

Exhibition October 4, 2023 – February 26, 2024

Sabatini Building, Floor 1

Ben Shahn

On Nonconformity



Italian Landscape II: Europa, 1944. Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama, The Blount Collection, 1989.2.37
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On Nonconformity examines the multifaceted work of Ben Shahn (b. 1898, Kaunas, Lithuania; d. 1969, New York), a central figure in the American social realism movement. A working-class Jewish immigrant from eastern Europe, Shahn became one of the most prominent, prolific, and progressive artists in the United States from the 1930s through the 1960s. His work addresses crucial aspects of twentieth-century history, both in the United States and globally, from the New Deal through the Vietnam War era. Highlighting Shahn's continued relevance, this first retrospective exhibition of his art in Spain focuses on his commitment to social justice through the lens of contemporary diversity and equity perspectives.

Shahn's masterful achievement in communicating to the broadest audiences encompasses paintings, murals, prints, drawings, and photographs, as well as book and commercial design. The exhibition features Shahn's social realist style, his complex and underappreciated use of modernist conceptual strategies and photographic sources, and his inventive repurposing of motifs. The show also illuminates Shahn's response to the postwar ascendancy of abstract expressionism and non-objective art in the US art world and to the oppressive political atmosphere of the early Cold War years epitomized by McCarthyism. Over time the artist shifted from documentary approaches

to more poetic, lyrical, and elegiac idioms that employed allegory, symbolism, and myth—secular and religious—in search of universal expression.

But Shahn never abandoned figuration or social content, and vehemently criticized the “hot” new art movements—abstract expressionism, pop art, happenings, and minimalism—as disengaged from the “human prospect.” Espousing the credo of artistic “nonconformity,” he asserted that dissent from tradition, the status quo, or even faddish trends is the precondition for all important art and great historical change. In the postwar US art scene—which was more pluralistic than conventional



Sam Nichols, tenant farmer, Boone County, Arkansas, 1935. Library of Congress

narratives have conveyed—Shahn remained pertinent, popular, and successful on his own terms.

As a thematic presentation of multiple media contextualized by archival documentation, *On Nonconformity* opens with Shahn's work as an artist-activist who was politicized in the dark days of the Great Depression. As a champion of the underdog, Shahn was a promoter of the rights of workers and immigrants, and a critic of the abuses of the powerful and the privileged. Seeking stories of struggle and instances of injustice, he embraced the *causes célèbres* of his time, such as the case of the persecuted Italian immigrants Nicola

Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Shahn responded to the massive unemployment triggered by economic collapse and to the rise of fascism in Europe. He used his art as a weapon in the class struggle and, after joining liberals in Popular Front coalitions, as a vehicle to fight fascism abroad and to denounce its manifestations at home.

Subsequent sections of the exhibition illuminate Shahn's work for the New Deal government of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Shahn was instrumental in the creation of the now-legendary photographic file of the Resettlement Administration/ Farm Security Administration, which



Welders (For Full Employment After the War, Register, Vote), 1944.
Michael Berg Collection © Estate of Ben Shahn / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

documented the devastation of the farm crisis and the Dust Bowl (severe dust storms caused by drought in the 1930s) with a humanist approach that continues to generate scholarly debate. Shahn's public murals, which express an inclusive vision of the United States, avoid idealization of workers and overt patriotic messages, and are thus among the more complex of the era. Even as Shahn recognized the limitations of the federal art projects, he was totally committed to them, and used his photographs as a source and inspiration for much of his art, especially in the 1930s and 1940s.

The exhibition galleries dedicated to World War II and the postwar years include Shahn's anti-Nazi posters, made for the Office of War Information, which focus on victims, not perpetrators, and use texts within texts that function as metacommentary on the nature of propaganda. His sorrowful wartime paintings speak to the devastation of war and human atrocities, but also to renewal and regeneration. During and after the war, Shahn ardently supported the cause of labor—an aspect of his work represented by his compelling posters made for the Congress of Industrial Organizations



Second Allegory, 1953. Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign © Estate of Ben Shahn / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

Political Action Committee. These range from aspirational images of an interracial labor force to the struggles that labor faced with big business in the later 1940s.

The Cold War-era works on display embody Shahn's response to the anti-communist crusade in the United States that catalyzed the blacklisting of countless liberals and progressives, as well as his response to the atomic age. *Second Allegory* (1953) features an individual threatened by a massive accusatory finger and by looming atomic forces. His poignant *Lucky Dragon* paintings serve as warnings of nuclear dangers still

with us today. In such symbolic works, Shahn increasingly experimented with abstraction, creating richly variegated and layered surfaces. At this time, he also wrote his most pointed critiques of McCarthyism's threat to liberal democracy and his strongest assertions of nonconformity and individual freedom in both art and politics.

In the section devoted to the civil rights movement, Shahn's images of the icon of nonviolent resistance, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and of lesser-known civil rights activists murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan, anchor the room. Shahn depicted King as a fiery, impassioned orator, reminding viewers of the radicalism of his demands for equality in his day. Like King and the Black Power figures who would soon eclipse him, Shahn saw the struggle for racial justice in global terms, as part of the wider decolonization movement. Thus, also shown are Shahn's images of India's leader of civil disobedience, Mahatma Gandhi, and the artist's illustrations for CBS television programs on the resistance to British and European colonial rule in various African nations.

The concluding sections of the exhibition address spirituality and identity, revealing Shahn's re-embrace of the biblical stories and Hebrew texts he knew so well as a child. With imaginative, lyrical pairings of word and image, Shahn gravitated to the figure of Job, who questioned God's ways and grappled with the mysteries of the universe. Works like *Identity* (1968) exemplify Shahn's last paintings—the raised arms and clasped



Identity, 1968, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
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hands expressing both spiritual uplift and earthbound protest against the then-raging Vietnam War. *Flowering Brushes* (1968) closes the show on a philosophical note—a reflection on the role of the artist in society. Shahn’s inward-looking “creator” conveys the ultimate paradox of the nonconforming artist, who must be at once part of and removed from society to make meaningful commentary on the human condition.