Modernism* (Heidelberg: Universitatsverlag C. Winter, 2001), 173–90; Diana L. Linden, "Ben Shahn's *Contemporary American Sculpture*," gallery brochure (New York: Jonathan Boos, 2017); and Christof Decker, "Fighting for a Free World: Ben Shahn and the Art of the War Poster," *American Art* 33, no. 2 (2019): 84–105. Sara Blair has read Shahn's New York photographs of the Jewish Lower East Side as meditations on modernity, immigrant assimilation, and on the ontology of photography itself. See "Spirituality, Identity, and the Hebrew Bible" in this catalogue.

12. Frances K. Pohl, *Love and Joy About Letters: The Work of Ben Shahn and Mirella Bentivoglio* (Claremont: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2003).

Shahn's complex use of photography—his own New York City street photographs and Resettlement Administration-Farm Security Administration (RA-FSA) photographs, as well as those of others—to create art in other media is a rich topic that has generated scholarly inquiry. But given the pervasiveness of the practice within his oeuvre and the new discoveries continually emerging from his photo source archive and clipping files, much remains for researchers to mine.

Although Shahn distanced himself from his own photography in the late 1940s, privileging his painting, he continued to refer to or draw on camera images for the entirety of his career. As this author has argued elsewhere, and as Decker and Fagg have shown in their essays for this catalogue, the ways that Shahn used his source photographs reveal his research, thinking process, sociopolitical concerns, and depth of understanding about the topics he explored.[13] Further, the way Shahn recycled and repurposed documentary and mass media photographs—along with the resulting afterlives of the appropriated images—affirms what one influential critic asserted: "Shahn looms as a post-Modern avatar, relevant in our present-day debates over originality and what constitutes artistic 'work.'"[14]

Shahn's layered visual language, with its "competing systems of pictorial logic," emerges across the media he breathtakingly mastered, gravitating to those that could reach mass audiences. He generally rejected a hierarchy of media.[15] The retrospective thus includes easel paintings and mural studies (gouache, watercolor, and his unique type of tempera that emulated the look of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florentine frescoes)[16]; drawings in ink or pencil (the backbone of his art); 35 mm photographs (a medium that he first took up for sketching but in which he quickly became an innovator); and prints (lithographs and screen prints made for mass-produced posters or for fine art editions). To amplify and contextualize this work, the exhibition features Shahn's source material, archival ephemera, and commercial design production, such as hand-scripted, illustrated books; magazine commissions; television advertisements; and press and newspaper photographs that he collected, catalogued, used, and reused in a myriad of ways.[17]

The artist's embrace of accessible and reproducible media coincided with his wide patronage—federal, state, and city governments; labor unions; corporations; political campaigns; religious organizations; universities and other nonprofits; and private art collectors. With each agency or project, Shahn surged to the forefront as a leader with far-reaching vision. A force of inexhaustible energy and drive, the warm, gregarious artist cut a charming figure as a raconteur in his prime and was remembered at the end of his life as "a generous, affectionate, wise and humorous giant of a man."[18] Even as he faced ideological clashes, dismissals, censorship, and blacklisting, Shahn never lost his conviction that art should be integral to society as a moral tempering force for science. Believing that the poet was as essential as the physicist, he praised attempts to revive the humanities in the early atomic age. Such beliefs resonate today, given the divestment in the arts and humanities by governments and educational institutions and the intense focus on science, technology, engineering, and math to prepare younger generations for the high-tech global economies of our time.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND RESONANCE

While each generation since Shahn's death could find his work timely, his art has taken on new urgency in the current polarized political climate in the U.S. and beyond, with the seismic disruption of conventional politics. Shahn's relevance surfaced vividly in the powerful exhibition *We Fight to Build a Free World* hosted by the Jewish Museum in New York (2021–22). Curated by conceptual artist Jonathan Horowitz, the exhibition addressed the resurgence of antisemitism in the U.S., tying it to the broader institutional racism and

13. See note 11 and essays by Katzman: "The Politics of Media: Ben Shahn and Photography," in Kao, Katzman, and Webster, *Ben Shahn's New York*, 97–117, 142–46; "Mechanical Vision: Photography and Mass Media Appropriation in Ben Shahn's *Sacco and Vanzetti* Series," in Alejandro Anreus et al., *Ben Shahn and the Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 51–80, 126–35; and "Source Matters: Ben Shahn and the Archive," *Archives of American Art Journal* 54, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 4–33. See also Tetsua Sakai et al., *Ben Shahn: Cross Media Artist/ Photographs, Paintings and Graphic Arts* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-Sha Co., Ltd., 2012); chapter 3 in Christof Decker, *Imaging the Scenes of War: Aesthetic Crossovers in American Visual Culture* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2022), 61–89; and John Fagg, "Ben Shahn and Jacob Lawrence: Beyond Genre Painting," in *Re-envisioning the Everyday: American Genre Scenes, 1905–1945* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023), 159–77.

14. Frederick Kaufman, "Ben Shahn's New York," *Aperture* 162 (Winter 2001): 74.

15. Davis, "The End of the American Century," 569. While Shahn believed all images were equal, whether made with the brush, pencil, or camera, painting was the medium in which he felt he could most fully express himself. Shahn, "In the Mail: Art versus Camera," *New York Times*, February 13, 1955, sec. 2, 15.

16. Part of the tempera revival (1930s–1950s), Shahn preferred tempera's fast-drying, matte qualities to the glossiness of oil paint. He used a complex paint mixture applied in layers (often onto paper) to achieve the tightness, clarity, and range of textural contrasts he desired. While tempera is a long-lasting medium, many of Shahn's paintings have suffered from cracking in the paint film and significant paint loss.

17. Shahn produced fresco murals during the New Deal and later mosaic murals, along with stained glass, sculpture, and scenography. In the 1930s, he even briefly engaged in film, which he called the "master medium."

18. Editor Russell Lynes quoted in Howard Greenfeld, *Ben Shahn: A Life* (New York: Random House, 1998), 322. As noted below, Greenfeld also discussed the less-flattering sides of Shahn, who could be egotistical and overbearing.

the rise of xenophobia and authoritarianism erupting around the world, including in long-standing democracies. Horowitz was invited to organize this show in the wake of the violent "Unite the Right" rally in 2017 that mobilized far-right extremist groups in protest of the proposed removal of the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia and in support of white supremacy.[19] The curator situated Shahn's work *We Fight for a Free World!* (c. 1942) (p. 152) at the heart of his installation. This painting was created to promote a never-realized series of anti-fascist posters Shahn envisioned for the Office of War Information (OWI) during World War II. It presents the proposed posters by artists of Japanese, Jewish, and German descent, featuring not the enemy but the "methods of the enemy"—a propaganda strategy intended to announce the dangers of Nazism to the U.S. population and strengthen domestic support for the war effort.

"Inspired by Shahn's attempt to incorporate multiple voices across years and cultural identities," Horowitz commissioned thirty-six contemporary artists to create their own posters—making reference to Shahn if desired—to respond to the struggles of our own day, such as gun violence, climate change, and Islamophobia.[20] The curator's own meta-installation of the resulting posters was complemented by his expert selection of other socially and politically engaged art, much of it contemporary, from a critical perspective. Recognizing the prescience of Shahn's warnings about threats to democracy, Horowitz underscored the relevance of Shahn's art to the twenty-first-century art of resistance. He keenly grasped the provocation of Shahn's textual language, implicating viewers' moral conscience (who is the "We"?), and of his framing of "art within art," which uses propaganda to comment on the very nature of propaganda.[21]

While the Jewish Museum exhibition was underway in 2018, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened *Shahn, Mooney, and the Apotheosis of American Labor*. A small, focused exhibition curated by Ilene Susan Fort, celebrating the museum's purchase of *Apotheosis* (1932–33), it reunited several paintings and source material from Shahn's series on Tom Mooney. Mooney was a San Francisco labor leader wrongly convicted of a bombing during the Preparedness Day parade in 1916 (in anticipation of the U.S. entrance into World War I). His persecution became a *cause célèbre* that generated mass protest on the left and mass media sensationalizing of corrupt witnesses, self-serving politicians, and, according to critic Shana Nys Dambrot, "high-profile defenders having a proxy culture war." The exhibition opened at a time when the U.S. saw an upsurge in major strike activity and an increase in public support for labor unions—a notable fact since organized labor has been on the decline in the U.S. since the 1970s.

Stressing Shahn's contemporary relevance, Nys Dambrot wrote, "what truly makes the [Mooney] project come alive is its readily apparent resonance with our current political situation. After all, mass demonstrations, government corruption, an epidemic of incarceration … and the domination of old white men in policymaking are commonplace now," noting Shahn's painting of the conservative California Supreme Court as "particularly heartbreaking" (p. 72). Nys Dambrot asserted that "at our own crucial moment of political strife," art like Shahn's is "one of the most powerful tools in the fight to reach people and change minds." His artistic voice, she concluded, is "one that a new generation of activists would do well to study, as the fearless man of principle and honored art-historical trailblazer he remains."[22]

In the year following the tumultuous 2016 U.S. presidential election, this author curated for the Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art at James Madison University (JMU) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, *Drawing on the Left: Ben Shahn and the Art of Human Rights*. The show interpreted Shahn's graphics as "a blueprint for speaking out against hatred, bigotry, inequality, and injustice" and "a clarion call for all citizens to stand in solidarity with

19. Marchers brandished torches reminiscent of those in Ku Klux Klan rallies, chanting: "Jews will not replace us."

20. Laura Feinstein, "We Fight to Build a Free World: A History of Artists Resisting Intolerance," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2020, theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/oct/07/we-fight-to-build-a-free-world-jewish-museum-new-york.

21. Interview with Jonathan Horowitz by the author, October 27, 2022. Horowitz's exhibition *The Future Will Follow the Past* (2022–23), Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia, also put *We Fight for a Free World!* at its core.

22. Shana Nys Dambrot, "A Powerful Look at One Artist's Quest for Social Justice," *L.A. Weekly*, October 18, 2018, laweekly.com/a-powerful-look-at-one-artists-quest-for-social-justice-more-than-80-years-later/.

vulnerable communities to ensure the future of democracy, pluralism, and even civilization itself."[23] Three years later, in the months leading up to the November 2020 presidential election, the Madison Art Collection at JMU launched the digital exhibition *Ben Shahn: Art as Civic Engagement*. Featuring Shahn's work related to voting as the cornerstone of a democracy, the display coincided with actual and proposed U.S. legislation in the name of "election integrity," which, in fact, restricted access to voting by economically disadvantaged communities—legislation facilitated by the 2013 Supreme Court decision that struck down major portions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.[24]

Another noteworthy Shahn exhibition, from 2017, *Ben Shahn: If Not Now, When?*, appeared at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago. Curator Ionit Behar offered this raison d'être for the modest show: "Ben Shahn's images of immigrants, refugees, labor organizers, and civil rights workers are as powerful today as they were during his lifetime. It is critical to exhibit Shahn's works in these times, in this country, in Chicago, and at a Jewish institution. His commitment to debate and social change is inspiring, a much-needed feeling here and now."[25] The "here and now" may be a veiled reference to the controversial 2017 "Muslim ban," a U.S. presidential executive order that blocked refugees from several Muslim-majority nations from entering the U.S., in their attempt to escape poverty, dictatorships, and in the case of Syria, a bloody civil war.[26] In this climate, a larger graphics exhibition opened in 2017 in New Hope, Pennsylvania, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakashima Arts Building, which today houses the Nakashima Foundation for Peace chaired by Mira Nakashima. The daughter of Shahn's friend, the architect and woodworker George Nakashima, who endured a World War II Japanese internment camp, Mira Nakashima told the press that "she was deeply disturbed by recent calls from conservative pundits for Arab Americans to be detained" and by "a rising [global] tide of racial prejudice and xenophobia."[27]

Finally, some influential New York art critics have in recent years asserted that Shahn's art can speak to our moment. Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* invoked Shahn's *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1931–32) (p. 70 left) in her March 2017 article "Should Art That Angers Remain on View?" It addresses the scandal at the Whitney Biennial surrounding Dana Schutz's abstract painting of the casket showing Emmet Till, the fourteen-year-old who was lynched by the Ku Klux Klan on August 28, 1955—a heinous crime that galvanized civil rights activism. Smith weighed the range of positions (including calls for censorship and the destruction of the painting) regarding whether a white artist today, at a moment when, in the words of Aruna D'Souza, "Black people are still subject to extrajudicial violence," has the moral authority to depict the mutilated body of this Black boy.[28] Smith stated that the controversy brought to mind artists like Shahn (white and Jewish) "who crossed ethnic lines in their depiction of social trauma." (Shahn, in fact, shared with Sacco and Vanzetti an identity as an immigrant.) One example of Shahn's cross-ethnic visual commentary is found in what Smith described as the artist's "stinging commentary on the trial of the [Italian, Catholic, and anarchist] immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti." They were executed in 1927 for a murder in Massachusetts for which they were denied a fair trial—and which many believe they did not commit. Smith's words suggest that Shahn's approach manages to avoid exploitation and voyeurism, and even does justice to the horror and pain experienced by others.[29]

Relatedly, in his November 2020 blog commentary "MoMA Hangs a Ben Shahn," Blake Gopnik, a regular contributor to the *New York Times* and biographer of Warhol, also used a canonical work by Shahn—*Willis Avenue Bridge* (1940) (figs. 1–2)—to underscore Shahn's currency. His excitement over viewing a Shahn painting in MoMA's new installation of its permanent collection left him "wanting a whole show of them."

23. Katzman, *Drawing on the Left: Ben Shahn and the Art of Human Rights* (Harrisonburg: Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art, James Madison University, 2017, 2018), 16.

24. See also *For All These Rights We've Just Begun to Fight: Ben Shahn and the Art of Resistance*, Snite Art Museum, University of Notre Dame, 2017, and *The World Through My Eyes: Celebrating the Legacy of Ben Shahn*, University Galleries, William Paterson University, 2019.

25. Betsy Gomberg, "Iconic Works by Artist and Activist Ben Shahn Go on View at Spertus," *JUF News*, April 5, 2017, juf.org/news/arts.aspx?id=442176. Diana L. Linden's *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals: Jewish Identity in the American Scene* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015) is relevant to current immigration issues. It also sparked Kathy Lynn Grossman, "How Ben Shahn's Art Anticipates Bernie Sanders," *Religious News Service*, May 19, 2016, religionnews.com/2016/05/19/how-ben-shahns-art-anticipates-bernie-sanders/.

26. Notably, 2015 saw 1.3 million Syrian refugees risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean, seeking asylum from civil war, who along with refugees from Africa and South and Central Asia triggered a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions within the European Union.

27. Tirdad Derakhshani, "Nakashima's Arts Building Turns 50 with a Gala Ben Shahn Retrospective," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 2, 2017, inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/George-Nakashimas-Arts-Building-to-mark-its-50th-anniversary.html.

28. Aruna D'Souza, "Who Speaks Freely?: Art, Race and Protest," *The Paris Review* (May 22, 2018), theparisreview.org/blog/2018/05/22/who-speaks-freely-art-race-and-protest/.

29. Roberta Smith, "Should Art That Angers Remain on View?," *New York Times*, March 28, 2017, C1.

Like Smith, Gopnik highlighted a classic Shahn work that shows his success at depicting people with identities different from his own. *Willis Avenue Bridge* exemplifies Shahn's "Sunday Paintings" series, which reflects his shift from an "art for the masses" to one that features the daily rituals of ordinary individuals—often waiting—as well as the artist's keen observations about their human and material conditions. This image of two Black women sitting on a bench that seems to float before a bridge connecting Manhattan to the Bronx over the Harlem River was created from Shahn's own New York photographs. While the transparent tempera layers evoke pathos and highlight the bony ankles of the elderly woman's thin body, the alarming red girders of the bridge and sturdy crutches of the disabled woman anchor the picture. The older woman's proud bearing, stylish cape, and elegant pearl necklace exude dignity.

Shahn's compassion for struggling individuals, shown with respectful honesty and without idealization, was noticed by Gopnik, who was writing several months after the racial justice protests by Black Lives Matter and allied groups following the horrific Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd. Readers can thus link Shahn's racially sensitive work to a new era of racial reckoning in the U.S. and globally, focused on an epidemic of police brutality that has disproportionately harmed people of color. Indeed, as Gopnik wrote: "In our current moment of social consciousness, Shahn is one artist who deserves another look.... In the 1940s and '50s, he was considered one of the giants of American art—Warhol and his classmates in art school were mad for him—and I for one would like to see him get a proper (MoMA? Whitney?) retrospective."[30]

BEN SHAHN IN SPAIN

The Museo Reina Sofía is a propitious place for such a retrospective. It is the home of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which is at the core of the museum's collection, and which remains the most famous and arguably the most riveting visual condemnation of the atrocities that crushed the fragile, young Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Incorporating collage allusions, abstraction, and surrealism to capture the devastation of the Basque town (a bastion of Republican Loyalist resistance) bombed by Nazi German and Fascist Italian air forces on behalf of General Francisco Franco and the Nationalist government, *Guernica* is also at the heart of the Reina Sofía's mission. The museum has dedicated much space to rethinking the meanings, contexts, and global manifestations of this influential artistic statement.[31] Shahn was one of many left-wing New York artists who fervently tracked the events of the Spanish Civil War and supported the Republican cause. Along with Japan's invasion of Manchuria and Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War politicized progressive U.S. artists in the 1930s, spawning a radical internationalism against fascism. Many saw the Francoist actions in Spain as a prelude to world war. Shahn, according to Diana Linden, "followed these events with consternation and alarm."[32]

While Shahn was not among the estimated 2,800 Americans who fought (with Republican militias) on Spanish soil in units such as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, as an artist of Jewish heritage he understood what was at stake in Spain.[33] Shahn likely shared the socialist, anti-Stalinist perspective of George Orwell in the British author's personal account of the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Undoubtedly, he read André Malraux's *L'Espoir* (*Man's Hope*) (1937)—a despairing political novel about the war's tragedy as a symbol of the human condition; he owned many of Malraux's books and pictured the fearless, pro-Republic artist on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1955. Shahn worked closely during World War II with poet-activists Muriel Rukeyser and Archibald MacLeish. Rukeyser's poem *Mediterranean* (1937) and MacLeish's co-written scenario for the film *The Spanish Earth* (1937) circulated in Shahn's orbit. He was part of the committee in summer

30. Blake Gopnik, "MoMA Hangs a Ben Shahn, and Leaves Us Wanting a Whole Show of Them," *Blake Gopnik on Art Blog*, November 18, 2020, blakegopnik.com/post/635164096125403137.

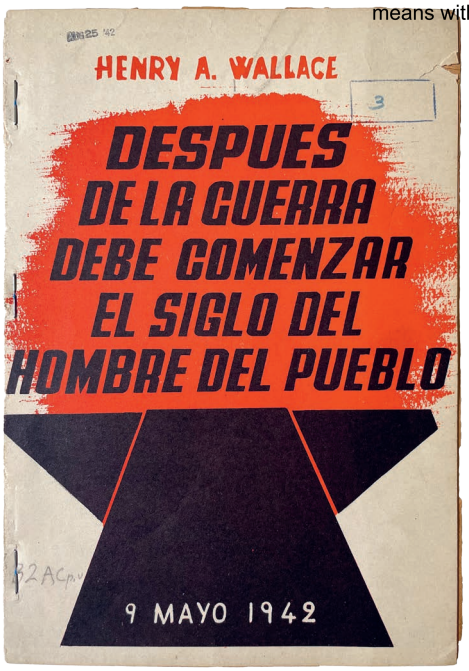
31. See *Rethinking Guernica*, launched by the Museo Reina Sofía in 2017: https://guernica.museoreinasofia.es/en.

32. Linden, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, 33. See Helen Langa, "New York Visual Artists and the Spanish Civil War," in Peter N. Carroll and James D. Fernández, eds., *Facing Fascism: New York and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 102–19.

33. "The Spanish Civil War had a special meaning for Jews.... Spain, the country of the Inquisition, had permanently expelled Europe's largest Jewish population, a thousand-year-old community, in 1492. Jews were vastly overrepresented in the International Brigades, comprising about one-quarter of their ranks." Stephen H. Norwood, *Antisemitism and the American Far Left* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 152. Franco wanted to save Spain "from a deadly conspiracy of Bolsheviks, Freemasons, and Jews." Adam Hochschild, *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2017), 28. See also Paul Preston, *Architects of Terror: Paranoia, Conspiracy and Anti-Semitism in Franco's Spain* (London: William Collins, 2023).

1
Willis Avenue Bridge, 1940

2
Untitled [Welfare Hospital, Welfare Island, New York City], 1934–35



3
Henry A. Wallace, with cover design by Ben Shahn
Después de la guerra debe comenzar el siglo del hombre del pueblo. Mexico City: Publicaciones de la Universidad Obrera, 1942

4
Charles Olson and Ben Shahn
Spanish Speaking Americans in the War: The Southwest. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, 1943

1936 that rewrote the "Call" for the First American Artists' Congress against War and Fascism, which he signed.[34] He served as an early editor and designer of *Art Front*, the organ of the Artists' Union, which published articles on Spanish artist Luis Quintanilla, whose imprisonment due to his role in the violent October 1934 Revolution (quelled by Franco) mobilized aid from the global intellectual community.[35] Shahn photographed Artists' Union members marching at the Spanish Consulate in New York City in spring 1935, carrying signs declaring, "Free Quintanilla and Other Victims of Spanish Fascism." The pictures show U.S. leftist solidarity with the radical activity of Quintanilla and his colleagues, who opposed the entry of right-wing forces into the Spanish Republican government (pp. 94–95).

Shahn kept a file he titled *Refugees* within his photo source archive, which contains mostly newspaper clippings of Spanish Civil War refugees fleeing violence—images he later used to create moving paintings on the devastation of war-torn Italy such as *Italian Landscape* (1943–44). In addition to his better-known anti-Nazi posters for the OWI, he produced wartime propaganda for Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), which focused on Latin America and on Americans of Latin American heritage. For example, Shahn's work targeted the U.S. Southwest with, in his own words, "our concepts of democracy" in order to counteract "fascist influence" and "the Spanish Falangist propaganda that had reached up there very solidly." This Spanish propaganda, along with that of the Axis nations, "encourage[ed] minorities to question their stake in an American victory."[36] Toward these ends, Shahn enthusiastically agreed to design a book with a Spanish translation of then-Vice President Henry Wallace's "Price of Freedom" or "Common Man" speech (*Después de la guerra debe comenzar el siglo del hombre del pueblo*) (fig. 3). Wallace had delivered the speech in 1942 to boost U.S. morale in fighting the Axis powers. In 1943, as part of a goodwill tour, he gave the speech in Spanish in Latin American countries, including those where European fascist and Spanish Falangist ideas had circulated. Little known to Shahn scholars, and much to Shahn's frustration, this Spanish book faced resistance from certain people in the OCIAA who believed that the "concept of Wallace's speech should not be made popular." Even though the text promoted U.S. democracy, Wallace's perspective was apparently seen as too socialistic.[37] (Shahn would go on to support Wallace in his 1948 bid for president on the Progressive Party ticket.) Shahn also collaborated in the OCIAA with poet Charles Olson on *Spanish Speaking Americans in the War* (1943), a bilingual pamphlet illustrated with press and government photographs. Shahn called it "a sympathetic piece" for Latino soldiers in U.S. states like New Mexico, which bore the brunt of the U.S. casualties in the notorious Bataan Death March in the Japanese-controlled Philippines (where Filipinos disproportionately lost their lives). Such pamphlets promoting ethnic or racial equality also "fomented congressional opposition" from conservative forces (fig. 4).[38]

Shahn was invited by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. to participate in a conference on *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) on November 25, 1947, when his own retrospective was on view there. Shahn admired Picasso and was moved by *Guernica* as a "passionate testament [of the artist's] sympathies," an art of "intransigent sentiments," and a symbol of artistic nonconformity.[39] Yet as Cordero Martín has discussed in her essay for this catalogue, Shahn also publicly critiqued the painting as ineffective in speaking to the layperson. While Shahn did not directly address atrocities of the Spanish Civil War, as did Picasso and Shahn's fellow left-wing artists, he created what appears to be a portrait of Franco, barely disguised within the painting *Defaced Portrait* (1955) (fig. 5). The work, "ferocious in its antimilitary acrimony," was inspired, Shahn said, by his fear over the 1955 rearmament of the West German army.[40] The image strikingly resembles not a German general but rather the Spanish General, as seen in a famous photograph from 1954. Exaggerating the shoulders

34. Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 9, 47–52. The Congress helped bring *Guernica* from Paris to New York in 1939.

35. Elliott Paul, "Quintanilla and Satire," *Art Front* 1, no. 3 (February 1935): 4–5, Ben Shahn papers, Smithsonian Archives of American Art (BSP-AAA). On the October 1934 Revolution, see Brian D. Bunk, *Ghosts of Passion: Martyrdom, Gender, and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

36. Interview with Ben Shahn by Saul Benison and Sandra Otter, Oral History Research Project, Columbia University, 1957, transcript, 78–79 (Columbia interview). Dan Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 24.

37. For Shahn's recollections of this book, which the author discovered in her research for this exhibition, see Columbia interview, 1957, 78–79. The Falange was an extreme nationalist political group founded in 1933 by José Antonio Primo de Rivera, which became the sole official political party under Franco in 1937, when it was forcibly merged with traditional right-wing elements.

38. Columbia interview, 1957, 79–80; Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, 25.

39. Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, 82–83.

40. James Thrall Soby, *Ben Shahn: Paintings* (New York: Braziller, 1963), 27; Conversation with Ben Shahn and Elkan Allan, February 10, 1956, transcript, 3, BSP-AAA.

of the pompous official, who dons a dense display of regalia on his ornate coat—which dwarfs the general's tiny hands and small head—Shahn used his palimpsest technique to efface the medals with black thrashing X's, allowing traces of the shiny medals to remain. This scathing portrait, and a related drawing, were made when official U.S.-Spanish relations had shifted from mutual disdain in the immediate postwar years to rapprochement as the Cold War proceeded. (The U.S. had ostracized Spain as an Axis ally, at least in official policy and rhetoric, and Spain attacked the harshness of U.S. capitalism.) The Pentagon saw Spain as strategically useful in the anti-communist crusade and as a military bulwark against Soviet influence in Europe.[41] The resulting Madrid Pact of 1953 was *realpolitik* to which progressives like Shahn ardently objected, as they continued to condemn Franco's dictatorship in their activities and in journals like *The Nation*.

In fact, in 1963, according to an FBI report, "Shahn joined other artists in an exhibit to help the Abraham Lincoln Brigade's campaign to aid imprisoned opponents of Franco Spain."[42] In early 1969, in what would be his last interview, Shahn reinforced his anti-Franco stance. After stating, "I'm not a pacifist," he suggested that the U.S. and Western allied powers should have militarily aided Republican forces to defeat the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War.[43] Most poignantly, close to his death on March 19, 1969, Shahn created what were likely his last drawings: life-sketches of world-renowned Spanish, Catalan, and Puerto Rican cellist Pau (Pablo) Casals (fig. 6). They met in Puerto Rico, where the legendary Spanish Civil War refugee settled circa 1956 after a long self-imposed exile in Prades, France. With his stuttered line, Shahn captured the restrained intensity of the musician's thick fingers moving his bow with surprising delicacy. Drawn to the focused expression of a fellow artist in the act of creating art, Shahn admired *el maestro* for his humanitarianism, bringing great music to ordinary people and crusading for world peace. Indeed, Casals' fame came not only from his restoration of Bach's cello music to the classical repertory and his innovative bowing and fingering techniques, but also from his impassioned support for the Spanish Republic and fellow exiles, his long-term refusal to perform in countries that recognized Franco, and his pledge to never return to Spain until democracy was restored.[44] Like Casals, Shahn avoided travel to Francoist Spain.

However, Shahn had ventured to pre-Second Republic Spain, in 1925 and again for about one month in 1929, as a struggling artist on his second European pilgrimage (when he lived in Paris and in North Africa, mostly on the Tunisian island of Djerba). In April 1929, he was in Málaga, planning to visit Granada, Córdoba, Seville, Madrid, and Toledo—which he called "the tourists' itinerary," as his main goal was to see the great museums. The Prado is where Shahn first saw the paintings of Goya.[45] Decades later, he paid tribute to this paragon of *l'artiste engagé* in *Goyescas* (1956) (p. 210), which shows a four-handed, empty-eyed Napoleonic general of Goya's era. He clasps one set of hands in anguished concern, and with the other callously plays a game of cat's cradle while trampling on "the strewn corpses of his victims." Exposing the duplicity of many political and military leaders—possibly referring to the USSR's repression of the Hungarian Uprising—*Goyescas* invokes Goya's *Los caprichos* (1796–98) and *Los desastres de la guerra* (1810–20). Indeed, in his artistic treatise *The Shape of Content* (1957), Shahn called Goya's unflinching protest "the most unforgettable indictment of the horrors of religious and patriotic fanaticism that has ever been created in any medium at all."[46]

Coincident with this homage to Goya, and as an ironic result of the thawing Cold War relations between Spain and the U.S., some Shahn works were shown in Spain, for example, at Barcelona's Palacio de la Virreina (III Bienal de Arte Hispanoamericano), which hosted a traveling exhibition of American paintings, sculptures, and prints organized by MoMA's International Council, *50 ans d'art aux États-Unis* (1955). His solo and group exhibitions in

41. "Franco's regime appreciated the prospect of U.S. economic aid and tourism, and international acceptance." Claudia Hopkins, "Bienvenido! Welcoming American Art in Francoist Spain, 1950s–1963," in Hopkins and Iain Boyd Whyte, eds., *Hot Art, Cold War—Southern and Eastern European Writing on American Art, 1945–1990* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 59. On the U.S. engaging Spain covertly to normalize relations as early as 1947, see Miguel González, "America's Shameful Rapprochement to the Franco Dictatorship," *El País*, October 23, 2018, english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/10/22/inenglish/1540219578_899934.html.

42. Herbert Mitgang, *Dangerous Dossiers: Exposing the Secret War Against America's Greatest Authors* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 215.

43. Richard Kostelanetz, "Ben Shahn: Master 'Journalist' of American Art (1969)," in *On Innovative Art(ist)s: Recollections of an Expanding Field* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 1992), 169.

44. Bernarda Bryson Shahn, *Ben Shahn Drawings*, unpublished book, circa early 1970s, 218–19. Bernarda Bryson Shahn papers, Smithsonian Archives of American Art (BBSP-AAA). Casals was criticized by fellow Spanish exiles and other leftists for playing for the John F. Kennedy White House in 1961 and living in a U.S. territory. Ironically, he was simultaneously under FBI surveillance for his international peace work and alleged sympathies with the USSR. His support for his native Catalonia and Spanish democracy never waned. See Pedro Reina-Pérez, "A Cellist in Exile: Pablo Casals and the Cold War," *Revista* 15, no. 2 (Winter 2016), revista.drclas.harvard.edu/a-cellist-in-exile/.

45. Shahn to Philip Shan, April 19, 1929, BSP-AAA; Bryson Shahn, *Ben Shahn Drawings*, n.p.

46. Soby, *Ben Shahn: His Graphic Art* (New York: Braziller, 1957), 20; Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, 8, 83.

5
Defaced Portrait, 1955

6
Casals with Cello, 1969

Europe and the U.S. were noted circa 1954–64 in the Spanish art journal *Goya*, which was founded in 1954 and regularly featured American art. And while Shahn's social realism was praised by Vicente Aguilera Cerni, "an important voice for American art in Spain," in his book *Arte norteamericano del siglo XX* (1957), it was generally U.S. abstract art (i.e., abstract expressionism) that found a more "welcoming context" in Spain. As Claudia Hopkins has stated: "Paradoxically, as is now well known, the conservative Francoist regime, craving international acceptance, promoted Spanish abstraction in international exhibition contexts in order to project a positive image of Spain" as a place of creative freedom.[47]

Shahn was better known in the 1950s and 1960s in other European countries—in the United Kingdom and especially in Italy. Despite his involvement in controversies regarding a cancelled 1947 U.S. State Department exhibition and subsequent attacks by right-wing congressmen on "communistic" modern art, Shahn was selected by MoMA in 1954, along with abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning, to represent U.S. painting at the Venice Biennale. (Shahn was favored by critics for his sincerity, his sympathy for oppressed people, and his individualistic style.) In 1956, MoMA and the U.S. Information Agency funded Shahn's trip to the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. As argued by Pohl, Julia Tatiana Bailey, and others, Shahn's figurative realism and social content served as a symbol of U.S. freedom in the early Cold War—as much as abstract art did.[48] Between 1961 and 1963, a Shahn retrospective and a graphics show, sponsored by MoMA's International Council, traveled to Israel and Japan and throughout Europe, but conspicuously not to Spain.[49] *Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity* will thus introduce Shahn's art on a large scale to Spanish audiences and reintroduce his work to new generations of European audiences.

There is some precedent for the Museo Reina Sofía exhibition. In 1984, in the early years of Spain's transition to democracy—when the social democratic government was dealing with an economic crisis and integration into the European community—the country saw its first solo exhibition on one aspect of Shahn's work. *Ben Shahn: Dibujos y fotografías de los años treinta y cuarenta*, organized by the Dirección General de Bellas Artes y Archivos (BAA), was shown at the Salas Pablo Ruiz Picasso in Madrid and was scheduled to travel to Valencia, Oviedo, and Barcelona. The director general of the BAA noted that Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal (the economic context of Shahn's social realism) was "an era of experimentation … [that] holds particular relevance for today's Spain."[50] Since 1992, four Shahn paintings have been part of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid. More recently, the Museo Reina Sofía included a few Shahns in exhibitions such as *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (2002–03) and *Encounters with the 1930s* (2012–13), which honored *Guernica*'s seventy-fifth anniversary. In 2020, the museum acquired its first Shahn work, *We French Workers Warn You* (1942) (p. 148 bottom), a multilayered propaganda poster circulated by the OWI, that holds great relevance for Europeans. Related to one of the Thyssen-Bornemisza paintings, the image shows workers protesting the labor decree on a "poster within a poster," issued by the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime, whose security forces held close watch over Spanish Civil War refugees in France during World War II.

Displaying this striking graphic within the present retrospective of Shahn's socially and politically engaged art comes at a critical moment in the history of Western European art museums, many of which are grappling with the legacies of imperialism and autocracy. The Museo Reina Sofía, rethinking its role and "responsibilities as a 21st-century cultural institution," inaugurated in 2021 a "rereading" of its permanent collection, evocatively titled "Communicating Vessels." Indeed, the museum has been committed for some time to diversifying its holdings and expanding its exhibitions to be more inclusive of female artists, Latin American artists, and forgotten Spanish exile-artists of the Franco era. Innovative—and often conceptual— curatorial investigations have addressed global

47. Hopkins, "Bienvenido!," 60–63. Thanks to Beatriz Cordero MartÍn for her research on the journal *Goya*.

48. Pohl, *New Deal Artist*, 147–72; Julia Tatiana Bailey, "'Realism Reconsidered': Ben Shahn in London, 1956," in *Modern American Art at Tate 1945–1980* (2019), tate.org.uk/research/publications/modern-american-art-at-tate/essays/realism-reconsidered. See also essays by Chiara Di Stefano.

49. The retrospective (1961–62) traveled to Holland, Belgium, Italy, and Austria; the graphics exhibition (1962–63) to Germany, Yugoslavia, Slovenia, Sweden, Israel, and Japan. The largely positive press reviews are housed in the Museum of Modern Art Archives.

50. Manuel Fernández Miranda, Foreword, in Eugenia Cucalón et al., *Ben Shahn: Dibujos y fotografías de los años treinta y cuarenta* (Madrid: Salas Pablo Ruiz Picasso, 1984), 5.

environmental crises as well as those related to migration, exile, colonialism, and cultural imperialism.[51] The exhibiting of Shahn's far-reaching art, contextualized in thematic episodes with archival documentation—and featuring the scholarly perspectives of catalogue essayists from the U.S., Spain, Germany, and the United Kingdom—offers yet another powerful way to further such timely explorations.

COMMITMENTS AND CONTRADICTIONS

While Shahn was ahead of his time (which partly explains his continued relevance), he was also of his time. He was a man of paradoxes who remains as fascinating for his contradictions as for his commitments. Shahn's biographers, as Pohl has stated, have long noted Shahn's paradoxical nature: "that he was popular with both labor organizations and big business, that he defended the primacy of content at the same time as he engaged in formal experimentation, that he was both political and spiritual."[52] Shahn was as comfortable speaking Yiddish with his working-class neighbors in the New Deal cooperative town of Jersey Homesteads (later Roosevelt), New Jersey, his home from 1939 to 1969, as he was conversing with Nobel prize-winning intellectuals at nearby Princeton University and "well-bred" curators at MoMA. In our current moment, other paradoxes or dualities emerge as we ask different questions of his art. For example, how did Shahn square his sharp critique of capitalism (and class privilege) in the 1930s with his embrace of commercial work in the postwar period? How do we make sense of his biting caricatures of General Motors president Alfred P. Sloan or the scandalous media mogul William Randolph Hearst alongside his commissions from *Time*, *Fortune*, *Harper's*, CBS Broadcasting, Container Corporation, Upjohn Company, and Volkswagen, among other corporations?

These questions must be asked because when Shahn worked for the OWI, he and other New Deal liberals and progressives vehemently opposed the takeover of the agency by corporate advertising executives. And in 1946 Shahn rejected a commission from the Chrysler Corporation, stating that industry should not stipulate content and that the artist can only make work "if he feels a powerful urgency in a situation." But given the massive scope of Shahn's commercial production, how did he navigate what Dan Belgrad has called "the triumph of a corporate-liberal advertising culture" in the postwar years? How did his work interface with, affirm, and/or subvert the growing power of large, monopolistic corporations and the ways big business sought "to sell Americans on the merits of U.S. capitalism?"[53] We know, for instance, that Shahn raised the level of commercial design to a high art, exerted a towering influence on the field, and invented a widely appropriated folk alphabet. He worked for television but also noted its menacing influence on culture. He even criticized how U.S. consumer products were promoted overseas in the postwar years, as this reinforced the nation's reputation as philistine and materialistic in European eyes.[54]

Shahn not only called out the rising economic imperialism of the U.S. abroad but also the increase in U.S. military interventions overseas. Although he saw U.S. democracy as "the most appealing idea that the world has yet known" and was a critic of the Soviet Union, he railed against U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia. In a 1964 talk for *The New Republic*, he wittily highlighted "the folly of our tactics" in Vietnam and predicted that the U.S. military would do the same in Indonesia, regretting that "artists will not be consulted in time to prevent bloodshed."[55] In 1967, he further expressed his protest of the Vietnam War in the *New York Times* with a peace message that paired his image of Gandhi with an antiwar quotation by Mark Twain. But it is unlikely that Shahn would have used the current language of colonialism or subscribed to the concept of "internal colonialism," as voiced by activists in his own time to refer to Black, native, and Latino peoples living in urban blight or on reservations as "colonized" citizens within the U.S. Seeing its greatest popularity in

51. Sam Jones, "How a Small Photo of a Bomb Site Took Its Place Alongside Picasso's *Guernica*," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2021, theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/10/reina-sofia-museum-reorganisation-robert-capa-photo. These efforts might further be examined in the context of Spain's Historical Memory Law of 2007 and the Democratic Memory Law of 2022, both aimed at addressing the legacy of the Franco era.

52. Pohl, *New Deal Artist*, 111.

53. Shahn to Baskerville, September 26, 1946, BSP-AAA; Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, 10; Michelle Kelley, "Fun and Facts about America: Postwar Corporate Liberalism and the Animated Economic Educational Film," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 61, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 154.

54. Maurice Berger, *Revolution of the Eye: Modern Art and the Birth of American Television* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Pohl, *New Deal Artist*, 138–39.

55. Shahn, "The Artist and the Politicians," *Art News* 52, no. 5 (September 1953): 6; Shahn, "Remarks to *The New Republic*," in John D. Morse, ed., *Ben Shahn* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 212–13.

the late 1960s and early 1970s with the radicalization of the civil rights movement led by Black nationalist groups, this theory represented for Shahn a militancy that, despite his progressive views on race and his potent images of the movement's pioneers, he did not seem to share.[56]

Shahn's anti-colonial work focused on the older European empires of Belgium, France, and Great Britain, the latter of which was the largest the world has known. He thereby supported the sweeping postwar decolonization movements in Asian and African countries. As early as 1925 in Tunisia, Shahn "join[ed] briefly the native 'underground' movement against the French."[57] In *India* (1943), he pictured the victims of the 1943 Bengal famine in British India (today's Bangladesh), which is based on a *New York Times* photograph of a family "ravaged by starvation"—in a tragedy that recent research has shown was exacerbated by British wartime colonial policies (figs. 7–8).[58] Over twenty years later, Shahn memorialized Gandhi, whose nonviolent disobedience strategies against British rule inspired Martin Luther King, Jr. and U.S. civil rights struggles (pp. 246–247). Shahn illustrated advertisements for "Reports from Africa" (1954–56), Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now* CBS television series featuring "the rising resistance to colonialism." One of Shahn's drawings includes stylized if not exoticized images of faceless African porters carrying baskets on their heads—abstracted figures revealing little cultural insight into the peoples depicted. Others include a more pensive, individualized portrait of an unidentified African man who faces the viewer, and a somber rendering of a South African family shown with overt signs of Apartheid-era discrimination (pp. 248–249). For the CBS film *Satchmo the Great* (1957), Shahn made spirited drawings from press photographs of renowned trumpeter Louis Armstrong and his All-Stars' European and African tours, including the life-changing visit of this "jazz ambassador" to Accra in the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) in May 1956. Shahn recognized Armstrong's support of the African nation's civil disobedience campaign for freedom from Britain, which it achieved in March 1957 (p. 249 left).

Further, Shahn supported the United Nations (UN) from its inception in 1945, with its founding charter based on "respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples." His haunting commissioned painting of the late UN Secretary-General, *Dag Hammarskjold* (1962) (fig. 9), must be seen in the context of the decolonization of the Belgium Congo. The isolated Hammarskjold is flanked by a flaming beast symbolizing nuclear destruction and an excerpt of a speech—his response to Nikita Khrushchev's demand for his resignation over his handling of the Belgian-Congolese violence, which erupted in the wake of Congo's declaration of independence in 1960. Shahn's work is a defense of his friend—more philosopher than politician—after his death on September 18, 1961 , in a mysterious plane crash in then-Northern Rhodesia (today's Zambia). Strong evidence suggests that this was an assassination by Congolese separatists and European mercenaries funded by Belgian mining interests (with possible assistance from U.S. intelligence agencies) who opposed Hammarskjold's peace mission in the new independent Republic of Congo.[59]

Shahn's critique of European empire coexists—or stands in tension with—his love of European culture, which he held as a high ideal. His art training at New York's National Academy of Design and at Parisian art academies was Eurocentric. His wartime paintings lament the destruction of classical landscapes in Italy, based on the premise that European culture was the heir to ancient Rome. Shahn revered Italian Renaissance art, designed stage sets for a Jerome Robbins ballet at the 1958 Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Umbria, and at the time of the 1954 Venice Biennale called Italy "the home place." Indeed, Italy, along with France, was a favorite travel destination of Shahn's in the postwar years, when he advised art students to "go to Paris and Madrid and Rome and Ravenna and Padua"

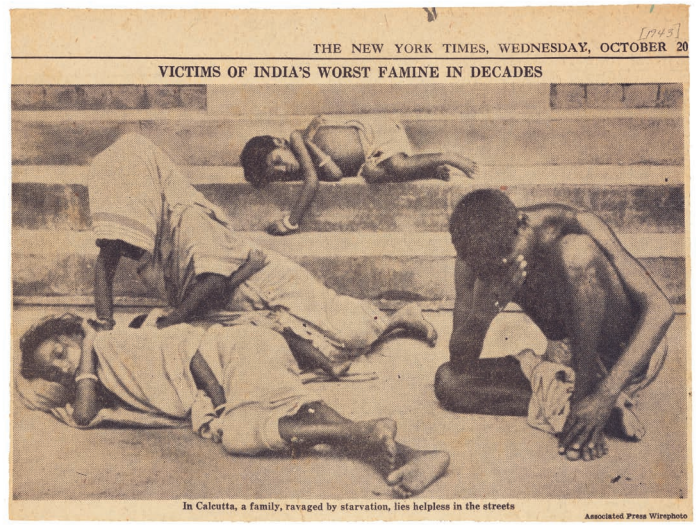
56. Charles Pinderhughes, "Internal Colonialism," in B. S. Turner, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (2017), onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118430873.est0187.

57. Selden Rodman, *Portrait of the Artist as an American, Ben Shahn: A Biography with Pictures* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 141.

58. Michael Safi, "Churchill's policies contributed to 1943 Bengal famine-study," *The Guardian*, March 29, 2019, theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/29/winston-churchill-policies-contributed-to-1943-bengal-famine-study.

59. United Nations Charter, Chapter 1: Purposes and Principles: Article 1 (2) (signed on June 26, 1945); Colum Lynch, "What Really Happened to Dag Hammarskjold's Plane," *Foreign Policy* (February 15, 2022), foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/15/hammarskjold-plane-crash-united-nations/.

7
India, 1943



THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 20

VICTIMS OF INDIA'S WORST FAMINE IN DECADES

In Calcutta, a family, ravaged by starvation, lies helpless in the streets

Associated Press Wirephoto

8
Photographer unknown
"Victims of India's Worst Famine in Decades. In Calcutta, a Family, Ravaged by Starvation, Lies Helpless in the Streets," *New York Times*, October 20, 1943

9
Dag Hammarskjöld, Doctor of Philosophy, Public Government Official, United Nations Secretary-General, 1962

and to "read Sophocles and Euripides and Dante and Proust." Fluent in French, Shahn insisted that aspiring artists should "know French" and he spent much (frustrated) energy in the late 1950s trying to enhance his reputation across Europe through Arnold Fawcus of Trianon Press, which produced deluxe editions of his illustrated books *Haggadah* (1966) and *Ecclesiastes* (1967). Finally, Shahn cared about European intellectuals' perceptions of the U.S., quoting existentialist writers like Jean-Paul Sartre who feared U.S. influence on French culture at a time when the reactionary "sinister attack against art" and "official acts of suppression" rendered U.S. democracy hypocritical in the eyes of European allies.[60] European high culture thus remained an enduring reference point for the artist for much of his creative and political life.

It is critical to note, however, that Shahn did embrace the art of many non-Western cultures. His extended stay in Djerba may be attributed to his fascination with its ancient, Arab-speaking Jewish community, memories of which informed his 1931 watercolors for a *Haggadah*. But with scant information about Shahn's North African travels, along with his romanticist words about following in Eugène Delacroix's footsteps in Algiers and his quoting of Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô* (set in ancient Carthage), he did not seem to push beyond Eurocentric, orientalist stereotypes of Arab and/or North African peoples as "exotic," sensual "others." Shahn collected non-Western art, including Hindu gouaches and pre-Columbian sculpture, and was fascinated by Mayan glyphs. As a child learning Hebrew and a young teenager training to be a lithographic engraver, he gained a deep and abiding love of lettering, which grew to include the Sanskrit and Arabic alphabets and Khmer script. He was especially drawn to Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, seeing the latter as "the honorable heirs to action painting" and to Western abstractionism. Shahn even planned a book on the legendary origins of certain Chinese ideograms—passions fueled by his travels in 1960 to New Zealand, Tahiti, Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan. This excursion inspired Shahn to pick up the camera again, photographing street scenes, storefronts, and signage, with a special focus on the exquisite carvings and stone sculptures of monuments, temples, and other religious sites. Although he joked about being a tourist photographer, his 35 mm snapshots are far from conventional postcard views. They reveal his cultural awareness that Eastern "esthetic and religious principles are so highly fused."[61]

Shahn drew similarities between the ancient Japanese city of Kyoto and interwar Paris. His special affinity for Japanese culture began as early as the mid-1940s, when he collected source material related to Japan and World War II. An International News photograph of August 9, 1945, from Hiroshima, "Atom's Destruction"—showing a modern building with "steel girders twisted into grotesque shapes"—became a symbolic motif in certain Shahn works that convey the destructive potential of science. He made drawings and paintings to commemorate the 1954 *Lucky Dragon* nuclear disaster at Bikini Atoll (1957–62) (pp. 230–233). In Japan he had a chop created of the Hebrew alphabet, which he stamped on new and even older works. Shahn collaborated with Nakashima, who in the 1960s designed additions and furniture for Shahn's International Style modernist home, synthesizing modern principles and traditional Japanese craft methods. Such admiration was reciprocal, as Shahn's art has long been revered in Japan—influential to Japanese graphic art during its postwar economic growth. (One aim of his 1960 trip was to review Japanese printmaking.) Indeed, Japan has organized numerous solo exhibitions on Shahn; notable collections of his work are held by the Marunuma Art Park and the Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art; and Japanese writers have made pilgrimages to Shahn's homes in the U.S. and Europe.[62]

Shahn's worldliness was informed by a universal humanist philosophy of the Western liberal tradition—a "new humanism" associated with the Franz Boas school of cultural anthropology that recognized and appreciated the cultural differences of peoples across the

60. Pohl, *New Deal Artist*, 158; Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, 113–14; Greenfeld, *Ben Shahn*, 292–98; Shahn, "The Artist and the Politicians," 34–35, 67.

61. Shahn to Philip Shan, April 19, 1929, BSP-AAA; Shahn, *Love and Joy About Letters* (New York: Grossman, 1963), 46, 27; Katzman, "The Politics of Media," 105–6, 144, note 22.

62. Columbia interview, 1960, 127–29; Sakai et al., *Ben Shahn: Cross Media Artist*, 213–17.

globe but affirmed their common human identity. These concepts were critical to the Cold War political integration of diverse countries under the umbrella of a "free world" alignment against authoritarian regimes. According to Cécile Whiting, Shahn's adherence to such a "pluralistic humanism" and shift (in his antinuclear and post-Holocaust work) to a more symbolic style that "minimized signs of racial and ethnic identity" enabled him to "extend compassion across national, ethnic, and racial divides" and "affirm a shared humanity." Yet as also articulated by Whiting, who referenced postcolonial theories, universal humanism has its pitfalls and limitations. This is evident in its "tendency to eradicate cultural specificity in the quest for an ideal of sameness … defined by the dominant culture" and to ignore the historical particularities of the suffering of distinct individuals or groups and of targeted genocides.[63]

How universal was Shahn's humanism? Like many leftist male artists of his generation, Shahn was more attuned to race, ethnicity, and class than to gender. Male figures dominate his paintings, posters, and murals about immigration, rural and industrial life, and the labor movement, as well as works dealing with the McCarthy era, civil rights struggles, and nuclear disaster.[64] When shown, women are often depicted as protective mothers, worried wives, grieving widows, or other vulnerable figures. In certain prints, women appear as ancient Roman goddesses with mysterious, supernatural powers. Notable exceptions are found in Shahn's photographs of Black female workers in Arkansas cotton fields or more privileged white female artist-activists in New York City. Women protesting to keep alcohol illegal are prominent in his *Prohibition* mural (pp. 130–131). The image of a sole woman toiling in a textile mill in the Bronx Central Post Office mural (by Shahn and Bernarda Bryson), according to Linden, both "corresponds to the marginalization of women in the [industrial] workforce" and stands out as "an exception in New Deal art."[65] Yet Shahn's art of the 1930s and 1940s, for example, does not reflect the increasing numbers of women taking jobs during the Depression in domestic service, teaching, and clerical fields (as "women's work" was less affected by the economic crisis). Nor does his art address the millions of women hired into the U.S. industrial labor force to support the World War II effort, when millions of men were drafted or enlisted into the military.

What is remarkable about this relative absence in Shahn's art of women engaged in wage work beyond the domestic sphere is that the artist was surrounded by strong, independent career women whom he respected, who inspired him, and who helped launch and maintain his career, years before the second wave of feminism began circa 1963. His first wife Tillie Goldstein, who shared with him a Jewish immigrant upbringing in Brooklyn, was a smart and politically engaged woman who worked as a bookkeeper to help pay for Shahn's travels abroad. His second spouse, Bernarda Bryson (later Bryson Shahn), who hailed from a more privileged Scottish, Christian family in Ohio, was a printmaker, illustrator, and writer, who as president, then secretary, of the Artists' Union and a one-time communist, influenced Shahn's political radicalization. Theirs was passionate love between equals, rooted in leftist affinities, ranging from their fascination with Russian newsreels to the socialist speeches of Norman Thomas to the labor histories of Samuel Yellen. Working to build a world closer to their own beliefs, they collaborated for the Resettlement Administration, the U.S. Treasury's Section of Fine Arts, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations-Political Action Committee.[66]

Shahn deeply admired RA-FSA photographer Dorothea Lange; New York Public Library superintendent Romana Javitz; MoMA curator Mildred Constantine; critic Betty Chamberlain; poet Muriel Rukeyser; and until their relationship deteriorated in the 1960s, his longtime dealer Edith Halpert of the Downtown Gallery. In a 1957 interview Shahn spoke of Halpert as "the dean of American art," a pioneer responsible for the careers of many

63. Cécile Whiting, "Ben Shahn: Aggrieved Men and Nuclear Fallout during the Cold War," *American Art* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 5, 12–13, 18. On how Shahn in his 1950s work avoided the "naïve humanism" that is often associated with MoMA's *Family of Man* exhibition (1955), see Christof Decker, "A Unique Universalism: Ben Shahn and the Rhetoric of Visual Anecdotes," in James Dorson et al., *Anecdotal Modernity: Making and Unmaking History* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 263–78.

64. Whiting argued that Shahn countered the antinuclear movement's stereotypical use of images of women and children as victims of nuclear disaster, creating works that reflect a "compassionate masculinity." See note 63.

65. Linden, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals*, 85–86; Langa, *Radical Art*, 122–27, 213–19. Shahn's *The Clinic* (1944) (p. 183) and *Convention* (1949), which address the need for decent obstetrics/neonatal care and the existence of sexual harassment, respectively, speak to his concern for improving certain oppressive conditions for women.

66. See Shahn-Bryson correspondence, undated (c. 1936–early 1940s), BBSP-AAA.

prominent artists who did a brilliant job in bringing "primitive art" to the fore; he was grateful for their long artist-dealer relationship. He praised art director Cipe Pineles as one of "the most courageous, the most inventive minds" in the commercial art world.[67] Yet Shahn biographers have also acknowledged his strong patriarchal side, noting his bitterness, anger, arrogance, and self-centeredness. Shahn caused much suffering to his first wife, daughter, and son, whom he essentially abandoned in New York City in the middle of the Depression (he saw the children sporadically in their early years) to start a relationship with Bryson Shahn, with whom he would raise three children and spend the rest of his life. Despite their enduring intellectual companionship, their mutual stubbornness led to volatile conflict, and she too suffered as a result of Shahn's dominant personality. She had to fit her career in and around the care of her family and Shahn's career, which she nurtured and protected, while hosting a constant stream of Shahn admirers. Like many progressive women of her generation, Bryson Shahn relied on her wit and cleverness to "negotiate" with her partner more space and time in their house to pursue her own creative and political work.[68]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Addressing the contradictions and dualities of Ben Shahn's art and life allows one to understand the artist holistically. Shahn neither glorified nor romanticized the ordinary people who populate his pictorial worlds. His subjects—waiting or working, suffering yet persevering, melancholic and hopeful—are pictured with feeling and restrained dignity. It seems fitting that Shahn and his art should be approached with the critical eye and compassionate heart with which he saw the world. As artist-activist-philosopher, Shahn left an extraordinary body of work that incisively chronicles the forgotten (as well as the famous) figures and events of much twentieth-century U.S. and global history. In so doing, he engaged in and expanded on what he called "aspects of realism." He experimented with old and new styles, drawing and redrawing on a rich trove of photographic and literary sources to make moving social statements and penetrating political commentary. Ultimately, Shahn used real-world particularities (or what he called "individual peculiarities") to create universal symbols for his time.[69]

Perhaps Shahn's greatest gifts are not the answers that his art offers to society's problems, though such answers are evident, for example, in his labor posters that announce the basic needs required for a decent existence. Rather, his most impactful legacy may lie in the questions that he asks of art: What are the roles that artists can play in society? What modes of art best communicate human experiences? And how can art aid in the perpetual struggle for a more just future? It is Shahn's musing on these profound questions in his compelling images and words that has endured. He extolled the power of art to stir the moral conscience of viewers, to elicit empathy for others, and to create meaning. As he eloquently said in 1953— notably at the height of the McCarthyite assault on civil liberties—it is the artist's "values, his judgments, made with love, or anger, or compassion that live in the work of art and make it significant to the public."[70] For Shahn, artists were not only creators who construct meaning, but also "truth-tellers"—catalysts in the quest for social justice. His faith in this latter role is "a much-needed feeling" at this crucial moment, as reactionary forces have severely tested the democratic experiment in the United States, as well as in other established and aspiring democracies in Europe and around the world.

67. Columbia interview, 1957, 108–9, 112.

68. See Rodman and Greenfeld biographies, and Edwin Rosskam, *Roosevelt, New Jersey: Big Dreams in a Small Town and What Time Did to Them* (New York: Grossman, 1972). Shahn's closest friend in later years, Rosskam noted his arrogance, but also his kindness and brilliance. Bryson Shahn's perspectives are gleaned from Interviews with Bernarda Bryson Shahn by the author, Roosevelt, New Jersey, 1989–2002, untranscribed.

69. Shahn, "Aspects of Realism," Black Mountain College, 1951, lecture transcript, BSP-AAA; Shahn, *The Shape of Content*, 38.

70. Shahn, "The Problem of Artistic Creation in America Today" (1953), in Morse, ed., *Ben Shahn*, 210.

WORKING AND WAITING: BEN SHAHN'S PICTURES OF AND AFTER LABOR

John Fagg

Commercial art and industrial projects can't hold out the spiritual comfort that work with labor gives.—Ben Shahn, 1946[1]

Before mark-making was art for Ben Shahn, it was work. Born into a family of woodcarvers and potters in Lithuania and following his family's migration to the United States in 1906, he was apprenticed at age fifteen to Hessenberg's lithography workshop in Lower Manhattan.[2] There Shahn began working toward the active, artisanal line that would come to characterize his drawing, printmaking, and painting. He later explained that this early experience of "cutting" lines onto lithographic stones meant that in his mature art, "I found that this chiseled sort of line had become a necessity, a sort of temperamental fixture, so that even when I drew with a brush the line retained that style."[3] Shahn put that line to work, delineating laborers' shirt sleeves hitched at the elbows; faces worn with toil and strain; and most strikingly hands, whether grasping hammers, raised as fists, or contorted in expressions of worry and grief. His career spanned from before the Red Decade of the 1930s, when trade unionism and socialism came close to mainstream politics, to after the second Red Scare of the 1950s, when suppression and persecution of the left ran rampant. He witnessed the shift from the producer economy (grounded in coal and steel) of the prewar years to the emerging consumer culture of the 1960s, which changed the nature and meaning of work in the U.S. Even as the political landscape shifted and Shahn's thematic and stylistic concerns evolved, the cause of labor always remained embedded in his thinking and in his artistic gestures.

Shahn's first deep investment in the form and theme of labor manifests in his paintings on the Sacco and Vanzetti and the Mooney scandals. In the early years of the Great Depression he turned from what he saw as the disengaged avant-garde art he encountered on two European trips in the 1920s to a directness and simplicity that he developed circa 1930–31 in depicting the infamous Dreyfus Affair and then applied to other *causes célèbres*. The case of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants and anarchists executed in 1927 for a murder many believe they did not commit, spoke to Shahn's sense of justice and inspired the series of twenty-three paintings that he exhibited at the Downtown Gallery in 1932. Shahn presented Sacco, a shoemaker, and Vanzetti, a fish peddler, as ordinary, dignified laborers in the context of their working-class, immigrant Boston community. In *Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco* (1931–32) (p. 71), the men sit side by side, the composition centered on Vanzetti's left wrist cuffed to Sacco's right—strong working hands denied by force the right to work. Using a montage of elements, Shahn created the horizontal panel *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1931–32), which he submitted to a mural competition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. At left, Sacco and Vanzetti stand alongside Parisian demonstrators: linked arms, raised placards, and one man's red scarf wrap the victims in the embrace of international solidarity. These aspects led Mexican muralist Diego Rivera to observe that Shahn's paintings "possess the necessary qualities, accessibility, and power to make them important to the proletariat."[4] The ideal Rivera pursued in his murals and saw in Shahn's work was an art at once *of* and *for* working people.

While the Sacco and Vanzetti series may have been motivated by Shahn's abhorrence of injustice, which he attributed to an intense childhood reaction to an Old Testament test of faith,[5] he directly engaged the labor politics of the interwar years with the Tom Mooney case. Mooney, a San Francisco union organizer, had been convicted for a 1916 bombing, despite perjured testimony and a strong alibi. In his Mooney series, as in *Tom Mooney Handcuffed* (1932–33) (p. 73), Shahn again showed a worker denied work, picturing Mooney—an iron molder by trade—imprisoned and inert. In *Apotheosis* (1932–33), Mooney

1. Walter Abell, "Art and Labor," *Magazine of Art* 39, no. 6 (October 1946): 262.

2. Ben Shahn, "Artist's Statement," in Dorothy C. Miller and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., eds., *American Realists and Magic Realists* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 52. Elsewhere Shahn said he started the trade at age fourteen.

3. Shahn, *Love and Joy About Letters* (New York: Grossman, 1963), 15.

4. Diego Rivera, "The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art," *The Modern Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1932): 51–57, here 56. See Alejandro Anreus et al., *Ben Shahn and the Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (Jersey City: Jersey City Museum and Rutgers University Press, 2001).

is framed by a carceral architecture of bleak brick walls that cut him off from his mother (whose sash proclaims, "My son is innocent"), the bland bureaucrats who adjudicate his fate, and the passionate crowd gathered to demand his release. At the height of the Depression, and with labor in the fore of public and political consciousness, this was a widespread demand, as evident in a 1934 folk song that cast Mooney's story as the "Ballad of the American Dreyfus Case" and in a 1938 *Life* magazine piece that named him "America's Most Famous Prisoner." Shahn's series claims Mooney's cause as the cause of labor and the left, whose raised fists in *Apotheosis* embody their protest. Shahn repeated this image of protest in another painting from the series, *Demonstration* (1933), and based both on an Associated Press photograph of a communist demonstration from the *New York Telegram*, found in Shahn's source archive. The act of repurposing photographic images to insinuate the politics of the original context into new settings would become a defining feature of Shahn's multilayered art.

This artistic practice found full expression when Shahn began painting from his own photographs. Equipped with a Leica camera and hurried instructions from his studio mate Walker Evans, and following a foundational stint as a New York street photographer,[6] Shahn set off in late 1935, with his future second wife Bernarda Bryson at the wheel, on a documentary road trip for the New Deal government's Resettlement Administration (RA). Traveling south through the coal mining workscapes of Pennsylvania and West Virginia, Shahn stopped at Scotts Run, West Virginia—a cluster of Appalachian towns that had become a notorious symbol of the Depression's devastating economic impact on mining communities.[7] Shahn's RA photographs from this trip, including *Striking Miners, Scotts Run, West Virginia* (1935) (p. 122 top) and *Payoff at Pursglove Mine, Scotts Run, West Virginia* (1935), were repurposed in the temperas *Scotts Run, West Virginia* (1937) (p. 123) and *Unemployed* (1938) (p. 119).

The paintings' titles strip away the specific details of mining and striking that the source photographs and their captions record. *Scotts Run, West Virginia* shows three men seemingly loitering without purpose in a railroad yard (p. 123). The men's inactivity; the desolate, scrubby yard; and the coal dust-stained company houses create an image of the malaise and degradation of working people's lives, which elides the picketing workers' proactive protest of their condition. Shahn's painting thus appears to be a passive document of everyday life in the Depression that avoids the kind of politics that might have made the Whitney Museum of American Art, which purchased it in 1938, uncomfortable. But traces of the confrontational atmosphere of the *Striking Miners* photograph linger in *Scotts Run, West Virginia*, in the piercing squint of the tallest man and in the central figure's left hand (p. 122 top). Here Shahn's lithographic line cuts through the tempera paint, taking on the graphic physicality of left-wing cartoons where proletarian muscles bulge and flex, hinting that the thumb pressed to forefinger might curl into a fist. The election posters interpolated from other Shahn photographs also suggest a political subtext to the scene. Shahn's painting, like much of his social realist work, wrestled with the question: How could artists on the left meaningfully express their politics in paint?

Shahn's RA road trip was part of a much larger New Deal program of federal patronage for the arts, for which he worked not only as a photographer but also as a muralist, graphic artist, exhibit designer, and advisor. Regarding this program, in a 1933 letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), artist George Biddle cited Rivera's claim that the Mexican mural movement "was only possible because [President Álvaro] Obregón allowed Mexican artists to work at plumbers' wages in order to express on the walls of the Government Buildings the social ideals of the Mexican revolution." His suggestion that a similar scheme would enable young American artists to express their awareness of the "social revolution

5. John D. Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," *Magazine of Art* 37, no. 4 (April 1944): 136.

6. See Deborah Martin Kao, Laura Katzman, and Jenna Webster, *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

7. On mining workscapes, see Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 125.

that our country and civilization are going through" instigated the 1934 Public Works of Art Project and subsequent programs that employed artists to make easel paintings, graphics, and public murals for schools, hospitals, and federal buildings. In a magazine article, Biddle further explained: "For the first time in our history the government has recognized the social necessity of art in life. Not only does it recognize the same responsibility to indigent artists as to indigent plumbers or bricklayers, it accepts a further responsibility to foster art and keep it alive during the depression."[8] U.S. government policy, at least for a brief moment, acknowledged the kinship between fine art and craft labor to which Shahn was committed: art could be purposeful, decently paid work.

Shahn's immersion in the practice and politics of mural painting came during his work as one of Rivera's assistants on the ill-fated 1933 mural commission at Rockefeller Center. There he learned—through masterful example—wall-scale composition and fresco technique, but also witnessed the breakdown of the professional working relationship between artists and patrons of opposing political ideologies. Rivera's mural was censored (and later destroyed) when it was found to contain a portrait of communist leader Vladimir Lenin. Shahn then conducted his own, largely successful fresco mural for an RA commission for Jersey Homesteads, the New Deal cooperative town built for Jewish garment workers that became the location of the Shahn family home from 1939 to the end of his life. There he depicted Eastern European Jewish immigration to the U.S. intertwined with labor union history, both critical to the formation of the town. Building on these experiences, Shahn would also place labor at the heart of the two coveted mural commissions he won from the U.S. federal government's Section of Fine Arts.[9]

In the mural *Resources of America* (1938–39), painted by both Shahn and Bryson, the towering figures of textile workers, gleaners, cotton pickers, and engineers dominate large panels in the main hall of the Bronx Central Post Office. In *The Meaning of Social Security* (1940–42), scenes of unemployment and destitution give way to the labor of New Deal infrastructure and social improvement projects along the main corridors of (what was briefly) the Social Security Building in Washington, D.C. (pp. 140–141, 143). Making art in public spaces and on the federal payroll came with demands, expectations, and controversies: the Walt Whitman quote Shahn chose for his Bronx mural was censored and some boosterish aspects of New Deal ideology are found in his Social Security mural. For many artists on the left, these conditions created an insurmountable tension with their commitment to an art of class struggle. For other painters of the period, the bureaucratic and collective culture of federal patronage was at odds with their individualistic artistic expression. By contrast, Shahn was relatively comfortable and successful in this environment, able to work within its structures and strictures to realize major mural projects. On completing his Social Security mural in 1942, Shahn brought the same collaborative spirit to work within government restrictions as Senior Liaison Officer in the Graphics Division of the Office of War Information (OWI), although there he was eventually thwarted by the "labyrinth of cross purposes" and petty bureaucracy that so often characterize white-collar work.[10]

The *Resources of America* and *The Meaning of Social Security* did not involve fundamental compromise for Shahn. While he contributed to the radical *Art Front* journal and other Popular Front activities linked to the Communist Party USA, his politics aligned with the "interventionist" and "progressive" public works projects of the early New Deal and he held deep respect for FDR.[11] Moreover, Shahn's commitment to labor was based on an ingrained, intergenerational feeling—a personal, visceral connection to work and workers that lay outside formal politics. Much of what he wanted to say about work could be expressed within the terms of a government commission, as seen in the Bronx mural

8. Quotes from George Biddle, "An Art Renascence Under Federal Patronage," *Scribner's Magazine* 93, no. 5 (May 9, 1933): 428, 430.

9. See Diana L. Linden, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals: Jewish Identity in the American Scene* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015).

10. Howard Greenfeld, *Ben Shahn: An Artist's Life* (New York: Random House, 1998), 188, 193.

11. Warren Carter, *Figuring the New Deal: Publics and Ideology in Treasury Section Painting and Sculpture in Washington, D.C., 1934–1943* (PhD diss., University College London, 2013), 242.

study *Riveter* (1938). The tonal harmony of the Black worker's body and functional overalls mesh man and work. His strong forearm creates a line of force that runs through the power tool he wields with great precision—the product of a steady concentration that binds hand and eye. This is meaningful mental and manual labor, the proud expression of the whole person who performs it. The worker is to be valued, elevated to the larger-than-life scale of the Bronx Central Post Office's high ceilings, though not above the stoop labor of the cotton picker or the managerial work of the engineer featured in other panels. The mass of the composition is balanced by Shahn's delicate yet deliberate line, imbued with the same commitment to craft that the riveter displays.[12] Shahn's New Deal representations of work fit the strain of populist thought that Michael Kazin has termed "producerism"—an emotive investment in industrial and agricultural labor that was common currency across the U.S. political spectrum for much of the twentieth century.[13]

Making art *of* and *for* working people was not, however, an unproblematic endeavor. Where Biddle could write directly to FDR given their bond as classmates at the prestigious Croton School and make detached, theoretical claims about art, labor, and social revolution, Shahn—with his working-class Brooklyn upbringing and ongoing dialogue with working people—had a grounded, at times cynical, perspective. The construction workers who seemed enthralled by Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural told him they were willing to destroy it as they "would do anything for time and a half." Revisiting *Resources of America*, Shahn asked the post office service crew foreman if he liked the mural. "Not particularly, but I'm sure glad you put all these guys in overalls up on the walls," came the reply. "It helped me organize the building crew. Made 'em think they were important."[14] This was not quite what Rivera meant by an art "important to the proletariat," and such responses, which punctuate Shahn's recollections of the period, must have caused him to question the accessibility of his murals and whether they were truly *for* the working people they were *of*.

Those became pressing questions when Shahn began to work under the more means-ends logic of public communications and political campaigning, first for the OWI and then for the Congress of Industrial Organizations-Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC). Where the hierarchies and internal politics of the OWI tested Shahn's capacity to make art in an institutional setting, the CIO-PAC work was a labor of love that, especially during the 1944 campaign to reelect Roosevelt, aligned his political allegiance to the president with visual representation of work and workers. His best-known CIO-PAC poster, *For Full Employment After the War, Register, Vote* (1944), utilizes elements of his earlier imagery and working practice. Shahn took Alfred T. Palmer's OWI photograph of ship welders, which he obtained for his source files, and repurposed it for the political campaign (pp. 187 top, 186). As Laura Katzman has discovered, Shahn replaced one of the white welders from the photograph with a Black worker (from another photograph), thus picturing a diverse and unified work force—a yet-to-be-realized goal of the labor movement and the Democratic party.[15] (The interracial image was rejected for an earlier OWI poster.) The controversy generated by claims of the white welder's likeness to FDR emphasized the need for clarity in political communication. Indeed, Shahn would distill, even simplify, his motifs of labor in other CIO-PAC posters, such as *For All These Rights We've Just Begun to Fight* (1946) (p. 194), in which a worker's fist is raised amidst a density of slogans and banners.[16]

Shahn's energetic images of active New Deal and wartime workers were at odds with his own lived experience of work. As a documentarian whose instinct was to engage directly with the people he photographed, Shahn saw that periods of purposeful labor, moments of solidarity, or opportunities to take pride in a job well done were rare and fleeting. Alongside his mural projects he developed a type of easel painting that he described as "personal realism" and exhibited as "Sunday Paintings." This name evokes the artworks' contrast with

12. See John Fagg, "Unit and Gross: Picturing Individual Workers and Collective Labor," in David C. Ward and Dorothy Moss, *The Sweat of Their Face: Portraying American Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2017), 45–46.

13. Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

14. Shahn, "Artist's Statement," in Miller and Barr, eds., *American Realists and Magic Realists*, 53; Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," 140.

15. Katzman, "Source Matters: Ben Shahn and the Archive," *Archives of American Art Journal* 54, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 21–25. See John Ott, "Graphic Consciousness: The Visual Cultures of Integrated Industrial Unions at Midcentury," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (December 2014): 883–917.

16. On Shahn's CIO-PAC work, see Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947–1954* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 9–33.

his government commissions and their stylistic borrowings from amateur or "folk" art. In works such as *Puddlers' Sunday* (1937 or 1938) and *Sunday Morning* (1938–43), male workers stand or sit around at leisure, their stasis accentuated by their moribund surroundings. Both repurpose elements from Shahn's RA photographs; *Puddlers' Sunday* derives from one shot in a series of striking workers (figs. 1–3). Here the original context of the photograph, the violent confrontations between strikers and strikebreakers of the July 1937 Little Steel Strike in Ohio, is largely suppressed, buried beneath the banality of what appears to be a workers' excursion to the countryside.[17] On viewing these "Sunday Paintings" exhibited at the Julien Levy Gallery in spring 1940, one critic observed: "Everybody sits around dejected, grim as though waiting for something to happen to them—and something not very inspiring at that."[18] This was a Depression-era reality for relief clients and laid-off workers as well as for longshoremen and cotton pickers hoping to make the day's crew, not to mention desk-bound government employees waiting to meet the next boss. Even taking strike action often meant simply doing nothing.[19]

Waiting bound to working also underpins the series of paintings Shahn developed from his illustrations for John Bartlow Martin's 1948 *Harper's Magazine* article on a mine disaster in Centralia, Illinois.[20] In the postwar period, Shahn began to take assignments from mass-market magazines, as well as from advertisers such as the Container Corporation of America and the Columbia Broadcasting Company (CBS), finding new ways to be a working artist after federal patronage ended and his involvement with the CIO-PAC waned. Shahn took great care over the terms of these projects and preferred those that fit his personal and political convictions, hence his interest in Martin's work.

Detailing the bureaucratic inertia and indifference regarding the failings in mine safety that led to the buildup of coal dust and culminated in a mine explosion that claimed 111 lives, Martin immersed readers in the micropolitics of industrial relations. The long article ranges across the bland language of corporate, union, and local government buck-passing, the miners' passionate plea to "save our lives" in a whistleblowing letter, and the fatalistic folk speech of grieving families. Shahn's response, a burst of creativity that produced over one hundred line drawings, of which *Harper's* used twenty-four, instigated a period of friendship and collaboration with Martin. Here was an understanding of labor and the state that matched Shahn's own broad purview and that moved beyond partisan union politics. A story that demanded a hundred drawings and that occupied the most space *Harper's* had ever allocated to a single article contrasts sharply with the short slogans and truncated imagery of the CIO-PAC posters. Moreover, Martin did not hold back on indicting the United Mine Workers of America as part of the "vast, unapproachable, insensate organism" that meant no one individual or entity took responsibility or intervened to close the mine.[21]

Shahn's line drawings present straight portraits of key figures in the story, in the manner of his earlier Dreyfus series (p. 181 bottom). They punctuate the thicket of acronyms and agencies into which Martin's investigation descends with the figure of a fallen miner. They visualize the mining community's folk fatalism with a simple shrine to a lost husband and son. "My wife comes from mine country and I have been down mines," Shahn told an interviewer, and his varied experiences of the mining workscape informed his response.[22] But the drawings also repurpose photographs, including those from Shahn, other New Deal documentarians, and *Life* magazine (pp. 179–180). The drawings and their textual and photographic sources were, in turn, employed across a series of mine paintings. *Miners' Wives* (c. 1948) (fig. 4)—showing women waiting for news from below with their loved ones' clothes hoisted above their heads—takes imagery from his mine drawing, itself derived from a *Life* photograph. The central woman's wrung hands are appropriated from the figure of fretful waiting Shahn devised in his line drawings. Her straight-lipped stoicism

17. Katzman identified and discussed Shahn's unofficial RA photographs from his source files in the Archives of American Art. Negatives are in the Harvard Art Museums. See Katzman, "Source Matters," 19–20, 33.

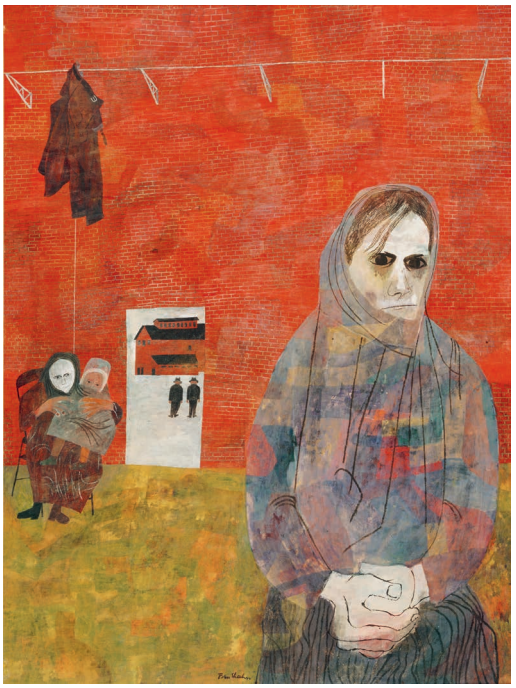
18. Quoted in Selden Rodman, *Portrait of the Artist as an American, Ben Shahn: A Biography with Pictures* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 77.

19. On Shahn's "Sunday Paintings," see Fagg, *Re-envisioning the Everyday: American Genre Scenes, 1905–1945* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023), 159–97.

20. John Bartlow Martin, "The Blast in Centralia No. 5: A Mine Disaster No One Stopped," *Harper's Magazine* 196, no. 1174 (March 1948): 193–220.

21. Martin, "The Blast in Centralia No. 5," 219.

22. "Interview (1957): Ben Shahn and Nadya Aisenberg," in John D. Morse, ed., *Ben Shahn*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 55.



1 and 2
Untitled [Steel Strike, Warren, Ohio], Summer 1937

3
Puddlers' Sunday, 1937 or 1938

4
Miners' Wives, c. 1948

corresponds to Martin's article, where one of the miners' wives told him, "them accidents happen, seems like it just has to be," while the "vast, unapproachable, insensate organism" of bureaucracy registers in the turned backs of the suited men and, metaphorically, in the vast brick wall.[23] While research is required to trace these specific sources, if *Miners' Wives* succeeds, it is because Shahn's layered understanding, informed by many kinds of knowledge about the working world, remains a tangible presence in the painting itself.

In February 1948, shortly after completing the *Harper's* illustrations, Shahn told the National Inter-Collegiate Arts Conference at Vassar College that "he works at a variety of jobs. His source of income is potato-raising and not the result of undivided attention to the brush and easel." This may have been a reference to the workers' cooperatives at Jersey Homesteads or a joke likening the menial aspects of his CIO-PAC and commercial illustration work to agrarian labor. Either way, Shahn clearly intended to project a workingman's identity to an audience that included students from Yale, Princeton, and Harvard universities. When pressed on what "the real question today for the artist is," he reportedly responded, "How am I going to feed myself and my family?"[24]

The conference at Vassar was among the first of Shahn's many engagements at elite northeastern universities, exemplified by his appointment as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard in 1956. During this period, Shahn befriended academics, including the Smith College art historians Oliver Larkin and Edgar Wind; taught at the experimental Black Mountain College; and in other ways participated in the movement—or retreat—of left-wing intellectuals into the academy. "There always has been, and I am afraid there will always have to be some kind of patronage," Shahn explained in a 1957 interview. "Willy-nilly, the universities are becoming the patron—if not of concept, of economic aid."[25] If moving in these circles pulled Shahn further from his working-class roots, that was tempered by his long residence in Jersey Homesteads (renamed Roosevelt in 1945). But this locale was changing too, as many resettled Jewish garment workers returned to New York and were replaced by young families and artists attracted to the bucolic setting and affordable housing, as well as Shahn's presence.[26] Against this turning tide, Shahn told Harvard students who aspired to become artists: "Get a job in a potato field; or work as a grease monkey in an auto repair shop. But if you do work in a field do not fail to observe the look and feel of earth and of all things that you handle—yes, even potatoes! Or, in the auto shop, the smell of oil and grease and burning rubber."[27] Seemingly inventing the "gap year," Shahn urged on his audience the experiential and olfactory sensations of manual work as if to instill in Ivy League graduates the identification with labor that had been the wellspring of his own art.

The communal experience of migration and striving that shaped Shahn's artistic approach, the solidarity among workers forged on the production line and fostered by the trade unionism of the interwar years, and even the very nature of the skilled agricultural and industrial jobs pictured in Shahn's New Deal murals were becoming the stuff of old folks' memories and history books in the postwar period. If a detachment from Shahn's working world was emerging for mid-twentieth-century audiences of his art, it is a gulf of understanding today. Rather than allowing his art to fall into the kind of nostalgia that makes 1930s denims and overalls a contemporary menswear trend, we might focus on the way that Shahn adapted to different mediums, political climates, and creative contexts without losing his core commitment to the values of work and workers. Those values might then be productively adapted to the ever-shifting, varied, and global nature of work in our current moment.

23. Martin, "The Blast in Centralia No. 5," 220, 219.

24. Carol DeCamp, "DeCamp Discusses Cage, Shahn; Their Approach to Art," *The Vassar Chronicle*, March 6, 1948, 3, 6.

25. "Interview (1957)," 47.

26. See Edwin Rosskam, *Roosevelt, New Jersey: Big Dreams in a Small Town and What Time Did to Them* (New York: Grossman, 1972).

27. Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 113.

DIGNITY, GRIMNESS, URGENCY: BEN SHAHN AND THE POSTER ART OF WORLD WAR II

Christof Decker

During the last war, the work of American artists was effectively harnessed to the war aims. Indeed we felt our cause strongly, so much so that in some cases the art of war posters and illustrations rose above immediate use to achieve the universality and deep feeling of truly great art.—Ben Shahn, 1952[1]

INTRODUCTION

During World War II visual communication was shaped by films, illustrated magazines, and newspapers, among other types of mass media. As part of this ensemble, posters played a special role. They employed dynamic forms and colors, were produced quickly and in multiples, were printed in huge sizes, and were presented in public spaces. Instantly visible and often ubiquitously displayed, posters could dominate the public sphere and impact the minds of large audiences. These features, combined with how they compress complex ideas into recognizable combinations of image and text, made wartime posters the precursors of today's meme culture. During the 1940s, however, posters were part of a slower-paced world of visual communication and their artistic potential—as exemplified in the work of graphic artists like Ben Shahn—was a topic of lively discussion in the art world.

In the United States, poster art had historically evolved in the fields of advertising and politics. But when World War II began, with Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, the U.S. was lagging behind other countries in the creation of posters containing visual information or propaganda. In Great Britain, Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union, and Spain, the political radicalization and extremism of the 1930s, and the start of the war, produced a constant outpouring of posters. Authoritarian regimes, in particular, developed new designs aimed to appeal to a public relying not only on newspapers for information but also on posters, photographs, films, and mass gatherings in public places for affective attachments. In Germany, Adolf Hitler's persona was crafted through campaigns presenting him as a savior, warrior, or leader of the German nation. Similarly, the targeting of the Jewish population was promoted by German poster campaigns. These works played on established antisemitic tropes like the "Eternal Jew" (as in a 1937 exhibition advertised by a prominent poster) and updated other stereotypes. In a 1942 series of posters reacting to the U.S. entry into the war on December 7, 1941, anti-American sentiments merged with antisemitism to perpetuate the myth that U.S. society was dominated by Jews. Mixing photography and caricature, posters such as *Kultur* claimed that finance, media, and culture were *verjudet* ("jewified")—a typical example of Nazi hate speech.[2] The authoritarian elite in Germany, the fascist regime in Italy, and the communist leadership in the Soviet Union spawned the development of poster traditions based on the respective political ideologies of each nation, as did the warring Loyalist and Nationalist factions in Spain during its civil war. State-sponsored and politically extremist poster production also provoked innovative visual counterattacks in anti-fascist works such as John Heartfield's *Adolf, der Übermensch: Schluckt Gold und redet Blech* (1932) (fig. 1).[3]

At the outbreak of World War II, European governments reacted quickly with poster art production, while American institutions realized the need to develop their artistic endeavors as rapidly as possible.[4] A case in point is the 1941 *Posters for Defense* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. It showcased Great Britain's use of posters in the Allied war effort and inspired one of many competitions to jump-start U.S. poster work. It was inadequate for the U.S. to continue to rely on advertising models, older designs from World War I, and European examples. Public tastes had changed, and as MoMA's *Bulletin* explained, poster art had to meet higher aesthetic standards.[5] Several government agencies and private manufacturing companies prioritized utilitarian purposes for posters to promote wartime needs: saving resources, boosting military production, or cautioning

1. Ben Shahn, "The Future of the Creative Arts," *University of Buffalo Studies* 19, no. 4 (February 1952): 125.

2. The poster shows Broadway lyricist Mack Gordon—adapted from a photograph in Hans Diebow's antisemitic brochure *Die Juden in USA* (Berlin: Franz Eher Verlag, 1941). An example of modernist art hangs next to a grotesquely convoluted statue of Mary and Jesus—caricatured examples of Nazi-deemed "degenerate art." "Low-brow" literature is shown as well as a racist depiction of an African American musician. "Kultur" in quotation marks indicates a cliché, predating the Nazi period, that U.S. culture was debased and vulgar.

3. Heartfield deconstructed Nazi terminology, in this case "Übermensch." An x-ray reveals Hitler to be a fake and a liar, controlled by outwardly invisible yet powerful forces. See David King and Ernst Volland, *John Heartfield: Laughter Is a Devastating Weapon* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 86–87.

4. On the history of war posters, see G. H. Gregory, ed., *Posters of World War II* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1993); Peter Darman, *Posters of World War II: Allied and Axis Propaganda, 1939–1945* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2011); and Steven Luckert and Susan D. Bachrach, *State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2011).

5. See "Posters for Defense," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 8, no. 6 (September 1941): 3–8.

the public against endangering U.S. security, as in Henry Koerner's *Someone Talked!* (1942) (fig. 2).[6] But it soon became clear that poster production required centralization at the Office of War Information (OWI) and a focus on more complex issues to help the public identify allies and enemies and to craft a compelling image of the American nation on the home front around which citizens could rally.

BEN SHAHN AT THE OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION

Shahn joined the Graphics Division of the OWI in fall 1942—a critical time in the war that saw major battles in Europe and Asia as well as the systematic persecution of the Jewish population across Nazi-occupied Europe. Shahn worked on various poster campaigns and brochures for the OWI and other war-related agencies. Yet it appears that when he left the OWI in summer 1943, only two of his posters had been used for public circulation while other projects were aborted.[7] Shahn's political convictions—his progressive and humanist concerns—were not always compatible with the official line of the OWI. Further, his approach to artistic creation relied on the autonomy and subjective vision of the artist, which soon conflicted with institutional routines that were ultimately modeled on the commercial advertising of corporate publicity departments.[8] Still, Shahn's time at the OWI was a crucial transition in his artistic trajectory and it introduced him to important media-world figures, among them Francis E. Brennan (art director at *Fortune* magazine) and William Golden (art director at CBS), both of whom he continued to collaborate with after the war.

In an early discussion with Golden at the OWI, as recalled by Shahn after Golden's untimely death, they tried to define the nature of a war poster: "It must be neither tricky nor smart. Agreed. The objective is too serious for smartness. It has to have dignity, grimness, urgency. Agreed. It has to be unblinkingly serious; agreed."[9] These ideas were part of a broader effort at the OWI to define visual communication from an American perspective.[10] They seemed to rule out two powerful European traditions that had emerged in the climate of political extremism: the hate propaganda of the Nazi regime and the biting satire of the anti-Nazi Heartfield school. And yet, if dignity, grimness, urgency, and seriousness constituted a form of visual rhetoric that addressed the audience as human beings, what this *democratic* idea of propaganda should look like as an effective tool of communication was less clear. The projects that Shahn managed to complete or had to abort, therefore, allow us to explore how this search for a complex, challenging, and urgently appropriate form of poster art developed during a key phase of World War II.

ATROCITIES IN LIDICE

This is Nazi Brutality (1942) (p. 144) is the first Shahn poster used during the war, reflecting the artist's response to the destruction of the town of Lidice, Czechoslovakia (today's Czech Republic) on June 10, 1942. After the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, Deputy Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, in Prague, German units perpetrated revenge killings in Lidice. Importantly, the German military did not attempt to hide the atrocities at the time but made them known in a public statement, featured prominently in Shahn's poster. The work shows an anonymous hooded man in a black suit standing in front of a red brick wall, his clenched and shackled fists signifying desperation and defiance. The view from below guides the viewer's attention to the ticker tape message from "Radio Berlin" that puts the "Nazi brutality" on display. The brutality applies both to the act of murdering hundreds of innocent civilians and to making the crime publicly known. While the brick wall opens up to a patch of blue sky, it also delimits the space where the man will be shot. A typical element in Shahn's work, the exquisitely painted wall, creates a sense of entrapment.

6. Koerner's poster cleverly combines the smallness of the proverbial "man in the street" with a massive, guilt-inducing finger. The newspaper headline allowed Koerner, who fled Austria for the U.S., to make his point in a highly compressed manner. The poster won first prize in a 1942 poster competition sponsored by Artists for Victory, the Council for Democracy, and the Museum of Modern Art.

7. For an in-depth discussion of Shahn's OWI work, see Christof Decker, "Fighting for a Free World: Ben Shahn and the Art of the War Poster," *American Art* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 84–105. Shahn also worked for the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, officially and in a freelance capacity, circa 1942–45.

8. On Shahn's often contentious tenure at the OWI, see Howard Greenfeld, *Ben Shahn: An Artist's Life* (New York: Random House, 1998), 187–96. On Shahn's move from the OWI to CIO-PAC, see Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 1993), 21–22, 68.

9. Shahn, "Bill," in Cipe Pineles Golden et al., eds., *The Visual Craft of William Golden* (New York: Braziller, 1962), 126.

10. See Decker, "Fighting for a Free World," 94–95.

1
John Heartfield
Adolf, der Übermensch: Schluckt Gold und redet Blech
(Adolf, the Superman: He Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk), 1932

2
Henry Koerner
Someone Talked!, 1942

(continued...)