

## Ben Shahn. *On Nonconformity*



**BEN SHAHN**  
*Carnival (Parque de atracciones)*, 1946  
Temple sobre masonita  
56 x 75,5 cm  
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
© Estate of Ben Shahn / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

<b>DATES:</b>	October 4, 2023-February 26, 2024
<b>PLACE:</b>	Museo Reina Sofía. Sabatini building, 1st floor. Madrid
<b>ORGANIZATION:</b>	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
<b>CURATOR:</b>	Laura Katzman
<b>COORDINATION:</b>	Beatriz Velázquez and Ana Uruñuela
<b>COORDINATION ASSISTANT:</b>	Ana Lázaro



**BEN SHAHN**  
*Identidad*, 1968  
Técnica mixta sobre papel  
101,6 x 69,8 cm  
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
© Estate of Ben Shahn / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

*On Nonconformity* is the first retrospective in Spain of Ben Shahn (Kaunas, Lithuania, 1898-New York, 1969), and the first retrospective of his work to be held in Europe since 1963. Organized by the Reina Sofia Museum, the exhibition brings together nearly 200 works from 50 museums, galleries, archives and private collections in the United States and Spain (including the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York) as well as abundant documentary material and original photographs from the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art and the Harvard Art Museums.

Recognized as one of the great representatives of American social realism and a staunch advocate of social justice, the exhibition reviews the multifaceted work of this working-class immigrant from an eastern European Jewish family, who was concerned with the most consequential issues in 20th-century history, such as the Great Depression and the New Deal in the United States; the rise of European fascism; the barbarism of World War II; McCarthyism and the repression of individual liberties during the Cold War; the threat of nuclear annihilation in the atomic age; the struggles for labor, civil and human rights when decolonization movements were

spreading across the globe; and, at the end of his life, the Vietnam War. His more lyrical and spiritual works of his later years, often incorporating passages from the Hebrew bible, also carry social content.

Shahn used multiple media in his work (tempera paintings, watercolors and gouaches; posters and silkscreen prints; sketches for murals; photographs and drawings). He also engaged in the commercial design of illustrated books and magazines. The exhibition, which coincides with the 125th anniversary of the artist's birth, shows the unique and experimental creative process of the artist, who had an astonishing mastery of many media, a compelling skill for using photographic source material, an inventive facility for repurposing motifs and a penchant for art forms that could reach wide audiences.

In the fifties Shahn achieved enormous popularity; he was selected to represent the United States, along with Willem de Kooning, at the Venice Biennale in 1954, and was the subject of numerous exhibitions, television programs and publications. This was the Cold War era, however, which saw the ascendancy of abstract expressionism and other forms of non-objective art as well as the emergence of anti-communist crusades. In this climate, Shahn began to lose favor with certain influential art critics and was also attacked for his progressivism.

Nevertheless, Shahn's relevance and currency in today's world is highlighted by Laura Katzman in the exhibition catalog, where she stresses that "although, after Shahn's death, his work might prove relevant to any subsequent generation, it seems to have taken on a new urgency in the highly polarized political climate that prevails today inside and outside the U.S., at a time when conventional politics has undergone a radical transformation."

## Art and Activism

The first room of the exhibition deals with Ben Shahn's work in the thirties when, after being trained in lithography and emulating the modernism of Cézanne, Picasso and the School of Paris, his work veered towards realism and his political commitment grew. He also began to draw from news photographs, which became characteristic of his working method throughout his career—an approach that can be seen in many of the display cases in the exhibition.

At this moment of economic crisis caused by the Great Depression of October 1929, the artist dedicated himself to calling out, with watercolors and gouaches, famous cases of injustice. The first *cause célèbre* he embraced is the trial of the French captain, Alfred Dreyfus—a victim of antisemitism between 1894 and 1906—and the second is that of two working-class Italian immigrants executed in Massachusetts in 1927 for a murder that many believe they did not commit. This case is represented here in the monumental work, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1931-1932).

Shahn next produced a series of gouaches on Tom Mooney (1932-1933), the Irish-American labor leader wrongly imprisoned for a 1916 bombing during a World War I Preparedness Day parade in San Francisco.

Additionally, the artist denounced the authoritarian tendencies of his own country, as shown in his scathing caricature of *Father Coughlin* (1939), the antisemitic "radio priest" and hate-monger, whom he satirized in the manner of Honoré Daumier and Francisco de Goya.

## Documentary Photographs

In the 1930s, Ben Shahn also took up photography, seeking a reportage aesthetic and "authentic" details for his social realist painting. With a 35 mm Leica and inspiration from his partner Bernarda Bryson, the artist photographed—with candidness and spontaneity—ordinary



**BEN SHAHN**  
Sam Nichols, tenant farmer, Boone County, Arkansas (Sam Nichols, granjero arrendatario, condado de Boone, Arkansas), Octubre de 1935  
Impresión digital (tal desde negativo de 35 mm). Copia de exposición  
20 x 25 cm  
The Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Colección FSA/OIW, [LC-USF33-006(37-M3)]



**BEN SHAHN**  
*The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* [La pasión de Sacco y Vanzetti], 1931-1932  
Temple sobre lienzo montado sobre tablero compuesto  
213 x 122 cm  
Whitney Museum of American Art, Nueva York. Donación de Edith y Milton Loventhal en memoria de Juliana Force, 49.22  
© Estate of Ben Shahn / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

citizens on the streets of New York City, young men incarcerated in prisons, and artist-activists demonstrating for jobs and using their art as a weapon in the class struggle. He began to use his own camera images as source material for his paintings and posters.

As a strong supporter of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, whose unprecedented social programs put millions of Americans back to work, Shahn agreed to work for the Resettlement Administration (RA), later renamed the Farm Security Administration

(FSA), whose goal was to combat the country's agricultural crisis and the devastation brought on by the Dust Bowl (heavy dust storms caused by the drought of the era.). His photographs, which were first used to make his RA posters, served to demonstrate the need for federal relief programs that relocated and retrained rural workers.

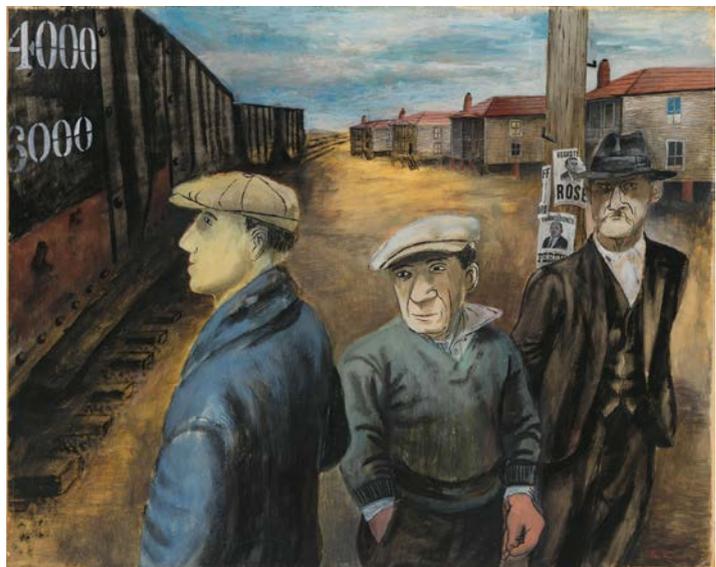
This second room features Shahn's iconic photographs of sharecroppers, tenant farmers and coal miners in the South and Midwest, which along with those of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Russell Lee, among others, created a massive and now-legendary photographic archive. Their photographs, simple but powerful, were once attacked as leftist propaganda, and later, ironically, as a sanitized documentation of poverty. Shahn's photographs are also notable for their critique of racial discrimination and segregationist policies that are contrary to the nation's democratic ideals.

### **New Deal Posters and Paintings**

Ben Shahn's employment in New Deal agencies during the Great Depression changed his life. While recognizing the limitations of the federal efforts, he believed strongly in the social programs and artistic projects of the U.S. government.

Posters from 1936, such as *Years of Dust* and *A Mule and a Plow*, depicting workers in desolate landscapes, were inspired by the graphic details and stark realities of Shahn's photographs for the RA-FSA, which visitors viewed in the previous room.

Shahn's photographs also provided the primary source material for his other works, such as his "Sunday paintings," including *Sunday Painting* (1938) and *Pretty Girl Milking the Cow* (1940), which dignify the ordinariness of people and their mundane activities. Exemplifying Shahn's "personal realism," these paintings mark a shift in his work from what in the 1930s was called an "art for the masses" to an art of the individual. Shahn attributed this shift to his revelatory photographic travels in the United States, as he had seen little of the country beyond New York.



BEN SHAHN  
*Scotts Run, West Virginia (Scotts Run, Virginia Occidental)*, 1937  
Temple sobre papel montado sobre madera  
57 x 72 cm  
Whitney Museum of American Art, Nueva York. Compra, 38.11  
© Estate of Ben Shahn / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

### **Public Murals**

The following room is dedicated to the murals of Ben Shahn, who took advantage of the opportunities that the New Deal art projects offered artists to address broad audiences in post-offices and other official buildings across the U.S. Shahn's murals, which promoted an inclusive vision of America, lack overtly patriotic messages and are among the most complex of the genre.

Shahn's 1934 unrealized mural for New York's Central Park Casino, sponsored by the Public Works of Art Project, features the theme of Prohibition. Its dynamic architectural settings serve as the backdrop for a satirical commentary on efforts to maintain or repeal the controversial national liquor prohibition.

Arguably Shahn's most successful and prestigious mural, *The Meaning of Social Security* (1940-1942), was commissioned by the Section of Fine Arts for the then-Social Security Building in Washington, D.C. Shahn included those who would be helped by the New Deal's Social Security Act, such as the unemployed, the elderly, and the disabled. He also subversively portrayed those left out of the legislation: farmers and what might be a domestic worker. The mural shows construction workers employed in public works projects, building houses and bridges. However, it avoids both the glorification of workers found in Soviet socialist realism and the simplistic celebration of the "American way."



BEN SHAHN  
*Welders (For Full Employment After the War, Register, Vote)*, 1944  
[Soldadores (Por el pleno empleo después de la guerra, regístrate, vota)]  
Michael Berg Collection  
© Estate of Ben Shahn / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

### Dignifying Labor

Ben Shahn's commitment to the cause of labor is exemplified by the posters he designed in the mid-1940s as chief artist and director of the Graphic Arts Division of the Political Action Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Shahn's posters—featuring figures with solid, hardworking hands—speak to the dignity of manual labor and to Shahn's values as the son and grandson of woodcarvers and craftsmen.

Examples of such graphics were created for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1944 reelection campaign. They portray the president as a

friend of labor unions and promote interracial cooperation on the job. *For Full Employment After the War: Register Vote*, for instance, shows a white and a black welder working together.

In 1946, given President Harry S. Truman's ambivalent support for labor unions, Shahn's posters took on a less hopeful tone. *Break Reaction's Grip* speaks to the struggle between labor and big business. *For All These Rights We've Just Begun to Fight* depicts a defiant figure with his arm raised, demanding the basic rights outlined in Roosevelt's Economic Bill of Rights, which appear in a multitude of overlapping banners.

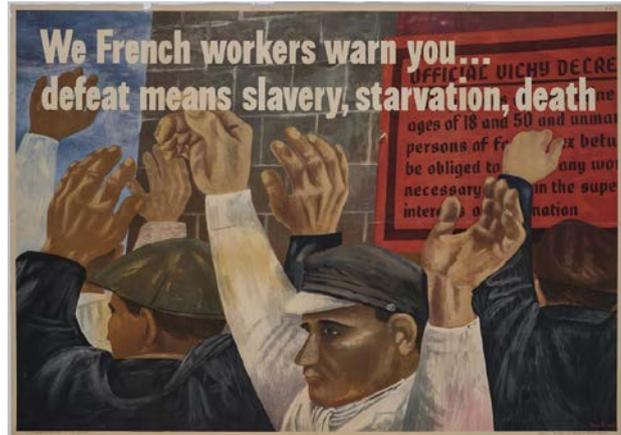
### World War II and the Postwar Era

During World War II, Ben Shahn worked for the U.S. Office of War Information (OWI). Created in 1942, it hired artists to design posters and brochures to encourage national support for the war effort. *This Is Nazi Brutality* (1942) shows the tactics employed by the Nazis to destroy the town of Lidice (Czechoslovakia) and murder or deport most of its inhabitants. *We French Workers Warn You* (1942) condemns the forced labor decree enacted by the Vichy government in collaboration with Nazi Germany during its occupation of France. In both works, Shahn focused more on the victims rather than the perpetrators.

The news photographs that Shahn witnessed of cartloads of dead people and bombed-out European cities left a deep impression on him and served as the basis for his war-related paintings. Shahn lamented the enormous destruction of beloved places in Italy, as seen in his Italian landscapes, where widows walk through the ruins of war. In his first postwar works, the artist contrasted destruction and renewal. One example is *Remember the Wrapper* (1945),

depicting the American liberation of an Italian town from Nazi occupation, which shows soldiers handing out chewing gum to excited children in a war-torn landscape.

In the years immediately following World War II, amid widespread celebration of the triumph of American economic and military power, Ben Shahn confronted the horrors of war, from the Nazi death camps to the destruction caused by the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. He used allegory, symbolism and myth to reflect on the fate of humanity in the new world order. Even Shahn's images of everyday or leisure activities took on an unsettling, melancholic symbolism, as in *Carnival* (1946), made from his FSA photographs of carnivals and an amusement park in Ohio. The equally enigmatic *New York* (1947), which reads as an evocative dreamscape of Shahn's memories of his immigrant past, reflects the artist's own ethnic identity in the U.S. as the full scope of the Holocaust was being revealed.



**BEN SHAHN**  
*We French Workers Warn You...defeat means slavery, starvation death, 1942*  
Nosotros los obreros franceses os prevenimos... la derrota supone esclavitud, hambre, muerte  
Litografía  
68 x 104 cm  
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

### **The Cold War: McCarthyism and the Atomic Age**



**BEN SHAHN**  
*Blind Botanist #2 (Botánico ciego núm. 2), 1954*  
Temple sobre lienzo, montado sobre tablero  
54 x 44 cm  
Colección Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York. Donación de la colección Dina and Alexander E. Racolin  
© Estate of Ben Shahn / VEGAP, Madrid, 202.

Ben Shahn's art and politics came under attack in the oppressive political climate of the early Cold War years. Americans' fear of Soviet communism was exacerbated by the persecution of communists, liberals and progressives by Senator Joseph McCarthy and his acolytes. Shahn himself was persecuted by the FBI for his leftist affiliations, questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee and blacklisted by CBS Broadcasting, for which he had designed advertisements.

This environment led the artist to create *Conversations* (1958), a work which shows two "officials" with their faces hidden behind masks, symbolizing, perhaps, the duplicity of democratic leaders meeting with dictators in the Cold War around the common interest of stopping the spread of communism.

In parallel, Shahn also responded to the nuclear threat with allegorical works showing abstracted forms such as *Second Allegory* (1953), in which a figure is attacked by a huge

accusing finger surrounded by red flames, suggesting the imminent dangers of atomic bombs. His last major series, *The Saga of the Lucky Dragon* (1960-1962), also serves as a warning about nuclear dangers. It is an eloquent set of paintings based on the 1954 U.S. test of an H-bomb at Bikini Atoll, which contaminated a crew of Japanese fishermen and several hundred

Marshall Islanders.

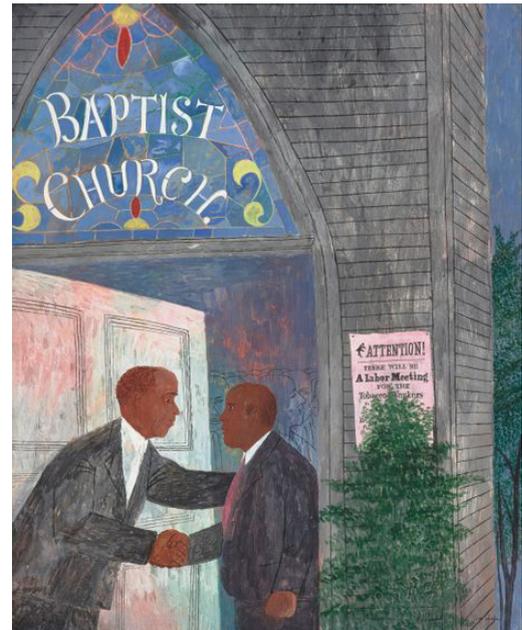
Equally disturbing are Shahn's depictions of "blind botanists," scientists immersed in their theories, physically threatened by their experiments or molecular structures. Shahn portrayed the famous theoretical physicists Albert Einstein and J. Robert Oppenheimer, whom he knew and admired for ultimately opposing nuclear weapons on moral grounds. Shahn's Oppenheimer appears as a tragic figure with hypnotic eyes, a furrowed brow and sunken cheeks, haunted by his leading role in the creation of the U.S. atomic bombs.

### **Civil Rights and Anti-colonialism**

Ben Shahn fervently supported the civil rights movement in the United States and the resistance movements against colonialism that swept the world in the 1950s and 1960s. As an American from a Jewish immigrant family who experienced antisemitic persecution firsthand, Shahn strove to combat racism and other forms of discrimination.

Shahn depicted the icon of nonviolence, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a riveting civil and labor rights activist in the midst of a moving oration—a picture that contrasts with the de-radicalized image of King today.

He portrayed King for *Time* magazine in March 1965, shortly after "Bloody Sunday," when activists marching from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, were brutally beaten by police and white residents of Selma. Reused for a lithograph with an excerpt from King's last speech before his assassination on April 4, 1968, the image was used in a fundraising campaign.



BEN SHAHN  
*The Church is the Union Hall* (*La iglesia es el sindicato*), 1946  
Temple sobre tablero  
51 x 41 cm  
High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Compra con fondos de Sherri y Jess Crawford, High Museum of Art Enhancement Fund, the American Art Collectors, Mr. y Mrs. Henry Schwob y Mr. y Mrs. John L. Huber  
© Estate of Ben Shahn / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

Another fundraising campaign included a 1965 portfolio with Shahn's haunting portraits of young civil rights advocates: two white Jewish men, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, and a black college student, James Chaney. They were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan on June 21, 1964, during the "Freedom Summer" campaign aimed at registering black voters in Mississippi. Their interracial cooperation and subsequent assassination prompted the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It should be noted that Shahn did not represent the powerful and controversial leaders of the Black Power movement or the women who were instrumental in the civil rights struggle.

In the 1960s, Shahn also commemorated India's struggle for freedom from British rule with his monumental portrait of Gandhi, the "prophet" of nonviolence, assassinated in 1948. Shahn's barbed wire line expresses the moral severity and firm vision of the ascetic leader sitting erect in a meditative position. He saw Gandhi as King saw him: as a spiritual inspiration and as a profound influence on America's civil disobedience strategies.

### **Coda**

The final sections of the exhibition address spirituality and identity, revealing Ben Shahn's return

to the biblical stories and Hebrew texts he knew so well as a child. With imaginative and lyrical combinations of words and images, Shahn looked to the figure of Job, who questioned the ways of God and confronted the mysteries of the universe. Works such as *Identity* (1968) exemplify Shahn's later paintings: raised arms and interlocked hands express both spiritual uplift and earthly protest against the Vietnam War. *Flowering Brushes* (1968) closes the exhibition on a philosophical note: a reflection on the role of the artist in society.

### **Catalog**

On the occasion of this retrospective, the Museo Reina Sofía will publish an illustrated catalog with an extensive essay by the curator, Laura Katzman, as well as texts by other authors who analyze Ben Shahn's work, such as John Fagg, Christof Decker and Beatriz Cordero Martín in collaboration with Katzman.

### **Related activities**

Meeting about Ben Shahn. Tour of the exhibition with the curator of the exhibition, Laura Katzman. Wednesday, October 4 and Monday, November 20, 2023 - 6:00 p.m.

#### **For further information:**

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