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BEN SHAHN: GRAPHICS  
ICE F 68 61  
Critical Reviews

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

CRITICAL REVIEWS - BEN SHAHN: GRAPHICS

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

First showing: STAATLICHE KUNSTHALLE, BADEN-BADEN, GERMANY  
August 3 - September 9, 1962

From Badische Neueste Nachrichten, Karlsruhe, August 14, 1962, by Dr. K.

....In his studies and completed works Shahn is....an expansive, far-reaching, poetic spirit. His line is filled with baroque impetus. His finer lines, placed vertically, show him as a very subtle and economical planner. When he adds a few dabs of color to these drawings consisting of fine lines, they gain warmth. The drawing of his hand, and the Composition with Clarinets, for instance, show him as being one of the most outstanding draughtsmen of our time. The way in which he draws his lines renders the object and what is specific to it so tautly and completely, that he can afford to take a part as being significant of the whole and thereby, nevertheless, give the viewer a complete suggestion of the whole. From this, most likely, stems the artistic force of the graphic of this Pole (sic) who has added his heritage of European, baroque art to the matter-of-factness of American verticals, in order to achieve a synthesis of life.

From Badisches Tagblatt, Baden-Baden, August 16, 1962, by Elizabeth Haller.

....Strongest impression: his H-Bomb poster, which, with its stark, darkly threatening colors, which one does not forget, a shouting protest.... Here Shahn rises to the artistic height of a Toulouse-Lautrec!

Consciously he places his almost consistently objective art in the service of humanity. Revealing is the quintet of men with raised wine glasses, who diabolically make a Pact.... On another sheet the physiognomies of the politicians with their shiny teeth become grimaces! These are threatening statements!

On the other hand, a lyrical sensitivity speaks in the artist's unusually sensitive graphic lines. Subtly he senses the outline of his own hand holding the pencil, and in the fine parallel lines of a wheatfield with sparsely added color effects is quiet nature poetry. The aspect common to all his work is the human element. It dominates even there where humanity seems to have left a blank, as in the mesh of lines that are music stands and chairs left behind by the orchestra members. This eternal human element is condensed in a great and valid statement in the portraits....

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From Frankfurter Rundschau, Frankfurt, August 17, 1962, by hr.

....Shahn.../has/ always /been/ convinced, that everything that reached the public from /his/ workshop would be polemic; he even harbors hopes of changing events beyond his easel and printing press by means of art. Or at least, hopes to make people aware of these events....

....Today..work like Shahn's enjoys anew the respect and veneration that it always deserved. It is commendable that his work is now becoming more intimately known in Europe also....

....This artist has depicted with great tenderness episodes from American country life, the blind accordion player, the unemployed workers on Sunday, wheatfields, and rustic architecture. In all this is shown a longing for a better, more satisfying life, for a world consisting of trustworthy neighbors. Meanwhile, Shahn - always in accordance with his self-imposed responsibility - made himself a propagandist painter, protesting against the distortions of society, economics, and politics. His critical elan did not exhaust itself during the days of the Depression; with his famous 'letter' he entered the battlefield, protesting the treatment of the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti; he is still protesting the nuclear bomb and segregation of races, thereby showing his wide-awake instinct for discovering intolerance and brutality wherever they appear.

From Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Frankfurt, August 21, 1962, by Ursula Binder-Hagelstange.

Shahn has a thorough education in offset printing and advertising graphics. The artist within him has known how to utilize these techniques...with an ingenious refinement and a sure instinct for sparse, strong effects. Shahn knows how to use black and white as colors, he knows the charm of a torn or a spotted India ink outline, the shocking effect that can be found in the combination of dull, painterly surfaces and graphically pronounced detail in the foreground, or the humour in the combination of a house front painted in gaily colored surfaces with a black, classical cornice. Heraldic elements and religious symbols appear in his work as well, which occasionally makes it (in a more decorative way) border on Marc Chagall's 'magic world theatre,' but which, however, partakes just as much of reality....

....Who were Sacco and Vanzetti? They protested against injustice and left behind them a letter that became famous. (Of course it is typical that one at first glance only admires the beautiful, even lattice of lettering in which Shahn prints this letter on newspaper, using alternatively thin and thick letters.) ...But like a critic tired of constant protest, Shahn finds a refuge in other areas, in nature, in the Bible: as in one work that is nothing except a cornfield, 'which reminds us of the sweet rustle of the



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stalks swaying in the wind ' to speak with Van Gogh, or, mysterious, 'The Lute'; or, printed in light ochre and light blue, with doves, Hebrew letters and ornamentation developed from these letters - 'David's Psalm No. 133' - evidence of what a great artist of lettering Shahn is. He takes aim at every letter separately, 'fringes' it in a Gothic way, attaches something to it, transforms it into a pictogram; or he creates alphabets of his own, writes musical notes, lets angels be enchanted with Bach and creates a blue African mask of the devil, while J.B's God stares darkly through leaves. The books are precious; Shahn has decorated them with lapidarian signs or with stubbornly angular, creeping ornamentation, showing himself not to be slavishly bound by the contents of the books, but creating a kind of artistic contrast....

From Deutsche Zeitung, Stuttgart, August 29, 1962, by Heinrich W. Petzet.

....Ben Shahn is a graphic artist of the most delicate sensitivity, who does not spend his 'existential excitability' (Mahlow) on mere play with his medium, but creates with illustrative and calligraphic means a strong realm of emotion. The uprising of a wounded soul against injustice, inertia, tyranny, and inhumanity - dramatic protests - can be found in Shahn next to the most tender lyricism. An art that is throughout engagée, which not only has been applied to the case of Sacco and Vanzetti, but which also indirectly can be found taking aim at the satiated smugness of the active politician.. In Study for 'Goyescas', or in the entanglement of thread in Cat's Cradle, the network of the lines is heightened to a level of virtuosity, without ever becoming an end in itself; on the other hand, in those instances where the message is conveyed with almost brutal means, the artistic form remains strong enough to captivate us....

Second showing: GALERIJE GRADA ZAGREBA, ZAGREB, YUGOSLAVIA  
November 6-30, 1962

From Vijesnik, Zagreb, November 13, 1962

...From the delicate and lyrical variations on the theme of a neglected and nostalgic child on the sidewalks of a big city, through expressive symbols of biblical motifs to political caricatures, sharp social satires and 'pure' artistic motifs, we see in every work an artist of great sensitivity, exceptional communication, acute observation, fighting conviction, and human warmth.... This is a really encouraging example for the public and for many painters who are unsure of themselves.

From 15 Dana (15 Days) (Zagreb), November 15, 1962.

...Shahn is known not only as an artist of social criticism with an extraordinary gift of perception, which ties his work to certain moral and cultural problems... but also as an artistic pedagogue in the content of his work and his concept of art.

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From Borba, Belgrade, November 23, 1962.

....In a hundred works - temperas, watercolors, drawings, posters, and illustrations, - he interprets his own moral and artistic nonconformity. His engagement in painting, in the finest sense of the word, is an active witness to the events into which the times have thrown the artist. In the expressiveness of his drawings, the power of his irony and his accusing observations, he sometimes reminds one of Daumier and George Grosz. Cat's Cradle, Red Devil, Why, and Sacco and Vanzetti are accusing in their grotesqueness. The accusations are often also without symbols and allegories, as, for instance, in the posters This is Nazi Brutality, Shall We Have Peace?, and Stop the H-Bombs. Painting of this kind is without doubt an important experience....

From Telegram, (Zagreb), November 23, 1962.

....Ben Shahn...belongs to the generation of American artists that comes between the so-called American Scene School (traditional realism) and the North American School, whose framework comprises the present most interesting and most valuable representatives of modern world art. From the former he inherited a sense for depicting typical scenes from American life, a sense for realism, within which tragic accents sometimes appear, and from the latter an interest in new areas of artistic problems. Benefiting from the experience of a part of European expressionism (Otto Dix and George Grosz), he has freed American realistic painting from its pompous stiffness, insisting on irony and satire, which in him never assumes a literary or pseudo-artistic character.

It is interesting that Ben Shahn is not restricted in his work merely to classical painting and graphic techniques....

....His art also discloses the typical sensibilities of drawing....

Ben Shahn's drawings show sureness and virtuosity...He uses elements of hebraic calligraphy, either as graphic signs or as a chromatic surface. In his graphics and illustrations this calligraphy has an even more important role. Printed text is used as an element of composition (Where there is the sword there is no book) or as an entire surface formed by elements of calligraphy.

....Remaining within the framework of traditional artistic expression, Ben Shahn, in his drawings, his colors, and especially in his composition, discloses elements of completely contemporary sensibility.



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Fifth showing: LUNDS KONSTHALL; LUND, SWEDEN, March 16 - April 15, 1963.

From Kvällsposten, (Lund), March 17, 1963, by Gunnar Bråhammar.

'I am more interested in life than in art,' he [Ben Shahn] frankly explains. I find this an exaggeration, because his art is always constructed in a very deliberate way and in spite of the realistic and naive execution often has a refined and sensitive tone. The mixture of melancholy dreaminess and estheticism, acid social accusation and propaganda gives his work a fascinating character. If Shahn had not been socially engaged, he could have become a dreamer and a painter of exquisite 'Stimmungsbilder'....

....In modern art, letters often have played a merely decorative role, been abstracted from their normal function and used as abstract pictorial elements. Ben Shahn lets them again form words in the picture, as in medieval times, and he adds word to word, creating sentences, messages, and accusations. But in spite of this he doesn't neglect the meaning of the letters and words as pictorial elements. The text becomes a rhythmic, living unity within the picture....

....In order not to believe the things that Ben Shahn tells us about those people with whom he is so deeply concerned, one has to be very insensitive. However, he can become too provocative and the picture too rhetorical, but for the most part this happens only in his posters, and there the demands are not the same. In his posters and brochures, Ben Shahn is extremely effective and disregards the tender refinement and lyrical tone usually found in his more free painting.... Here perhaps his realistic and propagandistic style is most successfully applied.

The posters are often constructed with strongly plastic effects and an exaggerated perspective that bring to mind Mexican art....

From Sydsvenska Dagbladet Snällposten, Malmö, March 22, 1963, by Katarina Dunér.

....The exhibition gives us above all the picture of an artist in the service of society. There does not seem to be any difference to speak of between his painting and his applied art - which latter constitutes the major part of the exhibition in Lund. Ben Shahn does not care about what is generally called free painting. He uses as his starting point - and at the same time, as his justification - an engaging happening, which he then comments upon with a compassion which often borders on sentimentality....

In the case of Shahn, one doesn't think of painting as mere painting, nor of drawing as drawing. The purely aesthetic expression seems to have been unimportant to him. The color is merely put on - illustrative color -

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the drawing is extremely simplified, outspoken (sometimes sloppy, as in cartoons).

Both the color and the drawing have the characteristic of being symbols referring to something: they lead the viewer's attention away from the picture to the message behind it, to the content. 'Form is always formulation,' is one of his key phrases. And he is rather alone in present-day American art in having gone in for the rehabilitation of content....

From Skanska Dagbladet, Malmö, March 23, 1963.

Ben Shahn's fame among us is primarily due to the portrait of Dag Hammarskjöld that he executed for the State Portrait Collection at Gripsholm Castle. A black-and-white preliminary study is included in this exhibition. On the catalog sheet, in large format, appears a color reproduction of the Gripsholm portrait. The drawing, it seems to me, is the most rewarding of the two. It imposes itself on one's memory. The world fame of the model does influence us, however, perhaps also, our judgement of the drawing. But Ben Shahn's penetrating study of the enigmatic model can nevertheless be considered a most unusual impressionistic picture....

....Ben Shahn speaks a language totally different from that of those artists who at present in both the Old and the New World are being loudly announced as masters and precursors. He does not feel compelled to show us something new all the time. He wants to excite, to awaken people to awareness and thought. He is launching a protest against the cruel consequences of defective laws, most clearly shown in the double portrait of the 'murderers' Sacco and Vanzetti with the text about tolerance and human value belonging to it....