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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PRESENTS RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OF BEN SHAHN'S
PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS, POSTERS AND SKETCHES FOR MURALS

Propagandist and poet in his easel pictures, his posters, his murals, his drawings, even in the photographs he takes as another artist might jot down studies in a sketch book for future paintings, Ben Shahn, nearing the half-century mark, grows "steadily more eloquent and assured.....He has developed over the past six years into one of the most varied of living American painters not only as to pictorial discovery but in prevailing mood of expressive means."

Thus James Thrall Soby appraises the work of the artist whose retrospective exhibition he is directing for the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, where it opens Wednesday, October 1, in collaboration with the Boston Institute of Modern Art. Dorothy C. Miller, Curator of the Museum's Collections, is Assistant Director of the exhibition which will continue through January 4. It will then go at once to Boston and after it closes there the Museum's Department of Circulating Exhibitions will send a selection from the exhibition on a tour of museums and art galleries throughout the country.

Simultaneously with the opening of the exhibition Mr. Soby's monograph on Ben Shahn, from which the above comment on the artist is quoted, will be published by Penguin Books Ltd. The book contains sixteen reproductions in full color and eighteen in black and white, and is priced at \$1.25. During the exhibition it will be sold at the Museum, and it will be sent to all members who regularly receive Museum publications. A special issue of the Museum's Bulletin has been published as a supplement and reproduces all the easel pictures from the show which are not reproduced in the Penguin monograph. It sells for 25 cents.

The exhibition will consist of approximately 55 easel paintings ranging in date from 1931 to 1947, a selection of the artist's drawings and of the many posters he has made for Governmental and private agencies; there will also be a small group of his photographs. The exhibition will include six border illustrations for the Haggadah lent by the Jewish Museum and selections from three of his famous series (in gouache and tempera): the Sacco-Vanzetti Series, 1931-32; the Mooney Series, 1932-33; and the Prohibition Series, 1933-34.

Ben Shahn was born in Kaunas, Russia, in 1898 and in 1906 arrived in this country where he lived with his family in Brooklyn. When he was fifteen years old he was employed as a lithographer's apprentice during the day and went to school at night. Between the years 1919-22 he attended New York University and later City College of New York which he left in 1922 to study at the National Academy of ^{Design}~~Science~~. He made two trips to Europe in 1925 and 1927 and travelled in France, Italy, Spain and North Africa. He was then influenced by the school of Paris Masters, particularly Rouault.

Shahn returned to the United States in 1929 and had his first one-man exhibition at the Downtown Gallery, New York, in 1930. In 1931 he turned away from the theory of art as "pure" expression, and decided to use his pictorial talents for story-telling and social commentary, as men like Hogarth and Daumier had done before him. He turned first to racial themes, producing twelve border illustrations for a copy of the Haggadah followed by ten water colors on the Dreyfus case. "Then," he says of himself, "I got to thinking about the Sacco-Vanzetti case...Ever since I could remember I'd wished that I'd been lucky enough to be alive at a great time--when something big was going on....And suddenly I realized I was.....Here was something to paint!"

Within seven months Shahn had completed what was to be his most famous series, twenty-three gouache paintings on the trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the American-Italian anarchists who were executed in August, 1927. He followed this series the next year with fifteen gouache paintings and a tempera panel on the case of the San Francisco labor leader Tom Mooney. Both series were admired by Diego Rivera, who hired Shahn as his assistant on the Rockefeller Center frescoes.

During 1933-34 Shahn was enrolled with the Public Works of Art project and did eight tempera pictures on Prohibition. In 1934, with Lou Block, he was commissioned by the Federal Relief Administration to prepare murals for a corridor at Riker's Island Penitentiary. These murals were never executed, as the completed sketches were rejected by the Municipal Art Commission after, however, being approved by the Major and Commissioner of Correction and by prisoners, among whom a poll was conducted. In 1935-38 Shahn was employed by the Farm Security Administration as artist-designer and for a short time as photographer. He completed for this agency a single-wall fresco for the community center of a Federal Housing development at Roosevelt, New Jersey where he himself now lives. From 1938-42 Shahn completed

a number of fresco murals for the Section of Fine Arts, U.S. Treasury. In 1942-43 he designed posters for the Graphic Arts Division of O.W.I. and in 1943-44 five posters for the Political Action Committee of the CIO. In 1945-46 he was Director of Graphic Arts Division for CIO.

During this entire period he continued his easel painting and was represented by eleven paintings in the Museum of Modern Art's American Realists and Magic Realists exhibition in 1943.

Commenting on Shahn and his place in American art, Mr. Soby has said:

"Shahn has been widely known as one of our foremost satirists since the appearance nearly twenty years ago of his series of paintings on the trial of Sacco-Vanzetti and on the case of the persecuted labor leader, Tom Mooney. In recent years he has emerged, too, as one of the most lyric of living American artists, his pictorial invention steadily more varied and rich, his technical fluency and warmth more and more impressive. Perhaps the best description of his art is the one he himself likes best--'hardboiled and beautiful.' Today he is one of the most authentic and powerful of American humanists, an artist who translates the American scene--and particularly New York City--into a strikingly personal statement of sympathy for mankind. The recent war has also inspired him to paint a series of pictures which constitute a lyric mourning for the sorrows and deprivations of Europe's peoples."

To return to the monograph on Shahn which Mr. Soby has written, he states further:

"Shahn himself is the opposite of the 'pure' painter nourished in his studio by esthetic faith. He prefers to work part of the week for a labor union or a government bureau, leaving the rest of his time for painting. He feels that he needs this contact with social activity, since otherwise, he says with alarm, 'I might be left with a paintbrush in my hand.'

"Shahn's vision is all of one piece. As propagandist he is involved in mass appeal on the far-flung scale peculiar to our times, and consequently faces an insistent temptation to sacrifice quality for communicability. He never yields. His paintings, posters, murals, advertisements, proceed from the same steady eye and are informed by a relentless integrity...Shahn, who belongs to the Left, is appreciated by both Left and Right; his work has been published in conservative magazines as often as in liberal; he has fulfilled commissions for labor unions and for industrial corporations; his paintings are bought on completion by collectors of every political hue.

"A paradoxical situation, yes--but one of immense reassurance for American artists and plain citizens alike. No one has told Shahn what or how to paint. He has worked from personal conviction, under no imposed directive or compulsion. So doing, he has earned an acclaim which, though in no sense popular as yet, is in diversity something of a tribute to this country's critical resilience, its willingness to treasure the artist who speaks with sincere authority in whatever idiom he alone prefers."