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BEN SHAHN
ICE F 38 58
Critical Reviews

The International Council of
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

CRITICAL REVIEWS: BEN SHAHN

The following quotations were taken from newspaper or periodical reviews of the exhibition BEN SHAHN, which was organized by The Museum of Modern Art under the auspices of The International Council.

First showing: STEDELIJK MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS,
December 15, 1961 - January 22, 1962

From Haagsche Courant, The Hague, January 6, 1962 by R. E. Penning

In one and the same painting he [Shahn] shows vision, caricature, illustration and allegory....The faculty of remaining true to himself in so many fields lends Shahn's art a powerful conviction.

From De Tijd, Amsterdam, and Maasbode, Rotterdam, January 27, 1962, by Marius van Beek

[Shahn] belongs to the most independent fighters against injustice known anywhere today.

From Het Vrijevolk, Amsterdam, (date missing), by Gerrit Kouwenar

It is possible that Shahn (after Hartley and possibly Marin) is one of the first and at the same time last typical American painters who, precisely owing to their national characteristics, have reached an international importance.

From Het Parool, Amsterdam, (date missing) by F. van den Berg

Anxiety, suffering innate to man, war's tragic destruction - they fill the restful rooms at Paulus Potterstraat with suffocating anguish....[Shahn is] an important artist and a versatile personality.

From Die Waarheid, Amsterdam, (date missing), by Max Visser

To Ben Shahn man in his very human essence is tragic....It is a great exhibition of a great and sincere artist.

Second showing: PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM, February 3-28, 1962

From Dimanche Presse, February 4, 1962

Since youth he has been interested in art and now he is justly considered one of the best painters of his time.

Ben Shahn proves to us the profound engagement that an honest artist is able to bring in his art, as a writer can in his works, to denounce the scandals of our civilization.

But Ben Shahn is also a poet...

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From Pan, Brussels, February 7, 1962

Ben Shahn, who just succeeded Rothko on the same walls, is evidently of another temperament and his show merits an attentive visit. More illustrator than painter, for sure, excellent poster artist as well, letterist of quality, his case is also like that of his celebrated contemporary Saul Steinberg....Ben Shahn uses a nearly equally vivid caricature, but in a sad and anguished way. His style comes partly from the great nordics, from Edvard Munch notably, also from certain German Expressionists like Campedonk, and there is rapport with our Spilliaert. But he has exploited also the lesson of collage, not that he incorporates cut papers in his works, but he makes analogous effects that permit him to confer an intense accent to certain well-chosen elements...

From Drapeau Rouge, Brussels, February 8, 1962

Here one is no longer playing. This vast ensemble by the American, Ben Shahn, is a major show. It concerns the best contemporary painter of the United States of my acquaintance. One, whether art lover or not, must see his work.

From Le Rappel, Charleroi, February 8, 1962, by Brigitte Goffaux

A spectacular exhibition is that devoted to Ben Shahn by the Palais des Beaux-Arts. What a universal talent! Ben Shahn reveals his mastery as a painter, as a draftsman and as a publicist.... The lyricism of Ben Shahn is not to woo the public: his manner near to that of Kafka and Gheorghiu, his disturbance, his tragic colors provoke everyone to reflection.

From La Libre Belgique, Brussels, February 9, 1962

Following MARK ROTHKO, the American painter of total nullity, who reigned in empty halls during two or three weeks at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, BEN SHAHN, on the contrary, has an indisputable presence....By courage, by fellowships, by study and courses, taken at night while during the day he worked as a lithographer, Ben Shahn became what he is today: one of the best illustrators and poster makers in the United States. In the manner of a Steinberg, but with a humane depth, a sad and poignant irony, sometimes with powerfully expressionistic thrusts....Like Goya, [Shahn] can say that man is the center of his oeuvre.

From Le Phare-Dimanche, (weekly periodical), Brussels, February 9, 1962

An artist. A man. Certainly with his weaknesses, but a benevolent heart and a laughing eye.

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From Le Soir, Brussels, February 9, 1962, by Paul Caso

It is not all of America which shows in the abundance of images which the artist presents to us, but his America, which he discovered at the age of eight, after having left Lithuania....This humming America of Brooklyn never ceases to cling to the feet of Ben Shahn. If he draws and paints it, it is to fix it in a powerfully human relief, not to arouse our pity, but to instruct us and to convince us that the fate of everyone concerns us all....But Ben Shahn also likes baroque fantasy like Steinberg where the simple pleasure in plasticity inspires personal alphabets and other compositions of an ardently individualistic nature. Because the defender of the wrongly electrocuted anarchists and the companion of Diego Rivera is a man who loves all the liberties.

From La Métropole, Antwerp, February 10-11, 1962

The humanitarian problems haunt him to the point of making him forget the exigencies of the art of painting. That is why illustration occupies so great a place in his work, which, without that, would have perhaps evolved towards a bookish pre-Raphaelism.

From Dernière Heure, February 12, 1962

Ben Shahn...is certainly a "naïf", but a developed naïf, we would tell ourselves. There is in effect, in the many works and surely in the drawings and lithographs, the touch of an artist favored with an affirmative technique and who knows when and how to use his strong points.

From Le Matin, Antwerp, February 10-11, 1962 by Yves Bourdon; also in Flandre Libérale, Ghent, February 16, 1962

...Ben Shahn is a distant descendent of Daumier and other accusers. Ben Shahn denounces the vices of society. If he does not have the sense of humor of Saul Steinberg, he possesses a penetrating mind (see his caricatures of Truman and Dewey, etc.). Unpitiful denunciations are subordinated to a high humanitarian ideal. The work of Shahn is an affront to smugness.

From Drapeau Rouge Magazine, Brussels, February 17, 1962, by Jean Cimaise

Yes, an American painting exists!this American national painting exists and the American pavilion at the 1958 show gave us a rich sampling. With the exhibition BEN SHAHN, at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, one has another example of it....the most authentic manifestation of a properly American painting. An art of simple and frustrated people, of immigrants, naively telling a story by means of popular art from all over, the americanizing of their lives, the story that they make; also like a popular song, this other artistic

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richness from the USA, the airs imported from Europe, the Lutheran chorals, the Irish ballads, are transformed, are remodeled under the air and the life of Texas or of Kentucky and find a new freshness and rich human intensity. Art pure, direct, where the heart beats lively, which ignores the Esthetic with a capital "E" and where all is real and spontaneous poetry. It is in having understood the value, for having understood that there beat the true pulse of the first American art, that Ben Shahn can be considered the most authentic painter of the United States, and one of the most significant painters in all international art of the present.

From Le Monde du travail, Liège, February 24-25, 1962

If one would study and analyze the social art of Ben Shahn, one would find oneself before a new phenomenon, rare in the plastic arts: that of putting respect for others, principally the proletariat, before himself.

...the exhibition offers us a sensational panorama by a very great artist who is nearly unknown here and whose singular genius we have been particularly happy to see.

From La Cité, Brussels, February 25, 1962. (Caption under a reproduction of Miners' Wives)

At the Palais des Beaux-Arts, too often devoted to the joys of the abstract, an extraordinary exhibition at present holds our attention. It is that of Ben Shahn who, with an inspired and cruel realism has given himself as a goal to paint the struggles and miseries of the American working class. Here is an example of that cruel and "engagée" art.

From Présence de Bruxelles, Magazine, Brussels, February-March, 1962

A great graphic master whose exceptionally personal painting ignores all the styles of the day. Technique often close to naïf painting, transcended by the intentions and the liberty of the drawing. Painting which haunts the memory by its victorial eloquence and technique, the profound style and moral content.

Third showing: GALLERIA NAZIONALE D'ARTE MODERNA, ROME, ITALY, March 31 - April 20, 1962

From Paese Sera, Rome, April 24, 1962, by Marcello Venturoli

The exhibition of 124 works by Ben Shahn has aroused the greatest interest, not only because.../it/ is among the most complete ever shown in Italy of this artist, but also since his 1954 showing at the Venice Biennale until now the change in taste has created different perspectives in judgment - both for and against Ben Shahn's achievements:

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there are frequent discussions about the "attualità" and "inattualità" of his art. There are many attacks from certain irreconcilably abstract groups and from the realists. The former proclaim the lack of value of certain works in which he becomes "figurative" to the point of illustration; the latter, on the other hand, claim that there is an involution toward an avant-garde touch of abstraction.

From Momento Sera, Rome, April 28-29, 1962, by Valentino Martinelli

The impressions, opinions and comments, generally very favorable on that first meeting [at the 1954 Venice Biennale] come up again today with some contrasts and reservations....Not always and not all his works have an absolute purity and a full formal vitalityThis show, so varied and so rich with both works and problems might require many further critical observations. At the moment, let us try only to understand better Ben Shahn's realism, his poetic world, so close to the most painful problems of the Western world.

From Il Giornale di Mezzogiorno, Rome, May 10, 1962, by Giacomo Etna

Was it worthwhile to put on the Mark Rothko show after the Ben Shahn show, which was far more important?

From Auditorium, Magazine, Rome, April 1962

The coherence - which in many painters of today identifies itself with the repetition "ad infinitum" of formal inventions - in Shahn's works is a result which originates naturally: each sign, each image has deep roots in the artist's conscience, humanity, political and religious ideas, humor. Shahn's formal coherence, therefore, is nothing but a reflection of man's coherence.

From Il Secolo, Genoa, May 20, 1962, by Emilio Lavagnino

Being a figurative painter, he has always commented on the facts of the world, expressing his precise, passionate opinion on the conditions of the oppressed and of the most wretched people. He expresses his social interest vivaciously and with immediateness and accomplishes this through a subtle, acute and very sure way of drawing with the precise illustrative aim which he evidently pursues.

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Fourth showing: ALBERTINA, VIENNA, AUSTRIA, May 23 - June 24, 1962

From Die Presse, Vienna, May 23, 1962, by Jorg Lampe

(Begins with a review of a Käthe Kollwitz exhibition)

....In juxtaposition to this art [Kollwitz] which even in its best female pathos, and just because of its pathos, is a little removed from our admiration, Ben Shahn presents us with a world, that although its theme is largely the same is seen in a completely different way. Here we find no expression, no pathos, not even a complaint (rather an accusation, by means of the style which is hard and subtle at the same time). Only the facts are seized, with utmost clear-sightedness and sobriety reduced to their most significant elements and given an unequivocal pictorial appearance, in spite of all its graphic subtlety.

In the early works.... the drawing, supported rather shyly by color, is somewhat awkward, but from about 1943 on.... Ben Shahn achieves a firmness, greatness and a power, manifest also in his colors, in conveying images, that is quite overwhelming.

Pictures like Age of Anxiety, and also the Lucky Dragon Series... and others, have a background full of strong allegory that makes us feel that, and also in which way, Ben Shahn's art is charged with an inner richness that extends far beyond the social formation of the human image. On the whole, the increasingly penetrating awareness of human loneliness constitutes an elementary factor in Ben Shahn's experience of the world and humanity.

And when, finally...one looks at the enchanting picture Dream with the reclining pair of lovers in a landscape that seems to become green and blossom only in the atmosphere of love, then one feels that Ben Shahn's human world, so narrowed down by misery and emptiness that it is almost starved, is redeemed into such a purity and peace, ...that all grey emptiness is obliterated. A miracle has here become painting.

From Neues Osterreich, Vienna, May 24, 1962, by Johann Muschik

He [Shahn] has stature. He has remained an American. There is something of the masculinity of Hemingway in him and also of that author's "death-shadowed" quality and melancholy. The thing that strikes one in viewing Shahn's work is the iron-hard consistency with which he has followed his own path, without leading himself into any kind of fashionable foolishness.

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Ben Shahn shows us an aspect of the United States that does not occupy any significant place in the songs of praise bestowed upon this immense country: the things that happen because of inhumanity, the naked misery that can be found behind a glossy front...

From Arbeiter Zeitung, Vienna, May 25, 1962

Why does this art speak so strongly to the public? Because Ben Shahn always takes a definite stand and has a very definite thing to say: he is speaking for the social, for the positive, against the provincial, for peace, for humanity.

From Osterreichische Neue Tageszeitung, Vienna, May 30, 1962, by Karl Maria Grimme

...The painter Ben Shahn...is governed by the same political passion as is Kollwitz, one could say that his starting point is somewhere between her and George Grosz. But this passion is never transferred to us directly, it is distilled in order not to repel us, the emotionally shy, with its pathos and thereby weaken the impact of the accusation. That is why there is rather a condensation, an analysis. The people seem like silhouettes, like paper cut-outs, isolated, even from their surroundings that mostly consist of vast empty spaces and naked walls; the outlines of the faces are distorted, the color often does not relate to the drawing. In this way the impact of these pictures of workers, of big industrialists is indirect in its accusation, the indirect means is nowadays the direct one...

From Express, Vienna, June 5, 1962, by Franz Tassié

The thing Ben Shahn does with colors is a chapter by itself. Here he is inspired in the strongest sense and largely independent of the intellect. His blue radiates in metaphysical gradations as if used by the prophets of the Old Testament.

As an artist Ben Shahn is a critic of our times of the first merit and his pictures will one day be considered as having the same importance as documents of our history of civilization as the sheets of Daumier. However, these two artists are as different as night and day.

In his art Ben Shahn is perfect and full of originality. He has given us a hard, acid and bitter art, because in it the content is as important as the form. Most likely it is not an art one is able to love, but a great, strong, most personal and fascinating art. Undoubtedly Ben Shahn is no genius of Picasso's stature; but on the other hand, in no line of his is he such a

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performer and a grimasseur as Picasso. What he creates has moved him in all of his soul. He presents the façade of things and one can see right through it. He who only sees the façade in Shahn's work, see nothing. But is it not the case with every artist? And are not graphic art and painting, paper and canvas exactly that mysterious veil which appears to separate the seen from the unseen in order to with this means, as if in a wonderful osmosis, unite spirit and matter?

Ben Shahn is among the great artists of this century, because he has drawn and painted the chronicle of this century....He is a well-rounded man and always remains Ben Shahn.

From Volksstimme, Vienna, June 15, 1962, by Axl Leskoschek

Buildings constitute the natural environment of the big-city-born Ben Shahn, and they have their share as carriers of the action....the color red plays an important part in Ben Shahn's work. The red is not interwoven with the other colors, but superimposed upon them. This is how red comes to have that impact. One example among many: of the "three musicians" two are dressed in overalls, the third one in a good suit, and his head also shows him as belonging to another class. His cello is red. In this way the trio has been given a meaning beyond their music making. It is an acknowledgment on the part of the artist of belonging to a certain community. The accordion of the "blind player" is red too, he who expresses his grief on behalf of Roosevelt's death in music, a grief that also shows us the eyeless face in a way which makes our hearts ache.

The eyes of the blind man are as real as the feeling that radiates from this, in every sense, unique work. Truth, the constant consort of Ben Shahn, shows him things deepened through its loving and caring observation.

We find the same thing in his commercial graphics, for instance in Phoenix.