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BEN SHAHN

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INTRODUCTION

BEN SHAHN

"His work expressed his concern with the human condition"

A. Warner

Ben Shahn was a man of many talents but essentially he was a communicator. In this essay I will discuss Shahn's 'mission' in relation to social realism, Shahn's own background, his lithographic apprenticeship and his love of letters resulting in a calligraphic style. The paper will also deal with the quality and aptness of Shahn's line. I will compare Shahn in terms of style and content with fellow Jewish artist Leonard Baskin.

In 1948 the editors of Harpers magazine approached ⁶ Ben Shahn with an article they wanted him to illustrate; no stipulations were given. "Here's the piece", one of them said to him, "if you like it we hope you will illustrate it. We have just so much money to spend on illustrations and if you decide you want to do one drawing only that's alright with us". Shahn called the editor to say he loved the piece and would be in the following Thursday with some drawings.

He arrived on Thursday with sixty-four drawings. "If you can't find what you want here" he said "I have thirty-five more at home. I got started and I couldn't stop". One day while leafing through a graphics book, I came across that little anecdote, and I was quite taken by it, despite the idealistic client/artist relationship. It demonstrates Shahn's real enthusiasm, dedication and love of drawing, qualities that I really admire. Such a story would no doubt bring fourth much guffawing from the present day illustrator, who finds it difficult enough to get adequately paid for a single drawing,

much less spending the extra time on 'ninety-eight' other variations. Nevertheless it's not the practicality of the situation that is of direct interest right now, but rather the attitude on the part of the artist. Although Shahn was well established at the time and could afford to spend the extra time, this still departs from the norm, as success is seldom seen as an opportunity to put more time into projects. Too often success breeds greed. But Shahn was by nature a generous man. For instance, he always kept a selection of prints for friends and visitors and took great pleasure in sharing his talent with other people. He was as a result a prolific printer. Primarily a painter, he was drawn from the easel to the graphic arts because of his need to communicate with a larger audience. He was never satisfied with the gallery system and its limited communicative power.

Social Realism:

Ben Shahn was a founding father of the social realist movement which aimed at closing the gap between artist and society by making art a weapon in the service of humanitarian ideals. The social realists believed that art and artist must be engaged with the contemporary world. They believed that they had a part to play in it, to act, if you like, as social critics. The depression years, with its political and economic crisis, seemed to call out for the need to define America's cultural identity. The depression period also resulted in the formation of the WPA/FAP, a relief programme for artists aimed at furthering employment that would also yield useful results. At its peak, the WPA/FAP employed nearly five thousand artists who were paid by the hour as skilled workers. Many never had it so good, many not deserving it. The creativity of certain artists, particularly the Social ¹⁸ Realists, did benefit greatly from the support of the WPA/FAP.

The administration was not involved in buying art and placed no restrictions on the artists, but mural projects of which there were many, had to be approved by the persons in charge of the location.

The WPA muralists were not inspired by the master fresco painters of the renaissance, instead they often took as their models the Mexican mural painters, like Diego Rivera. The vigour of Mexican style with its protests against economic and social injustice in forceful expressionistic images that were often expressed in allegorical or religious terms, impressed the Americans, who were convinced that art should serve a higher purpose than itself. At a time when American painters were involved in finding an authentically American means of expression, the Mexicans successful marriage of native Indian style with modernism seemed a particularly attractive solution. Many of the WAP artists, including Shahn, did mural work. Also, many of them played an active role in politics and sought to convey a specifically political message through their art. In 1936, nearly three hundred painters, designers, photographers and sculptors from the artists congress, dedicated to propagandising anti-fascism. Shahn was one of its members.¹⁸

The social realists had a "deep, sometimes naive, sometimes bitter, but always passionate belief that art must show the truth, and when it does society will react".¹⁹ Much of the work not only serves the function of calling attention to the particular injustices and despairs of the time, but stand as lasting statements about the human condition. As a result, the message conveyed in much of the work is still important half a century later. The best of Shahn's work has this quality. In some ways subjects that were topical then, like Sacco and Vanzetti, have even more potency now, because the event can now be viewed with a greater degree of objectivity and analogies can be made with similar events both past and

present. The folk singer/song writer Woodie Guthrie wrote a song about Sacco and Vanzetti and here in Ireland Christy Moore recorded and performs it, which is where I first heard of the case. Moore like Guthrie, is also a social critic, or a 'cause man' as the cynics would call him. His choice of material reflects many of the aspects of social injustice and repression that our society faces and although I am dubious about some of his sympathies, he plays an important social role. However in music to-day, rock music in particular, there is a real social conscience that seems to me to be much broader and universal than much of the Irish contemporary art at the moment. While many Irish artists now swing towards realism, the concerns remain primarily plastic. By and large, the extent of involvement with the human prospect is reduced to an egotistical self-searching and at its most adventurous state deals with personal relationships. If the recent exhibition of "ten realists" at the Project Arts Centre is anything to go by, the mood is garishly decadent and quite pessimistic, an exception being Paul Funge's beautiful Jazz Musician. Just at a time when one would think that some artists would want to attempt dealing with our demonic social problems, the main concerns remain at a masturbatory level. You might say that this reflects the apathetic nature of our present society, be that as it may, but personally I feel that this apathy must be dealt with in a more positive way. This morbid self-analysis rather than being a cure is a symptom of our society's present sickness.

The 'realism' of the American social realists on the other hand evolved directly from the graphic tradition of magazine illustration and poster art. Much of the painting of the social realists was little more than the colouring of drawings and Shahn is typical of this. Their application of colour had a naive quality with no effort made to conceal awkward brush strokes. The social realists' realism should not be confused

with the realism of artists like Edward Hopper who continued in the Henri tradition, as Barbara Rose comments, "In comparison the social realists were not far removed from political cartoonists".¹⁹ In terms of painting this is quite true, for a man with such a sensitive and highly evolved line Shahn's painting is quite disappointing. Whereas Hopper's realism tends to be pictorially representative or 'true to life', Shahn's is more symbolic and discards superfluous details in favour of a more uncompromising essence of reality. Of course in terms of painting virtuosity Hopper totally outshines Shahn. Although probably not what Rose had in mind, some political cartoonists, Gerald Scarfe or Ralph Steadman in particular, are to-day's cutting social commentators. Their choice of medium reflects their desire to communicate to a large audience and this does not make them less important as social artists.

Shahn: Background

Having looked at social realism I would now like to deal with Shahn's own background. Born in Kowna, Lithuania in 1898, Shahn and his family emigrated to the United States when he was eight years old. He showed an early love of drawing and lettering, his first experiences with the latter was in the form of Hebrew characters which he copied over and over again. He had a voracious appetite for reading.

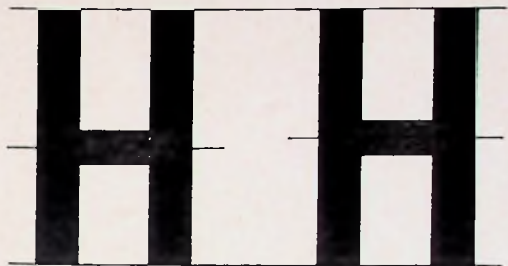
Shahn came from a tradition of craftsmen, potters on his mother's side and wood-workers on his father's. He spent much of his youth drawing so it was natural that at the age of fourteen Shahn be apprenticed. He chose a lithographic shop, Hesselberg's in Downtown Manhattan, where he worked for four years while attending high school at night in Brooklyn. Under this apprenticeship, Shahn's style developed under stern supervision. "I was apprenticed to a lithographer and if learning a craft was my ostensible reason and purpose, my private one was to learn to draw - and to learn to draw always

better and better. However, in the lithographic trade those who drew were the aristocrats of the business. First one had to learn the hard things, like grinding stones and running errands and drawing letters - thousands of them.^{"6"} He had to know to perfection every curve, every serif, every thick element of a letter and every thin one, where it belonged and how it related to the form of the letter to which it belonged.

In those days before the advent of metal plates, most printing was done using lithographic stone. Bavarian limestone was used, which was highly polished but retained a subtle and unique texture. Images or letters in Shahn's case, were drawn directly onto the stone with a lithographic crayon. These stones could also be treated with photographic emulsion for most work but the craft element of the whole process was the drawing of letters directly onto the stone surface. Because of the skilled craftsmanship involved many fine art print workshops retain this process.

Shahn discovered the Roman alphabet in all its glory and elegance. To make a perfect Roman letter Shahn spent months on the A alone and when he finally felt ready to move on to B, the foreman would not accept the A and would make him do more. Shahn by this stage was discovering the wonderful inter-relationships, the rhythm of line as letter moves into letter. When he had begun to achieve assurance and mastery over the letters themselves, there was still something missing - spacing. The foreman made Shahn examine the spaces around letters in a word or sentence, the negative space, the shapes and patterns carved out of the background by the letters themselves. Shahn found, as every student typographer does, great difficulty in achieving balanced spacing so that all the letters might emerge into a perfect line. Then the foreman shared the secret of the glass of water with him. "Imagine", he said, "that you have a small measuring glass. It holds, of course, just so much water. Now you have to pour the water out of the

A.



(1)

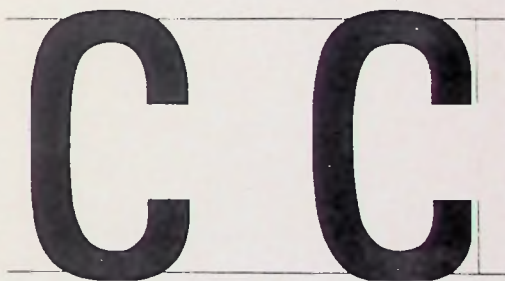
B E H S X 8

(2)

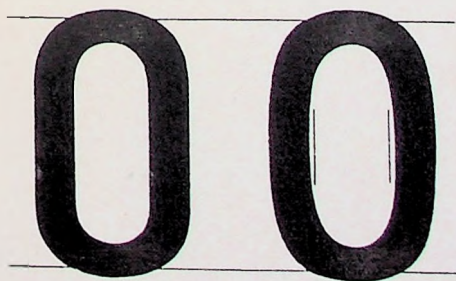
B E H 2 X 8



(3)



(4)



(5)

glass into the spaces between the letters, and every one has to contain exactly the same amount - whatever the shape. Now try".⁶ So this way Shahn discovered that letters are quantities, and spaces are quantities and only the eye and hand can measure them.

The complex and delicate balance required in proper letter spacing may not be fully appreciated by someone not involved directly with typography. I would therefore like to show with the aid of some examples the factors that Shahn would have had to come to terms with. It is a process of visual perception and the illusions that certain shapes create when put together, these illusions must be recognised and utilised in order that a line of type might look balanced.

¹² Letter forms created mechanically lack balance and must be altered so as to look "right". For instance the upper half of a shape always seems stronger than the lower. Shapes divided exactly in the middle, or placed in the centre of the page, produce a top-heavy or off-centre effect, for which allowance must be made. The visual centre always lies above the geometric one. Example (1) shows this, with the letter H and such an adjustment must be made. Example (2) demonstrates that in almost all letter forms the upper half is made smaller than the lower. If the letters are reversed, the difference is clearly seen. In example (3) we see that the short vertical seems thicker than the long vertical although both bars are of the same thickness. This well known illusion is very important in typography as example (4) shows. In Sans serif letters, the straight sections of a curved letter, shorter than a full vertical for optical adjustment. Example (5), straight lines which run into a curve seem to be distorted. The O on the left is drawn with geometrically vertical sides, and the form seems 'pinched' in the middle. To correct this, the O on the right is drawn with the verticals slightly curved outward. Example (6) shows how the letter's size and shape is affected by its

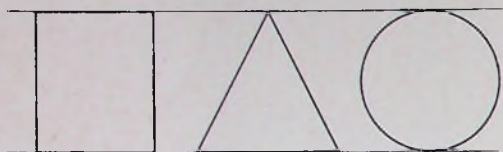
HE	LP
AV	OA
DO	CS

(6.)

E	H
T	O
V	A

(7.)

A.



A O N

(8.)

E E

(9)

O O

(10)

U U

(11)

relationship to other letters and surrounding space; proportional spacing is therefore necessary. Largest spacing is required between two vertical letters, almost as much as two diagonal ones. A vertical and an open-sided figure need the least space; two round forms, or a round and a diagonal one, are set closer together than two vertical forms; and the two open-sided figures are set closer together than two round ones as, again, the open spaces must be taken into account. Example (7) demonstrates how setting letters one below the other requires visual adjustment to make them appear in line, which they will not do if they are set flush left, that is, each extreme left edge set in line. In example (8) a rectangle, a triangle and a circle drawn between two parallel lines produce different effects, so that the rectangle seems taller than the triangle and circle. This is because the rectangle is in contact with the top parallel line along one whole side whereas the triangle and circle touch it only at one point. This optical illusion has to be taken into account in type designing where round capitals must be drawn above and the lines so that their apparent size is the same. For instance angled letters such as the A are usually drawn over the lines, again for optical adjustment. In sans serif letters, example (9), horizontal lines seem thicker than vertical lines of the same actual thickness, as seen on the left, they must be drawn a little narrower than the verticals in order to appear correct. In the same way, example (10) the strength of the lines in round forms has to be corrected, as in the O, where the top and bottom curves seem too thick. Example (11) shows where the letter on the left is constructed with compasses, and is adjusted on the right, the curves in most sans serif letters diverge from the geometrically correct.

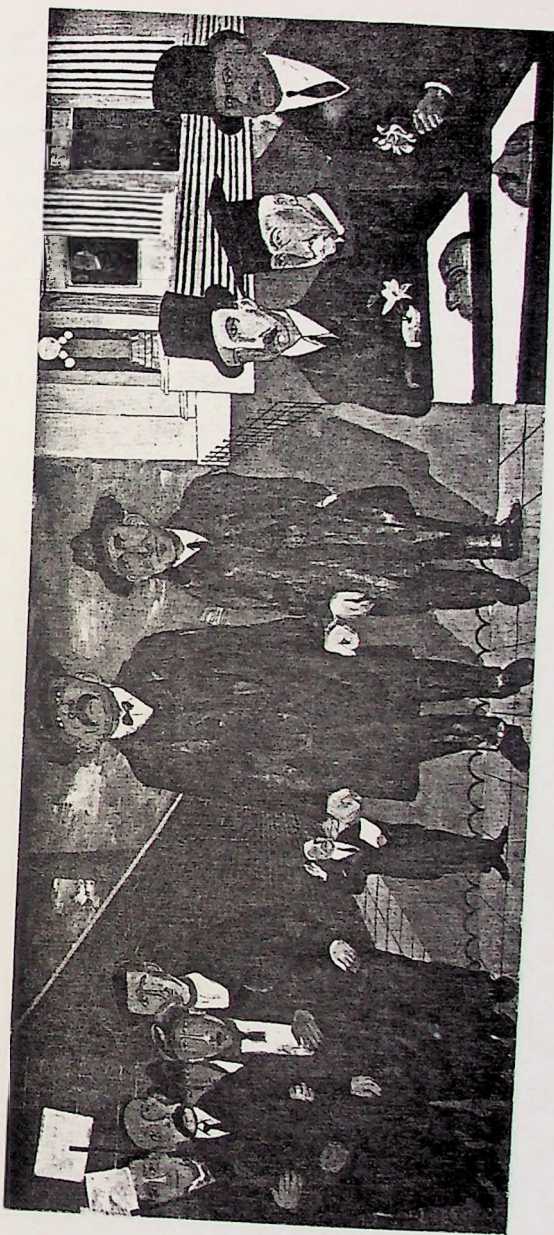
There are but a few of the basic visual problems that a letter maker would have to solve, and these simply deal with sans serif typefaces, by far the most uncomplicated and the easiest to work with. Obviously in mastering this craft, Shahn developed a keen sense of balance. He also learned to work in a precise way; literally cutting the lines that he made, working against the resistant material of the stone. This balance, coupled with the cutting line are hallmarks of Shahn's drawing style. He says of it, "I found that this chiseled sort of line had become a necessity, a sort of temperamental fixture, so that even when I draw with a brush the line retained that style".⁶ Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti,^c Hamlet^j and Flowering Brushes^k all display Shahn's cutting line and balance with Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti^c being the best example of the latter trait.

Shahn's lithographic experience gave him the skills that left him never short of work or money. But while his craft kept him fed and clothed his main interest was painting, and this took up most of his time. Shahn's early work was in a post-impressionist vein which he did not find satisfying. He was confused and did not know what to do. He had had a brief encounter with art school but discovered that they had nothing to offer him, he had studied science successfully but without satisfaction. Then while in France he got a small book on the historic Dreyfus case. He made a series of portraits of people involved in the trial with supporting text and this marked the turning point in his career as an artist. He began to remember how he had wished that he'd been lucky enough to be alive at a great time, "when something big was going on, like the crucifixion, and suddenly I realised I was"⁶ - the Sacco and Vanzetti case, another crucifixion. "From then on I knew what I wanted to do, and I've been doing it ever since". Shahn's search for his art was a process of coming to terms with himself, of honesty with himself. He realised that to be part of a

movement or scene, although very attractive and secure, was not for him. For his art's mission was to tell what he felt, to say what he thought. "Shahn's inquiring, challenging mind would not let him be neutral to his surroundings, he needed always to express graphically his interpretation, his position. He rebelled against the needless waste of life and the seemingly helpless plight of the little people".⁵

Together with his lithographic experience Shahn's work with the FSA had shared in having a definite effect on his work. Shahn was a multi-talented man and with his photography he proved this. He later used his photographs as raw material for painting. "Photos give those details of forms that you think you'll remember but don't - details that I like to put in my paintings".⁶ He travelled the country extensively with the FSA, this was a revelation for Shahn as his previous travelling had been in Europe, and he had not travelled at all in the U.S. It was in the middle of the depression and Shahn did not have a penny so he jumped at the chance to travel and to get paid for it. The impressions that this experience left with Shahn led him to reject 'social realism' - for what he called personal realism. "I prefer to call it personal realism, the distinction is that social realism is dictated from outside, personal realism comes from your own guts".

In the following section I will examine Shahn's Sacco and Vanzetti series. This was typical of his 'social realist' work, dictated by a topical event. Later I will look at the Credo theme which would be in Shahn's "personal realist" vien.



Б.

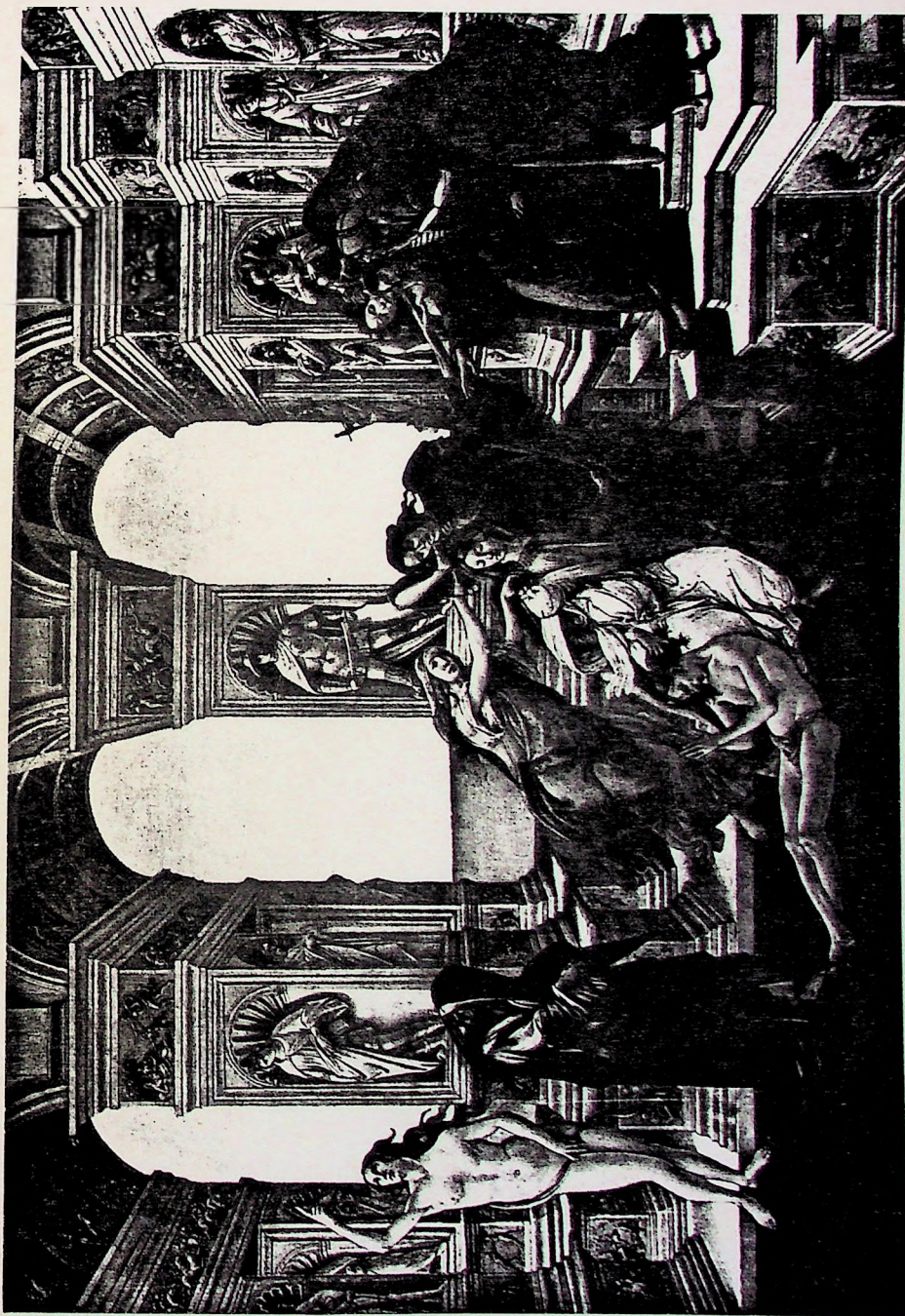
The Sacco and Vanzetti Theme

Early in Shahn's career as an artist, two Italian-born Americans, Nicola Sacco and Bartholomeo Vanzetti, attracted attention by their radical strike activities and their flight to Mexico in 1917 to evade the draft. In 1920, they were arrested and charged with the murder of a Massachusetts paymaster. Although witnesses claimed that they were two miles away at the time, and although there were other weaknesses in the case, Sacco and Vanzetti were found guilty and condemned to death. Their lawyers charged that the court was prejudiced, but a stay of execution was denied and the two died on the 23rd August, 1927.¹

This execution resulted in an international outcry of protest; most believed that Sacco and Vanzetti had been executed not because of a payroll crime but because of their ethnic origin, radical beliefs and draft evasion.

Shahn emerged as an American painter of significance in 1932 with the Downtown Gallery exhibition of twenty-three gouache paintings entitled the 'Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti'. This exhibition created quite a stir and together with the 'Drayfus Case' consolidated his position as a social artist. Shahn's interest in Sacco and Vanzetti continued resulting in drawings and prints on the same subject appearing twenty-five years later. The early tempera painting Sacco and Vanzetti⁸ show all the individuals involved with the case. They are portrayed with rigorous simplicity. On the left a group of workers gather in protest against the harsh background of a factory wall which stretches far back into the distance. The two central figures are Sacco and Vanzetti standing proudly together, Sacco's fists clenched tightly, determined to face his unjust punishment with honour, knowing that his death will stand as a testimony against injustice towards his fellow man. He looks much stronger than Vanzetti whose shoulders slouch in an uncomfortable looking fashion. This awkwardness is further

portrayed in Vanzetti's hands, the left hand is placed in his pocket but the right hand is limp and cuffed to the stronger hand of Sacco. Despite this lack of physical fortitude Vanzetti's face also shows acceptance of fate, an honest, simple face. The shadow both men cast is long, symbolic of their far reaching effect on people all over Europe and the United States. They dwarf the sentencing judge, just as they dwarf the 'justice' which condemned them, justice (or laws) that were designed to suit its creators. This has all the Animal Farm connotations of the pigs designing rules that will make their position stronger and make changes, regardless of merit, impossible. Unfortunately, this seems to be true of most governing bodies, even the most democratic. The dwarfed judge stands with right hand held ironically aloft in solemn oath. A similar figure appears framed on the walls of the courthouse building. The three figures on the far right represent the committee which was appointed after the trial to decide on the validity of appeals made by the accused, and as a result of protests and campaigns made by liberals everywhere. The committee was made up of men from both academic and judiciary backgrounds. The opinion of this committee was that the guilty verdict should be sustained. In the painting the three committee members stand over the open coffins of the two men. It is curious the way the coffins are cut off, although it's not detrimental to the structure of the picture as they are placed in line with the gable end of the courthouse building. I would have preferred the coffins placed in the opposite direction so that the actual ends of the coffins would be in line with the courthouse and the edge of the picture plane would cut off the remainder. Perhaps this raw edge was put there to accentuate the feeling of uneasiness, however, it spoils it for me. The line created by the coffin edges and gable end is, I feel, too strong and tends to chop off a third of the picture.



M.

5. John Canady compares this painting to Botticelli's Calumny. The comparison lies, as he puts it, in "the punishment of innocent people who are sacrificed to public hysteria". In Botticelli's case it is an anguished protest against the spirit of the witch hunt. The purpose is therefore quite similar, although the pictorial appearance, due to considerable time difference, is quite different. As was the case with Sacco and Vanzetti, vehement controversy surrounded the case of Savonarola, a priest who was executed in 1498 and upon which the painting Calumny is based. Both painters believed that their subjects were victims of miscarriage of justice. It is therefore interesting to compare the protests made in pictorial by two different artists in the light of their own beliefs. Both artists accuse their respective governments of ignorance, suspicion, deception and dogmatism. Both governments, feeling that the very structure of their society was being undermined, reacted in a blind rage desiring only to destroy and not to understand. In Botticelli's painting this was all commented on through allegorical concealment and according to Battina Wadia not very well. "Botticelli was a great painter of mythology, but not of allegary, if he can fairly be judged by his one attempt"¹⁶. On the other hand Shahn's painting makes obvious accusations with no effort whatsoever at disguising the message. As Canady puts it "all subtleties and indirections are abandoned for an uncompromising indictment"⁵. Of course, a half century after Botticelli's painting was completed there existed a very liberal attitude to what a painter could actually paint and Shahn used this to his advantage, in that the controversy surrounding his early work did much to guarantee him success.

Canady sums up by saying, "The pictures we have seen so far have taken their subjects from specific instances of social cruelty or injustice. In varying degrees they accepted or overcame the limitation that can prevent this kind of picture from being an independent expression - the limitation, that is, of the observer's being dependant on knowledge of the specific



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event for full understanding of the pictures meaning. Even without this knowledge, even if we are left to find for ourselves their general sense, these pictures are works of art of interpretive power, or at least of curious fascination".^{5.}

I would add to this that the very presentation of such pictures makes one want to find out the story behind the images. Of course this is the case with any picture, a knowledge of its background greatly increases one's perception and appreciation of the work. Though, in the case of Sacco and Vanzetti its essential, the figures are portraits and have little value unless associated with the event depicted - Botticelli's Calumny however could be easily enjoyed at a surface level because of its allegorical style, it is first and foremost a painting unlike Sacco and Vanzetti which exists solely to communicate a story. Due to Shahn's basic lack of painterly ability, I don't believe that the naive style is affected, Sacco and Vanzetti is nothing unless viewed with the knowledge of its purpose.

C.

Shahn's print the Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti is a much stronger work than the earlier painting we have just examined. Shahn's real talent and uniqueness lie in his drawing and lettering and here we see both combined beautifully. The desire to 'find out more' is much stronger when one is faced with the moving immortal words of Bartolomeo Vanzetti. In Shahn's print, he combines these words with powerful portraits of the two men. It is a potent image that remains in one's mind, showing Shahn's hand at its best. The quality of the line is so beautiful, and so apt. The choppy, cutting line bold and uncompromising, simple and direct. The blank eyes give the figures an eerie quality and this is reinforced when one is reminded of their untimely deaths. It is wonderfully balanced. Both figures have an odd posture, the heads are at an opposite slant to the bodies. Sacco's heavy mustache is contrasted by Vanzetti's thin mouth, as the heavy outline of his head is contrasted with the fine one surrounding Sacco's. As in the painting, Vanzetti's right arm



D.

appears limp and lifeless, and again they are cuffed. In this case Sacco's right wrist also appears to be cuffed with the chains leading out of the picture, to what is undoubtedly his captor. Sacco's rugged features are accentuated by a strong line down the left side of his face giving form to big prominent cheekbones and firm jaw. Much less attention is paid to the hands, the heads being the main feature here and expressive hands would be more associated with freedom than captivity. In yet another print called Portrait of Sacco and Vanzetti,^{D.} the figures alone are depicted without words, it is the same image that was used in the other print. Here the disproportionate relationship of the large heads to the small bodies is very apparent. The distortion, however, is a very important part of Shahn's attempt to show the tragic plight of these two men. Shahn worked mainly from photographs to create these portraits and the faces would have been familiar to any newspaper reader of the time as the story got a lot of coverage.

Years later, recalling the Sacco and Vanzetti series, Shahn said "I was trying to take advantage of the spectators existing feeling and set fire to that. I didn't try to convince Judge Thayer, or those who believed them guilty. But I do think that by presenting the two anarchists as the simple, gentle people they essentially were, I increased the conviction of those who believed them innocent".⁶ Shahn of course was then presenting the case to the American people long after the tragedy had taken place and when both men were dead.

The text used in the Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti is based on a transcription made during the trial by reporter Philip Strong. The idiosyncratic grammar and spelling are used to emphasise that these are the words of Vanzetti himself. When this is combined with the use of Shahn's own 'folk alphabet' the effect is very personal and most memorable. The choice of this folk alphabet, which will be looked at more closely later, was taken very seriously by Shahn. He wanted to use the entire historic statement and give it a pictorial impact rather than a printed

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look. He wanted it to be taken seriously. The folk alphabet fulfils both criteria as well as looking very attractive. Its unfamiliar characters and structures halt the reading somewhat, producing a slower reading effect and approximating the feel of Vanzetti's broken English, so in the end one takes it very seriously. Shahn's sincere sympathy and concern for injustice is demonstrated here and it remains to this day a biting protest, and warning against the uncompromising intransigence of governments towards any radical minority groups.

The personal 'folk alphabet', an integral part of many of Shahn's works, was acquired from close study, great effort and endless practise. During the thirties, Shahn had photographed handlettered signs that he had seen along the highways and which had quite an effect on him. Here he could see the violation of all the rules of lettering and balance that had been drummed into him during his apprenticeship. Everything that was considered wrong in lettering was practised by those people, the owners of petrol stations, shops or other businesses who had something to advertise but were unskilled in the art of lettering. To the typographer this was totally unacceptable, but being so however, Shahn found it irresistably interesting. This says a lot about the type of character he was, since (one would imagine) a man so typographically aware would cringe at the sight of these efforts. But despite all its ignorance of rules, Shahn detected certain consistancies in patterning and style in such lettering.

Shahn studied the work of these amateurs and examined the qualities that he found attractive. He then utilised these qualities in his own alphabet, but in such a way as to make them very appealing to the eye. The amateurs tended to ignore the importance of the thick and thin elements in a letter, the result was that often where a letter should be thick it was thin and vice versa. Shahn makes careful use of this characteristic in his folk alphabet and balances the thick and thin elements while retaining the naive look. If one squints one's eyes while viewing

the whole passage, one can see the interesting patterns created by the heavy and light lettering, and also on the negative spaces and blank rivers that flow down through the passage.

One of the greatest faults in amateur lettering is lack of consistency. That is, not sticking to a particular style of character all the way through. In Shahn's alphabet however, if one picks any given letter, G for instance, one will see that Shahn uses the same basic style throughout. They do of course vary in size from letter to letter but the same structure is used, a thin angular round with a thick horizontal. If one spends the time and examines each letter thus so, one will see the consistency with which the letters were executed. However, being a 'folk' alphabet mimicking amateur lettering there are exceptions, for example, the second E of PEDDLER (third line from bottom) is different utilizing a thick vertical instead of a thin one. Shahn's letter A demonstrates varied uses of a single character while maintaining consistency in terms of line weight. In fact, all the letters display this diversity but are controlled to fit into a definite character style. The undulating lines which the sentences create are also very appealing as is the unjustified right-hand side of the passage.

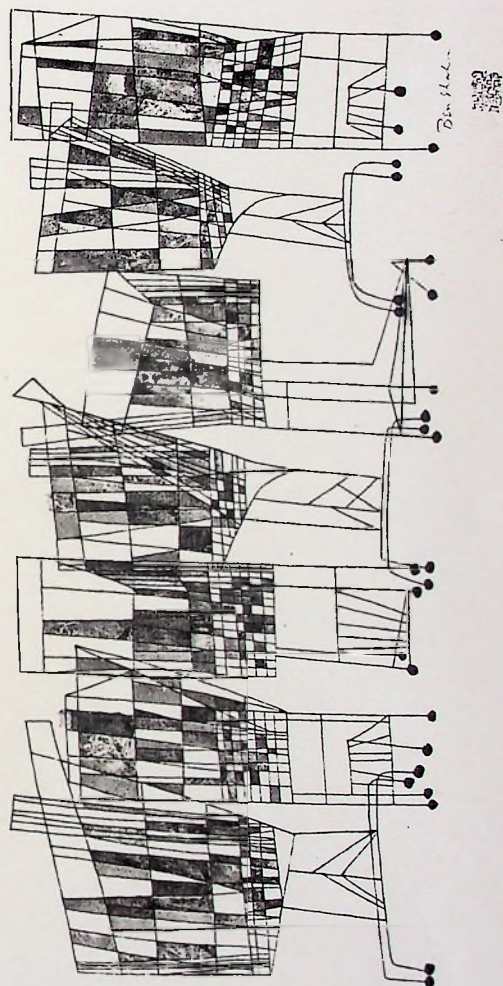
Shahn and Commercial Art

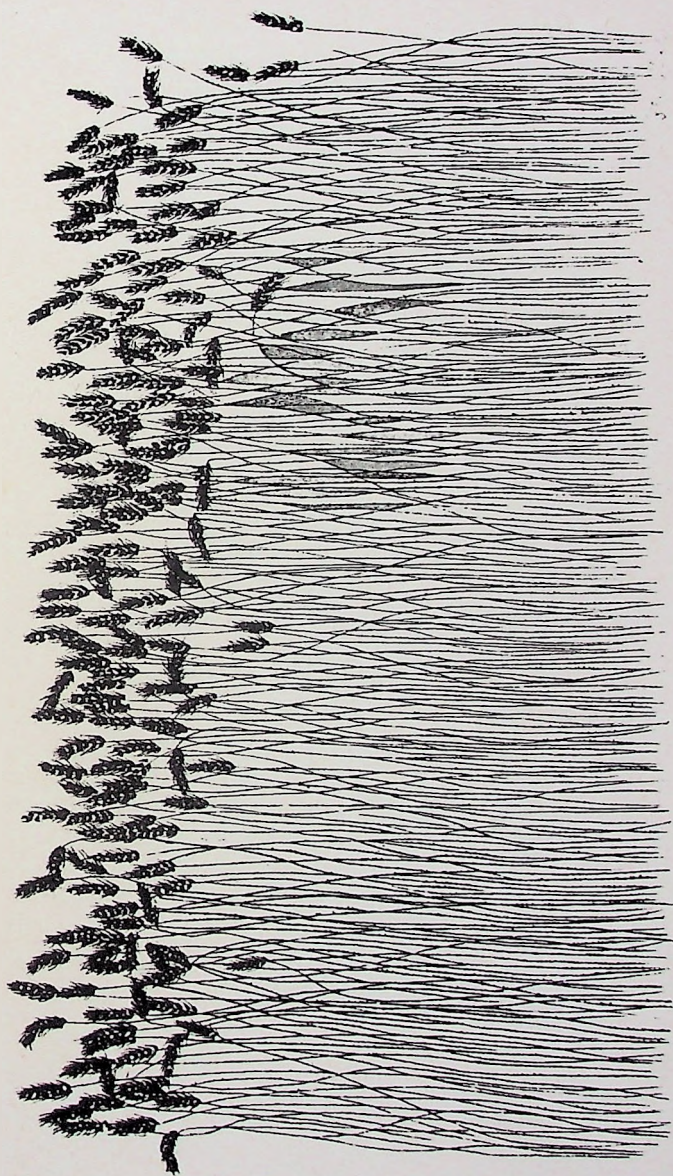
Having looked at Shahn's background, Social Realism and Sacco and Vanzetti, very much a social theme, I would now like to turn my attention to Shahn's activities within the sphere of commercial art.

Shahn did a lot of commercial work and had even more to say about it, he is often heralded by designers as 'one of the best'. However, as I said earlier, he was primarily an easel painter and his photography, writing, lettering and graphic work were all part of his desire to communicate with a wider audience. Shahn speaks of commercial art in the most idealistic ways. "That commercial art's value is demonstrated in an amusing way by the fact that ads of another era became collectors gems in this".⁶ However I will be very surprised if twentieth century commercial art will be acclaimed in the future like Toulouse Lautrec is to-day. To many Shahn is the personification of the perfect marriage of two very disparate camps, commercial and fine art. But Shahn's views about how the artist can approach both camps, simultaneously even, with the same creativity and expressiveness, lose their validity somewhat when one looks at the kind of briefs that Shahn received. At the beginning of the essay I quoted one such instance but as well as highlighting Shahn's wonderful character it shows the totally unrealistic nature of his relationships with the client. In another, Dingles Golden describes how he decided to choose artists and give them a free hand at illustrating articles in his magazine. "My idea was to allow the artist to read as well as illustrate the story and even to choose the part he wished to make a picture of... we would publish the picture only if he liked it well enough to exhibit it in his own gallery".¹¹ It was considered a wild theory, and to help start the programme Golden needed a painter of 'stature, integrity and courage'. He chose Ben Shahn.

A wild, wonderful idea, but Shahn received the commission only, as was the case with all his commercial work, because he was a well established artist. Shahn's lectures on Commercial art relate only to the most up-market projects, initiated by large organisations who are willing to spend a lot of money using fine art for their advertising. The purpose behind this is that if the company or organisation is associated with fine art, they will in turn be associated with a certain part of the market, a decidedly upper part of it. This fact is not often made known to the student graphic designer to whom Shahn is generally portrayed as an example of the kind of man who could work in both camps. Shahn was a great fine artist whom affluent organisations could afford to hire. Being the kind of social artist that he was, Shahn's style suited commercial work. As was the case with Harpers magazine, Golden was delighted with his work. I would be curious to see how Shahn would have handled the typical commercial art work, where one must stunt creativity and tread carefully through the whims of 'blind' clients who either have no idea of what they want or turn out to be budding 'art directors' themselves. Quite probably Shahn would have managed very well, but the point is he never had to and this is real commercial art, this is where the 'abuse' lies. Shahn in his essay 'Some revaluations of commercial and fine art',⁶ says, "I believe that the most serious handicap that commercial art suffers is its abuse, but where does that abuse begin, at what point?" At the point where the artist ceases to have control over the visual image. This together with simple monetary logistics is the answer, you must pay dearly for good graphic design or illustration. Most large companies that can afford this have a good image, though there are a number of exceptions. On the other hand bad work, often devoid of a designer's hand, can be bought cheaply by the businessman who cannot afford or knows no better. Apart from this however, most of what Shahn has to say about this subject is very true, for instance - "the main difference between fine art and commercial art is intention, the

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intention of the former may be as broad as the human experience, its level is philosophical rather than practical, it may be what commercial art can not be - controversial, the former's intention is to sell". Another piece I find interesting - "Craftsmanship is essential to either commercial or fine art, but in fine art craftsmanship may be to a much greater degree, subordinate to the idea or feeling content in the work".

Shahn had a great ability to be able to approach any given problem, not in terms of his own style but in terms which the problem demanded. His work with William Golden of CBS proves that good art can be used for commercial purposes, which isn't all that surprising really! Two prints based on drawings done for CBS are Supermarket^F and Wheatfield^G. Both display Shahn's balance and aptness of line, and both incorporate the hand colouring of negative space. Of the two, however, I think Wheatfield is the most successful. It echoes Shahn's early childhood life in Russia and displays a much subtler and restrained use of colour than Supermarket. The handling of the slender stalks, with heads bowing with the weight of ripe grain, is quite beautiful. Their positioning seems so natural and the area of colour accentuated is pictorially very strategic. That simple little area of colour makes the whole picture something really special. There is just enough, nothing superfluous or over-done; it's just right. The colouring does not stop the eye from wandering through the stalks or from admiring the intricate patterning that the heads create. The other print Supermarket again displays Shahn's marvellous sense of balance in the positioning of the trollies, but lacks the delicacy which makes Wheatfield so beautiful. The colour application is also a little strong. These prints are hand coloured and it's suggested by Prescott that Shahn's children helped in colouring and this may explain their intensity. Such was the regard Shahn placed in colour application, that he would allow his children to do the work! It is interesting to note that there is no social message in these, rather the purpose here is purely decorative.



I have the right to believe freely
to be a slave to no man's authority.
If this be heresy so be it. It is still
the truth. To go against conscience is
neither right nor safe. I cannot.....
will not..... recant. Here I stand.
No man can command my conscience.

H.

The Credo Theme

Although I find fault with some of Shahn's ideologies in relation to commercial art, I admire greatly his ability to communicate his deep felt concerns with such conviction and understanding. The Sacco and Vanzetti series demonstrates this and so does the Credo Theme but on a more personal level.

Several of Shahn's prints and drawings reflect an interest in the writings of Martin Luther. Here again Shahn awakens the memory, the memory of one who, we have been taught in this country, to consider as an evil man. Personally I have never stopped to think of Martin Luther, and my last encounter with the man would have been in primary school, at which time he was portrayed in the worst possible way. I was therefore conditioned to disregard and pigeon hole him along with all the other 'baddies'. I don't recall any real reason given, but the general idea was that he totally upset the right and proper structure of things, and it just hasn't really been the same since.

H.

Shahn's first version of Credo incorporates a quotation from Luther's statement at the 1521 Diet of Worms, an assembly before which Luther defended his beliefs. It combines this with the image of a fire beast that Shahn had earlier developed to illustrate a fire tragedy. Shahn used and reused images he created and it is quite remarkable that he could so successfully employ elements from different themes and arrive at something new and fresh. Such was the case with this print. In its existing form it relies too much on one's understanding of the symbolism. Does the fire beast symbolise the burning at the stake, a fate that faced Luther? One cannot be sure.

Six years later, in 1966, Shahn returned to this theme, printing the image of a bold angular man holding a book open,¹ on top of the earlier Credo print. So on the pages of the 'open book' one sees the fire beast and below it the quotation as before. This is a strong potent image and like the

5/11/69
10:00 PM
Bm Shale



I have no man's authority
to tell me so be it. It is still
the truth. To go against conscience is
neither right nor safe. I cannot....
will not.....recant. Here I stand.
No man can command my conscience.

C.

Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti it has a lasting effect. It is so protestant, the bold yet soft edged lines are much more suitable in this case than his usual choppy wire line. The gaze is uncompromising in its fixed expression of honest determination, with the two short lines above the brow suggesting a frown. The black, blue and white suggest puritanism and a certain coldness. The calligraphy gives the quotation the personality it needs and one almost assumes it to be written by Luther himself. This effect is achieved by a very apt style of writing which looks vaguely medieval or at least foreign in origin. It is also angular like the figure. It is quite different from the folk alphabet which would appear a little too ethnic in this context. This difference leads one to associate the images with the writing to a greater extent, and see it as very much the essence of the persons portrayed. This quotation refers to the concept presented in Luther's manifesto that "the individual conscience is the highest moral authority"^I. Shahn obviously admired Luther's sense of purpose and his belief in what he felt to be true, retained at great personal risk. The very fact that Shahn recognised Luther's words as being important and significant, shows the intellectual and philosophical sides to this man.

Shahn: The Choppy Line

I think what above all else attracts people to Shahn is his choppy "barbed wire"⁵ line drawings. After further study of his work most discover that there is much more to this man than his unique line. However despite the man's many talents, his line remains for me the main attraction, with his folk alphabet coming a close second. It is a line that has a piercing energy, that seems to work towards and accumulate at strategic points. It's full of gestural emotion, which is very expressive and is always executed with great empathy for the subject matter. It is also calligraphic in its rhythmic qualities. Two great examples of this line can be seen in Hamlet^J and Flowering Brushes^K where Shahn placed great emphasis in hands as



J.

הוא היה אומר אם אין אני לי כמי לי וכמי
אני לעצמי מה אני ואם לא עכשיו אימתי



K.

expressive symbols, this can be clearly seen in these two drawings. The furrowed brow and nail-biting pose are the main features of Hamlet. The absence of outline for the head gives emphasis to the eyes and the position of the hand with small finger being bitten is really lovely. The whole thing is so simple and so evocative of a nervous, troubled mind.

Flowering Brushes is a more worked drawing but the extra lines are put to good use in those wonderfully sinewy forearms that rest on elbow points denoted by little circles. Again here the hands are very important: one supporting the chin while the other holds a 'bouquet' of colourful brushes. The face of the 'Artist'; a theme Shahn was working on of which this is one example, is absorbed in thought and is nicely understated. The blank eyes, which we also have noted in Sacco and Vanzetti, work well here also. They suggest perhaps the abstract nature of the thoughts of the artist, or a looking inwards on himself. The Hebrew quotation across the top is a famous saying of Hillel the Elder, a great personality in Jewish history, who lived during the reign of Herod. Translated it means - "He (Hillel) used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? If I care only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?"¹

Shahn and Calligraphy

Having examined aspects of Shahn's work with relation to quality of line, I would now like to dwell on the origins and development of Shahn's interest in calligraphy which manifested itself in the development of his folk alphabet which we looked at earlier.

Shahn's Jewish background was an intrinsic part of his personality. It made him very aware of persecution and injustice on a universal level. This is not surprising considering that he lived through a period when millions of Jewish people were exterminated. This infused Shahn's work with a genuine concern. "I hate injustice, I guess that's about the only thing I really do hate".⁶ As he got older Shahn returned to religious themes

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which he had ignored for most of his life in the face of more important issues. It marked the full turn of his life's circle, his childhood upbringing being very religious. In many ways Shahn typifies the American dream, a poor immigrant of a then persecuted race who turns into a successful and important artist. Without such a background it is unlikely that Shahn could have produced such powerful images. The emphasis on craftsmanship at home did much to gear Shahn towards thinking about his art in a similar way. Also, his early exposure to Hebrew writing, in all its elegance, instilled in him an awareness of lettering that would later grow into something quite unique. Many years later Shahn retained his interest in Hebrew and developed his own Hebrew alphabet. This included the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet designed for use in his book Alphabet of Creation.^L When Shahn with his wife Bernarda, visited Japan in 1960, he had a chop, or seal, made from a modified version of this alphabet. It produced a charming design when stamped in the traditional oriental orange colour. Shahn loved his alphabet signature and took great care and pleasure in deciding where best to place it on a finished print. Shahn had several versions of the alphabet made in the form of little gold pins, the first of which he gave to his wife. Shahn's work received much acclaim and respect from oriental critics who much admired his calligraphic style. To Shahn this was a great compliment as he considered the oriental as unsurpassable at calligraphy. Speaking of Chinese lettering Shahn said, "In them more than any other letters or figures that I have seen, I have sensed the element of timing, of the fast movement and the slow, the deliberate and the rash - that wonderful progression of time and movement that continues to reside in the figure after it is made". ... "This art, of course, is action painting par excellence".⁶ Oddly enough, much of his own work in particular his drawing,

contains many of the above traits. Shahn goes on to talk about first emergence of oriental art in the West when artists tried to "emulate the fluid forms"⁶. However, the hand and wrist were not there and the result pathetic. However, when the art of the West freed itself from its academic restraints, Shahn believes a new understanding arose where rather than trying to imitate the lightning past and yet controlled hand of the oriental, western artists could achieve the fast and slow movements, rhythms in which control was not a factor. In other words the essence of hand movements and rhythms could be communicated by the western artist in a more primitive and less developed fashion than the oriental. In this way, Shahn looks upon Franz Kline as being a good example of a twentieth century 'calligraphic' artist.

Interestingly enough though Kline thought otherwise. "I don't think of my work as calligraphic. Critics also describe Pollock and De Kooning as calligraphic artists, but calligraphy has nothing to do with us ... In the first place calligraphy is writing and I'm not writing".¹⁷ This again demonstrates Shahn's pretentious tendencies. Although a very capable and intelligent writer, he suffered to some extent from the 'wise old man' syndrome which can be a bit much at times. He also seemed to want to muse into the area of art critic; he resented the fact that some critics believed it 'their duty' to interpret what the artist did and that they considered the artist incapable of doing so, a mere instrument or vehicle for the artistic process. I share Shahn's resentment. Of course the problem here lies in the ambiguity of the term calligraphic or any term when one speaks of painting. Kline obviously took it to mean 'writing'. However, in art criticism the term 'calligraphy' has been broadened to include almost anything that has curvative or rhythmic qualities. Also, anything basically linear with gestures that relate to hand movements, indeed a very broad term. In this way Kline could be definitely considered calligraphic. But so could any number of other artists, heretofore not

considered but who display similar characteristics. When under the umbrella of poetic license that art criticism seems to offer, one can make things fit, be it calligraphic or phallic, if one looks closely some aspect of almost any work will fit into the broad criteria demanded by such terms.

Leonard Baskin

Shahn did a lot of graphic work, mainly as I said earlier, because of the greater audience such a medium offers and secondly so that he could give work to his friends. He was very particular about the printers he used, and concentrated to a large extent on two printers he knew personally. One of these was Leonard Baskin, an important active artist for more than three decades.

Baskin, like Shahn, has been oblivious to criticism and fashion in art and has unerringly tackled the human prospect. He too is a multi-talented man, acclaimed not only for his outstanding printmaking but also for his sculpture, his illustration and his own Gehenna Press responsible for the production of some of the most beautiful books of the century. He started out as a draughtsman and printmaker but in the last twenty years has spent a lot of time in sculpture. Shahn taught Baskin at one stage and they maintained a close relationship all through their lives, up to Shahn's death in 1969. Like Shahn, Baskin was also a Jew, and for him a Jew is someone peculiarly at risk in the conditions of our time, someone who is often fated to be an eternal outcast. The themes in Baskin's work are easy enough to recognise. He has always considered man's body to be the most wonderful thing in nature, and he has been preoccupied with death, fearing and celebrating it. His figures confront it in the most uncompromising fashion, and are exposed to its full horror and terror. Shahn always believed he could display the horrors of death, sickness and suffering by using the image of man, and likewise Baskin has continued working in this mode in a time when to be figurative was becoming less and less

acceptable. He did remain figurative however and his only deviation from man as a symbol, and those are symbolic not replicas of man, are birds. Eerie and gruesome, Baskin's birds took off so to speak, with the artists interaction with long time friend and poet Ted Hughes. Together they have had several projects combining Hughes's poetry with Baskin's illustrations. They developed the 'crow' idea into something quite unique and formidable. Baskin, who has always loved poetry, spends part of every year in his studio in Devon to be next to his poet friend, whom he regards as a genius. Baskin's figures, be they bird or man, two or three dimensional, have a wonderful subtlety about them. They are figures which stand isolated, waiting, but for what? Man is viewed by Baskin in his naked state, without sentiment, existing in the brief space between birth and death. They would seem apt personifications of characters from Camus or Gide, gazing with detached curiosity at the world around them, victims of destiny existing only to be hurled into nothingness at the end of their little lives. Baskin writes that "... Man has been incapable of love, wanting in charity and despairing of hope. He has not moulded a life of abundance and peace, and he has charted the earth and befouled the heavens more wantonly than ever before. He has made of Arden a landscape of death. On his garden I dwell, and in mining the horror, the degradation and filth, I hold the cracked mirror up to man". Baskin can also write.

Although both Baskin and Shahn grapple with man's moral and ethical problems, the feeling both artists evoke are quite different. Shahn's desire to universally communicate demands that a very simplistic approach is adhered to. Baskin's audience is more select and as a result his work is more subtle in flavour. When the artists' complete work is viewed together I personally feel that Baskin does have the edge. With Shahn it's more of a 'love/hate' relationship, depending on the particular style he used. For instance, I have grown to dislike intensely Shahn's painting technique, while his drawing



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craft is excellent the same cannot be said for his painting. Maybe he just wasn't able to do any better because being so 'craftsmanship' orientated I'm quite sure if he could have he would. As I mentioned before I adore his quality of line, but I am often a little bored with some of his subject matter particularly some of the later religious works, which do nothing for me. Oddly enough Baskin's painting is by no means his greatest asset either. But Baskin uses his painting ability, if a little limited, resourcefully in lovely drybrush work. He never lets it take away from his real talents - drawing and sculpture. All of Baskin's work appeals to me and his sculptures fascinate me, appearing quite different to his drawings yet the feeling evoked is the same. In particular I like Daedalus^N (bronze 1967). The uncluttered body, the wistful face in knowledgeable anticipation of something about which the viewer must speculate, a face scarred, rough, round, bald head and shoulders. And most attractive is the absence of a waist, making the figure very human yet unique. This is a figure with which I developed an immediate affinity.

Any of the twenty-nine illustrations from the Hughes/
Baskin book Cave Birds¹⁴ demonstrate the man's virtuosity with pen and ink. There are twenty-nine birds that evoke the patterns of life and death "and the mutant stages in between".¹⁴

I don't believe I have ever seen words so aptly illustrated or images so enhanced by verse, I almost imagine that the creative process might have been simultaneous. This book is the manifestation of the close relationship existing between poet and artist. So perfect is the bond that unites image and word here, Baskin's birds not only perch on Hughes's wrist but would seem to hold his very pen firmly in their beaks. It would therefore be wrong to examine these creatures without their life source, the poetry.



Only a little Sleep, a little Slumber ^{14. P}

And suddenly you
Have not a word to say for yourself.
Only a little knife, a small incision,
A snickety nick in the brain
And you drop off, like a polyp.
Only a crumb of fungus,
A pulp of mouldy tinder
And you flare, fluttering, black-out like a firework.
Who are you, in the nest among the bones?
You are the shyest bird among birds.
'I am the last of my kind'.

Without such words one could still greatly admire this drawing both ^{P.} in terms of the excellent draftsmanship with which it is executed and also in terms of the emotions and feelings it evokes. However viewed in relation to the verse, a very complete experience is felt, for this is a very piercing visualization of Hughes' words. The kind of natural balance, seen in Shahn, is evident here also. However in place of Shahn's choppy coarse line we see a miniscule line full of ominous mystique. A great variety of textures are simulated here, with short scratchy little lines blending with the brittle drybrushed boundaries of the central black body. Baskin's treatment of the feathers, beaks, and talons is uniform throughout the book, though displayed in a wide variety of bird-like forms. The awkward pose taken by the creature is so apt and his beady little eye does demand certain sympathy. The strong horizontal of the birds back is further accentuated by the close proximity of the parrallel page-edge. This horizontal droops at either end in beak and wing tips. A pyrimidal type structure, denoted by the two legs and tail has its point nestled in the birds feathery belly upholding the whole body from beak-tip to tail.

As with all Baskin's work this is not a representative image, it is a symbol of the closeness of life to death. This bird stands, somewhat shakily, like Daedalus waiting. It is this quality that I find most enthralling in Baskin's work. His ability to convey such emotion amaze me. One empathises with his characters immediately because they are so much part of us all. His fascination with death is not morbid for he has such an under-

standing of it. One is quite surprised to see such a subject portrayed in such odd and yet readily identifiable forms, it is rather like a 'd  ja vu' experience. I believe we all must have an intrinsic, but suppressed, understanding of death and this seems to emerge when one is confronted by a Baskin bird.



This book is the perfect marriage of words and images, the empathy with each other work and the way Baskin and Hughes work side by side comes through here. Paul Cummings suggests that Baskin's birds are "elegant decorative images" not necessarily conveying anything deeper. I disagree, believing that the evocative nature of these creatures makes it impossible to view them in anything but a deep way. They cut deep with fiendish talons, malevolent beaks and beady eyes, and when coupled with the haunting and compelling words of Ted Hughes the effect is quite disturbing. Baskin, again like Shahn, has an empathy with man's situation, but rather than specifically pointing at issues Baskin reveals the faults and weaknesses as intrinsic elements of man's condition, not as an excuse for his actions but rather an affirmation of his helplessness in the face of his own failings. Weeping Man is a touching portrait of man in this way. Shahn when at his best, gets this across also but showing the fault in such a way that it demands correction, a sort of Jewish self-righteousness if you like. In Baskin's work this is not felt, the fault is presented, and that's it. The suggestion is not reinforced in any way but depends on the perception of the viewer. This again highlights the fact that while Shahn tried to communicate with everybody Baskin just makes images. He apparently has no aspiration towards communicating with the masses, with the view towards enlightening them the way Shahn had. Shahn's purpose was a noble and heartfelt one and I suppose in comparison Baskin could be accused of snobbery working more within the sphere of fine art. The pros and cons of such an attitude aside, the result is that Shahn's work suffered somewhat by the demands that 'universal understanding' put on it, while Baskin remaining aloof retains a wonderful subtlety and mystique in his work. However, it's quite unlikely, even if he lives for over another half century, that Baskin will ever have anything like the effect that Shahn has had on the world of visual communications.

Conclusion

I have talked about Ben Shahn in a variety of ways. I have looked at his background, the importance of his religion and upbringing leading to a love of lettering and an apprenticeship in the lithographic trade. I have examined his role in the Social Realist movement culminating in the development of his own 'personal realism'. Stemming from this was the discussion of two particular themes which I found interesting, Sacco and Vanzetti and Credo. Also, of course, Shahn's activities in Commercial Art were dealt with, resulting in the gradual awareness of some of Shahn's faults. However, my initial attraction to Shahn was his quality of line and this remains for me his most admirable asset, it's what sets him apart from everyone else. I also admire his character, his intellect, his craftsmanship and his love of hard work. Unfortunately, Shahn tended to be pretentious in his preachings, the holes in his ideologies are politely concealed by the academic and professional alike who seem to prefer not to spoil the perfect memory of a great man. Such glorified presentation is demonstrated by the fact that I failed to find a critical word against Shahn in all of my research, this eventually tends to have a negative effect on one's feelings towards the artist. Nevertheless, Ben Shahn was a very important individual, an artist with an extremely sensitive social conscience, a rare occurrence in any society. His message is still valid and if it seems dated then it is due to our society's regression into apathy rather than any movement towards any greater understanding or awareness.

I feel that if Shahn had been less aware of social issues and the need to communicate them to a wide audience he would have been a more intriguing 'artist', rather like Baskin. However, had he resigned himself to operating within the cosy confines of fine art he would not be remembered as anything but 'another artist'. However it was Shahn's compulsive desire to visually point out to the whole world the "plight of the little people" ¹ that makes Shahn a very special and important artist.

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