

The Museum of Modern Art

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BEN SHAHN 1898-1969

Twenty-three works by Ben Shahn are currently on view at The Museum of Modern Art in a special exhibition to honor the artist who died Friday, March 14, 1969. Selected from the Museum's collection and installed in Gallery 19 by Margaret Potter, Associate Curator of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, the memorial exhibition is designed as a small tribute to an artist the Museum has admired and whose work it has collected throughout his career.

The exhibition is comprised of ten paintings, four drawings, three posters, two theatre designs, and a recently acquired illustrated book, For the Sake of a Single Verse from The Notebooks of Malte Taurids Brigge by Rainer Maria Rilke. The book was presented in October, 1968 as a gift to the Museum by Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, in memory of the late René d'Harnoncourt, Director of the Museum from 1949 to 1968. The works on view, executed between 1931 and 1968, include two stage décors for e.e. cummings' him (1961), Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco (1931-32) from the series of twenty-three paintings that Shahn made on the famous trial, and the well-known French Workers (1942-43). In addition, brush and ink portraits of Mayor LaGuardia (1946) and Robert Oppenheimer (1954) and a self-portrait are shown as well as several of Shahn's familiar posters of 1944 encouraging voter registration.

Born in Kovno, Russia (Lithuania), Shahn immigrated with his family to Brooklyn in 1906. From 1913 to 1917 he worked as a lithographer's apprentice. Until 1931 occasional work in lithography supported his studies at New York University, the City College of New York, and the National Academy of Design. In 1925 and 1927 he made two trips to Europe and Africa.

In 1931-32 Shahn discovered in the Sacco and Vanzetti case a narrative subject worthy of passionate concern. The discovery of a suitable subject considerably eased Shahn's attempt to turn his devotion to accuracy to a creative rather than a purely

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reportorial use. In Shahn's own words: "Perhaps it is the fulness of fear with which the artist addresses himself to his theme that will determine, finally its stature or its seriousness. But I think it can be said with certainty that the form which does emerge cannot be greater than the content which went into it." Shahn's series of 23 small gouache paintings of the Italian-American anarchists aided him with his first public recognition. Throughout the rest of his successful career, Shahn continued to respond to political and social affairs, particularly they touched individual lives. His rendering of such subjects as the Tom Mooney embryo and the suffering of the European Jews during World War II display his particular end of realism and intense imagination.

In his book on Ben Shahn (1947), James Thrall Soby, Honorary Chairman of the Painting and Sculpture Committee of The Museum of Modern Art, and a Museum trustee, comments: "Shahn's vision is all of one piece. As propagandist he is lived in mass appeal on the far-flung scale peculiar to our times, and consequently faces an insistent temptation to sacrifice quantity for communicability. He never yields. paintings, posters, murals, advertisements, proceed from the same steady eye and are formed by a relentless integrity."

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