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Full Length Research

Black Links to Be Seen: African Americans in Ben Shahn's Illustrations

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This study examined the works of American social realist artist Ben Shahn. During the Cold War following World War II, the artist created a multi-material artistic link by integrating illustration, painting, and photography into his editorial illustrations based on specific texts, in which issues regarding the black community were closely associated with illustrations and events of the era. In spite of the postwar social/political dilemmas in America, Shahn succeeded in 1ublicizing the mass images revolving around particular textual subjects to mass media, galleries, and general public. In this way, the long-buried lives of the black people in America were brought into the public's view.

Keywords: Ben Shahn, editorial illustration, social realist art, African American, mass media.

INTRODUCTION

The Jewish-American artist Ben Shahn was an American social realist artist, as well as a left-wing intellectual and humanitarian. As an Eastern European migrant influenced by his prewar experiences in the New Deal revolution and the labor movement, Shahn was deeply involved in social justice and racial issues. Due to the anti-communist hysteria where dissent was forbidden after World War II, the left-wing Shahn made himself a target on the FBI's blacklist, but that did not stop him from raising his voice for the black community and the working class.

Shahn's postwar illustrations revolved around the postwar American political reality and examined postwar sensitive issues, such as the labor movement, racial issues, and debates on nuclear arms. In his editorial illustrations for magazines, Shahn particularly laid emphasis on the political/social situation for African Americans. In addition, the study found that by intentionally accepting a large number of illustration commissions, Shahn created an artistic link that integrated illustration, painting, and photography, and manifested the close association between illustrations and events of the era. Regardless of the postwar social/political dilemmas in America, Shahn successfully publicized the mass images revolving around particular textual subjects to mass media, galleries, and general public, disclosing the long-buried truth of the American black lives.

Americans to Be Seen:

Common Fate of the Minorities

When examining how the Jews and the African Americans portrayed each other in artistic terms, Heyd (1999) pointed out that Ben Shahn was one of the few Jewish artists in America taking part in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. As a matter of fact, since the 1930s, Shahn had started raising his voice for the black community in the trade union and continuously participated in events held by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The blacks were one of the few invariable subjects in Shahn's works, and could be frequently seen in paintings, photographs, and murals. Like the other

Americans, the blacks were under Shahn's daily observation, and their destinies were recorded in the artist's works. Although Shahn changed his artistic style into obscure symbolism after World War II, his concern for the black issues remained firm. By means of editorial illustrations, he revealed to the public the unseen situations of the blacks in America. These coal miners, slum dwellers, and civil rights movement leaders were portrayed in Shahn's illustrations, which represented his endorsement of racial equality and justice in opposition to the distorted values during the Cold War period.

Shahn's concern for racial issues was closely associated with his own life experience. Living in Brooklyn, New York, he was familiar with the blacks and the migrants. When travelling to Northern Africa at a young age, he also spent a short amount of time living on the island of Djerba in Tunisia in order to contemplate his work. The daily lives of the blacks could be frequently seen in Shahn's early creations. He depicted the regular lives of the Americans, which, in his view, included not only the whites and the blacks but people of all races. It was in 1938 when he left New York for the South to record the recession under Roosevelt's New Deal that he became aware of the racial issues in America. While capturing the inhumane treatment of the black miners and cotton pickers, Shahn witnessed the racial discrimination problem in the South and began questioning the accuracy of the coverage received (Greenfeld, 1998). By means of photography, Shahn started to reevaluate reality. In Natanson's study (1922) of the black image in the New Deal, Shahn's photos were proved to be of value for their subtle insights into the racial relations of the time. Because of Shahn's profession as an illustration artist, to whom the photos were mostly auxiliary to his creations, the objectives of his photos were different from those taken by professional photographers, capturing the blacks from a multicultural and egalitarian perspective. In this way, the effects the New Deal had on Southern black miners and tenant farmers during the recession were clearly manifested.

The trip to the South enlightened Shahn on the reality of human lives: "Theories had melted before such experience. My own painting then had turned from what is called 'social realism' into a sort of personal realism" (Shahn, 1957a). Later when Shahn was creating the murals, his self-narration showed that he portrayed the black female cotton planters of the South for the purpose of depicting the America outside of New York. The trip to the South also affected Shahn's photography in New York, which laid more emphasis on the lives of the blacks living in the New York slums. In Willis Avenue Bridge (1940) (Figure 1), two neatly dressed African American women were sitting on a bench, and one of them was holding a pair of crutches while the other seemed to be awaiting something. The way the two were placed side by side hinted at a sense of inner dilemma resulting from a long wait. The work was inspired by one of Shahn's early photos taken in New York (Figure 2), whose image context remained obscure. However, the image reappeared in Shahn's later mural, The Meaning of Social Security (Figure 3), which was positioned within the framework of "lacking social security," and through which we were able to perceive Shahn's concern for the lives of the blacks in America. The mural symbolized the artistic link combining photography, painting, and mural in Shahn's early works, where both the blacks and the whites were regarded as the Americans that needed to be seen.

Figure 1: Ben Shahn, *Willis Avenue Bridge,*1940, Gouache on paper on board, H:58.4 x W: 79.4 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Lincoln Kirstein. Artwork © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y

Figure 2: Ben Shahn, *Untitled (Welfare Hospital, New York City),* 1933-1934, photograph, negative, 2.4 x 3.6 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Bernarda Bryson Shahn. Artwork © President and Fellows of Harvard College

Figure 3: Ben Shahn, *The Meaning of Social Security,*1942, mural located at the Wilbur J. Cohen Federal Building, Washington, D.C., Credit line: Photographs in the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Gift; Carol M. Highsmith; 2009; (DLC/PP-2009:083). No known restrictions on publication

Ben Shahn's Editorial Illustrations:

Labor Movement in the South

It was not out of sheer fortuity that Shahn devoted himself to illustration work after the war, given that prior to the war he was already involved in various kinds of materials, such as painting, mural, photography and poster. After the war, he began accepting copious amounts of illustration commissions, and it was not for money that he accepted these four hundred or so requests. Despite being under the FBI's surveillance after the war and publicly accused of being a communist, Shahn was adored by artists and general public alike. In 1947, Shahn held a massive solo exhibition at MoMA and was named one of the top ten artists of the time. Later in 1954, he was chosen as the American representative artist at the Venice Biennale. Illustration work was therefore not something Shahn needed in order to earn a living. As a matter of fact, Shahn had his own principles in accepting illustration commissions. Taking his status as a freelance artist seriously, he kept away from gallery intervention, and accepted commissions from acquaintances only (Shahn, 1954). Pohl (1989) highlighted the importance of personal contact as it ensured that the commission tallied with Shahn's political beliefs. Shahn also rejected many requests he found unsuitable for him, for he felt he was unable to work for anything he did not identify with. When examining Shahn's principles of illustration commission, Rodman (1951) pointed out that, "Unless there is, in the objective situation which he is about to paint, some element which, on the one hand, may offer him a challenge as to an aesthetic solution; or, unless there is a human or personal problem which he feels the need to present and interpret, there is little honest motive for making a painting." What's more, Shahn also, without hesitation, rejected a commission from the Chrysler Corporation to create a collection work on the automotive age, which testified to the artist's autonomy in deciding on commissions.

The first illustration work Shahn created after the war was a commission from the CIO in 1946, in which he drew a series of editorial illustrations for "Labor Drives South," an article on the Southern labor movement in Fortune magazine. As the Illustration Manager of CIO, Shahn was willing to work during go-along interviews. The art director of the magazine was also a friend of his. The 1946 Southern labor movement involved unions of different industries; however, Shahn intentionally laid emphasis on the tobacco workers, which comprised mostly black people, in order to manifest his political support for the black community. Although there was no textual demonstration of how CIO's endeavor for the labor rights for the blacks was hindered by Southern owners, local committee members, sergeants and the church, the court scene in Shahn's illustration suggested that the labour movement was protected by the law. In The Church is The Union Hall (Figure 4), the poster wrote, "There will be a Labor Meeting for the Tobacco Workers," and Shahn depicted how the CIO was prevented from organizing trade unions outside the black church. The two men shaking hands at the church door indicated male identity, and the text hinted at their role as citizens fighting for labor rights, while the racial identity of black Americans came last. This embodied the egalitarian perspective that Shahn's works featured, highlighting the equal status between Southern black workers and any other American workers in the hope of a higher level of equality and democracy.

Figure 4: Ben Shahn, *The Church is The Union Hall*, 1946. Print on color, Print unknown. From "Labor Drives South" , Fortune magazine, November 1946, p. 141. © Fortune magazine

Figure 5: Ben Shahn, *The CIO Takes a Long Lease in the South*, 1947. Brush and ink, Print unknown. *New Republic*, January 1947, p. 21. ©New Republic.

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Fortune and Shahn were on the same side of the fence. Both of them were liberalists standing against racial discrimination in the South and labor inequality. An illustration showing a local sergeant from behind and criticizing the authority's connivance toward the illegal violence during the labor movement ended up unused by the editors. It was likely that Shahn disapproved the article's peaceful tone of the narration of what the Southern trade union underwent. He gave a description of the tension he perceived there, hence the illustration of the back view of the sergeant confronting the workers at the headquarters of the trade union (Benison and Otto, 1960).

The rejected illustration was later shown in "The CIO Takes a Long Lease in the South" (Figure 5) in the left-wing magazine New Republic. In comparison to the harmonious narration tone in Fortune, New Republic unflinchingly disclosed the racial violence in the Southern trade union: "…one sheriff waved a pistol at a Negro picket line and threatened to bury them all in the local graveyard" (Martin, 1947). Instead of basing his work on an existing text, Shahn portrayed the back view of the sergeant with his sight set on the empty headquarters of the trade union, underscoring the authority's indifference toward racial discrimination in a seemingly ordinary surveillance atmosphere.

The image served as a strong criticism of the Southern labor movement, which was involved in the political witch hunt. The Democratic CIO was criticized by the right-wing AFL and considered racially biased, hence the suppression of labor rights and equal racial/civil rights, as well as the anti-communist social hysteria. Despite the postwar anti-communist mass awareness in America, the hidden political score setting had crossed the line of democracy, which many intellectuals found unsettling and stood against. The accusation against the CIO did not deter Shahn from working on the subject of the union. By means of editorial illustrations based on specific texts, the artist found a channel for political criticism through which he raised his voice for the black community during the Red Scare.

This was a crucial artistic link with image appropriation, placing a rejected creation at another text that tallied with the image and thus putting it to the best use. The inspiration for the illustration was a photograph taken by Shahn himself during his trip to the South (Figure 6). The illustration was again used in Laissez-faire (Figure 7), which depicted the then strike news photo (Figure 8) of the auto workers at Ford and featured the sergeant who refused to be involved in the disputes between management and labor. The work also served as Shahn's criticism of the government. In other words, the illustration in Shahn's artistic link not only conveyed the artist's social message but evinced the strong association between illustrations and events of the time.

Figure 6: Ben Shahn, *Untitled (Bessemer City, North Carolina),* May 1946-August 1946, photograph, negative, 2.4 x 3.6 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Bernarda Bryson Shahn. Artwork © President and Fellows of Harvard College

Figure 7: Ben Shahn, *Laissez-Faire*, 1947. Print, 42.5 x 58.2 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Stephen Lee Taller Ben Shahn Archive, Gift of Dolores Taller. Artwork © Estate of Ben Shahn / Licensed by VAGA, NY.

Figure 8: Ford Employees Attacking C.I.O. Leader Yesterday, May 27, 1937.Photographers unknown. Ben Shahn papers, 1879-1990, bulk 1933-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. ©2020 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Ben Shahn's Collaboration with Harper's:

From the Tragedy to the Universal Human Emotion

Shahn's plentiful illustrations rendered him part of the mass image. Photography, painting, and illustration comprised a sort of multi-material image appropriation that aimed at bringing the black issues from particular texts to the public's view. One of the most well-known examples was Shahn's collaboration with Harper's.

Both Harper's and Fortune were established by magazine magnate Henry Luce, who was

considered a supporter of capitalism. Luce stood against the government's intervention in the operation of enterprises and free markets, asserting that the enterprise was the main force of social development in the future. Therefore, most of the articles laid emphasis on the labor movement and the viewpoints of the liberalists. Both magazines targeted middle-class readers. Despite being part of the mainstream media, Harper's produced a great number of articles on social issues with the magazine's wide circulation and its left-leaning and liberal editors. The collaboration between Shahn and Harper's also began with a personal relation: Shahn's wife Bernarda Bryson was an illustrator who had long collaborated with Harper's and helped convey the commission request from managing editor Russell Lynes to Shahn. Nevertheless, the main reason for the collaboration between Shahn and Harper's was Shahn's friend John Bartlow Martin, a journalist who wrote a piece on the mining accident for Harper's and asked Shahn to create an illustration for the article. Although Shahn had never worked on an editorial illustration for a news report, which was quite different from the subject of the labor movement and political issues, he was thrilled by the idea, because during his past trips he used to take a lot of photos in the Southern mines, where he became friends with many miners and gained a great deal of knowledge about their lives (Shahn, 1959b).

There were seven series of illustrations produced in total during Shahn's collaboration with Harper's, including five series of editorial illustrations and two magazine covers, among which two of the editorial illustrations on the Chicago fire and the hydrogen bomb accident were later used in paintings and became well-known works of the artist.

The first three collaborations between Shahn and Harper's were illustrations for the pieces written by John Bartlow Martin, who dedicated himself to the disclosure of social issues. Their first collaborative work was "The Blast in Centralia No.5: A Mine Disaster No One Stopped" (1948), which revolved around the mining accident that occurred in Number 5 Mine, Centralia, Southern Illinois on 25 March 1947, where a hundred and ten miners were killed due to deliberate negligence and bureaucracy. Shahn was willing to work on a lower wage and eventually produced almost 64 illustrations. Although only 24 of them ended up being used, Shahn considered it as a great opportunity to disseminate all the injustice many suffered from (Greenfeld, 1998).

This study called attention to another two illustration works on black issues, especially "The Hickman Story," which was closely related to the change in Shahn's artistic style. Published in August 1948, "The Hickman Story" discussed the blacks living in poverty and the racist residential policies, which eventually led to a tragic fire accident. The story featured its protagonist James Hickman, an African American moving from the South to Chicago in 1945 in the hope of a better life. However, he was forced to live in the black slum due to a racist residential policy. Moreover, not only was Hickman in a rental dispute with his landlord, he also lost his four children in a suspicious fire accident. Having no one to turn to because of the authority's indifference, he fired the gun at the landlord out of despair (Martin, 1948). Martin (1948) mentioned that at first Shahn collected a number of visual materials, which were later renounced for he felt that the universal significance of the incident had surpassed the crime committed and eventually decided to focus on the story of a small family that most people could relate to. This was similar to Martin's approach when he wrote about the mining accident. Instead of laying emphasis on the conflict between the government and the trade union, he wrote a story about a miner, who was simply a helpless, regular man (Boomhower, 2015).

Martin's writing, which aimed at transforming true events into moving and appealing stories, was strongly influenced by Shahn. The incident caused a sensation as well as a series of political protests. Shahn was deeply moved by the story, and after pondering over some relevant visual materials, he decided to renounce all the referential resources, for he felt that the significance of the incident itself had surpassed anything a story could present, and what really could move people was the universal compassion aroused by one's misfortune (Shahn, 1957a: 26). Shahn began looking for symbols in Hickman's life that represented the transition from a Southern tenant farmer's life to that in Chicago. Instead of giving a description of the incident in a reporting fashion, Shahn aimed to enlighten the viewers on the incident's impact on a family that truly existed and hoped to avoid any racial opposition. He eventually offered 16 editorial illustrations in three weeks and charged only $250 dollars, which was one-tenth of the regular price.

The Hickman story was not merely a fire accident, but a representation of the suffering black families in many cities in America as a result of the Jim Crow laws and the racist residential isolation policies. Because of such policies, many blacks moving from the South to Chicago were forced to live in cheap apartments in the slums, living a life poorer than that in the South. As Martin mentioned in his article, life in the North for the blacks was no better than that in the South, and it seemed like there was no place for the blacks in America (Martin, 1948).

Nevertheless, Hickman's misfortune was nothing new to the postwar blacks living in poverty. What made them stand out was not the tragic events they suffered but how they won justice in the public's view. The Socialist Workers Party in Chicago stood on the same side with black civil rights organizations in defense of Hickman, regarding him as a victim of injustice rather

Figure 9: Ben Shahn, *The Hickman story*, 1948. Brush and ink, Print unknown. Harper's Magazine, August 1948, p.49. © Harper's Magazine Foundation.

Figure 10: "Secret". photograph from Conditions in Greece: Confidential Photographic Record (Official Publication of The Royal Hellenic Government, 1942). Photographer unknown. Ben Shahn papers, 1879-1990, bulk 1933-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. ©2020 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

than a criminal in order to protest against the poverty issue and racial discrimination that the blacks in Chicago encountered. Despite Hickman's victory and his being released, the incident did not mark its place in history. Allen (2009) contended that it was the Cold War that erased the Hickman case from the public's memory, for the war placed socialists, communists, and left-wing radicals on the margins of America. Since the attorney of the Hickman case was a member of the communist Socialist Workers Party, the case, despite being one of the successful examples of working-class rebellion after the war in America, was deliberately forgotten by history (Allen, 2009).

The multi-material image appropriation could also be seen in the Hickman illustrations. Hickman's mourning portrait and the Southern female cotton picker figure representing Hickman's wife are examples. However, what stood out the most was the four children who lost their lives in the fire (Figure 9). Using the press photos of the massacre during World War II as reference (Figure 10), Shahn put Hickman's remarks below the illustration: "Paper was made to burn, coal and rags. Not people. People wasn't made to burn" (Martin, 1948: 47). Through the text and the image, viewers were able to perceive the sense of disempowerment that the blacks in America bore toward their unknown destiny.

Shahn was still haunted by the Hickman story even after he finished the illustrations, for the four deceased children in the story aroused the artist's childhood fear of fire, hence his desire to portray the emotions revolving around the tragedy rather than the tragedy per se (Shahn, 1957a: 32). As a result, the horrific incident was also brought into Shahn's work Allegory

Figure 11: Ben Shahn, *Allegory*, 1948. Tempera on panel, 36 1⁄8 x 48 1⁄8 in. Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of William P. Bomar Jr. in Memory of Mrs. Jewel Nail Bomar and Mr. Andrew Chilton Phillips. Artwork © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y

Figure 12: Ben Shahn, *The Hickman story*, 1948. Brush and ink, Print unknown. Harper's Magazine, August 1948, p.48. © Harper's Magazine Foundation

(Figure 11), for the purpose of depicting the human fear of fire and stimulating viewers' compassion through disaster, racial injustice and the cruelty of poverty.

In contrast to his realistic works in the past where distinct social messages were visible, Allegory featured a number of symbols of Shahn's inner experience. For instance, the fire represented not only the fire in Hickman's apartment but the childhood experience with fire of the artist, who used to live in the New York slums when he was young, just like the Hickman family (Figure 12). Moreover, the creature near the fire was likely to be either the combination of the fire-breathing Greek monster Chimera and the She-wolf of Roman Mythology or the projection of Shahn's mother, whom he distrusted and feared. Lying underneath Chimera could be either Hickman's black children or the Jewish children in the massacre. Or, they could even be, as Shahn claimed, the artist's own siblings. The combination of the inner experience and the sense of horror produced by the image conveyed a universal and fundamental human emotion revolving around tragedy, as well as an oppressive visual experience. With the intense and symbolic image and the colorful composition, viewers were forced to contemplate the existence of the characters in the image and, just like Shahn, subsequently found their inner experience awakened.

Nevertheless, despite the universal human emotion Allegory aroused, during the Cold War period, the work was accused of being communist propaganda because of the plentiful red patterns in it. Shahn opposed the accusation by underscoring the work's attribute as a symbol of personal memories. Many years later, Allegory became Shahn's representative work. With the powerful symbols and colorful composition, it stimulated the viewers to ponder over the existence of the characters in the image. In this way, the story of Hickman could be reiterated, and the black people living in Chicago in 1948 could therefore solidify their significant place in the art history.

The third collaborative work between Martin and Shahn was an editorial illustration on residential justice for the black people. Published in December 1950, "The

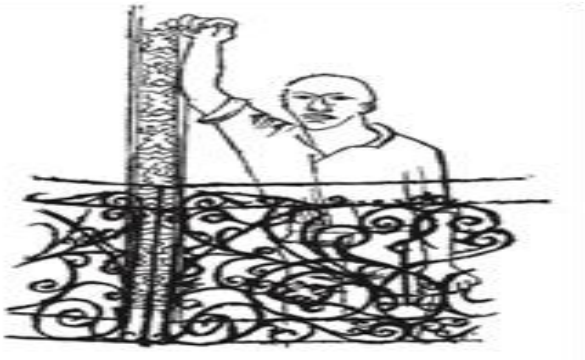

Figure 13: Ben Shahn, *The Strangest Place in Chicago*, 1950.Brush and ink, Print unknown. Harper's Magazine, December 1950, p.95. © Harper's Magazine Foundation

Figure 14: Ben Shahn, *Three Men*, 1939. Tempera on paper mounted to masonite, 45 x 76.8 cm, Harvard University Art Museums © Estate of Ben Shahn / Licensed by VAGA, NY.

Strangest Place in Chicago" featured the Mecca Flats, the black slums of Chicago. Once a luxurious apartment building in Chicago, the Mecca Flats was the tourist hotel during the 1893 World's Fair. However, it became the black slums of Chicago as a result of residential isolation, which Martin examined from a social, economic, and racial perspective (Martin, 1950a).

In his depiction of the Mecca Flats, Shahn particularly portrayed the various types of inhabitants on each floor in order to manifest a living space with no capacity for mobility, rendering the image more desolate than Martin's textual description. The Mecca Flats depicted by Shahn was isolated outside of the world, resembling the blacks living in the Black Belt. In one illustration, the image of an inhabitant standing in the corridor and staring down the courtyard represented an intense sense of emotional imprisonment.

The creative consciousness aiming at universality in Shahn's Allegory could also be seen in this series of illustrations. The Mecca Flats per se was replaced in the illustration with the scene of another city that was just like the black slums about to be forgotten. Although this illustration (Figure 13) was not reused in another painting to create an artistic link, it involved one of Shahn's early works depicting the New York slums (Figure 14) and reflected the collective memory that the artist shared as a Jewish immigrant. In this way, the work served as a reminder for viewers of the historical predicaments encountered by the minorities.

CONCLUSION

Black Links to Be Seen

Through a series of editorial illustrations, the particular concern for black issues, and the multi-material artistic link, it was obvious that Shahn intended to bring the lives of the blacks living in America to the public's view by means of illustration commissions and mass media. The origin of the illustration and the illustration per se, which was the origin of the painting, were associated with the external significance of the work and served as a channel for dissent during the Cold War period. In this fashion, Shahn succeeded in his attempt to respond to various racial issues and social phenomena. The artistic link between black illustrations and black-themed paintings constituted a number of

Figure 15: Ben Shahn, *Thou Shalt Not Stand Idly By* (from the Nine Drawings Portfolio), 1965. Offset photolithograph in black and burnt sienna, 56.3 x 42 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Stephen Lee Taller Ben Shahn Archive, Gift of Dolores S. Taller. Artwork © Estate of Ben Shahn / Licensed by VAGA, NY

black links to be seen, which served as a form of classic pattern in defense of the black civil rights.

Throughout history, the Jews and the blacks have worked together many times to fight for civil rights. Shahn's concern for the black community and racial justice had accompanied him throughout his artistic career. Thou Shalt Not Stand Idly By (Figure 15), which Shahn created in the last few years of his life, was an appeal for the elimination of racism and social collaboration. These time periods were reflected by the two hands and two languages shown in the poster. They also revealed the hidden black links Shahn created in his postwar illustrations, which aimed to call the public's attention to the importance of racial justice and black equality. It is no exaggeration to say that Shahn was, indeed, one of the very few great artists who unflinchingly manifested his support for the black community during the Cold War period in America.

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