

## CRITIC'S PICK

# Ben Shahn's Social Realist Art Feels Relevant Again in Landmark Survey

An old master of the Great Depression painted a portrait of America as it still may be.



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By **Blake Gopnik**

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With some artists, there's one work that seems to capture their essential achievement.

In the long-overdue retrospective now at the Jewish Museum in New York, the entire artistic project of the American painter Ben Shahn comes clear in a single fascinating painting from 1940 called "Contemporary American Sculpture." It depicts a gallery at the Whitney Museum hosting sculptures from that January's survey of the nation's artists — except that Shahn, left out of that survey, reimagines the walls surrounding those stylized modern works as covered in his own realist paintings.

Those show scenes of everyday life during the Great Depression — decrepit workers' housing; a farmer by his shack; poor Black women at a welfare hospital — depicted as though the Whitney's walls have been pierced to reveal the all-too-real world out beyond. It recalls how Renaissance murals pierced church walls to let in the more-real world of the Bible.

“Contemporary American Sculpture” captures what’s at stake in the most potent works in “Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity,” as this revelatory survey is called. Those works use the time-honored art of painting to make the modern world, and its signature troubles, as present as Shahn can manage. The effect is gripping, and feels utterly relevant for the troubled moment we are living in now.

For a decade or so on either side of World War II, Shahn’s achievements made him an art star, earning him a major show at the Museum of Modern Art and honors including a place in the American Pavilion of the 1954 Venice Biennale, shared with the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning.



Ben Shahn, “Scotts Run, West Virginia,” 1937. During the Great Depression, Shahn felt sympathy for Americans suffering the deprivations he grew up with. (This painting was based on a photograph he took.) Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; via The Jewish Museum

But it was de Kooning and his ilk who went on to dominate the art world; as Cold War reaction took hold, Shahn, a dedicated leftist, saw a slow but unbroken decline in his critical fortunes. There has barely been an uptick since. The Jewish Museum show is Shahn's first notable survey in the United States since one at the same museum in 1976. Featuring 175 artworks and objects, photos by Shahn and his peers as well as illuminating ephemera, it was organized abroad, at the Reina Sofía museum in Madrid, where it was a big hit in 2023; the curator Laura Katzman had to work hard to find an American museum to take it.

Shahn was raised in immigrant Brooklyn, where his family, who were Jewish, had landed in 1906, when he was 8. They were fleeing deprivation, antisemitism and oppression in their native Lithuania, then under Russian rule. Shahn's father, a socialist and anti-czarist, had been forced into exile in Siberia. In the United States, the Shahns still had such struggles that young Ben had to drop out of high school to help fund the household. He landed in a lithographer's workshop, where he mastered the fundamentals of visual art.

But his career as an artist took a while to jell, as he attended various courses in various places — New York University, the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass., the City College of New York. In the 1920s, Shahn, supported by a hard-working wife, Tillie Goldstein, was able to take in the high points of old master and modern art across Europe. (He arranged a meeting with Picasso but got cold feet and called it off.)

By 1933, Shahn was back in New York, assisting the great Diego Rivera on his infamous mural for Rockefeller Center, soon hacked off the wall because of its portrait of Lenin. Unlike his mentor, Shahn never quite subscribed to communist doctrine, though he shared the movement's egalitarian aims.

For a solo show at the prestigious Downtown Gallery in New York, that same year, Shahn portrayed scenes from the saga of Tom Mooney, a labor leader falsely imprisoned for a 1916 bombing, who wasn't released until 1939.

If the images in the survey feel more like news than comment, that's partly because we can sense the press photos Shahn used as his sources. Though his paintings themselves aren't close to photorealistic — his technique can be potently slapdash — their subjects have the verve of seeming caught on the fly. His image of two perjurers who helped convict Mooney has the strange perspective of a wide-angle lens, as does its newspaper source, on view at the Jewish Museum alongside other documentation that gives insight into Shahn's art.



A 1923 news photograph showing Bartolomeo Vanzetti (left) handcuffed to Nicola Sacco, in a courthouse in Dedham, Mass. Shahn used it as his source for a painting in the Jewish Museum show. via Boston Public Library



Ben Shahn, "Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco," 1931-32, gouache on paper. This painting retains the tight cropping of its source photograph. Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; via Museum of Modern Art

The exhibition includes an earlier series on the controversial 1921 trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants executed for murder despite flimsy evidence. Shahn's painting of the two handcuffed men is cropped weirdly tight; we see that it echoes a source photo that had been cropped the same way, to save space on the printed page. Shahn borrows the feel of a photograph's direct observation to make his painted subjects seem more directly observed by us.

In the mid-1930s, he took up the camera himself, as part of a New Deal project to document Depression hardships. His photographs in this show stand up fine against nearby ones by famous colleagues like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. Shahn used them as sources for the New Deal murals he was soon making — the show mostly includes them as studies — and then for many of his later paintings.

The vast majority of photographs in Shahn's day were black-and-white and very small. They couldn't have the sheer presence of scenes at life scale, in full color. That had been the territory once staked out in the "history paintings" of the European old masters; in the best works in the show, Shahn channels the potent "reality effect" of those paintings, but uses it to capture distinctly modern subjects and social ills, and the modern look of a photographed world.



Ben Shahn, "Years of Dust," 1936, poster. Shahn was a fierce proponent of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. via Museum of Modern Art

That achievement comes especially clear in the colorful posters he made during World War II for the American Office of War Information, which show figures, at life size or larger, suffering under the Nazis and their partners. Those figures might as well be Christian martyrs on the walls of a Renaissance church. (Shahn reworked one poster about Nazi slave labor into a painting called "1943 AD," in which a stretch of barbed wire becomes a crown of thorns on one of the enslaved.)

Shahn's vision was too potent for the Office of War Information: It seems to have released only two of his posters.

A bit later in the 1940s, working for the Congress of Industrial Organizations — a major confederation of unions — he created other posters that used the same effects to champion causes such as colorblind hiring and voting rights. Welders — one Black and one white — loom above us in this show, as if they were just the other side of the museum wall.



A photograph by Alfred T. Palmer, showing two welders, October 1941. Shahn used this photograph as the source of a poster, changing the race of one of the welders to Black. The Jewish Museum



Ben Shahn, "For Full Employment After the War, Register, Vote," 1944. Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; via The Jewish Museum

Unfortunately, in the decade or so before his death in 1969, Shahn could seem more interested in modern aesthetics than in modern people and their plights. His pictures became palimpsests of allusive symbols, reheating modern styles from Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso. Toward the end of this show, we miss the immediacy of Shahn's earlier pictures, with their close ties to an observed world. Instead, we're offered illustrations of moral themes and spiritual subjects that can read like vaporous musings.

What Shahn couldn't have realized, as he turned away from his potent visions of the 1930s and 40s, was that they would find new purchase almost a century later, when once again we face issues of racial injustice, and what our nation might do

about it, and prosecutions that can seem to serve politics, not justice.

Back in 1933, in an essay for the Downtown Gallery show, Rivera called Shahn “magnificent,” and said his paintings captured “a complete portrait” of the reality Shahn had grown up in. At the Jewish Museum, a century later, they seem to offer a portrait of our reality, too.

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### **Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity**

Through Oct. 12, the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan; 212-423-3200, [thejewishmuseum.org](http://thejewishmuseum.org).

***A correction was made on May 29, 2025: An earlier version of this review gave an incorrect date for the artist Ben Shahn's exhibition at the Downtown Gallery. It was 1933, not 1939. It also misstated the date of Tom Mooney's release from jail. It happened in 1939, not 1933. The review also misstated the frequency of publication of the artist's New Deal photographs. They were widely disseminated, not rarely shown.***

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