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AN AMERICAN IN VENICE:
BEN SHAHN AND UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY
AT THE XXVIITH VENICE BIENNALE
OR
PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN AMERICAN LIBERAL



by

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ABSTRACT

In 1954 the Museum of Modern Art, as the new proprietor of the American pavilion in Venice, selected only two artists to represent American painting at the twenty-seventh Venice Biennale--Willem de Kooning and Ben Shahn. At first glance, this appears to be a somewhat incongruous coupling. A closer examination, though, reveals that each of these artists represented part of a larger American cultural propaganda campaign aimed at improving the image of America throughout the world. The development of this campaign paralleled, and was intimately bound up with, that of the Cold War.

As the major international showcase for contemporary art, the Venice Biennale assumed an important position in America's overall cultural foreign policy. The works exhibited there represented not only individual talent but also national ideologies and cultural achievements. In retrospect, the inclusion of de Kooning in the 1954 Biennale can be explained by his reputation in America at that time as one of the avant-garde of the American art scene. Various scholars have also shown how his abstract style embodied an image of America as a land of freedom, aggressive individualism, and innovation, an image that was valuable as a foil to the purportedly oppressive nature of life in Russia. While Ben Shahn was, admittedly, a recognized modern American artist in 1954, he was neither a member of the artistic avant-garde nor a representative of aggressive individualism. But he was a representative of certain other aspects of American liberal democracy--humanism, free speech, anti-communism, and anti-fascism--that were able to improve America's image in Europe in 1954 much more effectively than de Kooning's aggression. Shahn's success in Italy in particular was the result of certain elements within the

paintings included in the Biennale and within his own personal beliefs.

While much has been written concerning the role of abstract expressionism in America and abroad during the Cold War, no similar study has been devoted to the work of Ben Shahn. In attempting to reveal the implications of and reasons for Shahn's appearance at the 1954 Venice Biennale, this paper will investigate Shahn's reputation and his work in relation to American foreign policy concerns in Europe, and particularly in Italy, in the early 1950s. The role of private institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art, and of the Venice Biennale in American foreign policy will be investigated, as well as the failure of de Kooning's art to meet with the same success as that of Shahn's art. Finally, an examination of the promotional literature for and press reaction to the exhibition of Shahn's work, and of two of the paintings included in this exhibition--Liberation and The Red Stairway--will show how Shahn was able to convince the Italian public that not only was he a great artist, but a great American as well.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
INTRODUCTION	
America at the Venice Biennale	1
Footnotes	10
CHAPTER ONE	
Italy and American Foreign Policy: Christian Democracy or Nothing	14
A Little Hagiolatry Goes a Long Way	19
Artium Spectaculum Omnium Terrarum	24
De Kooning: Innovation and Aggression	28
Footnotes	33
CHAPTER TWO	
The Artist and The Politician	41
Italy, Oppression, and the Free Individual	45
A Modern-Day Crucifixion	54
An Overwhelming Success	58
The Dignity and the Reality of the Oppressed	66
A Little Something For Everyone— <u>Liberation</u> and <u>The Red</u> <u>Stairway</u>	81
Footnotes	105
CONCLUSION	
Success and Failure at the XXVII Venice Biennale	115
Footnotes	122
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	124
APPENDIX A	131
APPENDIX B	133

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure		Page
1.	Willem de Kooning, <u>Woman I</u> , 1950-52	31
2.	Ben Shahn, <u>Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco</u> , 1931-2	56
3.	Ben Shahn, <u>Summertime</u> , 1949	61
4.	Ben Shahn, <u>Spring</u> , 1946	62
5.	Ben Shahn, <u>Miners' Wives</u> , 1948	63
6.	Carlo Levi, <u>Trachoma</u> , 1953	69
7.	Renato Guttuso, <u>Roman Boogie-Woogie</u> , 1953	70
8.	Ben Shahn, <u>Handball</u> , 1939	72
9.	Ben Shahn, <u>This is Nazi Brutality</u> , 1942	74
10.	Ben Shahn, <u>We French Workers Warn You</u> , 1942	75
11.	Ben Shahn, <u>Break Reaction's Grip--Register Vote</u> , 1946 .	76
12.	Ben Shahn, <u>We Want Peace--Register Vote</u> , 1946	77
13.	Ben Shahn, <u>For All These Rights We've Just Begun To</u> <u>Fight--Register Vote</u> , 1946	78
14.	Ben Shahn, <u>Warning--Inflation Means Depression--Register</u> <u>Vote</u> , 1946	79
15.	Ben Shahn, <u>Liberation</u> , 1945	83
16.	Ben Shahn, <u>The Red Stairway</u> , 1944	84
17.	Ben Shahn, <u>Italian Landscape</u> , 1944	85
18.	Ben Shahn, <u>Father and Child</u> , 1946	86
19.	Edouard Manet, <u>Rue Mosnier Decked With Flags</u> , 1878 . . .	95
20.	Giorgio de Chirico, <u>Melancholy and Mystery of a Street</u> , 1914	97
21.	Leonardo da Vinci, <u>Adoration of the Magi</u> , c. 1481 . . .	99
22.	Sandro Botticelli, <u>Adoration of the Magi</u> , early 1470s .	99
23.	Sandro Botticelli, <u>Adoration of the Magi</u> , 1482	100
24.	Ben Shahn, <u>Allegory</u> , 1948	102

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There is more to a work of art than meets the eye.
Popular Saying

INTRODUCTION

The American pavilion, with its tiny dome and miniature symmetrical wings, is Colonial neoclassic, halfway between Monticello and Howard Johnson.

Lawrence Alloway, The Venice Biennale, 1968

America at the Venice Biennale

On 19 June 1954 the twenty-seventh Venice Biennale opened its doors to the public. Those who entered the American pavilion were met by an exhibition entitled "Two Painters and Three Sculptors From the United States." The three sculptors were Gaston Lachaise, Ibram Lassaw, and David Smith; the two painters Willem de Kooning and Ben Shahn. The latter combination appears, today, somewhat unusual—de Kooning, one of the main figures of abstract expressionism, and Shahn, called, variously, a social, new, or magic realist.¹ To those art historians raised within the formalist tradition the presence of de Kooning in the major international contemporary art exhibition of 1954 would not seem particularly surprising. Abstract expressionism in the early 1950s was, after all, the most advanced art movement in the modernist continuum. But the presence of Ben Shahn poses certain problems. His active involvement in various forms of social protest and his belief in the primacy of socially-relevant content in art place him outside the avant-garde, modernist tradition of this time. Such qualities are more in keeping with the artistic climate of the 1930s in America and, indeed, this is where most recent histories of twentieth-century American art place Shahn.² His outstanding success at the Venice Biennale is even more inexplicable within the framework of the formalist tradition. It is necessary, therefore, to go beyond this framework in order to discover why Shahn was sent to Venice and why he was so well-received.

The last decade has seen the appearance of a number of articles

explaining abstract expressionism's success in the late 1940s and early 1950s in terms of its ability to fulfil certain of America's ideological needs.³ In the following pages the argument will be presented that Shahn's inclusion in the twenty-seventh Venice Biennale, and his ultimate success, were the result of a similar ability. Such an argument rejects the notion that this success depended solely upon the formal or aesthetic qualities of Shahn's work, and accepts the importance of studying the relationship between his art and the larger social context in which it occurred. By studying this relationship, an understanding will emerge of the complexity of America's dominant ideology in the post-war period and the place of art within it.

The Venice Biennale was not merely a showcase for artistic achievements, but a stage on which ideological responses to current national and international events were acted out. Lawrence Alloway compares it to the great exhibitions of the nineteenth century:

The Biennale, by reason of its size, needs to be related also to the giant nineteenth-century exhibitions in which art from all countries was combined with technology and science. This was the usual form of prestige-exhibitions, of which early examples are the Great Exhibition in London, 1851, and the Exposition Universelle in Paris, 1855. An exhibition is, it must be stressed, ideological in form, a sign-system that is more than the sum of the separate exhibits that it contains.⁴

Just as these earlier exhibitions broached issues particularly relevant to the expanding industrial societies of the nineteenth century—"free trade, division of labor, increase in means of communication, the stimulus of competition"—the post-World-War-II Venice Biennales centered around contemporary social and political concerns.⁵ One of the most important of these was the ideological battle between the United States and Russia known as the Cold War. That this battle had indeed entered the realm of art was noted by Bernard Denvir in his review of the 1954 Biennale for the British magazine The Artist: "As this year saw the participation of a number of Iron Curtain

countries, one almost inevitably began viewing the Biennale in terms of cultural 'blocs'." ⁶

There is no simple explanation of the motivating factors behind the Cold War. The traditional historical interpretation of it as America's attempt to defend the rights of freedom against the onslaughts of communism has been proven wanting by the writings of such revisionist historians as Richard M. Freeland and Gabriel Kolko. ⁷ They go beyond the rhetoric of democracy and communism to the economic factors they feel to be one of the Cold War's ultimate causes.

According to these historians, American foreign policy in the immediate post-war era was dominated by the concern that another depression would ensue if the country's wartime production level could not be expanded, or at least maintained. ⁸ The American government felt that this expansion or maintenance was possible only if there existed "an expanding world economy based on the liberal principles of private enterprise, nondiscrimination, and reduced barriers to trade." ⁹ Such was the basis of what became known as the "open-door" policy. But the door was to open only one way, and that was to allow for the free flow of American goods into other countries. The American government insisted on maintaining its own preferential tariffs at the same time it was demanding that other nations abolish theirs. ¹⁰

Europe played an important role in this expanding world economy, both as a marketplace for American products and as a buffer against the westward spread of communism. Kolko explains this importance further:

It was this same effort to foster a reformed world economy that compelled the United States to turn its attention, with unprecedented energy and expense, to the future of the European continent and Germany's special position in it And however weak Europe might be at the moment, the United States had to consider how its reemergence—with or without Germany—might potentially affect the United States' contemplated role on the Continent should Europe once again assume an independent role. Allied with Russia, or even a resurgent

Germany, Western Europe could become the critical, perhaps decisive, factor in international economic and political power.¹¹

The realization of American goals required the existence of governments in Western Europe that were united in their support of America's economic policies. But this unity was threatened by the existence, after the war, of strong left-wing and nationalist forces in the four major Western European nations—Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. According to Kolko, "in the spring of 1947 Washington was still aware of the fact that the primary, immediate threat to America's interests was the emergence of assorted brands of socialism and capitalist nationalism in Europe."¹² In attempting to prevent these forces from gaining power, the American government established an economic aid program, the Marshall Plan, which ensured money to those governments willing to cooperate with American economic policies.¹³ Cooperation with American military objectives was also encouraged through the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 and the subsequent attempt to establish a European Defense Community (EDC) which included Germany.

Both the economic and military revitalization of Europe required exceedingly large sums of money which Congress, controlled by the more conservative and isolationist Republican Party, was initially unwilling to approve. Congressional approval, though not ultimately a controlling factor in the formation of American foreign policy at this time,¹⁴ was necessary at an ideological level as reassurance to the American public that it maintained control over the government's actions through the democratic process. By promoting the image of Russia as an immediate military threat to Europe, and thus to the rest of the non-communist world, the Truman administration succeeded in 1947 in overcoming this Republican opposition to its European foreign aid program.¹⁵ The continued use of these communist-scare tactics

over the next decade to justify military and economic exploits abroad established the basic tenor of the Cold War, even though such organizations as NATO and the EDC were originally designed to combat internal subversion rather than external Russian attacks.¹⁶

The single-mindedness with which the American government pursued its economic and military objectives in the late 1940s and early 1950s brought increasing criticisms from the various governments of Western Europe. The exact nature of these criticisms will be discussed later, but their major import was to decrease European confidence in the viability of an alliance with America and to prompt a reassessment of the main alternatives to America's international 'open-door' democracy--socialism, communism, and nationalism. This lack of European confidence in America threatened not only America's economic well-being, but also its sense of national security. In the words of the American political historian Robert W. Tucker:

No doubt, the radical critic is right in insisting that in our foreign aid we have sought to promote only such development as is firmly rooted in a Capitalist framework because this framework affords the best assurance of our continued freedom of access to raw materials and investments. It is equally clear, however, that still another reason is the fear that any other course of development, and certainly one that takes a strongly collectivist form, would mean that the American example was no longer relevant to much of the world. The prospect of the growing irrelevance of the American example must raise, in turn, the issue of American security in the greater than physical sense. At least it must do so if the proposition is once accepted that the integrity of the nation's institutions and the quality of its domestic life require a congenial international environment.¹⁷

In order to stimulate this flagging European confidence and to reassure Europe that the American example was still relevant, a massive propaganda campaign was undertaken. On 20 April 1950 President Truman, in an address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, stressed the need for a 'campaign of truth' to counteract the negative image of America in Europe, an image he attributed to the false claims of communism. "Our task," he stated, "is to

present the truth to the millions of people who are uninformed or misinformed or unconvinced."¹⁸ The fine arts, as traditional repositories of 'truth', played an important part in this campaign, appearing in the form of international dance performances, music recitals, and art exhibitions.

In the promotional literature surrounding the American exhibition at Venice an image of Shahn was presented that reflected not only his own individual concerns, but also the broader national and international interests of the American government. On a general ideological level he represented the notions of freedom, individualism, and humanism in America. Applied to Italy in 1954, these notions referred to specific political developments, above all the previous year's defeat of Alcide de Gasperi's pro-American Christian Democrat government in the Chamber of Deputies and the corresponding increase in the power of both the Right and the Left. The American government held that freedom, individualism, and humanism were possible only in a nation ruled by a democratic government of the Center, a belief that formed the basis of its post-war liberal ideology.¹⁹ By exhibiting a lack of faith in the De Gasperi government, the Italian Chamber of Deputies was also exhibiting a lack of faith in the American liberal policies that De Gasperi's government supported. The United States had to attempt to restore this faith in order to assure itself of Italian support for its plans for a unified Europe. The promotion of the art and beliefs of Ben Shahn in Italy was part of such an attempt.

In 1953 the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), drawing from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, purchased the American pavilion at Venice. While the Museum had been the major organizer of the Venice Biennales since the late 1940s, the 1954 Biennale was the first exhibition organized under its new ownership. As part of the Museum's International Exhibitions Program, this Biennale came

under the care of Porter McCray, Director of the Department of Circulating Exhibitions.²⁰ The works by de Kooning, Lachaise, Lassaw, and Smith were chosen by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie while James Thrall Soby selected those by Shahn.

The choice of de Kooning and Shahn can be explained, to a certain extent, by the official theme of the Biennale, Surrealism. Participating countries were asked, though not required, to adhere to this theme or at least to the more general theme of fantastic art.²¹ De Kooning had been connected with the surrealist group in New York in the early 1940s and exhibited, in his subsequent stylistic development, an emphasis on the concept of psychic automatism, rather than on the more explicit imagery of surrealist art. Shahn's connection with surrealism can be found in his association with the American art movement known as magic realism, which supported the surrealist notions of detailed, in some cases almost photographic, realism and bizarre or fantastic imagery.²² Shahn's work was seldom, though, as bizarre or fantastic as that of the major artists of this movement, notably Peter Blume, Paul Cadmus, George Tooker, and Ivan Albright. The choice of Shahn rather than another of these magic realists needs, therefore, to be explained.

While the Museum of Modern Art was a private institution, its interests can be connected with those of the federal government on two levels. First, its Board of Trustees contained many of the same prominent businessmen who exerted significant control over American foreign policy. Second, the Museum advocated the same ideological imperatives as the American government. It did so by acknowledging the need for a strong cultural propaganda offensive in order to counter communist accusations of barbarism and materialism, and by actively and openly participating in such an offensive. Art was, for MOMA, a weapon in the Cold War, and it chose the five artists who would represent

America at the 1954 Venice Biennale accordingly.²³ Denvir, in his review of the Biennale, noted:

This year marked the beginning of a new era of American art at Venice, for the Pavilion at the Biennale has recently been taken over by the Museum of Modern Art as part of its Rockefeller-financed programme of effecting closer cultural contacts between Europe and the U.S.A.²⁴

As well as supplying essays on the individual artists for the official Biennale catalogue,²⁵ MOMA published its own forty-page catalogue in English and Italian for free distribution to the press and to any members of the public who specifically requested it.²⁶ It included the same essays by Ritchie and Soby as appeared in the official catalogue—Ritchie wrote on de Kooning and the three sculptors, Soby on Shahn—as well as a foreword by the Director of MOMA, Rene d'Harnoncourt, biographies of the artists, statements by Shahn and de Kooning, a listing of the major works shown, and twenty-seven illustrations. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., MOMA's Director of Museum Collections, also produced an article on the U.S. exhibition for the official Biennale publication La Biennale.²⁷ As these writings were, in effect, the most important pieces of promotional literature produced by the Museum, close attention must be paid to the particular image they present of Shahn and to how the people at whom this image was aimed—the press and the public—responded.²⁸ An examination of one additional piece of writing will also help in establishing Shahn's reputation in Italy in 1954, and that is his article "The Artist and the Politician." It appeared in Art News in September 1953 and, two months later, in the Italian art journal Sele Arte.²⁹

The discussion that follows, then, will be divided into two major parts: an examination of the political situation in Italy and the American reaction to it; and a consideration of the promotional literature and Italian press reaction surrounding the work of Ben Shahn at the 1954 Venice Biennale, with an analysis of two of the works included in this exhibition—Liberation and

The Red Stairway. An attempt will be made to reveal the implications behind Shahn's presence at this Biennale by showing the ideological importance of culture, particularly art, in America's propaganda offensive; how international art exhibitions acted as a vehicle for this propaganda; the connection between Shahn and American concerns in Italy as revealed in the promotional literature and press reaction; and the manner in which Shahn was able to appeal to almost every sector of the Italian public by combining a broad range of stylistic and thematic references in his work.

Lawrence Alloway notes that in the decade after World War II attendance at the Venice Biennales ranged from 150,000 to 216,471. He comments further that the size and variety of these crowds made the Biennale "a significant factor in the spreading of knowledge and shaping of taste," and therefore increased the importance of national identity and prestige in the individual exhibitions.³⁰ Ben Shahn was sent to Venice as a representative of America, as were de Kooning, Lachaise, Lassaw, and Smith. His success in Italy, however, was much greater than that of the other four artists, particularly de Kooning's. It was achieved due not so much to his artistic talents, which were admittedly considerable, as to his ability to address the Italian public in an artistic and ideological language which they could understand. With lyrical realism Shahn presented those aspects of American ideology--defender of the poor and oppressed, champion of justice and free speech--that were most appealing both to the poor and oppressed in Italy and to the elite that ruled them. They were aspects that held the greatest possibility of winning over the allegiances of Italian society from communism and neo-fascism to American democracy.

Footnotes

¹ A similar contrast between abstraction and realism is found also in the sculpture in the American pavilion, where the large, realistic Standing Woman (1932) by Gaston Lachaise is combined with the delicate, abstract Pillar of Cloud (1954) by Ibram Lassaw and Hudson River Landscape (1951) by David Smith. These single works were the only sculptures to appear in the pavilion, placing, therefore, a greater emphasis on the two large exhibitions of painting.

² See Dore Ashton, The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning (New York: Viking Press, 1972), pp. 35, 64, 88, 146; Milton W. Brown et al., American Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Decorative Arts, Photography (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), pp. 448, 452-54; and Barbara Rose, American Art Since 1900: A Critical History, Praeger World of Art Paperbacks (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 128.

³ The principle of these include Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," Artforum 11 (May 1973):43-54; Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," Artforum 12 (June 1974):39-41; David and Cecile Shapiro, "Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting," Prospects 3 (1976):175-214; John Tagg, "American Power and American Painting: The Development of Vanguard Painting in the United States Since 1945," Praxis (1976):59-79; and Serge Guilbaut, "Création et Développement d'une Avant-Garde: New York 1946-1951," Histoire et Critique des Arts: Les Avant-Gardes (July 1978):29-48. See also Serge Guilbaut, "Création et Développement d'une Avant-Garde Américaine: Bataille Ideologique Entre Paris et N.Y. 1945-1951 ou Comment New York Kidnappa la Notion de Modernisme Hors des Mains Parisiennes" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1979).

⁴ Lawrence Alloway, The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: from salon to goldfish bowl (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1968), p. 36.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bernard Denvir, "Mayfair to Manhattan," The Artist 48 (November 1954): 35. These Iron Curtain countries included Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The paintings ranged from traditional social realism to early French impressionism. Russia did not exhibit at this Biennale. Rumania was included as well.

R.H. Hubbard also wrote of the 1954 Biennale:

"Jury day brought out this cleavage between the communist and non-communist worlds in an interesting way. The all-day meetings which took place in the great heat of an Italian summer day resembled a miniature United Nations. The polite but insistent French, the diplomatic British and Belgians and Dutch, the ebullient Egyptians—all were there; and the Iron curtain exercised the veto or the nearest thing to it. For they would vote for no one but the "social realists" and when these were eliminated they would turn in blank ballots" (R.H. Hubbard, "Show Window of the Arts—XXVII Venice Biennale," Canadian Art 12 (Autumn 1954): 19-20).

⁷Richard M. Freeland, The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and Internal Security 1946-48 (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) and Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

⁸Kolko, Limits of Power, p. 20.

⁹Sec. of State James F. Byrnes, U.S. Department of State Bulletin, 26 August 1945, p. 279, quoted in Kolko, Limits of Power, p. 23.

¹⁰Julian Amery, Conservative Member of Parliament in Britain, wrote in 1953:

"At the present time, the United States is still trying to have the best of both worlds. It has tried in a series of international instruments to dictate the economic policies of the free world. It is now, however, more unwilling than ever to make its own economic policies conform to the doctrine it has preached" (Julian Amery, "The American Choice," in James Burnham, ed., What Europe Thinks of America (New York: John Day Co., 1953), p. 158).

¹¹Kolko, Limits of Power, pp. 2-3.

¹²Ibid., p. 37.

¹³The attitude of the American government towards financial aid recipients after WWII is reflected in a statement by Sec. of State James F. Byrnes in 1945: "We cannot play Santa Claus to the world but we can make loans to governments whose credit is good, provided such governments will make changes in commercial policies which will make it possible for us to increase our trade with them" (Sec. of State James F. Byrnes, U.S. Department of State Bulletin, 18 November 1945, p. 785, quoted in Kolko, Limits of Power, p. 22).

¹⁴According to G. William Domhoff, "American foreign policy during the postwar era was initiated, planned, and carried out by the richest, most powerful, and most international-minded owners and managers of major corporations and financial institutions. None of the factors that are often of importance on domestic issues—Congress, labor, public opinion—had anything but an occasional and minor effect of foreign policy" (G. William Domhoff, "Who Made American Foreign Policy, 1945-1963?" in David Horowitz, ed., Corporations and the Cold War (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), p. 25).

¹⁵For a detailed analysis of the beginnings of the Cold War see Freeland, The Truman Doctrine. According to Freeland, Russia was too weak, both militarily and economically, after the war for it to have posed a serious threat to Europe.

What also increased Congressional opposition to aid to Europe was the existence of a strong Republican Asia-first faction that placed greater importance on helping Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist forces in China (Kolko, Limits of Power, Chapter 22).

¹⁶Kolko quotes Sen. Arthur H. Vandenberg as stating in 1949 that NATO was not strong enough to discourage a Russian attack and that it was "chiefly for the practical purpose of assuring adequate defense against internal subversion" (Kolko, Limits of Power, p. 499).

¹⁷Robert W. Tucker, The Radical Left and American Foreign Policy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 68.

¹⁸President Harry S. Truman, "Fight False Propaganda With Truth," in Robert E. Summers, ed., America's Weapons of Psychological Warfare (New York: 1951), p. 28.

¹⁹One of the main textbooks of this new liberalism was Arthur M. Schlesinger's The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949).

²⁰Because of his extensive political background and association with Nelson Rockefeller, Eva Cockcroft describes McCray as "a particularly powerful and effective man in the history of cultural imperialism" (Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism," p. 40).

²¹The Council of the Biennale also suggested that the number of artists whose work was shown be limited.

²²Shahn was included in the Museum of Modern Art's 1943 exhibition "American Realists and Magic Realists" (Dorothy C. Miller and Alfred H. Barr, eds., American Realists and Magic Realists, reprint edition (New York: Arno Press for the Museum of Modern Art, 1969), pp. 52-53).

²³For a discussion of private enterprise's control over American foreign policy during the Cold War see Domhoff, "Who Made American Foreign Policy" and Gabriel Kolko, The Roots of American Foreign Policy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). Cockcroft's article "Abstract Expressionism" provides an analysis of MOMA's use of art as a Cold War weapon.

²⁴Denvir, "Mayfair to Manhattan," p. 35.

²⁵Venice, Biennale d'Arte, La Biennale di Venezia, catalogo, 27th, 1954 (Venezia:Venezia Alfieri, 1954).

²⁶New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2 Pittori: de Kooning, Shahn; 3 Scultori: Lachaise, Lassaw, Smith. Esposizione organizzata dal Museum of Modern Art, New York, Venice: Esposizione Biennale Internazionale D'Arte XXVII, 1954, Stati Uniti d'America (New York: Marchbanks Press for Museum of Modern Art, 1954). The original 8,000 copies were such a success that an additional 3,000 were printed. The publication of such catalogues had become, by the 1950s, standard practice for most countries (Alloway, Venice Biennale, p. 141).

²⁷Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Gli Stati Uniti Alla Biennale: Shahn e De Kooning, Lachaise, Lassaw e Smith," Biennale di Venezia, no. 19-20 (Aprile-Giugno 1954): 62-67.

²⁸A United States Information Service (USIS) syndicated article based on information provided by MOMA was also distributed to a number of Italian newspapers. For a list of these newspapers see New York, Museum of Modern Art, "Summary of European Press Reaction to the Exhibition "Two Painters and Three Sculptors From the United States," Shown at the XXVII Biennale, Venice, June 19-October 17, 1954," 1 October 1956, n.p. (Mimeographed.)

²⁹Ben Shahn, "L'Artista e il Politicismo," with a commentary by Carlo Ragghianti, Sele Arte, no. 9 (Novembre-Dicembre 1953):25-29.

³⁰Alloway, The Venice Biennale, pp. 139, 141. In the chapter entitled "Art and the Expanding Audience," (pp. 122-31) Alloway discusses the fact that in the twentieth century art exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale were not limited to a small art elite but were attended by a steadily-increasing sector of the general public. The situation of the Venice Biennale in a summer holiday center for both Italians and foreigners would have undoubtedly have added to the variety of its audiences.

CHAPTER ONE

Italians have only three real political choices—Communism, neo-Fascism, and Christian Democracy. For those loyal to the Western tradition of democracy, the first two are unthinkable.

H. Stuart Hughes, The United States and Italy, 1953

Italy and American Foreign Policy: Christian Democracy or Nothing

In 1953 H. Stuart Hughes, an American historian of Western and Central Europe and chief of the research staff of the Office of Strategic Services for a year in Italy during World War II, wrote a book entitled The United States and Italy.¹ "The heart of this book," states Donald C. McKay in the introduction, "is recent Italy and its interest for, and relation to, the United States."² Hughes lists, in his first page of text, the major capacities in which Italy appeared in American foreign policy in 1953:

as one of the four great powers of Western Europe—an indispensable partner, first in the European Recovery Program, now in the Atlantic Alliance; as a friend in one World War and an enemy in the next—forgiven and reaccepted into the democratic fraternity, but still unaccountably excluded from the United Nations; as the territorial headquarters of the Catholic Church, the birthplace of modern fascism, and the home of the largest Communist party in the non-Communist world.³

In its capacity as an indispensable partner in the efforts toward a unified Western Europe Italy, since the establishment of the De Gasperi government in 1945, had constantly favoured American aims. It had, according to Hughes, "worked loyally for the strengthening of every possible tie among the nations of the West."⁴ But, by the summer of 1953, the imminent defeat of the De Gasperi government threatened to destroy this partnership.

The same year Hughes' book was published, a collection of nine essays edited by James Burnham appeared in a volume entitled What Europe Thinks of America.⁵ The authors of these essays were Europeans selected by Burnham

and asked to write down their thoughts about America. His selection process, as outlined at length in the introduction, is unusual though not surprising, considering the fact that he was one of many ex-Trotskyites who avidly denounced their 1930s communist affiliations in the 1950s:

I invited as contributors only proved friends of the West and the United States. I deliberately excluded communists, fellow travelers and neutralists I was interested to hear what Europe thinks of America from observers who are friendly, objective, frank, and loyal, who are willing to write without diplomatic reservations what they themselves thought and what they found that others thought Most of the contributors . . . belong to the Center or the Right They are not merely noncommunist but anti-communist; they are all nonsocialist and I think that all or almost all are anti-socialist.⁶

Guido Piovene, journalist for the Turin newspaper La Stampa and author of the book De America, which documented his travels in America in 1950-51, was one of the contributors to Burnham's book. In his essay "Ungrateful Europe," he makes the following observation:

A sincere European cannot pass up this opportunity to say a few frank words. The excesses of a McCarthy, the ridiculous arbitrary visa requirements, and the exclusion of certain writers and actors have done more harm to the reputation of the United States in Europe than the withdrawal of a few divisions of troops or a few million dollars. These things represent a real loss of strength. A truly great world power must have understanding of others, of their aims and abilities and of exactly what can be expected of them. Europeans must not get the idea that American civilization, upon which they base so much of their hope for the future, is introverted, calculating, narrow and obtuse, with no antennae for capturing ideas other than its own. The United States will truly win over Europe by the loftiness of its politics and social outlook: if it refuses to lower and degrade itself simply on the pretext of using the same methods as the enemy, and above all if it shoulders its responsibility for the destiny of Europe without ungenerous and moralistic restrictions, as if this destiny were, as it is, tied up with its own.⁷

The effects of McCarthyism in Europe were particularly evident in early 1953, when Roy M. Cohn, the new Chief Counsel for McCarthy's committee, and a friend David Schine, travelled throughout Europe "upbraiding American diplomats supposedly soft on communism, attacking United States Information Service libraries for exhibiting the work of such "radicals" as Mark Twain and Theodore

Dreiser, and provoking the wrath of the European press."⁸ But there was also another factor prompting Piovene's condemnations of the excesses of McCarthyism: the development of a similar reactionary climate in Italy.

In supporting De Gasperi's Christian Democrat Party and its anti-communist platform in the 1948 elections, largely through Marshall Plan funding, the American government helped assure this party's victory over left-wing forces.⁹ But this victory was not without its drawbacks. As Hughes points out, it brought into power a Christian Democrat Party composed of two distinct forces: one which stood for "personal liberty and the Western democratic tradition," i.e. De Gasperi and his pro-American followers; and another which maintained its allegiance to a fascist nationalism and which rejected American interference in the Italian economy.¹⁰ It was a party similar, in fact, to the American Republican Party which was made up of both liberals like Eisenhower and reactionaries like McCarthy. The ideological strength of the right-wing forces in both parties lay in their commitment to anti-communism. In the communist-scare atmosphere of 1948, created to bring about the victory of the Democrats in America and the Christian Democrats in Italy, these right-wing forces gained increasing influence. They were able, through charges of official 'softness' towards communism, to limit certain actions of the more moderate government leaders, actions which often had little to do with the communist threat.¹¹ By 1953 these reactionary movements, rather than communism, posed the biggest threat to the American government's interests in Italy. McCarthyism eroded the American democratic image and limited, through Congress, aid to Europe, while Italian neo-fascism threatened the effectiveness of NATO and the achievement of an economically-united Europe.¹² The reality of this Italian threat is commented on by Hughes:

The Communist threat is of course greater in the sense that a

Communist regime would effectively wipe out political democracy in Italy and would deliver the country over to Soviet domination. But the Fascist threat is more immediate. Neo-Fascism in power would be milder than Communism . . . however, while a Communist government is out of the question, the coming to power of a government under Monarchist (and indirectly under neo-Fascist) influence is a very real possibility.¹³

Declining in popularity during the provincial elections of the first two years of the decade, De Gasperi's Christian Democrats were faced, in the 1953 Chamber of Deputies and Senate elections, both with strengthened neo-fascist and monarchist parties and the constant challenge from the Left. The government's last-minute changes in the electoral laws and its return to the electoral theme that gained it victory in 1948—anti-communist unity behind Christian Democracy, with the addition this time of anti-neo-fascism—were not enough to win the majority it needed.¹⁴ The Communist Party increased its strength in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, maintaining its position as the major opposition party with 22.6 per cent of the vote.¹⁵ The neo-fascists (Italian Social Movement) and monarchists (National Monarchist Party) also gained seats in both Houses. While the gains of the latter two parties were far from sufficient to enable them to form a government,¹⁶ singly or together they could provide De Gasperi with the additional support he needed to ensure an absolute majority. "It was on the Right, then," states Hughes, "that the election had produced the most serious contender for a share in government responsibility."¹⁷ De Gasperi's unwillingness to deal with these, as well as left-wing, parties resulted in the defeat of his proposed single-party minority government in the Chamber of Deputies on 28 July 1953.

Hughes, it appears, completed his book prior to this defeat, for he speculates as to the possible route the Italian government might take if De Gasperi was defeated, a route travelled by a Christian Democracy transformed

by right-wing influences into a clerical-corporative movement similar to Mussolini's fascism.¹⁸ Such a 'trasformismo' was actually attempted later that year by De Gasperi's immediate successor, Guiseppe Pella, in his efforts to meet "the wishes of both the economic and clerical Right."¹⁹ Though he was replaced in February of 1954 by Antonio Scelba, a Christian Democrat of more centralist leanings, right-wing elements within and outside of the Party continued to exert pressure on the government.²⁰

Such shifts in the power structure of the Italian government were, according to Hughes,

very much an American problem. For the United States, by its prompt decision to back De Gasperi at all costs, has assumed a responsibility for the further development of his administration. If Americans wish to reverse the trend toward clerical corporatism, they must take steps in time to support the Prime Minister against his faint-hearted friends and the rivals who are striving to supplant him.

. . . American influence in Italy is an accomplished fact: the only question concerns the direction in which that influence is to be applied.²¹

An Italian government controlled by the Right, with its nationalist and anti-NATO sentiments, would greatly jeopardize America's attempts to establish an economically-united Western Europe.²² Hughes' suggestions as to the measures necessary to ensure De Gasperi's stay in power involved the improvement of the American image that De Gasperi supported. Two ways of doing this would have been to lower U.S. tariff barriers and increase the Italian immigration quota, measures that were impossible for the American government to implement due to its own reactionary climate at home. Isolationism and mistrust of foreigners were major characteristics of McCarthyism.²³

Even though the United States was unable to prevent the fall of De Gasperi, it continued its efforts to discourage Italian support of both right-wing and left-wing politics in favour of its own brand of liberalism, and to improve its image in ways other than lowering tariffs or increasing immigration. One form these efforts took was that of cultural propaganda.

Typically, there is more to vital ideology than a functional relationship to everyday problems and efforts on the part of the faithful to live by its precepts. There must be an iconography: pictures, crosses, sacred words and gestures --an awe-inspiring symbolism which continuously dramatizes key facets of the dogma. A little hagiolatry goes a long way, but the perseverance of any ideology calls for some of this too.

Leonard G. Benson, National Purpose, 1963

A Little Hagiolatry Goes a Long Way

While the United States government could obtain many things through military force or economic pressure, Italian confidence in America was not one of them. The creation and maintenance of the positive American image necessary to gain this confidence could be obtained only through a massive propaganda effort, and the main governmental agency assigned to this task was the newly-reorganized United States Information Agency (USIA).²⁴ Created on 1 August 1953 as an independent Agency responsible for all U.S. information activities overseas, it assumed the duties of its predecessor, the International Information Administration of the Department of State, as well as those of the Technical Cooperation Administration and the Mutual Security Agency.²⁵ The Agency's mission was, in the words of President Eisenhower in October 1953,

to submit evidence to peoples of other nations by means of communication techniques that the objectives and policies of the United States are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress and peace.²⁶

In Western Europe the Agency's program was designed

to promote greater understanding of, and support for, NATO and related collective security measures; to encourage the will to move forward toward unification; to expose the Soviet myth and reduce Soviet influence; and to present to this highly literate area a convincing and inspiring picture of America and its policies, both internal and international.²⁷

The last of these four considerations provides a clue as to the form

American propaganda was to take in Europe, the key phrase being "highly literate." According to Thomson and Laves in their book Cultural Relations and U.S. Foreign Policy, the American government acknowledged the need in their propaganda offensive for "the classification of different countries on the basis of their strategic importance to the United States campaign; the selection in each country of target groups; and the choice of the most effective materials and media for reaching those groups."²⁸ Such an approach formed an integral part of USIA tactics. In its First Review of Operations the following statement appeared:

It was recognized that each country presents different problems. Instructions were issued to the field to re-define the objectives in each country, with emphasis on reducing them in number The criterion in each instance is "Does it help support and explain our foreign policy in terms of others' legitimate aspirations?"²⁹

In defining Europe as highly literate, the USIA had already singled out one specific broad target group--the literate middle and upper classes rather than the largely illiterate lower classes. While the latter, as part of the general voting populace, had to be considered as well, it was recognized that the majority of power lay within the middle and upper classes. For example, in its attempts to win over European industry to American production techniques, the American government focussed its attention on "leading personalities in industry, agriculture, and labour; middle-ranking specialists; and younger persons with a potential for leadership."³⁰ The techniques used to appeal to such an educated audience would necessarily have to avoid, as the USIA put it, "strident and propagandistic material," which would create suspicion rather than cooperation.³¹ The first few years of Truman's 'campaign of truth' had, in fact, created such a suspicion. Thomson and Laves record the official reaction to this state of affairs:

The emphasis of the "Campaign of Truth" on urgent and unilateral propaganda to combat Communism had by 1953 provoked a reaction. The view had emerged that the character of the whole United States

information and cultural program had become "too direct, too shrill, too polemical and, in a sense, too patronizing." Any attempt, it was argued, to manipulate for nationalistic ends the minds and loyalties of our actual and potential friends abroad was contrary to American principles, and was naturally resented by those whose confidence and help we were seeking While (the above view) recognized that the critical character of the situation created by the cold war demanded a policy of vigorous and careful guidance rather than laissez-faire operation, it held that the program should be honest, calm and moderate, and intellectually mature, and that it should be directed toward the fundamental attitudes and values of foreign peoples.³²

Culture, especially when narrowly defined as the "higher" arts, played a vital role in this shift in policy. The ideological messages contained within "lower" cultural media such as Hollywood films—good (democracy) always wins over evil (communism), any hard-working individual can make his or her fortune—might have been consumed unconsciously along with the more obvious plot by a less educated viewing audience, but members of the middle and upper classes were more likely to have recognized the propagandistic elements in these films and to have regarded them with cynicism. Painting and sculpture, as "fine arts," were generally considered by all levels of society to be exempt from political concerns. The ideological messages regarding the American way of life contained within these media would therefore be accepted, along with the aesthetic qualities of the works, as uncritically by educated people as were the messages in Hollywood films by the uneducated.

The importance of the cultural aspect of America's international image was attested to as early as 1951 in a report of the Bureau of the Budget in Washington:

The value of international cultural interchange is to win respect for the cultural achievements of our free society where that respect is necessary to inspire cooperation with us in world affairs. In such a situation, cultural activities are an indispensable tool of propaganda.³³

Europe's impressive cultural inheritance made it especially critical of that

of the United States. The view held by a large number of Europeans, that America was materialistic, barbarous, and uncultured, was strengthened in the early 1950s by certain actions of the American government. These actions included participation in the Korean War, pressure on Europe to accept American economic and defense policies, and refusals to respond to Russian peace overtures. In the abovementioned book by Burnham, Raymond Aron, a strong supporter of America, author, and leading political columnist for the liberal-right Paris newspaper Le Figaro, questioned "whether there may not be higher cultural values unable to survive the American obsession with productivity."³⁴ Productivity and culture were, for Aron, antithetical; true culture was, therefore, non-productive. Guido Piovene, as well, acknowledged the existence of certain anti-American sentiments, which included "derogatory European remarks about 'materialism,' 'standardization,' perpetual hurry, the lack of 'savoir-vivre' and artistic interests."³⁵ While Russia had long claimed that such was the case in America,³⁶ open criticisms of this nature from the conservative ruling classes of Europe were more disturbing. Russia's claims could easily be dismissed as communist propaganda; those of Europe could not.

What further complicated the issue of America's culture, or lack of it, was Russia's peace offensive. This offensive included both overtures in the political arena and widespread use of cultural activities in relations with non-communist countries. The use of cultural activities in this way was particularly evident after Stalin's death in 1953:

Scientists lecturing to scholarly audiences, musicians playing in concert halls, and football and other athletic teams performing in stadia were all parts of the same offensive to impress foreign peoples with a favorable picture of life in the Soviet Union and with the cultural fruits of Communist society. Soviet books were actively flooding into many of the countries of Asia. Often handsomely produced but subsidized to sell at low prices, they ranged from literary classics and elegantly illustrated books on art to children's story books, from volumes by Marx, Engels, and Lenin for intellectuals to low-cost propaganda pamphlets for the general public.³⁷

In the Third Review of Operations (July-December 1954), USIA Director

Theodore Streibert commented on this cultural offensive:

The Communist campaign was noticeably more subtle. It dangled the lure of increased East-West trade before other nations and continually stressed the Soviet desire to "ease international tension." Greater numbers of Soviet Bloc "cultural representatives" journeyed to other countries, and more non-Communist visitors were welcomed at Moscow and Peiping.³⁸

One main result of this offensive was the improvement of Russia's image in Europe. Italy's response can be found in the warning by Piovene:

I am writing these lines during the Russian "peace offensive." Incidentally, I must call attention to the fact that all over Europe the students and athletes of Soviet Russia invariably draw public applause. Is the applause communist in character? Does it mean that Europe wishes to fall under Russian domination? No, neither of these suppositions is true. But Soviet Russia has spoken of peace without demanding capitulation, and this is quite enough to arouse a popular response. As for cultivated people, many of them fear that the United States may shatter a precarious peace by making demands the satisfaction of which seems to us unimportant.³⁹

As so much of the rationale behind American foreign policy depended on the existence of an oppressive, tyrannical, barbarous image of Russia, as opposed to a just, cultured, freedom-loving image of America, the threatened disappearance of both these images in Europe was of real concern to the United States government.⁴⁰ And while it was pointed out earlier that the greatest immediate problem for America in Italy was the rise of the Right, this country still contained the largest active Communist Party in the non-communist world. An improvement in Russia's image would, inevitably, result in increased support for the Italian Communist Party.⁴¹

While the United States could do little to stop the Russian peace offensive, it could increase its efforts to convince Europe of the high quality of American, as opposed to Russian, culture. The fine arts were important in furthering this objective, and the most effective means of conveying American achievements in the areas of painting and sculpture was the international art exhibition.

The foreword of the catalogue of the Venice Biennale of 1954 uses the phrase "artium portus," haven of the arts, to describe this exhibition The first Biennial took place in 1895 with 15 countries participating, all of them European except for the United States. In 1954, 32 countries are represented, including Australia, and five from Asia, four from Latin America and two from North America. Of the 18 European nations four are from behind the Iron Curtain. Merely from the standpoint of this representation it may be understood why the Biennale is looked upon as the great gathering place of contemporary art. It is more than "artium portus;" it is "artium spectaculum omnium terrarum," a show window for the art of the whole world.

R.H. Hubbard, Canadian Art magazine, 1954

Artium Spectaculum Omnium Terrarum

In June 1951 Eloise Spaeth, speaking to members of the American Federation of the Arts on the need for government-funded art exhibitions abroad, made the following observation:

Everyone in the State Department with whom I have spoken . . . knows only too well how our prestige suffers by our not having a strong consistent program geared to show the world that other facet of American life—the part that is the heart and soul of any people—their creative life.⁴²

She commented further on the role of exhibitions in 1953 in a review of an exhibition of American art in India:

The arts of a country should be so integrated into the life of a country that any comprehensive exhibition going forth would act as a mirror. The stranger should be able to look into it and see reflected there the vitality, the creativity, the spiritual force of the country—yes, the confusion, diversity and materialism also.⁴³

By being able to portray both the positive and negative aspects of American society, American art was presented by Spaeth as representative of the true freedom and honesty to be found in that country—the freedom to criticize without being censured, the honesty to admit certain faults.⁴⁴ Contrary to the opinion of the French critic Aron, Spaeth found art and materialism not only quite compatible, but, along with vitality, spiritual force, confusion

and diversity, basic characteristics of American life. The international art exhibition was the mirror in which these characteristics and this life were reflected.

Spaeth's campaign for more government funding of art exhibitions abroad ran into difficulties when these exhibitions included modern art. Even though this art was ideal both for conveying the notions of freedom and individualism and for convincing the elite of Europe's art world of America's relatively advanced aesthetic development,⁴⁵ it was attacked by the forces of McCarthyism, notably Senator George Dondero of Michigan, as communistic.⁴⁶ These attacks made open support of modern art by the government extremely difficult, with the result that the promotion of modern art abroad became the responsibility of private agencies, though often with indirect funding from the federal government.⁴⁷ This shift in emphasis from public to private support occurred at all levels of informational activities. While the reorganization of these activities in 1953 under the USIA resulted in general cutbacks in funding, the only Agency activity to receive an increase was the Office of Private Cooperation, whose budget was doubled. The rationale behind such a move is found in the USIA's First Review of Operations:

We are convinced that the maximum of business and other non-governmental actions and services must be marshaled behind the Government's information program. This has been demonstrated to be one of the most effective ways to strengthen the entire program.⁴⁸

Private agencies rather than the American government, therefore, became representative of the daring and avant-garde spirit in America. Barr spelled this out clearly in his article for La Biennale: "Private ownership of the American pavilion will ensure, the Museum feels, a progressive spirit that is free from censure."⁴⁹ Denvir voiced a similar view: "At the (1954) Biennale at least, artistic conservatism and Communism go hand in hand, whilst free enterprise is linked to the more adventurous forms of artistic explorations."⁵⁰

The Museum of Modern Art was the major private institution to promote American modern art abroad. Its assumption of this task was due both to a genuine belief in the aesthetic qualities of this art and, as was mentioned earlier, to a vested interest in the American foreign policy objectives that modern art furthered.⁵¹ The bulk of this promotion was done through its International Circulating Exhibitions Program, begun in 1952 with a five-year grant of \$625,000 from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. According to Russell Lynes in his book Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art, the purpose of this Program was "to let it be known especially in Europe that America was not the cultural backwater that the Russians, during that tense period called 'the cold war', were trying to demonstrate that it was."⁵² The same Rockefeller Brothers Fund provided the money to purchase the American pavilion at Venice in 1953, and it was under the International Program that the American exhibition at the 1954 Venice Biennale was organized.⁵³

Because of the absence of government-organized exhibitions of modern art abroad, MOMA's international exhibitions were seen as indications not merely of its own personal tastes, but of the tastes of the American nation as a whole. This was particularly true of the Venice Biennale, where all pavilions with the exception of the American were government-owned.⁵⁴ In condemning the Museum's "dictatorial powers" in his review of the 1954 Biennale, the American art critic F. Taubes, an avid supporter of traditional as opposed to modern art, pointed out that "these shapers of the "official" taste in art are the ones who arrange international shows and thus they are in the position to misrepresent us abroad."⁵⁵

The Venice Biennale, as "the largest, the most international, and the most publicized exhibition of contemporary art," was more, then, than simply

a showplace for individual talent; it was an important arena for the presentation of national ideologies and cultural achievements.⁵⁶ R. Melville, in his review of the 1954 Biennale for the BBC publication The Listener, referred to the separate exhibitions as "the temporary emblems of national dignity."⁵⁷ This Biennale was part of America's larger propaganda offensive, and in light of the new emphasis on certain tactical considerations within this offensive --the gearing of information to the strategic importance of certain countries and to the legitimate aspirations of particular target groups within these countries--the exhibition of Ben Shahn's work in 1954 can be seen as aimed at a specific country and at specific target groups within this country. The country was Italy, and the main target group those Italians who had lost faith in the superiority of the American political system and way of life, and who were beginning to look favourably at the options offered by both the Right and the Left.

In the early 1950s Ben Shahn was a strong advocate of the liberal policies of both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, openly attacking McCarthyites and communists alike in America.⁵⁸ His well-known admiration for Italy, coupled with this support of the American government, made him an ideal person to send to Venice in 1954. In order to fully appreciate the effectiveness of Shahn and his work, it will help to look briefly at the response to the other major exhibition of painting in the American pavilion, that of Willem de Kooning. The generally unfavourable nature of this response can be attributed to the failure of de Kooning's art to maintain the ideological relevance that had made abstract expressionism so successful earlier in the decade.

The next logical step took the form of a disparagement of Parisian painting in creating new criteria of quality, using as standards the purely "American" characteristics of violence, force, grandeur, spontaneity and lack of finish.

Serge Guilbaut, Histoire et Critique des Arts journal, 1978

De Kooning: Innovation and Aggression

The ascendancy of the United States in the realm of politics after World War II was accompanied, according to certain American writers and politicians, by an ascendancy in the realm of art.⁵⁹ The notion that after the war New York replaced Paris as the center of modern art, is also a familiar one in surveys of Western art. For example, Helen Gardner's Art Through the Ages states: "Abstract Expressionism carries all before it after World War II, especially in America, to which the artistic center of gravity appears to shift from Europe."⁶⁰ Such a shift meant that New York's abstract expressionists now represented the latest development in the history of modern art.⁶¹ This quality of newness or "most recent" was important in an era of accelerated technological advance, where it was generally equated with "better."⁶² By appearing as the latest link in the chain of modern art, abstract expressionism was meant to impress the more advanced sector of the European art world, and the ruling classes that this sector represented. For the more general viewing public, whether in America or Europe, abstract expressionism was at best, incomprehensible, at worst, an affront to the word art.

The reaction to de Kooning's work at the 1954 Venice Biennale indicates that what little favourable response existed did, in fact, come from the avant-garde sector of the European art world. According to a press analysis of this Biennale compiled by MOMA in 1956, reproductions of de Kooning's work appeared "only in the more advanced periodicals," and the only magazine to request material on him for an article was the Italian "avant-garde publication

Spazio."⁶³ But the response of this, and other, sectors of the art world was generally either neutral or unfavourable. It was a response that centered, most notably in the French press, on the failure of the artist's work to maintain the advanced character that had been abstract expressionism's strong point three or four years earlier.⁶⁴ Phrases such as "too facile," "boring," and "lacking in freshness" pointedly conveyed this attitude.⁶⁵ G. Mario Marini, in the Roman current art events periodical Notiziario d'Arte, commented: "For de Kooning we will not use much paper, not because he isn't an artist worthy of serious consideration, but because in him form and content present problems identical to those that we find in almost a hundred other European painters."⁶⁶

These criticisms indicate that the quality of innovation was no longer perceived as an attribute of abstract expressionism by the European art world that this art was particularly meant to impress. By 1954 "almost a hundred other painters" were involved in the same formalistic experiments as the American abstract expressionists. Two critics—the American Alfred Barr, Jr., and the Englishman Bernard Denvir—even went so far as to attempt to disassociate de Kooning from the accepted meaning of abstract expressionism, i.e. total non-objectivity. Though de Kooning was the most influential abstract expressionist, claims Barr, he was also the one "who has so strongly moved away from abstraction," to include "explicit" or "at least identifiable" subject matter.⁶⁷ Denvir describes de Kooning, along with Francis Bacon, as "unfettered by slavish traditionalism, and yet immune from the worst excesses of formalism."⁶⁸ In other words, de Kooning's art was somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, an image that corresponds nicely to American liberalism.⁶⁹

If de Kooning failed to convince Europe of America's inventiveness, he

succeeded, at least, in convincing it of another American attribute—its aggressiveness. His Woman series (Figure 1) evoked a particularly negative response from European reviewers, Alain Jouffroy describing them as "horrible" and "violent" in Beaux-Arts,⁷⁰ and Mario Marini as "disproportionate, contorted, mutilated, unrecognizably transformed (and) repulsive" in Notiziario d'Arte.⁷¹ Individuality, innovation, and aggressiveness were three key "American" qualities that had been attributed to abstract expressionism at the turn of the decade.⁷² But this latter quality of aggression did not have the same positive connotations in 1954 that it had had in the late 1940s, when Europe was relying on America to act decisively on the question of European reconstruction; when Russia's peace offensive was still in its early stages and had yet to prompt widespread European questioning of America's "peaceful" intentions; and when Europeans still hoped that this aggression would contribute to the creation of a stable world order. America's involvement in Korea from 1950 to 1953 and its massive rearmament program had caused Europe to become increasingly critical of three major aspects of American foreign policy: military interference in Third World countries; unwillingness to respond to Russian peace offers; and pressures on Europe to comply with American economic and military policies.⁷³ Europeans, according to Piovene, "feel that the United States is dragging them into war in the defense of interests on which a compromise is possible."⁷⁴

Barr included a quote in his La Biennale article in which de Kooning described art as "not peaceful," "enveloped in the melodrama of vulgarity," and "uncomfortable."⁷⁵ It was, unfortunately for the American government, an accurate description of many Europeans' view of the United States in 1954. Where de Kooning's paintings were meant to embody the positive aspects of American aggression—among them this aggression's ability to safeguard freedoms



Figure 1. Willem de Kooning, Woman I, 1950-52
Museum of Modern Art, New York
(Harold Rosenberg. de Kooning. New York: Harry
N. Abrams, 1974. Plate 93)

and liberate the oppressed—the European public saw only negative connotations. The ideological message had backfired.

De Kooning failed, then, to win for America the respect and good feeling that were lacking in Europe in 1954. His art was aimed, specifically, at an avant-garde art world that had already tired of abstract expressionist techniques and at a ruling class that had become critical of American aggression. It was directed at no country in particular, for one of this art's ideological qualities was its "universality."⁷⁶ It was an art that knew no national boundaries, as America's economic trade policies were to know no national boundaries. But in a climate of rising nationalist sentiment, particularly in Italy, this universality was a negative rather than a positive quality.

Where de Kooning failed, Shahn met with overwhelming success, a success due in large part to the timeliness of the ideological messages embodied in his work. H. Lester Cooke, the Director of the American pavilion in Venice, included the following observation in his summary of the public response to Shahn's work:

Americans owe a debt of gratitude not only to Shahn but to the Museum of Modern Art of New York which privately financed and organized the present exhibition. "It was an intelligent thing to do" writes a Rome correspondent, "these paintings have done more for the prestige of the United States than any other exhibition of American art sent to Europe."⁷⁷

Exactly how Shahn's work was able to contribute to this prestige, particularly in Italy, will now be examined.

Footnotes

¹H. Stuart Hughes, The United States and Italy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953).

²Ibid., p. ix.

³Ibid., p. 1.

⁴Ibid., p. 219.

⁵James Burnham, ed., What Europe Thinks of America (New York: John Day Co., 1953).

⁶Ibid., pp. vii, x, xii.

⁷Guido Piovene, "Ungrateful Europe," in Burnham, What Europe Thinks of America, p. 132.

⁸Walter LaFeber, America, Russia, and the Cold War 1945-1975, 3rd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), p. 141. Early in 1953 McCarthy reached the height of his power when he was appointed as head of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in the Republican-controlled Congress.

⁹"In January 1947 De Gasperi visited the United States, returning with a \$100 million loan and advice to eliminate the Communist-Nenni coalition from the Rome government" (Kolko, Limits of Power, p. 348). See also *ibid.*, p. 438.

For a table of the election results see Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Rome, Ten Years of Italian Democracy 1946-1956 (Rome: Apollon, 1957), pp. 76-77.

¹⁰Hughes, The United States and Italy, p. 144.

¹¹For an excellent series of essays on the vested interests of certain sectors of American society in the anti-communist campaign see Robert Griffith and Athan Theoharis, The Spectre: Original Essays on the Cold War and the Origins of McCarthyism (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974).

¹²Of the more extreme neo-fascists in the Monarchist Party Hughes writes: "Fanatically republican and even socialist in their platform vocabulary, uncompromisingly hostile to the Atlantic alliance, this radical wing, which originally gave the MSI its characteristic color, now represents an embarrassment and a danger to the responsible leaders of the party" (Hughes, The United States and Italy, p. 222).

¹³Ibid., pp. 229-30.

¹⁴The CD Party managed to pass a law which, among other things, gave a bonus of eighty-five seats to any coalition of parties that polled a minimum of 50.01 per cent of the popular vote. This would give such a coalition a comfortable majority in the Chamber of Deputies. But De Gasperi's coalition did not collect enough votes to qualify for the bonus in 1953. For a full

explanation of this law see Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Ten Years, pp. 75-77.

The Center coalition of Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals, and Republicans gained an absolute majority in the Senate and a simple majority in the Chamber of Deputies. But De Gasperi's unwillingness to cooperate with the leftist wing of the Social Democrats ruled out the inclusion of members of this party as active participants in the government, and with it that party's support.

¹⁵The major opposition party in Italy since after the war had been the Communist Party. After having refused to follow the lead of its French counterpart and resign from the Italian government in 1947, the Italian Communist Party forced De Gasperi to dissolve the Chamber of Deputies and Senate and call another election. It subsequently entered into an alliance with the Italian Socialist Party to form the Peoples' Bloc and to win 113 of the 499 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 72 of the 237 seats in the Senate. In the 1953 elections the Communist Party alone won 143 seats in the Chamber, with the Socialist Party gaining an additional 75, out of a total of 587. The figures were 54 and 28 respectively in the Senate. In these same two elections the Christian Democrats dropped from 305 to 262 seats in the Chamber and from 131 to 116 seats in the Senate. For a full set of figures see Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Ten Years, pp. 76-77.

¹⁶These parties held a combined total of 69 seats in the 1953 Chamber and 25 in the Senate.

¹⁷Hughes, The United States and Italy, p. 229.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 230. For an analysis of clerical corporatism in Italy see *ibid.*, pp. 69-98.

¹⁹H. Stuart Hughes, The United States and Italy, revised ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 201. See also "A Premier Goes Skiing: Italy's Pella Quits in the climax of a crisis months in the making," Life, 18 January 1954, p. 38.

²⁰Amintore Fanfani was Pella's immediate successor but he remained in power for only two weeks.

²¹Hughes, The United States and Italy, p. 231.

²²Ibid., p. 79.

²³Ibid., pp. 233-34. The sources of this isolationism in America and its effects on American foreign policy are discussed fully in LeRoy N. Rieselbach, The Roots of Isolationism: Congressional Voting and Presidential Leadership In Foreign Policy (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1966).

²⁴Donald C. McKay commented in the introduction to Hughes' book: "A truly effective Atlantic Community can never be forged solely from weapons and economic strength. Beneath and supporting these more obvious instruments of cooperation must be the mutual knowledge and understanding of the partners (Hughes, The United States and Italy, p. ix).

The USIA, formerly the United States Information Service (USIS), was reorganized because of McCarthy's intensive attacks throughout the first half of 1953. For an account of the nature of these attacks see Charles A. Thomson and Walter H.C. Laves, Cultural Relations and U.S. Foreign Policy (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 99-109, and Martin Merson, The Private Diary of a Public Servant (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

²⁵United States Information Agency (USIA), First Review of Operations (August-December 1953):n.p. (Foreword).

²⁶Ibid., p. 5.

²⁷Ibid., p. 30.

²⁸Thomson and Laves, Cultural Relations, p. 87.

²⁹USIA, First Review, p. 7.

³⁰Thomson and Laves, Cultural Relations, p. 92.

³¹USIA, First Review, p. 7.

³²Thomson and Laves, Cultural Relations, p. 36.

³³Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁴Raymond Aron, "The United States as the Dominant Economy," in Burnham, What Europe Thinks of America, p. 210.

³⁵Piovene, "Ungrateful Europe," p. 123.

³⁶According to Senator William Benton in Congress on 22 March 1950, the basic attacks by Russia on the U.S. were:

"First. The United States is headed for a cataclysmic economic crash.

Second. The rulers of the United States are fascists, warmongers, and monopolists.

Third. Although the rich in the United States are getting richer, everybody else is getting poorer and there is starvation, unrest, and growing sympathy for the Soviet Union among the masses.

Fourth. America's vaunted freedom is a fraud, and our doctrine of equality is belied by racial and religious discrimination.

Fifth. Our character is bad—we are culturally barbarous, money-mad, lawless, crime-ridden, and effete" (in Thomson and Laves, Cultural Relations, p. 79).

³⁷Ibid., p. 27. In September of 1953 a collection of Indian paintings, drawings and sculpture were being shown in the USSR, an exhibit arranged by the Soviet Fine Arts Association (Staff Reporter, "International Art Exhibition in Calcutta," n.p. or name of newspaper, 8 September 1953, found in Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.).

³⁸United States Information Agency, Third Review of Operations (July-December 1954): inside cover.

³⁹Piovene, "Ungrateful Europe," pp. 125-26. Piovene's elitism shows through in his contrast between the "popular" and "cultivated" responses to Russia's peace offensive, and his presentation of the latter as more discerning than the former.

⁴⁰According to Kolko, the Russians were aware of the manner in which the U.S. was using them as a psychological threat, particularly in the issue of German rearmament. Therefore, "at the beginning of 1949 they not only ignominiously withdrew all their immediate demands on Germany but also embarked on an overwhelming world peace propaganda campaign" (Kolko, Limits of Power, p. 502).

⁴¹The Communist Party had maintained its position in Italian politics largely through the advocacy of reformist rather than revolutionary policies, thus adding to the creation of a non-threatening image of communism in Italy.

⁴²Eloise Spaeth, "America's Cultural Responsibilities Abroad," College Art Journal 11 (Winter 1951-52):118.

⁴³Eloise Spaeth, "Synthesis of Arts in America: 20 Contemporaries," The Hindustan Times Art Supplement, 6 May 1953, p. 2. Spaeth was Chairperson of the Exhibition Committee of the American Federation of Arts.

⁴⁴The existence of this freedom to criticize allowed the criticisms voiced to be incorporated into the dominant ideology as essential parts of the larger whole. For a discussion of this notion of incorporation see Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," New Left Review, no. 82 (November-December 1973):1-16.

⁴⁵See Serge Guilbaut, "Création et Développement d'une Avant-Garde Américaine: Bataille Idéologique Entre Paris et N.Y. 1945-1951 ou Comment New York Kidnappa la Notion de Modernisme Hors des Mains Parisiennes" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1980).

⁴⁶For a discussion of these attacks see Jane de Hart Matthews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," American Historical Review 81 (October 1976): 762-87 and Frances Pohl, "The 'Campaign of Truth' in American Art," paper presented at the Second Annual Mark Goodson Symposium on American Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 23 April 1979.

⁴⁷The involvement of the CIA in supporting and controlling, through various trust funds and foundations, the promotion of culture during the Cold War is documented in Christopher Lasch, "The Cultural Cold War," Nation 204 (11 September 1967):198-212.

⁴⁸USIA, First Review, p. 3.

⁴⁹Barr, "Gli Stati Uniti", p. 62.

⁵⁰Denvir, "Mayfair to Manhattan," p. 35

⁵¹That such a belief in the quality of modern American art existed is presented clearly in Russell Lynes, Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art (New York: Atheneum, 1973). For works that deal with the connections between the Museum and the American government see footnote 23 in the Introduction of this paper.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 384.

⁵³The Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Rockefeller Foundation were the two agencies through which the Rockefeller family made their millions of dollars of official donations to the Museum for such things as building additions, education programs, and exhibition programs.

⁵⁴Lynes, Good Old Modern, p. 385. The following quote from Lynes is a brief post-war history of the American pavilion at Venice:
 "The Museum also bought the United States pavilion at the Venice Biennale from the Grand Central Art Galleries, which had been built in 1929 for its own shows when they were an artist's cooperative gallery. After the war the pavilion was made available to the Museum, and the shows sent there were selected by Barr and Sweeney and Dorothy Miller. The federal government (which meant the State Department) was not interested in taking it over, and was unmoved by the fact that it was the only pavilion at the Biennale that was not owned by its nation's government. The internationally minded staff and trustees of the Museum were shocked that America should not be represented at this most prestigious, if intensely political, international art show where all the European countries and Russia were blowing their cultural horns while America, in a manner of speaking, stayed home and sucked its thumb. . . . From 1954 to 1962, without government help, the Museum made itself responsible for exhibitions by distinguished American artists at Venice"(p. 385).

⁵⁵F. Taubes, "What is the World Painting Today," American Artist 19 (February 1955):59.

⁵⁶Denvir, "Mayfair to Manhattan," p. 35.

⁵⁷R. Melville, "The Venice Biennale," The Listener 52 (29 July 1954):180.

⁵⁸In Kolko's view, there was very little difference between the two administrations: "Eisenhower's somewhat heavier utilization of businessmen in his administrations should not obscure the fact that many of them had already gained their experience under Truman, but especially that they shared the same goals, and represented the same power constituencies, as those that preceded and followed Eisenhower's government" (Kolko, Limits of Power, p. 677).

⁵⁹In 1946 Clement Greenberg still felt that "Paris remains the fountain-head of modern art, and every move made there is decisive for advanced art elsewhere—which is advanced precisely because it can respond to and extend the vibrations of that nerve-center and nerve-end of modernity which is Paris" ("The School of Paris: 1946," in Clement Greenberg, Art and Culture: Critical Essays (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 120). Three years later he is willing to suggest that "three or four of (the abstract expressionists) are able to match anything being done by artists of the same generation elsewhere in the world." He is even willing to "hazard the opinion that they are actually

ahead of the French artists who are their contemporaries in age" ("Symposium: The State of American Art," Magazine of Art 42 (March 1949):92). By 1953 all doubt as to their superiority had vanished. "Do I mean that the new American abstract painting is superior on the whole to the French?" he asked. "I do," was his answer ("Contribution to a Symposium," 1953, in Art and Culture, p. 125).

After the war American politicians presented their country as the protector of Western art and culture against the communist hordes, and the "sole guarantor of the avant-garde spirit" (John Tagg, "American Power and American Painting," p. 66).

⁶⁰Helen Gardner, Art Through the Ages, sixth ed., revised by Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 772. Burton Wasserman also comments: "By 1945, with the end of World War II a very distinct, new direction took shape. An image unlike anything before it appeared in the work of several painters who can be grouped together with the collective name: Post World War II School of New York While the new movement owed many debts of gratitude to earlier artists it was also a break-away from most of what had come before" (Burton Wasserman, Modern Painting: The Movements, the Artists, Their Work (Worcester, Mass.: Davis Publications, 1970) p. 87). See also H.W. Janson, History of Art: A survey of the Major Visual Arts From the Dawn of History to the Present Day, second ed., (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 663-73 and Gina Pischel, A World History of Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Decorative Arts, revised and expanded ed. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1975), pp. 704-07.

⁶¹See footnote 3 of Introduction to this paper for a list of articles dealing with this issue.

⁶²This was particularly true in light of the nuclear arms race, where the U.S.'s ability to keep one step ahead of the Russians was seen as vital for the nation's security.

⁶³MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 3. The article in Spazio was to be written by the French critic Michel Tapié de Celeyran, but the magazine ceased publication before the article was written. As will be seen later, many articles were written on Shahn in various magazines and newspapers. The last three pages of MOMA's press review list the major of these articles.

⁶⁴The French art world would obviously not have taken kindly to America's claims of ascendancy over Parisian art. France would also have resented the strong pressure from the American government in the early 1950s to abandon its opposition to the European Defence Community. According to LaFeber, Sec. of State John Foster Dulles warned in mid-December 1953 that "France must ratify or face an "agonizing reappraisal" by Washington of American commitments to Europe" (LaFeber, Cold War, p. 169).

⁶⁵Léon Degand, "La Biennale de Venise," Art d'Aujourd'hui 5 (Septembre 1954):65 and Alain Jouffroy, from an article in Beaux-Arts (Paris), quoted in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 10. The title of the article and the date were not given.

⁶⁶G. Mario Marini, Notiziario d'Arte, no. 6-7, 1954, quoted in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 9. Title of article and page not given. Tachisme, or

'art autre' was well-established in France in the early 1950s, at the same time that the Italian artists Afro and Santomaso were introducing the Italian public to home-grown abstract expressionism. See Dore Ashton, "Avantgardia: Reflections from Rome on the avant-garde movements in Italy and America during the last decade," Arts Digest 29 (15 March 1955):16-17, 34.

⁶⁷Barr, "Gli Stati Uniti," p. 65.

⁶⁸Denvir, "Mayfair to Manhattan," p. 35.

⁶⁹Another similarity between abstract expressionism and American liberalism is described by Clement Greenberg in 1949 when he talks of this new art as "one of the few manifestations of our time uninflated by illegitimate content—no religion or mysticism or political certainties. And in its radical inadaptability to the uses of any interest, ideological or institutional, lies the most certain guarantee of the truth with which it expresses us" ("Art Chronicle: Our Period Style," Partisan Review 15 (November 1949):1138). This "end to ideologies" was an important, though misleading, liberal concept, for it actually meant an end to only right- and left-wing ideologies in favour of an ideology of the center (see Daniel Bell, The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties (New York: Collier, 1961)). By abandoning recognizable content, abstract expressionism differentiated itself from the art and ideologies of both the Left and the Right, and thus aligned itself with the "vital center." It was able, in so doing, to avoid most of the McCarthyite accusations of subversive subject matter levelled at modern art by such figures as Senator Dondero. Abstract expressionist artists such as Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell were included in Dondero's lists of subversives but, because they had abandoned political involvements along with recognizable content, they did not receive the same individual attention given to such artists as Shahn or Yasuo Kuniyoshi. Abstract expressionism was accused, though, along with the rest of modern art, of contributing to the degeneration of American culture and the weakening of the nation's moral fiber, and thus making it easier for the Russian forces to take over. Some Americans also claimed that certain abstract paintings disclosed "weak spots in U.S. fortifications and such crucial constructions as Boulder Dam" (Jules Langsner, "Art News from Los Angeles," Art News 50 (December 1951):52).

⁷⁰Jouffroy, in MOMA "Press Reaction," p. 10.

⁷¹Marini, in *ibid.*, p. 9. MOMA's summary of the European press reaction describes the response to de Kooning's Woman series as follows: "As in the United States, de Kooning's Woman series fascinated and outraged many critics. Some found their expressionism boring, others distasteful, others questioned their intense ferocity" (MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 9).

⁷²Guilbaut, "Avant-garde," Les Avant-gardes, p. 39.

⁷³In March 1951 the United States had completed its first successful thermonuclear test at Eniwetok Island in the Pacific. The following year saw the launching of the first atomic-energy-powered submarine, the USS Nautilus, which was part of that years \$60 billion defense budget, and the development of the B-52 bomber. The establishment of the system of nuclear stockpiling created, as early as 1951, a supply of 750 to 1000 nuclear bombs in the United States (Kolko, Limits of Power, p. 669).

Sylvan Troeder, in "American Anti-Colonialism: The North African Experience," found in Burnham, What Europe Thinks of America (pp. 90-108), elaborates on Europe's attitude towards American involvement in Third World countries. He states that this involvement raised the basic question in European minds: "Is it possible that the extraordinary growth of American power may incite Americans to extend their influence over countries that are strategically important either for geographical position or raw materials?" (p. 92). Troeder answers this question in the affirmative.

With regard to America's response to Russia's peace offensive, see Kolko, Limits of Power, Chapter 25.

American pressures on Europe took the form of threats to withdraw American troops from Europe and to rely on massive nuclear retaliation of any Russian attack in the area if the European Defense Community was not accepted. This plan appealed to the Republican Congress, who saw the use of nuclear weapons as the cheapest, most effective way to deal with communists (LaFeber, Cold War, p. 170).

⁷⁴Piovene, "Ungrateful Europe," p. 124.

⁷⁵Barr, "Gli Stati Uniti," p. 66.

⁷⁶"Many recognized in (de Kooning) tendencies that transcended any national barriers and found analogies between his work and those of artists elsewhere in the world who are attempting to grapple with similar problems" (MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 9).

⁷⁷H. Lester Cooke, transcript of report on Ben Shahn's exhibition at the 1954 Venice Biennale to MOMA (no title), in Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D148.

CHAPTER TWO

My credo is that the artist, in the very business of keeping his integrity, begins to supply some of the moral stamina our country needs.

Ben Shahn, Paragraphs on Art, 1952

The Artist and the Politician

In order to understand why Shahn was sent to Venice and why he was so successful, it is necessary to look at the promotional literature for and the press reaction to his exhibition. The major pieces of promotional literature produced for the 1954 Biennale by the Museum of Modern Art were its own special catalogue and the article by Alfred Barr, Jr. on the American exhibition for the Biennale publication La Biennale. As indicated in the Introduction, Ben Shahn's article "The Artist and the Politician," which appeared in translation in the November-December 1953 issue of Sele Arte, will also be considered.¹ The following sections will examine, however, not only the ideological surface of these writings, but also the underlying political realities to which they refer.

Lawrence Alloway, in his book on the Venice Biennale, records how as much as a year prior to the actual Biennale, galleries would arrange special shows throughout Europe of any of their artists included in the upcoming exhibition at Venice, and write articles on them for various European magazines. This was done in order to create publicity and exposure for these artists, usually with an eye to the major prizes awarded at the Biennale.² Shahn's article differs, though, from the average run of publicity writing in that it records his political sentiments rather than his artistic views or achievements. This emphasis on politics permeates all of the promotional

literature on Shahn, and it will be useful, therefore, to first examine Shahn's particular political stance as expressed in the Sele Arte article.³

"The Artist and the Politician" was originally presented by Shahn at a conference of the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee in January 1953, a conference organized to protest the actions of McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and was subsequently printed in the May 1953 issue of the Committee's publication Rights.⁴ It then appeared in the September 1953 issue of Art News,⁵ the 8 November 1953 issue of the Colorado Springs Free Press, and, finally, the November-December 1953 issue of Sele Arte. In this article Shahn condemned the increasing right-wing attacks on modern art as communistic⁶ and expressed his concern regarding the effect that such attacks might have on America's image abroad:

Aside from the incalculable damage that such investigation and suppression do to our own culture, we might consider some of their international implications. It is conceded, even by generals, that however great may be our military prowess, our ultimate victory or defeat in the struggle with Communism will be a victory or defeat of ideas.

Our idea is Democracy. And I believe that it is the most appealing idea that the world has yet known. But if we, by official acts of suppression, play the hypocrite toward our own beliefs, strangle our own liberties, then we can hardly hope to win the world's unqualified confidence.⁷

Right-wing attacks on modern art in America served, therefore, to weaken the forces of democracy in their fight against communism. In his criticism of both extremes of the political spectrum, Shahn revealed his strong support for the liberalism of the American government:

The liberal of today--the altruist--the humanitarian--any citizen who feels his responsibility toward the public good--finds himself caught between two malignant forces.

To the right of him stands the force of reaction, that has always opposed reform or progress

To the left of the liberal stands the Communist contingent, ever alert to move in upon his good works, always ready to supply him with its little packages of shopworn dogma, to misappropriate his words, his acts and intentions

Together, these two forces have constituted an unholy team.⁸

In the reactionary atmosphere that had contributed to the defeat of De Gasperi and that was being reinforced by the attempts of his successor, Guiseppe Pella, to appease the Right, the sentiments expressed in Shahn's article would have had particular relevance. Many Italians were relying on America's help in combatting rising neo-fascism in their own country, and the appearance, therefore, of a similar reactionary climate in America was obviously distressing. In the commentary that accompanied Shahn's article by the editor of Sele Arte Carlo Ragghianti, the following statement is found:

The article attacks one point that involves us directly. America as an ideal and a potential of liberty is too important for the whole world, as well as for culture, for us to remain indifferent to the grave complications that Ben Shahn points out and which confirm so much other information that we constantly read in American newspapers and magazines (The) work of the free American artist found among us a deep and anxious echo and represented an opportune and fruitful admonition.⁹

Shahn eased Italian anxiety by publicly condemning McCarthyism and thus showing that this movement had yet to stifle free speech in America. What Ragghianti found most consoling about Shahn's article was not its content, though, but the fact that it was published by Art News, "one of the greatest, most accepted and diffused American magazines," rather than by a "small club magazine."¹⁰ The wide circulation this magazine enjoyed would allow the American public, and by implication the Italian public through Sele Arte, to "find again and defend the traditional positions of liberty, which are at the base of the "ideal of America.""¹¹ While the reputation Ragghianti claimed for Art News was obviously exaggerated, this magazine's status as an art journal rather than a political pamphlet such as Rights was important, for it meant that the information contained between its covers maintained an aura of non-partisan, artistic 'truth' rather than of political propaganda. Ragghianti's subsequent demand for Italian "intervention" should America deviate from its traditional positions was a ghostly echo of a similar demand by Hughes that

same year for American intervention in Italy should De Gasperi be defeated.¹²

Ragghianti applied Shahn's accusation that, in America, "people of the basest ignorance are sitting in judgement upon art"¹³ to a similar situation in Italy in December 1952. It was during this month that right-wing members of the Italian Senate criticized the public administration and national gallery at the XXVI Venice Biennale for assigning prizes to and purchasing certain contemporary works of art. They described these works as "grotesque objects that could not possibly, in any way, be considered expressions of art, and that were contrary to every aesthetic sense and that were loathsome and derisive to the sound and balanced aesthetic taste of the Italian people."¹⁴ The works attacked included both the modern painting and sculpture of Mario Radice and Alberto Viani and the social realist canvases of Carlo Levi and Renato Guttuso. In Italy, as in America, then, right-wing politicians were attempting to repress modern and social realist art in favour of more traditional contemporary art forms. Shahn's labelling of such attempts as "tragic buffoonery" placed him among the defenders of modern art, an art that represented a vital part of progressive, liberal culture and that he had earlier described as "one of the few remaining outposts of free speech."¹⁵

Shahn ends his article with the admonition that

the time is here—perhaps it's past due—for a reassertion of Democracy, a reawakening of freedom To take such a stand is not just a matter of self-interest. It transcends that; it's a matter of much needed, and much wanting, patriotism.¹⁶

If those Italians who read this article were unable to connect Shahn's messages with the political situation in their own country, or to equate the concerns of the present American administration with those of the liberal elements in the Italian government, then Ragghianti's commentary helped them make such connections. And Shahn's call for action could thus be taken as a call to Italians to rally their support behind a more liberal Christian Democrat leader, as represented by Pella's successor in February 1954, Antonio Scelba.

I hate injustice. I guess that's about the only thing I really do hate.

Ben Shahn, Interview in Magazine of Art, 1944

Italy, Oppression, and the Free Individual

The essay on Shahn that appeared in both the official Biennale catalogue and the smaller one published by MOMA, was written by James Thrall Soby, a close friend of Shahn's who had been associated with the Museum for over twenty years.¹⁷ In this essay Soby emphasized three major themes: Shahn's admiration for Italy; his concern for the oppressed, particularly the labouring classes; and his "paradoxical" public-private nature.¹⁸

Shahn's proclaimed love for Italy held obvious advantages in a campaign centered on winning the good will of the Italian people. In a letter to Shahn written on 17 March 1954 in which Soby discusses the Biennale essay, he refers to the significance of this love: "I won't make a big point of this, of course, but a few statements might help the Italians to understand that even though we were officially enemies, we grieved for them nevertheless."¹⁹ Soby's devotion of almost half of his piece to Shahn's feelings for Italy would seem to suggest that a 'big point' was, in fact, being made.

Soby related at length an incident from Shahn's past in which an Italian barber explains to the young Shahn why the peasants returned to their homes beneath the still-smoking Mount Etna: "When you have planted so much in one place, you have to go back to it." Besides admiring this perseverance in the face of disaster, Shahn is described as being fascinated as well by Italy's superb visual heritage, and the dignity and grace of the people. "Like most artists," Shahn is quoted as saying, "I look upon Italy as 'the home place'." His grief over the disasters of war in Italy resulted in a number of paintings "in which Italian children, unquenchably imaginative,

explore the new ruins of ancient buildings." One of these paintings, Liber-
ation, was present at the Biennale.

Soby presented the reader, therefore, with a picture of a persevering, imaginative, homeloving Italian people passively accepting the successive destructions and reconstructions of their country, and he presented America, through Shahn, as a caring and sympathetic nation. It was a picture of Italy that promoted the inevitability of history, the inability of the Italian people to alter the pattern of poverty and oppression which imposed itself so regularly upon their lives. This picture's existence depended upon a refusal both to acknowledge the causes of this poverty and oppression, and to accept the active, revolutionary alternative offered the Italian people by the Communist Party, an alternative the American government also refused to accept. Hughes, in his book on Italy and American foreign policy, provided us with a surprisingly similar description of Italy:

In the devastation inflicted by the war, Italy suffered more heavily than any Western nation except Germany

Yet even in the midst of homelessness, undernourishment, and anxiety about the future, the Italians enjoyed certain advantages over their neighbors. The fact that they had always been poor, that they had known hardship as their normal lot, gave them a special kind of experience and fortitude to face the deepened misery of wartime The Italians, as we have seen, did not simply look at their ruined houses in helpless despair: they went to work to rebuild them with their own hands.²⁰

This "fortitude" would, according to Hughes, improve the lot of the Italian people only if it was applied to a systematic reconstruction of the Italian nation under the leadership of the Christian Democrats and on the basis of the economic principles of American capitalism.

The suggestion that American artists looked on Italy as the "home place" was also misleading. Italy, for most modern American artists at that time and particularly for non-objective artists, represented the home of a perspective and naturalism that no longer held any meaning, and that therefore

had to be abandoned. Abstract expressionism attempted to destroy the continuity of history by rejecting the artistic achievements of the past and embarking on a seemingly revolutionary path.²¹ In different circumstances this rejection of the past, a past which included both modern French and traditional Italian art, had represented a positive aspect of the American image, proof of this country's independent and progressive nature. But at the 1954 Biennale one of the main concerns was with reassuring the Italian people of their importance to America. Pointing out de Kooning's similarity to Boccioni²² and Shahn's admiration for Italian art, an admiration evident in his obvious references to fourteenth and fifteenth century Italian painters in certain of his works,²³ helped serve this purpose.

Shahn's concern for the oppressed and the working classes was presented by Soby as the result of his own upbringing in "the poorer sections of Brooklyn" where he was forced to make sidewalk sketches by "local toughs." A rejection of art-for-arts-sake and an acceptance of "narrative commentary on the life and social issues of his time" resulted in two series of pictures—the first on the case of the Italian-American Sacco and Vanzetti, and the second on the trial of the labour leader Tom Mooney. These series touched on two very important issues in Italy—the American government's attitude towards Italian immigrants, and the position of labour as the stronghold of the Italian Communist Party.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Italians were allowed into America with few restrictions. The decade from 1901 to 1911 alone saw the influx of over a million and a half Italian immigrants. By 1920, however, growing isolationist sentiments had changed American attitudes toward immigration. The subsequent quota acts of 1921 and 1924 cut off virtually all new immigration to the States.²⁴ A series of bombings in April and June of 1919,

along with the Russian Revolution of that same year, had also triggered a wave of anti-communism similar to that of the early 1950s.²⁵

Sacco and Vanzetti were two of many political dissidents to fall prey to this growing "red-scare" mentality. Being labour agitators and anarchists, as well as having fled to Mexico in 1917 to avoid the draft, they were kept under close supervision upon their return to the States by Attorney-General A. Mitchell Palmer. Palmer's notorious raids resulted in the rounding up of many labour unionists and real or imagined radicals, who were "frequently beaten, often summarily deported if they were foreign born, or held for months without trials or hearings."²⁶ In addition to these raids, a general fear and mistrust of immigrants, particularly economically successful ones, was prevalent in the predominantly White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant states of New England where Sacco and Vanzetti lived. The widespread protests in the U.S. and abroad over the execution of these two Italian immigrants in 1927 were based on the conviction that Sacco and Vanzetti had been found guilty by virtue of their political beliefs and nationality rather than because of any evidence proving them guilty of robbery or murder.²⁷

The bad feeling that resulted from the persecutions of Italian Americans and the termination of Italian immigration in the 1920s was still present in Italy in the 1950s. In 1953 Vittorio Zincone, editor of Giornale dell'Emilia of Bologna and an active member of the Liberal Party, commented on "the disappointment of the popular classes with the America that went back on its assumed promise of redistributing the wealth through migration."²⁸ The U.S. immigration quota for Italians in 1953 was actually lower than that of 1924, additional technical requirements making it even more difficult for prospective immigrants to enter the country.²⁹

The political importance of labour in Italy in 1953 is indicated by

Hughes' statement that "labor remains the core of Communist electoral and organizational strength. It accounts for a substantial share of the two and a half million members that make the Italian party the largest in the non-Communist world."³⁰ The purge of communists from American labour unions in the late 1940s, and a similar American-backed attempt by De Gasperi,³¹ added to the antipathy the Italian working class already felt toward the United States because of U.S. immigration policies, and increased the support of this class for the Italian Communist Party.

Soby presented Shahn as a critic of American actions in the 1920s toward Italian immigrants and as a supporter of the causes of labour in Italy and in America, with one major exception: "(Shahn's) sympathies always have been with the oppressed, though he has vigorously repudiated the cure for their ills proposed by Communism." The United States wanted to win as much of the support of the Italian labouring classes as possible, and one way of doing so was to present an American artist who came from the same background of oppression; who fought for the rights of Italian-American labour leaders; who condemned the cures to their problems offered by communism; and who created an easily-understandable narrative art concerned not only with aesthetic problems, but with "various causes in which he has believed." He was, in other words, an artist who was fighting an ideological battle on Communism's own terms.

The final major theme in Soby's essay dealt with what he considered a "paradox" in Shahn's career, that while Shahn was engaged in public-social activity, he was still able to remain "one of the most private and individual of American easel painters." What Soby was emphasizing here was the difference between Shahn and communist social realists. Shahn was free to be a private individual and at the same time to criticize the actions of his

government without being censured. Proof that his criticisms did not result in censure was the fact that his paintings were "bought avidly for American collections, public and private, from one coast to the other." Soby closed on a confident note: "The respect we in this country feel for (Shahn) has already begun to extend abroad. It is our hope that it will now be shared in Italy." What Soby was hopeful of was a shared respect not only for Shahn as an artist, but also for the American values that he represented.

The quote by Shahn that followed Soby's entry was taken from a lecture given at Harvard in April 1951.³² In the first of the two paragraphs, Shahn lionized the American cult of the individual:

So much that we live with and experience today has become devoid of personality. Objects that we handle and use are mass produced, our clothing, mass designed But art is still the citadel of the individual. It is one of the few remaining outposts of free speech—unprocessed speech. The personal touch of the artist's hand remains ineradicably upon his canvases. Whatever he says or feels is communicated directly and without modification to those who look at his work.

The phrases 'devoid of personality', 'mass produced', and 'mass designed', conjure up the familiar stereotypical image of communist society as presented by American propaganda. While Shahn's "we" implied that such a situation existed in America as well, it existed as an unfortunate, unwanted evil in American democracy, an evil that would be defeated by that last citadel of the individual—art. The overall implications of this view are complicated and seemingly contradictory considering Shahn's involvement in the production of commercial art. This last citadel of the individual was, according to Shahn, an art that was above the objects produced for and bought by the 'masses', a suspiciously elitist sentiment coming from such a socially-conscious artist. But Shahn viewed commercial art not as an art that appealed to the lowest common denominator in its vast audience, but as one that, in maintaining the higher standards of fine art, would be educative and a "source

of increasing pleasure and value to the public."³³ And yet even though Shahn believed in the value of high quality commercial art, he also still believed that fine art was superior to commercial art because it was able to be both controversial and philosophical, which "practical" commercial art could never be. Fine art was, for Shahn, "the securest haven of free speech left to us."³⁴ He failed, or refused, to acknowledge the fact that this haven was also subject to the practical considerations of American politics.

By insisting on the importance of the individual, Shahn found favour with those who were losing their sense of individuality, whether because of communist authoritarianism or capitalist mass-production. He appealed to their intelligence by avoiding both the blatant propaganda of standard advertising art and orthodox social realism, and the incomprehensibility of non-objective art, producing instead finely-crafted, "poetically" realistic paintings and drawings. In so doing he situated himself in the center of these two extremes, allowing enough social realism in his work to create a vague sense of moral indignation and enough modernism to keep this indignation anchored firmly in the world of art.

Shahn shared many of the most basic values held by the liberal ruling elite and felt that his art could help to rectify the ills that were marring an otherwise admirable political system. He did not agree with Robert Motherwell, who believed that only through the "rejection, almost 'in toto', of the values of the bourgeois world," which meant the rejection of figurative content, could art remain relevant in twentieth-century America.³⁵ This acceptance by Shahn of the bourgeois values of America's leaders, and of their accompanying ideology, suggests a similar acceptance of the associations attached to his art. But such an acceptance on the part of an artist was not necessary for his or her art to be incorporated into this ideology. Even

these abstract expressionists who rejected the bourgeois world and who felt, like Mark Rothko, that "the familiar identity of things has to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment," found their art in the forefront of the battle between democracy and communism.³⁶

Shahn's political and moral allegiances were, in fact, confusing and at times seemingly contradictory, but no more so than the workings of the liberal ideology he represented. And if the people who viewed his work at the 1954 Biennale were aware of the contradictions within either the artist or the ideology, the significance of these contradictions was lost in the overwhelming acceptance of the paintings themselves.

An example of the pervasiveness of this liberal ideology is found in the last four sentences of the paragraph quoted above. For here we find Shahn using the same language of freedom and individualism as the leading abstract expressionists—citadel of the individual, free speech, unprocessed speech, personal touch of the artist's hand, communicated directly and without modification. Only in this instance, these expressions are used to describe qualities found, in Shahn's opinion, only in realistic, socially relevant art. The expressions themselves have a totally different meaning than when used by abstract expressionists.³⁷ Free, unprocessed speech was, for Shahn, speech unaffected by the attacks of both the Right and the Left. The personal touch of the artist meant a visible, recognizable craftsmanship, evidence of the rational, moral nature of the artist. Direct, unmodified communication was the result of an art that needed no lengthy explanation by an art expert or critic to be understood. Two of these qualities were, according to Shahn, absent from non-objective art; personal touch and direct communication.

The first sentences of the second paragraph of Shahn's quote in MOMA's

catalogue continued this criticism of non-objective art:

But I think that artists ought to recognize this, that there is no moral reason why art ought to go on if it has nothing further to express Art is important only if it essays to be important Society needs more than anything else to be reminded that man is, in himself, ultimate value.

For Shahn, abstract expressionism's biggest sin was its lack of visible moral commitment, its concern not with man as "ultimate value" but with the physical properties of painting itself. In a collection of quotes published by Shahn in 1952 entitled Paragraphs on Art he commented:

Non-objectivism is about the most non-committal statement that can be made in art. It rests its faith in the machinery with which a painting is put together—materials plus organization. Its basic precept is that art is simply experience, an experience that lies solely within the physical properties of the painting. Abstract and non-objective art deny the validity of any moral intention in art.³⁸

Shahn appears to be in general agreement here with the condemnation of non-objective art by both Russian and Italian communists.³⁹ By agreeing with this aspect of communist dogma—the belief in the need for socially-relevant content in art—and at the same time supporting the vaunted humanism and individualism of American democracy, he was able to produce an image of this democracy that would appeal to a socially-conscious Italian public.

The end of Shahn's quote carries a reminder to society

that neither the pressure of events nor the exigencies of diplomacy can warrant the final debasement of man Art, because it is the innate expression of man, speaks also in final values, tends to reaffirm the individual. Art is neither use, nor appointed task; but given human compulsion, some intellectual stature and great competence, it can perhaps bring man back into focus as being of supreme importance.

Phrases such as 'the pressure of events' and 'the exigencies of diplomacy' would have carried certain connotations for Italians in the summer of 1954. In the past few years two developments had threatened the debasement of man: the attempts of right-wing politicians in both Italy and America to repress cultural freedoms; and the increasing American economic and military pressures

on Europe, particularly with regard to the European Defense Community.⁴⁰ Shahn's reassurances that art would reaffirm the individual and bring man back into focus as being of supreme importance could have been interpreted as meaning that the American government would also concern itself with such tasks, given Shahn's position as representative of America and the use of similar phrases to describe American democracy.⁴¹ His insistence that art was neither "use" nor "appointed task" could also have been interpreted as a condemnation of communism and communist social realism in favour of a modern American art and government that embodied such qualities as "human compulsion, some intellectual stature and great competence."

. . . all great beliefs have in common with religion the spiritual quality that makes for good art.

Ben Shahn, Portrait of the Artist, 1951

A Modern-Day Crucifixion

In addition to the essays in the Biennale and MOMA catalogues and Shahn's article in Sele Arte, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., MOMA's Director of Museum Collections, was invited to produce an article on the U.S. exhibition for La Biennale.⁴² In it he reiterated many of the themes that appeared in the writings of both Soby and Shahn.

Barr began his article by commenting on the private ownership of the American pavilion and the fact that such ownership ensured the existence of a "progressive spirit free from censure." This was in opposition to the government-owned pavilions which were open to interference from government officials who were often subjected to "pressures of a philistine nature." He gives as an example the instance of American legislators undergoing "insistent warnings from concerned academic artists regarding the correctness or even the patriotism of their modern rivals."⁴³ Amid these philistine pressures and censures,

Shahn appeared as an artist with a "profound, passionate interest for the human condition."⁴⁴ The first example offered by Barr of this concern was Shahn's Sacco and Vanzetti series of paintings, represented at the 1954 Biennale by Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco (Figure 2). But rather than emphasizing the fact that the victims were Italian immigrants or labour leaders, Barr took a different tack. He included, instead, the following quote by Shahn concerning this series:

Ever since I could remember I'd always wished I'd been lucky enough to be alive when something big was happening, like the Crucifixion. And suddenly I realized I was living through another crucifixion. Here was something to paint!⁴⁵

Equating Sacco and Vanzetti with Christ would have had obvious advantages in Italy where the bulk of the population, including many of those voting for the Communist Party, were practising Catholics.⁴⁶ And Shahn's deification of two Italian immigrants whose crucifixions had been largely the responsibility of the American government, would also have had a certain Magdelene-like appeal to Italians, regardless of their individual political allegiances.⁴⁷

While Barr failed to connect Shahn with labour via Sacco and Vanzetti, he did make the connection in the following paragraph:

His murals, like those in the main Bronx post office in New York, and in the Federal Security Building in Washington, have as their subject matter work or social well-being. His posters for the Office of War Information and for the CIO (the large labor union) and some of his larger paintings deal with social and political subject matter.⁴⁸

In a country of high unemployment, a low standard of living, and high political consciousness, an artist concerned with work or social well-being would have had particularly strong appeal.⁴⁹ But after connecting Shahn with these issues Barr, like Soby and like Shahn himself, added an important qualifier: "But Shahn is not a social realist in a communist sense." The quote he then included by Shahn condemned "the formulae of commissars," the "exaggerated generals and extremely idealized proletariat," and the "lack of conviction"

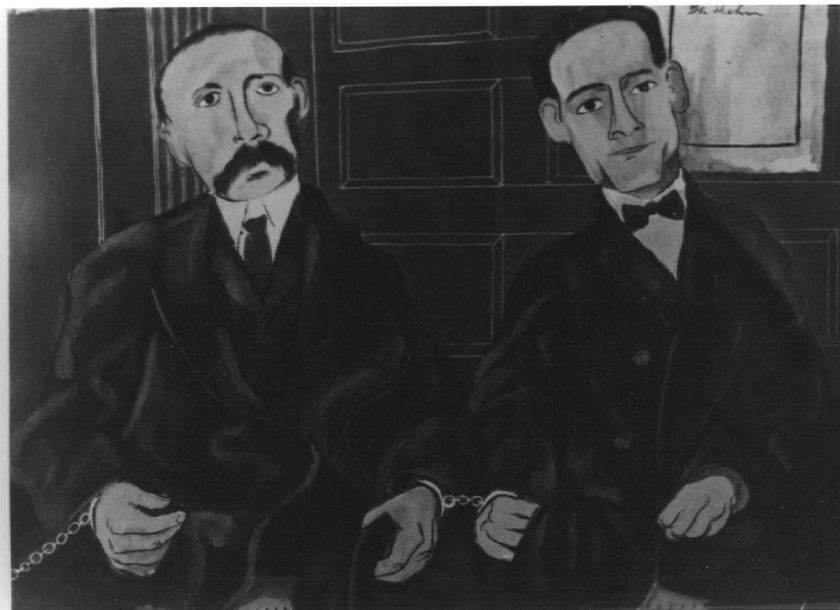


Figure 2. Ben Shahn, Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco, 1931-2
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Mrs. J.D. Rockefeller, Jr.
(James T. Soby. Ben Shahn. West Drayton, Middlesex:
Penguin Books, 1947. Plate 3)

evident in Soviet art. It was an art in which, according to Shahn, "the search for truth has for the time been arrested."⁵⁰ This search for truth could only be carried out in a democratic society patterned after that of America.

Barr, seemingly anticipating the criticism that McCarthyism had greatly hampered the search for truth of any kind in America, acknowledged the fact that Shahn's searchings had indeed brought him "on occasion into conflict with orthodox conservatives in the United States as well as with orthodox radicals." Shahn was therefore placed, again, in the 'vital center', a center that was the best and most American place to occupy. Proof of the favourable nature of this position was the outstanding success Shahn enjoyed throughout America:

He has received five government commissions for murals, sixty of his works are found in 30 American museums, and many others are included in wealthy private collections. He designs covers for American businessmen's periodicals and participates in conferences in American universities. The prestige of Shahn is very great, both as an artist and as a champion of freedom without compromises.⁵¹

Exactly what Barr meant by freedom without compromises is difficult to determine. Perhaps it referred to that element in American ideology that Shahn so aptly represented—freedom of speech, the freedom to criticize without being censured. But, as mentioned earlier, while Shahn may have criticized certain faults within the American democratic system, he never criticized or doubted the basic capitalist tenets upon which this system was based.

The three pieces of writing discussed above contributed to the creation of a very specific image of Ben Shahn. He was presented, above all, as both the defender of the liberal ideals of the American (and Christian Democrat) government and, at the same time, the watchdog who prevented any deviations from these ideals. He was meant to appeal to the Italian people, specifically,

through his concern for the oppressed, his sympathy for the causes of organized labour, and his support of a realistic, socially-relevant art that rivalled communist social realism yet remained decidedly "democratic" and American. It is time now to examine the Italian reaction to the exhibition of Shahn's works and the promotional literature attached to this exhibition, to discover whether, in fact, he was seen this way.

It was Ben Shahn who was the overwhelming favorite of the United States representation and indeed proved one of the chief attractions of the Biennale.

Museum of Modern Art, "Press Reaction", 1956

An Overwhelming Success

The Museum of Modern Art's International Program Report on the American exhibition at the 1954 Venice Biennale, which appeared in October 1956, included the following brief summary of the general European reaction:

The response of the critics, the press and the public to the exhibition was enthusiastic. Ben Shahn, especially, proved to be a chief focus of interest at the Biennale. He was awarded the top purchase prize, offered by the Museu de Arte Moderna of Sao Paulo, Brazil. In addition to the numerous illustrations of his work which appeared in newspapers and periodicals . . . , his drawing Clarinets was selected for reproduction on the cover of the program for the 17th International Festival of Contemporary Music, one of the official events of the Biennale The Ministry of Education at Rome and a number of museums and galleries throughout Europe (the Gemeente Museum of the Hague, the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, the Kunsthaus, Zurich, the Galleria La Bussola, Turin and the Galleria dell'Obelisco, Rome) requested the Museum to arrange a show of Shahn's work for them following the close of the Biennale.⁵²

Another request for Shahn's work was made by the Italian Minister of Fine Arts, who wished to explore the possibility of a one-man show of Shahn's work sponsored by the Italian government. This was, according to the Director of the American pavilion H. Lester Cooke, an "impressive compliment" considering "the only other living non-Italian artists who have been honoured by the Government this way are Picasso, Matisse and Rouault."⁵³

The summary of European press reaction referred to earlier in the discussion of de Kooning's work accompanied the above report. It appears, according to the information contained within this summary, that Shahn more than met the expectations of MOMA's organizers, and that the response to his work reflected the concerns dealt with in the Museum's promotional literature:

In contrast to the prevailing currents of surrealism and abstraction which dominated most of the exhibitions at the XXVII Biennale, Shahn's personal version of realism and his recognizable content appeared unique and refreshingly unhackneyed. Moreover, his understanding of poverty and tragedy and his sympathy with the oppressed struck an immediate responsive chord with the Europeans because of their own war and post-war experience. To the Italians, especially, Shahn's use of Italian subject matter made his work even more sympathetic, and he appeared to them as an understanding friend.⁵⁴

Shahn's appeal, therefore, lay in his recognizable content, understanding of poverty and tragedy, sympathy with the oppressed, and Italian subject matter. These qualities made him appear an understanding friend of those Italians who, themselves, were poor and oppressed, who were either tired of or confused by both abstract art and orthodox social realism, and who found in Shahn's work a palatable alternative to both these art forms. Analogously, the American government hoped that the liberal democracy it offered as an alternative to the two political extremes of neo-fascism and communism would prove just as palatable.

The connection between Shahn as an artist, and Shahn as an official representative of America was also, according to MOMA, successfully made:

One of the most striking and possibly surprising aspects of Shahn's appeal was the fascination that he exerted as a distinctly "American" painter of "American" subjects. In spite of his European birth and his kinship with certain European painters, Shahn was regarded as entirely representative of the United States in his psychology, subject matter and pictorial means.⁵⁵

His politics, too, could be added to this list which, along with his psychology, subject matter, and pictorial means, were not representative of all of America—which included reactionaries such as McCarthy—but only of that

part represented by the liberalism of the present administration.

This appeal as a distinctively American painter was noted by Lisa Licitra Ponti in her short article on Shahn for the art magazine Domus. She found, particularly in the paintings Summertime (Figure 3) and Spring (Figure 4), a "lightly satirical observation of the 'real' in American customs that is truly wonderful."⁵⁶ Franco Catania provided a more detailed observation in the Corriere de Sicilia:

This Lithuanian-born Jew paints precisely the myth of America--the America of Washington, of Ford, of gangsters; of the America that grew so rapidly out of the courage, the simplicity and the struggles of the early pioneers The painting of Ben Shahn is one of the most sincere, alive and original documents in contemporary American art.⁵⁷

Catania's combination of the notions of myth and sincere documentation is somewhat puzzling. How could Shahn paint both at the same time? This myth of Washington, Ford, gangsters, and pioneers does not, in fact, seem to have appeared in any of Shahn's paintings or drawings included in the Biennale exhibition.⁵⁸ But in the themes that did appear in these works--labour, war, and oppression--Shahn actually did present the duality suggested by Catania. The documentation was present in the ruins of Liberation (Figure 15) and in the dazed expression and clenched hands of the woman in Miners' Wives (Figure 5); the myth emerged in the suggestion, inherent in the ideology that these paintings represented, that the conditions of poverty, war, and oppression were all part of an unalterable historical progression rather than of an alterable class conflict.

Catania saw Washington, Ford, and gangsters in Shahn's paintings because he was looking for them, just as Ponti interpreted a young couple lying on the grass and a man eating watermelon as "the 'real' in American customs" and as the French critic Jouffroy found in Shahn's works not light satirical observation, but "sharp social criticism."⁵⁹ Shahn's paintings were effective as

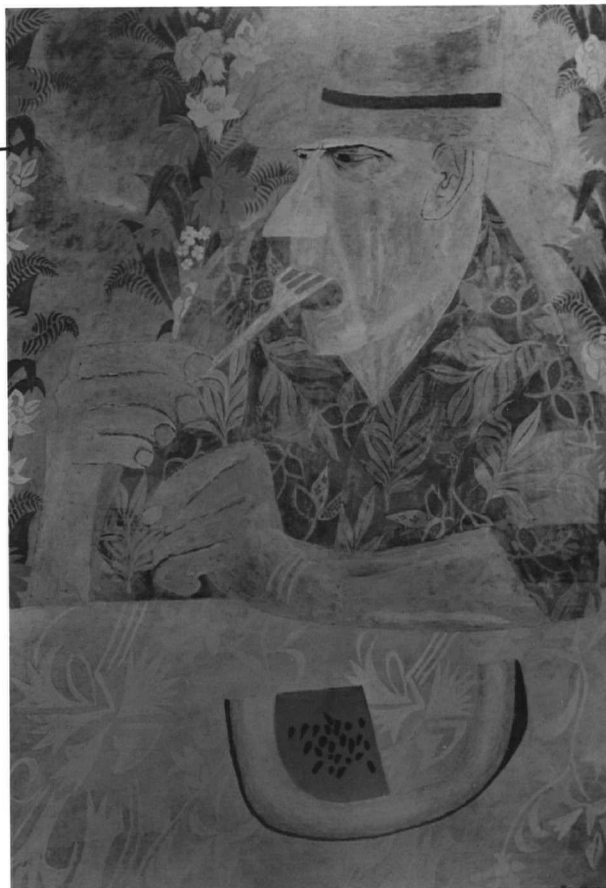


Figure 3. Ben Shahn, Summertime, 1949
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy,
Andover, Mass.
(Bernarda Bryson Shahn. Ben Shahn. New York: H.N.
Abrams Inc., 1972. Page 101)



Figure 4. Ben Shahn, Spring, 1946
Room of Contemporary Art Collection, Albright Knox
Gallery
(James T. Soby. Ben Shahn: Paintings. New York: George
Braziller, 1963. Plate 29)

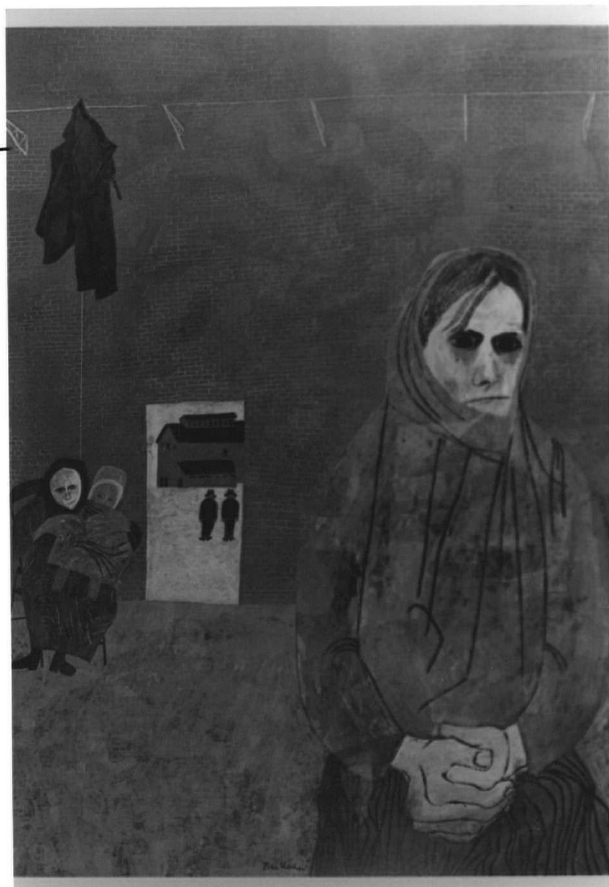


Figure 5. Ben Shahn, Miners' Wives, 1948
Philadelphia Museum of Art.
Gift of Wright S. Ludington
(Bryson Shahn. Ben Shahn. Page 177)

cultural propaganda, therefore, not only because they contained specific Italian and humanitarian subject matter, but also because they permitted such a wide range of interpretation. More will be said about this aspect of Shahn's work later.

Catania's myth of America, of Washington, Ford, and gangsters, was particularly strong in Italy at this time. In a way it did remain both myth and reality, for few were able to travel to America to discern the difference. Few were also willing, even when confronted with conflicting evidence, to give up this dream of a land of wealth and opportunity so different from their own. This myth was transmitted largely through the media of popular culture, such as Hollywood movies, American popular magazines, and American advertising art. While respect for the American way of life was the ideological rationale behind cultural, political, and economic excursions abroad by both government and private institutions, a respect based on this particular area of American culture proved disturbing to some:

It may be flattering to discover the prestige that things American enjoy in Italy. But it is less reassuring to observe how often it is the undistinguished products of the United States which have been exported in greatest quantity and to which the Italians have taken with most alacrity. Toward the more vulgar and spectacular aspects of America, the average Italian betrays a disconcerting lack of resentment. In Rome one finds little of the dignified Parisian resistance to the advance of American popular culture: the Hollywood films and the neon lights continue their conquests unchecked.⁶⁰

The source of some of Hughes' concern may have been the belief that the graphic displays of crime and political corruption in American movies and magazines would provide ammunition for communists in their attacks on American capitalism as decadent and materialistic. This would have been a valid concern in Italy where the strength of the Communist Party was such that even though many Italians were attracted by the American dream, they still saw the most workable solutions to their immediate problems in the offerings of the Italian Communist Party.

Catania, in the above quote, touched on two further aspects of Shahn's background that had added significance in Italy, and in Western Europe as a whole--the fact that Shahn was, by birth, Russian and that he was Jewish. Italy's relationship with Russia was a complex one: a close physical neighbour; an enemy in World War II; a friend of America, Russia's enemy in the Cold War; and the home of a major political party allied to the Russian Communist Party. Shahn's Russian birth connected him to Italy as a one-time neighbour; his departure from Russia and wholehearted acceptance of life in America symbolized the superiority of the one over the other, of American democracy over communism. His Jewish heritage served to strengthen the authority with which he spoke on the evils of oppression and persecution, the fate of millions of Jews in Europe at the hands of the Nazis still fresh in most European minds.

In another part of his article, Catania stated that Shahn's works were "born out of a human and poetic experience which can be clarified not inappropriately by evoking the name of Chaplin."⁶¹ Evoking this name in Europe in 1954 would have brought to mind a much-publicized incident of the previous year, when Chaplin had refused to return to America after being harassed by the FBI and the Internal Revenue Service because of his political opinions. "America is so terribly grim," he said, "in spite of all that material prosperity. They no longer know how to weep. Compassion and old neighborliness have gone, people stand by and do nothing when friends and neighbors are attacked, libeled and ruined."⁶² Shahn, like Charlie Chaplin, condemned these developments in America and offered reassurances that such deviations from the tradition of democracy were, in fact, being dealt with by the present American government. The Army-McCarthy hearings, which ran from 22 April to 17 June 1954 and which were broadcast on national television, helped drive these reassurances home.⁶³

My work is about people. Mostly the lower one third of the people. I try to show them with humor as well as poignancy: in any form of art it is well to have laughter with the tears.

Ben Shahn, Newark Sunday Call, 14 January 1945

The Dignity and the Reality of the Oppressed

Shahn's understanding of and sympathy for the poor and the oppressed were major factors in his success in Italy. Catania described Shahn's work as containing "an affectionate attachment for the world of poor people, for the disinherited, for the oppressed, whom he always represented in an aura of redemption, expressing pained sensibility in the face of injustice."⁶⁴ Pilon Ugo, the sixty-year-old Italian guard at the American pavilion and one of the poor about whom Shahn painted, wrote to Shahn: "Your paintings constitute that which is most loved and most beautiful in the struggling life of poor populations."⁶⁵ Cooke summarized the reaction to Shahn's evident concern for the hardships suffered by the majority of Italians as follows:

After the war Italy was left devastated and impoverished, and although she has risen phoenix-like from the ashes, six years of destruction left problems both physical and spiritual which few Americans can understand Shahn represents this poverty, suffering and dignity, whether in the brick jungle of Brooklyn or in the rubble of bombed Italian homes, with a sincerity and understanding which every visitor to the American pavilion can see and understand.⁶⁶

Shahn appealed to poor and oppressed Italians, then, not by presenting the dismal reality of their poverty, like the Italian communist painters, but by showing in his paintings the "beauty" of their struggling life. "There are other painters here in Italy," commented a factory worker from Bologna in talking of Shahn's work, "who like to remind us of our poverty. Carlo Levi and the Communists, for example, but they show us as though we were ox-like actors in a third-class opera. We know a good painting when we see it and we know when some one is sincere."⁶⁷

MOMA's press review states that Shahn's sympathy with the poor and oppressed "created a special problem for Communist writers, for although they found his subject matter acceptable to them, his style and nationality were not."⁶⁸ His condemnation of the Communist Party also made his acceptance difficult. According to the Museum, the communist newspaper L'Ora of Palermo dealt with the issue by reproducing Liberation along with two social realist paintings in an article discussing the prize-winners and condemning "avant-garde tendencies" at the Biennale. While not mentioning any names, the article also

spoke disparagingly of non-Communist "social realist" artists in general . . . , stating that "their social realism is still like a seed sown on arid ground, without realism or tradition, and has not yet been translated into formal terms, thus is 'social' only in the widest and most basic sense of the word."⁶⁹

For orthodox communists in Italy familiar with the Party line on art, the illustration of Shahn's painting accompanying this article would have been seen as an example of "arid" social realism, even though Shahn himself was not condemned by name. But for those Italians who were not familiar with this line, or who were willing to accept communist politics but not communist art, the appearance of Liberation alongside two social realist paintings may have proven to be an advantageous comparison for Shahn.

Social realism in Italy in the early 1950s was not the same as social realism in Russia. Just as the Italian Communist Party under Togliatti maintained a certain independence from the Russian Communist Party so too did Italian communist artists.⁷⁰ The realism of Renato Guttuso and Carlo Levi was much less exact and naturalistic than that of such Russian artists as S.A. Grigoriev and F. Reshetnikov. And while the paintings of these Italian artists remained within the Party dictates of peasants and workers, they presented, on the whole, a much gloomier and more static picture of the life of the lower classes than that described by the Russian social realists. The

1953 Annual All Soviet Union art show, for example, was dominated by academic, moralistic paintings—The Return, Discussion of a 'D', Fresh Number of the Shop Paper—showing healthy Russian workers acting to improve their lot by encouraging such virtues as faithfulness and intelligence.⁷¹ The works of Levi and Guttuso at the 1954 Biennale, on the other hand, tended to provide simple portraits of the Italian peasants in all their roughness and poverty—The Widow, Three Labourers, and Trachoma (Figure 6) by Levi— or depressing examples of the decadence of Western habits and art—Guttuso's Roman Boogie-Woogie (Figure 7). In 1953 John Berger, a leftist British art critic, wrote of Guttuso:

Guttuso deals with the very elements (heat, dust, the soil) which the common Italian people work with every day of their lives The Italian character of Guttuso's paintings does not belong to the Italy of the "cultured" tourist—and this must be allowed for. Rawness comes before mellowness, effort before elegance, labour before a meal—and Guttuso does not disguise such facts.⁷²

While the paintings of these Italian artists may have been less idealistic and more truthful than the Russian canvases, they were also less useful as communist propaganda. For an art that simply reminded the Italian workers of their poverty, without providing clear-cut guidelines for change in an aesthetically-pleasing manner, carried the possibility of alienating these workers and creating a dissatisfaction that might work against communist aims. Such a dissatisfaction is found in the sentiments of the Bolognese factory worker quoted above.

The success Levi and Guttuso enjoyed in Italy indicates that not all Italians were offended by the style and content of their paintings. It also suggests that their work may not have been as politically radical as one might suspect, the picture-buying public tending to be composed of conservative businessmen rather than communist workers. Just how acceptable these communist artists actually were to non-communist audiences is indicated by an article



Figure 6. Carlo Levi, Trachoma, 1953
(Lisa L. Ponti. "Pittura alla Biennale." Domus
Settembre 1954. Page 28)



Figure 7. Renato Guttuso, Roman Boogie-Woogie, 1953
(Douglas Cooper. "Reflections on the Venice Biennale."
Burlington Magazine. October 1954. Page 319. Figure 25)

in the 30 November 1953 issue of Time magazine, which praised Guttuso as "one of Italy's most talented artists." This talent, the article claimed, was the result of his unwillingness to fit his artistic conscience "into the tight jacket of Red discipline." It was an unwillingness which allowed him, in The Dying Hero, to rise "above the level of flat political posters with his geometric handling of pillow and sheets, skillfully done in shades of off-white against a violently contrasting red drapery."⁷³ What was important to the author of this article was not that Guttuso's canvases were filled with "miners, child laborers, peasants, and decadent rich folks sunning at Capri," but that he had broken with Red discipline by rejecting the academic style of Russian social realism. Guttuso was thus co-opted into capitalist ideology as another convert to Western democracy, for in favouring, in his own words, a "less rigid, more flexible" style, he was seen as favouring a political system that allowed such flexibility.⁷⁴ He gained acceptance with the middle classes in both American and Italy because his presentations of Italian poverty and capitalist decadence had advanced far enough along the stylistic continuum of art history to allow them to be categorized as art rather than as propaganda.

While L'Ora had dealt indirectly with Shahn's work at the Biennale, the communist weekly Il Contemporaneo of Rome carried a front-page article titled "Shahn in the Cellar," which was accompanied by a reproduction of Handball (Figure 8) and which criticized the organizers of the American exhibition for not publicly exhibiting certain of Shahn's posters dealing with the subjects of peace and labour.⁷⁵ MOMA, in its press review, explained that "the posters were listed in the catalog and were shown on request though not hung, since it was thought preferable to devote the limited wall space at the pavilion to showing paintings and drawings rather than graphic works."⁷⁶ But, according



Figure 8. Ben Shahn, Handball, 1939
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Purchase Fund
(Soby. Ben Shahn. Penguin Books. Plate 15)

to the author of the article, Gian Paolo Paoli, another reason for their absence was given to him: "(The curator), with an austere look, told me that those catalogue numbers corresponded to posters not exhibited for "reasons of public order," which however could be shown as requested."⁷⁷

The posters were eight in number: We Demand the National Textile Act, 1935; This is Nazi Brutality, 1942 (Figure 9); We French Workers Warn You, 1942 (Figure 10); For Full Employment After the War—Register Vote, 1944; Break Reactions Grip—Register Vote, 1946 (Figure 11); We Want Peace—Register Vote, 1946 (Figure 12); For All These Rights We've Just Begun to Fight—Register Vote, 1946 (Figure 13); and Warning—Inflation Means Depression—Register Vote, 1946 (Figure 14). All but the first three were produced by Shahn for the Political Action Committee (PAC) of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) for their campaigns to mobilize the American labour force behind the Democratic candidates in the 1944 presidential and 1946 congressional elections. We Demand the National Textile Act was never actually published as a poster, while Nazi Brutality and French Workers were created while Shahn was working for the Office of War Information (OWI).⁷⁸ How these works would constitute a threat to public order is understandable in terms of the particular issues in the forefront of Italian politics at this time—the rise of a reactionary party reminiscent of its precursor led by Mussolini and the increase in the Communist Party's power due to the backing of organized labour. Unemployment, inflation, and the threat of another war were also sensitive subjects in Italy in 1954. Shahn's posters, unlike his paintings, were graphic and to the point. They did not allow feelings of nostalgia or a sense of passive acceptance of one's fate, but advocated action. They dealt in harsh and convincing terms with political realities. It is unlikely that riots would have broken out in the American pavilion had the posters been hung. But it would have been next to impossible for the Italian public to

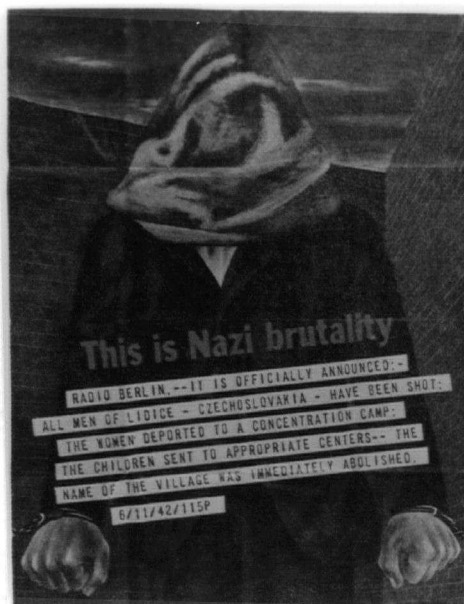


Figure 9. Ben Shahn, This is Nazi Brutality, 1942

New Jersey State Museum

Gift of The Record, Hackensack, N.J.

(Kenneth Prescott. The Complete Graphic Works of Ben Shahn. New York: Quandrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1973. Page 123. Figure 144)

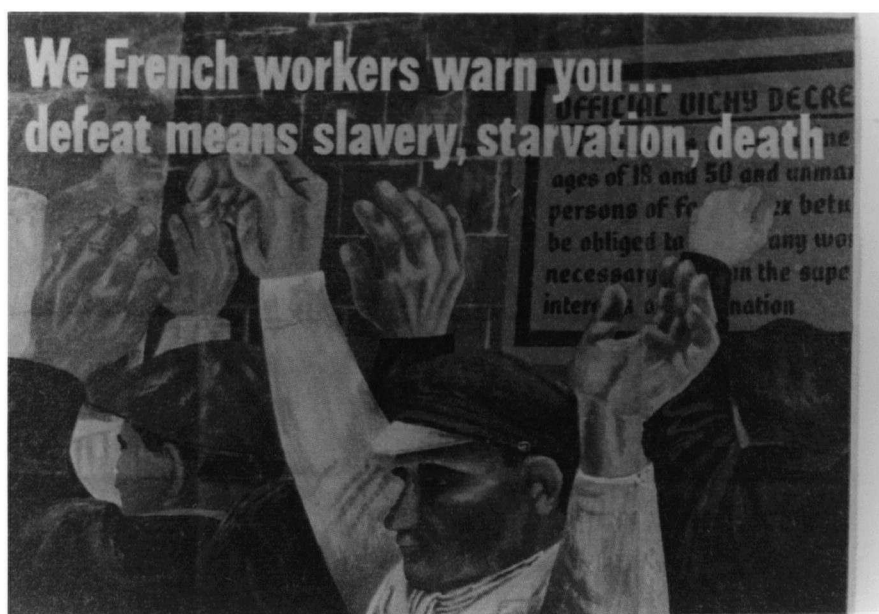


Figure 10. Ben Shahn, We French Workers Warn You, 1942
 New Jersey State Museum.
 Gift of Circle F
 (Soby. Ben Shahn. Braziller. Plate 27)

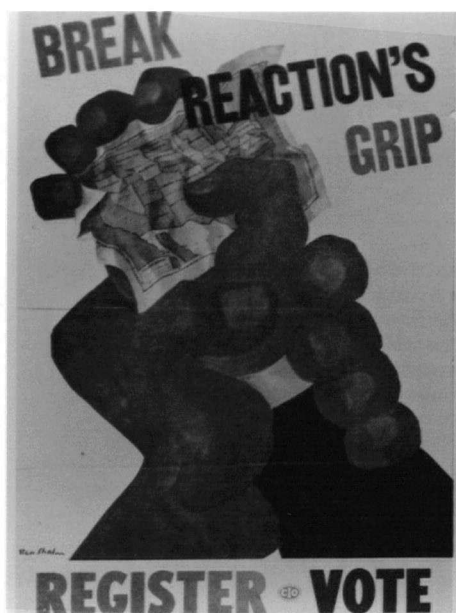


Figure 11. Ben Shahn, Break Reactions Grip--Register Vote, 1946
New Jersey State Museum
(Prescott, Graphic Works. Page 131. Figure 154)



Figure 12. Ben Shahn, We Want Peace--Register Vote, 1946
 Museum of Modern Art, New York
 Gift of Mrs. S. Spivak
 (Soby. Ben Shahn. Braziller. Plate 12)



Figure 13. Ben Shahn, For All These Rights We've Just Begun To Fight--Register Vote, 1946
 New Jersey State Museum
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Lewis
 (Prescott. Graphic Works. Page 131. Figure 155)

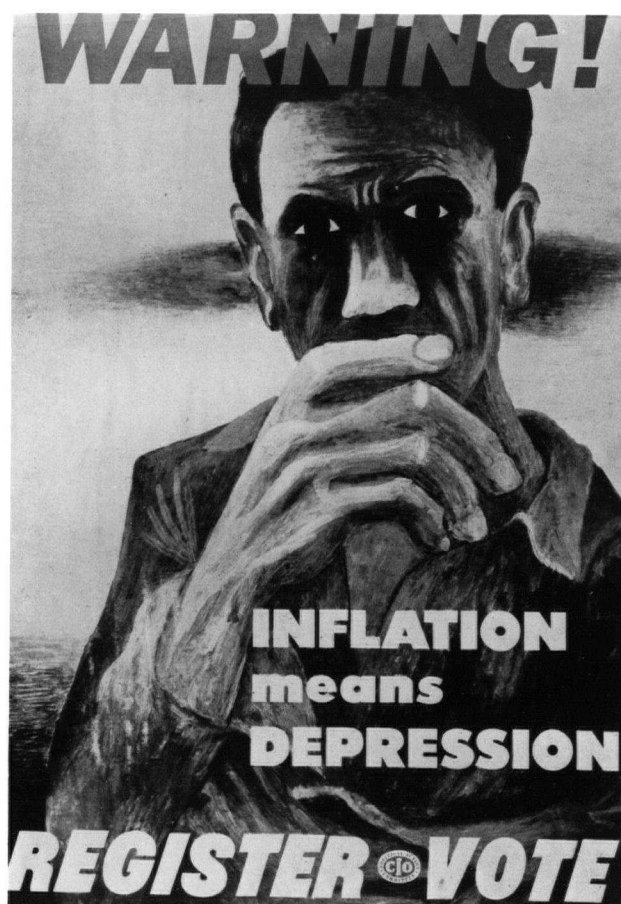


Figure 14. Ben Shahn, Warning—Inflation Means Depression—Register Vote, 1946
Museum of Modern Art, New York
(Soby. Ben Shahn. Penguin. Plate 24)

have looked at these works and not been reminded of the growing reactionary climate, unemployment, and inflation in their own country, and, most importantly, to have seen the solution to their problems in organized labour, which in Italy meant the Communist Party. Such messages would have been unacceptable to both the Italian and the American governments. The depictions of coarse, "ox-like" workers in these posters might also have proven as unacceptable to the Italian factory worker from Bologna as the paintings by Levi and Guttuso. Indeed, certain of Shahn's posters for the steel workers union in the late 1930s "were rejected by one high union leader because the faces and figures were "too ugly to appeal to workers.""⁷⁹

Paoli found that these posters by Shahn constituted an image of America that was dear to most Italians—an anti-fascist America—and that to keep them secluded in a back room especially after having listed them in the Biennale catalogue was a "grave insult" to both logic and culture. He also suggested that their seclusion was the result of the Museum's fear of encountering the prohibitions of the American State Department. This suggestion was a valid one considering the fact that a Czech-American organization's order for 40,000 Nazi Brutality posters from the OWI shortly after they were produced was "cancelled by one of the civilian morale "experts" on the grounds that its message was too "violent.""⁸⁰ Paoli ended his article by pointing out that this whole incident had cast doubt on the reliability of America's "religion of freedom."

Why the Museum included these posters in the first place, knowing that there would be no room to show them and that the subject matter would be controversial, is uncertain. Perhaps it wanted to exploit the full range of Shahn's appeal, or perhaps it was unaware of the full extent of the controversy these posters might arouse until after their arrival in Italy. It was easy

enough, though, to dismiss them as less important than Shahn's paintings, as mere informational as opposed to fine art, and thus remove them from public view.

With astonishing unanimity every segment of the press, regardless of political orientation (which especially in Italy frequently colors art criticism) or of the critics preference for abstract as against representational art, joined in encomiums.

Museum of Modern Art, "Press Reaction," 1956

A Little Something For Everyone—Liberation and The Red Stairway

As was pointed out in the previous sections, many different aspects of Shahn and his work were found appealing by the Italian public. While Cooke attributed Shahn's universal popularity, for the most part, to his understanding of the poverty and oppression of the Italian people, he also acknowledged the advantages of Shahn's broad range of appeal:

European criticism tends to be divided horizontally by national boundaries and vertically by national opinion. Professional opinion is apt therefore to be stereotyped, and it can often be said in advance what a French left-wing writer, for example, will say about a non-objective Italian painter. One reason that Shahn has fared so well at the hands of this critical hierarchy is because his paintings cannot be docketed into any of the categories of modern art.⁸¹

European critics could therefore cast about among the numerous references to both past and contemporary art in Shahn's work for those which suited their own individual political or aesthetic tastes.

MOMA's press review comments further on this quality in Shahn's work:

An interesting phenomenon is that each writer seemed to find a different and highly personal basis for admiration. Some dwelt on the content of Shahn's paintings, others on purely formal aspects of his art; some stressed his lyricism, others his satire.⁸²

An understanding of how this phenomenon described by MOMA contributed to Shahn's success in Italy can be obtained by examining the implications of various stylistic and thematic references in two examples of his work, Liberation

(Figure 15) and The Red Stairway (Figure 16). Before beginning such an undertaking, it should be noted here that Shahn's knowledge of the tradition of art history was extensive. He had studied at the National Academy of Design in New York and had spent three years in the latter half of the 1920s studying and painting in Europe. Shahn's attitude during these years is described in Rodman's biography of the artist: "Shahn wanted to know everything there was to be learned from Europe, not only from Breughel and Daumier and Masaccio and Giotto, but from Dufy, Rouault, Picasso—and Klee."⁸³ The results of this diverse training are evident in his work.

One of the measures of Shahn's popularity in Italy was the appearance of illustrations of his works in all types of publications, from the liberal art magazine Domus to the communist weekly Il Contemporaneo.⁸⁴ According to MOMA, Liberation was the universal favourite, with The Red Stairway a close second, followed by Italian Landscape (Figure 17), Father and Child (Figure 18), Spring, and Summertime.⁸⁵ The popularity of these paintings indicates that although they were painted up to ten years prior to the 1954 Biennale, their images were able to be successfully recycled a decade later. In his report to the Museum, Cooke commented on the success of this recycling:

It is now ten years since the pictures of children in bombed Italy, which have been acclaimed in Europe, were painted. The memory of the theme is still strong, and whether, like Daumier and Dickens, Shahn will continue to be regarded as a great artist after the causes which he championed and the tragedy he describes have passed from people's memory is a question that no one at present can answer. For the moment, however, the Italian public believes that without question he is the greatest painter the United States has produced.⁸⁶

The meaning of the images in Shahn's paintings had changed to a certain extent along with their physical and temporal context. How Shahn's post-war paintings Liberation and The Red Stairway were able to convince the Italian public in 1954 of his greatness will now be examined.



Figure 15. Ben Shahn, Liberation, 1945
Private Collection, James T. Soby
(Soby. Ben Shahn. Penguin. Plate 29)



Figure 16. Ben Shahn, The Red Stairway, 1944
City Art Museum of St. Louis
(Soby. Ben Shahn. Penguin. Plate 23)



Figure 17. Ben Shahn, Italian Landscape, 1944
Walker Art Center, Santa Barbara
(Soby. Ben Shahn. Braziller. Plate 32)

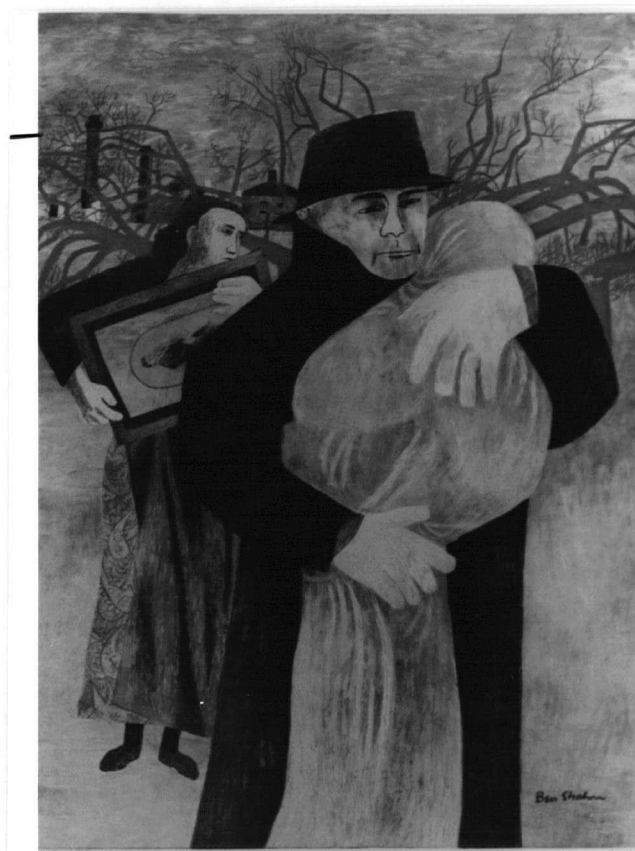


Figure 18. Ben Shahn, Father and Child, 1946
Private Collection, James T. Soby
(Selden Rodman. Portrait of the Artist as an American.
New York: Harper & Bros., 1951. Plate facing page 140)

Liberation was painted in 1945 and was one of a series of post-war paintings. Its popularity in Italy in 1954 can be explained on many levels. The most basic of these is its subject matter--the joy felt at the end of World War II and "the tremendous task of reconstruction, material and human, facing the post-war world,"⁸⁷ a task which the Italians had met with predictable dignity and fortitude. Shahn's painting presents not a graphic depiction of the real horrors and destruction of war, as did his Nazi Brutality poster, but what appears at first glance to be a visually appealing, lyrical image of its aftermath. The implication is that life will continue as usual, that the children will resume their play amid the rubble of their home and that the home itself will be rebuilt (with the help of the Marshall Plan). Yet the joy of play and liberation is disrupted by a disturbing sense that all is not quite right. The central child whirls about with a certain maniacal intensity, while the child on the right appears much too small for comfort or safety. Indeed, their frozen postures, combined with the sweeping diagonal brushstrokes of the agitated blue-gray sky, gives the sense that it is the world which is spinning around the children rather than the children around the pole, that they are caught helplessly in the center of a man-made maelstrom. The contrasts between the bright patches of wallpaper and the blackened remnants of the ceiling, the neatly preserved cornice and the pile of rubble, add further to the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity in the painting. The only truly stable element, to which our eye continually returns, is the bright red pole placed slightly to the left of center. While it is tempting to read into the colour and placement of this pole a reference to Shahn's political allegiances in 1945, such an interpretation would, in this case, be straining the limits of speculation.

Shahn's intention in creating this sense of ambiguity in his work is

revealed in a 1944 interview with John D. Morse:

But most important is always to have a play back and forth, back and forth. Between the big and the little, the light and the dark, the smiling and the sad, the serious and the comic. I like to have three vanishing points in one plane, or a half dozen in three planes. My type of social painting makes people smile. The height of the reaction is when the emotions of anger, sympathy, and humor all work at the same time. That's what I try to do—play one against the other, trying to keep a balance.⁸⁸

Shahn aligns himself so closely here with the vital center ideology of American liberal politicians that one could almost imagine he was describing the checks and balances tactics of the American government rather than the formal and psychological characteristics of his own art.

Shahn achieved his desired balance in Liberation and in so doing presented a combination of anger, sympathy, and humour proper for a post-war painting of Italy. Too much humour or joy would have suggested an insensitivity to the actual sufferings of the people, too much anger or sadness an unwanted reminder of the reality of these sufferings, many of which were still present in 1954. Too much joy could also have suggested the idealism of fascist art and its attendant nationalist sentiments, too much anger the dogmatism of communist art and socialist sentiments. In playing off one against the other, Shahn prevented the viewer from being preoccupied by either extreme, and created instead a more general feeling of pathos. In his biography of Shahn, Selden Rodman notes this quality of uncertainty and play back and forth in the children of Liberation:

Do they belong to the past or the future? To war or peace? Is it a flight to new life or a dance of death? Are they cripples or angels? All of these possibilities are in the picture but it is in the nature of Shahn's genius to leave the questions unanswered.⁸⁹

The power of Liberation, therefore, lay in a tension and a balance within the painting that produced questions but no answers, awe but no action.

Pilon Ugo, the Italian guard, described the awe produced by Shahn's

paintings as verging on a religious experience:

Your Paintings hanging from the walls of these halls are admired by everyone are like an invitation to a prayer and the Visitors are the best proof of it; they come by themselves, in groups, and on their tiptoes they come close to them, they observe them with attention, they contemplate them in the most dead silence, collected almost as mute as at a Pilgrimage; it is stupendous, it is marvelous all of this, and I for 10 hours a day without interruption I admire and my soul gets filled with this very large compassion because I too am part of Your Paintings.⁹⁰

Ugo's sentiments corresponded to the general tenor of the Italian press and public reaction as recorded in Cooke's report and as noted by Marini in

Notiziario d'Arte:

Shahn has been a revelation for us. He spoke to us, he impressed us, he attracted us again We have encountered in him a delicacy and a virile energy, bitter and sometimes ironical, intimate and extrovert, rich with a richness of content and imagery.⁹¹

It was not necessary to place Liberation out of view in a back room at the 1954 Biennale for reasons of "public order."

As an artist, Shahn spoke the 'truth' about the events of the real world. The validity of this truth, however, depended largely upon his art being recognizably modern. This distinguished it from the art of the communist social realists, who presented the same issues but, because of their manner of presentation, were labelled propagandists rather than bearers of truth. "Ben Shahn," commented the German critic Heinz Keller in 1954, "appears to succeed in doing what "Social Realism" futilely attempts: the revival of subject matter in a legitimately modern form."⁹² Furthermore, for any art in the twentieth century in America or Western Europe to maintain its ideological monopoly on relevant truths, it had to remain in the forefront of the modernist revolution, since outmoded styles connoted outmoded truths. Yet a connection had also to be maintained with the old masters and thus with the 'universal' truths found in all art of all ages. Abstract expressionism succeeded in both—in the former through its total rejection of subject matter, and in the latter through its

evocation of primeval, primitive instincts—but was, as has been shown, inappropriate for Europe in 1954.⁹³ Shahn, though not in the absolute forefront of technical developments, revealed his modern roots in Liberation with his collage-like building interior, his bright, flat colours, and his distorted perspective. "No one," stated the head of a Rome art gallery, "wants to return to the academic style of 1880 like the communists do. (Shahn) has found a style which is wide enough in range to allow him to say what he wants, and he still is as contemporary as avant-garde abstractionism."⁹⁴ The two-dimensionality, simple forms, precise outlines, and use of tempera in Shahn's work align him with the past masters of fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italian art. "In the art of Ben Shahn," claimed an article in Corriere Militaire, "one can find again that state of grace of fifteenth-century painting which gave a complete and penetrating picture of its time."⁹⁵

Liberation, then, contained a jumble of references to war, destruction, reconstruction, children, fifteenth-century Italian painters and the churches where their works were found, and modern art. Such references would have appealed, accordingly, to an Italian viewer's hatred of war, persistence and fortitude, sense of home and family, cultural pride, Catholic beliefs, and tastes for modern, but not too modern, art. And whichever of these references were perceived, once the associations surrounding them had run their course, the viewer would have been left with the realization that the source of these possibly confusing but predominantly reassuring and familiar thoughts was the work of an American.

Liberation also had an ideological significance that was indicated in its title rather than in its images, a title that referred to a specific aspect of American foreign policy. Walter LaFeber, in his book America, Russia and the Cold War 1945-1975, discusses the change that occurred in American foreign

in 1950. In the summer of that year President Truman and his Secretary of State Dean Acheson

committed the United States to Formosa and Indochina, began re-arming Germany, nearly tripled American defence spending and—in the climactic act—invaded North Korea in order to show opponents at home and abroad that the United States was no longer content with mere "containment," but now aimed for liberation.⁹⁶

While the policy of containment laid emphasis on the preservation of existing non-communist regimes in order to prevent the expansion of Soviet power, the policy of "liberation" allowed for a more offensive role in the global fight against communism. This was particularly true in Third World countries which had yet to commit themselves to either the East or the West. American acts of military aggression in Korea and later in Viet-Nam were justified in terms of the "liberation" of the inhabitants of these countries from the forces of communism, rather than in the more practical terms of the protection of America's free access to the raw materials of these areas.

This concept of liberation, therefore, would have been a familiar and public part of American foreign policy in the early 1950s. In Italy the liberation to be carried out by the American government, or rather by the Christian Democrat government with American aid, was the freeing of the Italian voters from the grips of both communism and neo-fascism. The term would also have called up images of an earlier liberation of the Italian peninsula carried out by the Americans in 1943, which had left a certain amount of rancor among Italian citizens. Piovene paraphrased this rancor:

"The American army came to free Europe and rid it of Fascism, and for this reason it was hailed as a liberator. Of course, the process had its disadvantages. Europe came out of it half destroyed, terrorized, spiritually exhausted, and exposed on one side to Soviet invasion. Naturally, we don't mean to say that it wasn't a good idea to rid us of Fascism or that you Americans should have stayed home " Liberation was a good thing, but there was no need to enforce the "unconditional surrender," which broke down the last of Europe's defenses. Europeans did not ask to have the Russians brought into Berlin and Vienna, or to be slapped down when they dared utter a word of warning.⁹⁷

The excesses contained within this liberation, and American authoritarianism in its aftermath, wounded Italian national pride. The fact that signs of similar excesses and authoritarianism were appearing in America's 1950s liberation of Italy and the rest of Western Europe aroused further criticisms and added to the steadily increasing Italian nationalist sentiment. The authoritarianism took the form of threats to withdraw Marshall Plan aid or to deploy nuclear weapons in Europe if obstacles to American economic and military objectives were not removed.⁹⁸ The excesses appeared most glaringly in American anti-communist rhetoric. Again, Piovene provided an indication of liberal Italian opinion with regard to the latter:

Europeans . . . do not feel obliged to make a choice between war and destruction on the one hand and communism on the other In short, our anti-communism is not identical with the American brand Communism is part of our history, a piece of our game. It was born in our streets and universities, as an erroneous answer to the problems consequent upon the disintegration of our ruling class. This is why European anti-communists do not wish to see too much of a heating of the cold war, why they feel they must argue their enemies into silence rather than knock them over the head. Europe thinks of itself as being up against a heresy of its own creation, a diseased organ of its own body, and it wants to effect a cure by some method other than killing Europe is not opposed to the communist ingredient which is already a part of it; it is opposed only to communist domination. And its purpose is to conserve the freedom and variety of its various philosophies.⁹⁹

Piovene advised the United States that a more effective way to help Europeans battle communism than by force of arms (NATO, EDC) would be to "increase its prestige and make itself respected even among those who seem least to understand it."¹⁰⁰ America's response to such advice was its massive propaganda campaign, and the exhibition of Ben Shahn's work at the 1954 Biennale was a part of this campaign. Shahn's attitude toward communism also paralleled that expressed by Piovene, for while he condemned communist cures for the ills of society, he fought for the basic freedoms of communists themselves in America. In 1952 he was one of the people who signed an open

letter to President Truman asking amnesty for the eleven Communist Party leaders convicted under the Smith Act in 1948.¹⁰¹ His support of the liberal doctrine of assimilation, of re-educating communists rather than killing them, would have gained him favour with all but the extreme right and left ends of the Italian political spectrum and would have helped offset the extremism of much official American anti-communist propaganda.¹⁰² He was the humanitarian liberal appealing to all classes to work together peacefully toward a common goal—American democracy. His paintings were, in the words of Pilon Ugo, "the emblem, the avanguard (sic), the invitation to all Social classes to walk toward Humanity."¹⁰³

The Red Stairway, like Liberation, deals with the destruction caused by World War II. It was painted in 1944, when the war was over in Italy but not in all parts of Europe. A one-legged man climbs a bright red stairway which is propped against the remaining wall of a bombed-out building. Behind the wall to the left is a pile of rubble surmounted by a network of rafters. To the right of the stairway a desolate, rocky landscape stretches back to the horizon and is occupied, in the foreground, by a lone figure bent under the load of a basket of stones. His shirt is similar in colour and texture to the stone that he carries and that surrounds him. Again, we find the same ambiguity that characterized Liberation. What is the meaning of this stairway that acts as a bridge between the two figures and that leads them, along with the eye of the viewer, in endless circles? Are the rafters remnants of the old building or the beginnings of a new one? Is the stone carrier rising out of the earth or sinking into it? Who is this cripple ascending the stairway, and is he a sign of hope or of futility? Such questions create that play back and forth which Shahn spoke of to Morse. It is a play that is strikingly evident in the style of The Red Stairway

as well.

In the area below the rafters Shahn has utilized Cezanne's 'passage' technique to create confusion as to the actual shape and consistency of the form being depicted. The right portion of this area is placed at an angle to the picture plane that suggests one half of a corner. Yet the left portion, even though it completes with its top edge the corner begun by the right, contradicts this shape by appearing instead to meet the right section behind its front edge and parallel to the picture plane. Whether this area is supposed to represent stone, sky, or earth is also uncertain, for it combines the textures and colours of all three as portrayed elsewhere in the painting. A further play back and forth between flatness and depth is found in the manner in which the sharply-receding plane of the main wall is brought up short by the large red patch halfway down its length, which represents the underside of the staircase.

The references to past art in The Red Stairway are numerous. In addition to having utilized Cezanne's 'passage' technique, Shahn appears to have lifted his crippled figure straight out of Manet's Rue Mosnier Decked With Flags of 1878 (Figure 19), removing the figure's right leg rather than his left. The stairway in Shahn's painting is also suggested by the ladder and the shadows on the road in Manet's work, and both paintings utilize the same sharply-receding perspective. While these similarities would not have been evident to the majority of the viewing public, they would have provided those who were aware of them with a connection between Shahn, Manet, and the modernist tradition, thus establishing Shahn's validity as a modern artist in the eyes of those to whom historical continuity was important.¹⁰⁴

Within the limits of Shahn's own work, this mysterious figure in a plain black suit with his back to us recurs a number of times, usually with



Figure 19. Edouard Manet, Rue Mosnier Decked With Flags, 1878
Jakob Goldschmidt Collection
(Georges Bataille. Manet. Lausanne, Switz.: Skira,
n.d. Page 98)

two legs and no crutches. He is most often associated with a disaster that has just occurred and appears, in pairs, in Death of a Miner (1949) and Miners' Wives (1948) (Figure 5). In both these paintings, as well as in The Red Stairway, the anonymity of these figures suggests a sense of helplessness and acceptance of disaster rather than an active determination to prevent further disasters by dealing with their causes.¹⁰⁵

Those who perceived the connection between Shahn's cripple and Manet's painting might also have noted some association between the stone carrier in The Red Stairway and The Stonebreakers of Courbet. The figures in both paintings are engaged in seemingly endless tasks, their determination, or resignation, suggesting that they will continue thus until their deaths. Most Italians, however, would have been able to identify with the sense of endless struggle and poverty in The Red Stairway without the aid of this nineteenth-century French canvas, the desolate, rocky landscape in which Shahn's figure labours so closely resembling the southern part of their own country.¹⁰⁶

The references in The Red Stairway to past Italian art provided further possible means by which the Italian public could relate to this painting. The sharply-angled wall marked by a series of arched windows and the macabre atmosphere of the work carry reminders of the work of Giorgio de Chirico, particularly such a painting as his Melancholy and Mystery of a Street (Figure 20).¹⁰⁷ The influence of fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italian artists is found in a number of elements within the painting. The simple massive figures, plain walls, arched windows, and general sense of narrative suggest such fourteenth-century artists as Giotto, Duccio, and Maso di Banco. The presence of two notable fifteenth and sixteenth-century artists is indicated in a somewhat more indirect manner. The broken, jagged end of the

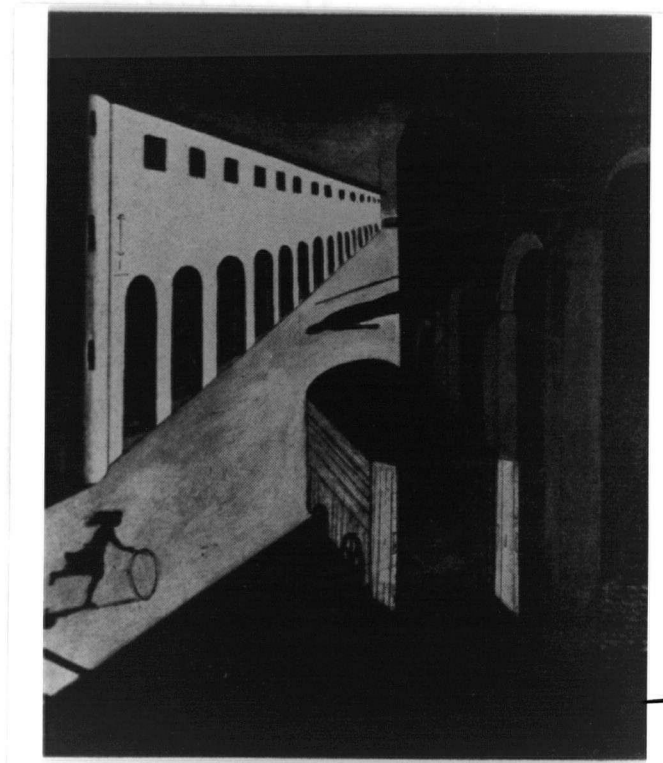


Figure 20. Giorgio de Chirico, Melancholy and Mystery of a Street,
1914
(Rodman. Portrait. Page 100)

wall in Shahn's painting was a device used by both Leonardo da Vinci and Sandro Botticelli to divide up space in their depictions of The Adoration of the Magi. Two such paintings would have been accessible to the Italian public in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (Figures 21 and 22).¹⁰⁸ The rafters in Shahn's painting can also be found in another version of The Adoration of the Magi by Botticelli, where a similar network of beams covers the figures of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus (Figure 23). The sharp, jagged wall and blackened rafters in Shahn's painting carried, therefore, two possible sets of connotations: death and destruction, and joy and rebirth. Shahn thus created that sense of balance and play back and forth that was so important to him and to American liberalism.

Shahn has identified himself in The Red Stairway with a lengthy artistic tradition ranging from the primitivism of fourteenth-century Italians to the realism of Courbet, the modernism of Manet and Cezanne, and the surrealism of de Chirico. Italians who saw this work at the 1954 Biennale could have attached importance to any or all of these associations, depending upon which coincided with their own ideas regarding the role of contemporary art in society—should it be narrative like the works of fourteenth-century Italian artists or should it merely concern itself with the stylistic developments begun by the French modernists?

A viewer's level of education, artistic or otherwise, would also have influenced his or her awareness of these various associations, people often tending to see what they are taught to see. Of all the references to past art in Shahn's painting, those referring to fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italian artists, whose works were so highly visible throughout the country, would have been most easily discernable to the Italian public in general. The reviews of the 1954 Biennale in Corriere Militaire, Paragone,



Figure 21. Leonardo da Vinci, Adoration of the Magi, c. 1481
Uffizi Gallery, Florence
(Cecil Gould. Leonardo. Boston: N.Y. Graphic Society,
1975. Page 42. Figure 17)



Figure 22. Sandro Botticelli, Adoration of the Magi, early 1470s
Uffizi Gallery, Florence
(Lionello Venture. Botticelli. Vienna: Phaidon, 1937.
Plate 16)



Figure 23. Sandro Botticelli, Adoration of the Magi, 1482
National Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Mellon Collection
(Frederick Hartt. History of Italian Renaissance Art.
New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969. Page 286. Figure 345)

and Sele Arte all noted the connection between Shahn's work and these early Italian artists, though none of the reviews mentioned any specific works.¹⁰⁹

The interpretations of Shahn's painting when it was first produced were slightly different than those in Italy in 1954. In 1945 the American business magazine Fortune described his whole series of war paintings, of which The Red Stairway was a part, as "personal, emotional statements put down in a style little related to past masters or current schools of art."¹¹⁰ They were, for Fortune, representative of an America that had attained, in its new role as world leader, both political and cultural independence from Europe. The Red Stairway was described in this magazine as having had its genesis in Shahn's memory of the eruption of Mt. Etna and the persistence of the Italian people in returning to their destroyed homes. It embodied, therefore, that persevering, homeloving image of Italy so aptly presented by Soby in his essay on Shahn in the MOMA Biennale catalogue.¹¹¹

The colour red, which occupies so prominent a place in The Red Stairway and in many of Shahn's other paintings, contributed to a further interpretation of his work in America. As the United States moved into the Cold War and the ideological threat of communism reared its ugly head, Shahn's preference for this colour resulted in certain people accusing him of having communist allegiances. In 1948 Henry McBride, art critic for the New York Sun, attacked the painting Allegory, with its large red lion (Figure 24), as "a subtle tribute to our quondam friend but present enemy, the Soviet Republic," and condemned the political implications of Shahn's work as "the shadiest. The shade often is red, and it is this time." He further suggested that Shahn be deported along with the Red Dean of Canterbury.¹¹² It is possible, therefore, that The Red Stairway could have carried similar communist associations for reactionary Italians in the unsettled political atmosphere of 1954.



Figure 24. Ben Shahn, Allegory, 1948
Fort Worth Art Center
In Memory of Mrs. J. Bomar and Mr. W.C. Phillips
(Rodman. Portrait. Page 40)

Fortune also commented on the manner in which Shahn dealt with the subject of war:

The most penetrating war art has not depicted battle action. How could it? Battle action in war painting is like the sex act in the literature of love; artists have learned that literalism is the worse part of esthetic valor.¹¹³

Shahn's paintings provided one alternative to the literal depictions of battle action. Abstract expressionism provided another, though it had yet to materialize on the American art scene in 1945. Shahn's anonymous figures, his symbolism, his sense of pathos, found favour with an audience unprepared to allow the realities of war to invade the domain of fine art. Of Shahn's presentation of post-war reconstruction in The Red Stairway Cooke writes:

Described in words or painted by a lesser artist, the theme would be either sentimental or propagandistic. With the lyrical vision of Shahn it is neither, but is a simple description of the seemingly futile endeavour of the dispossessed people, stated with compassion and poetic sincerity.¹¹⁴

In 1951 Selden Rodman described Shahn's series of war paintings in a manner similar to that of Fortune:

The impression conveyed by these ten pictures may be summed up in the word 'pathos'. The war is seen not in terms of action or battle or masses or ideals. It is seen in terms of desolation, homelessness, loneliness, civilian starvation and the individual sufferer.¹¹⁵

It is by focussing on the individual sufferer that one is prevented from seeing the broader implications of such suffering and the actions needed to deal with the source of the problem rather than the symptoms.

Both Liberation and The Red Stairway were, without a doubt, finely crafted works of art. In their sensitive handling of colour and line—the latter in the refined tradition of Paul Klee—they held great visual appeal for Italians and non-Italians alike. But underlying this aesthetic appeal was a series of complex associations which gave to these works a particular significance in Italy in 1954. And because these two paintings contained such

a great number of interpretative possibilities, they were able to win approval from the broadest possible range of the Italian public.¹¹⁶ No one person would have been able to perceive all of the associations contained within their borders. But there was a good chance that among the references to family, reconstruction, religion, Italian fourteenth-century art, French modernism, and Italian surrealism, each individual viewer would have been able to find some theme or figure that struck a positive note. And the more positive notes struck for Shahn, the sweeter the song for America.

Footnotes

¹All of these writings have been referenced in footnotes 25 to 27 of the Introduction. The official Biennale catalogue was obviously important, as well, as promotional literature, but it included the same essays on the artists as appeared in MOMA's catalogue.

²"Prizes cannot be viewed in isolation, as sudden bounty; they are almost always part of a series of public events" (Alloway, Venice Biennale, pp. 20-21). Prizes were important because they would increase the prestige of an artist and thus the value of his or her work. Shahn was the recipient of the Sao Paolo purchase prize at the 1954 Venice Biennale.

³Shahn was also included in MOMA's international exhibition "Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors" that travelled throughout Europe during 1953-54, and was part of the U.S. exhibition at the 1953 Sao Paolo Biennale where he was awarded a major prize. In addition, articles on him appeared in both the pilot and Fall, 1952 issues of the American international magazine Perspectives, USA (Selden Rodman, "Ben Shahn," Perspectives USA, pilot issue (January 1952):59-72; Selden Rodman, "Ben Shahn: Painter of America," Perspectives USA (Fall 1952):87-104). Both articles were accompanied by reproductions of Shahn's work, including Handball, Liberation, and Miners' Wives.

⁴Ben Shahn, "The Artist and the Politician," Rights 1 (May 1953):n.p. Shahn was a member of the Freedom of the Arts Committee of the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. He was a sponsor of the January 1953 Conference along with Albert Einstein, Thomas Emerson, F. Lloyd Wright, and others. His talk was part of the Freedom of the Arts forum at this conference, and was accompanied by talks by the authors Matthew Josephson and Merle Miller, James Thrall Soby, and the economist J. Raymond Walsh. He also designed a poster for the conference (Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D144).

⁵Ben Shahn, "The Artist and the Politician," Art News 52 (September 1953):34-35+.

⁶Shahn had been named, along with a number of other modern artists, in Senator George Dondero's attacks on modern art in Congress. See U.S., Congress, House, Senator George Dondero, "Communist Art in Government Hospitals," 81st Cong., 1st Sess., 11 March 1949, Congressional Record, 95:2317-18; and U.S., Congress, House, Senator George Dondero, "Communist Maneuver to Control Art in the United States," 81st Cong., 1st Sess., 25 March 1949, Congressional Record, 95:3234. He was also labelled communist by the leaflet Counterattack (25 July 1952) for his support of, among other things, the Bill of Rights Conference, the National Council of Arts, Sciences and Professions, the defense of the Hollywood Ten, and Henry Wallace's presidential campaign.

⁷Shahn, "L'Artista e il politicismo," pp. 26-27.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹Ibid., p. 28. Sele Arte was an Italian art journal similar in content and political stance to Art News.

¹²Ibid. See the quote by Hughes included on page 18 of Chapter One of this paper.

¹³Shahn, "L'Artista e il politicismo," p. 26.

¹⁴Carlo Ragghianti, "Lettura Aperta," Sele Arte, no. 4 (January-February 1953):42. Lists of senators and of artists are found on pages 42 and 43 respectively.

¹⁵Ben Shahn, quoted in MOMA, 2 Pittori, n.p., and taken from a lecture given at Harvard University in April 1951.

Art critic Peyton Boswell commented in 1949 on the suitability of modern art as a representative of American culture:

"... . "modern" art is one of our strongest outposts of rugged individualism, or private enterprise and the valuable human desire to build that better mousetrap (Peyton Boswell, "A Plea For Tolerance," Art Digest 24 (1 June 1949), quoted in a speech in Congress by Senator Javits of New York on 23 August 1949 (Congressional Record, p. 12099))."

While Shahn defended the right of artists to produce social realist art if they so wished, he did not defend the quality of this art. His condemnations of Russian social realist art will be seen later.

Also, Shahn's ideas on modern art and his canvases represented only one part of liberal ideology, while those of the abstract expressionists represented another. For an analysis of the controversy over which of these two types of modern art was most "American," see Pohl, "Campaign of Truth."

¹⁶Shahn, "L'Artista e il politicismo," p. 28.

¹⁷For a record of Soby's involvement with MOMA and his upper-class background ("the scion of a Hartford family which had made its fortune in the manufacture of pay telephones") see Lynes, Good Old Modern, pp. 235, 403.

¹⁸The full text of Soby's essay and Shahn's statement can be found in Appendix A.

¹⁹James T. Soby to Ben Shahn, 17 March 1954, Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D147.

²⁰Hughes, The United States and Italy, pp. 183-84. The similarity between this description and that of Soby and Shahn is less surprising than at first glance, when it is remembered that all three men shared the same liberal ideology and support for the American government.

²¹This attempt to destroy the continuity of history failed, for abstract expressionism merely ended up being incorporated into the prevailing ideology

as the latest link in the still-unbroken chain of art historical development. The importance of maintaining a link with the past has already been discussed in footnote 71 of Chapter One.

²²Barr, "Gli Stati Uniti," p. 66.

²³The exact nature of these references will be pointed out in the discussions of Shahn's paintings Liberation and The Red Stairway.

²⁴Hughes, The United States and Italy, p. 197.

²⁵A sampling of newspaper articles dealing with this early anti-communism and a discussion of the reasons behind it can be found in Robert Percy Weeks, ed., Commonwealth vs. Sacco and Vanzetti (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1958).

²⁶Paul von Blum, The Art of Social Conscience (New York: Universe Books, 1976), p. 101.

²⁷Sacco and Vanzetti were charged with the robbery and murder of a paymaster and guard at a shoe factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts. For an account of their trial see Weeks, Commonwealth; Herbert B. Ehrman, The Untried Case; the Sacco-Vanzetti Case and the Morelli Gang (New York: Vanguard Press, 1933); and Eugene Lyons, The Life and Death of Sacco and Vanzetti (New York: International Publishers, 1927).

²⁸Vittorio Zincone, "Moral America," in Burnham, What Europe Thinks of America, p. 48.

²⁹Hughes, The United States and Italy, pp. 198-99.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 177.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 176. A similar American-backed purge of labour unions occurred at this same time in France.

³²The Marshall Plan was also announced at Harvard in 1947.

³³Ben Shahn, "Some Revaluations of Commercial and Fine Art," talk presented in 1950 to the students of Franklin School in New York, in John D. Morse, ed., Ben Shahn, second printing (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 127.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 126.

³⁵Robert Motherwell, "The Modern Painters World," Dyn 6 (1944), quoted in Barbara Rose, Readings In American Art Since 1900 (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 131.

³⁶Mark Rothko, statement in Possibilities: An Occasional Review, no. 1 (Winter 1947-48):84.

³⁷For the exact meaning of these phrases for abstract expressionists see Guilbaut, "Création et Développement d'une Avant-garde Américaine," (Ph.D.).

³⁸Ben Shahn, Paragraphs on Art (New York: Spiral Press, 1952), n.p.

³⁹Gian P. Paoli, a writer for the communist paper Il Contemporaneo, condemns non-objective art as "a truly 'pure' art, detached from material reality and from the everyday preoccupations of common man" (Gian P. Paoli, "Ben Shahn in Cantina," Il Contemporaneo, 25 Settembre 1954, p. 1). For a sample of Russia's attacks on abstract art see Aline B. Saarinen, "USSR vs. Abstract—A Leading Soviet Cultural Organ Attacks International Moderns," New York Times, 22 August 1954, sect. II, p. 8.

⁴⁰The EDC was finally defeated in August 1954 by the French government's refusal to ratify it. Of American pressures on Europe to rearm Kolko writes that "the Europeans understood the costs to their own economies; for rearmament, after the first stimulus to production, was guaranteed ultimately to worsen their situation by increasing the cost of imported raw materials, leaving them much less to export or consume" (Kolko, Limits of Power, p. 637).

⁴¹The belief in the central importance of the individual was one of the basic tenets of American democratic ideology. In a 1960 study entitled United States Foreign Policy: Ideology and Foreign Affairs conducted by the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960) the first of seven basic elements in America's constitutional democracy was described as follows:

"The human person and his unique worth stands at the center of the democratic doctrine. From this follows the deep concern for human liberty and dignity. Human welfare is the measure of social and state action; the human being is looked on as an end in himself and not as a means or instrument to be manipulated by the society or state" (p. 8).

⁴²For more information on Barr see Lynes, Good Old Modern and Dwight Macdonald, "Profiles: Action on West Fifty-third Street—II," The New Yorker, 19 December 1953, pp. 35-66.

⁴³Barr, "Gli Stati Uniti," p. 62. Barr's response to the attacks of American legislators can be found in his article "Is Modern Art Communistic?" New York Times Magazine, 14 December 1953, pp. 22+.

⁴⁴Barr, "Gli Stati Uniti," p. 64. Shahn's notion of "human condition", while taking into consideration the reality of such things as war and poverty, does not view them in terms of class interests or conflicts.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 65. Shahn painted this series in 1932 though, five years after the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti.

⁴⁶For the Christian Democrat Party, "a political movement both of great landowners and of poor peasants, of industrialists and of Catholic workers, and of all the different types of middle-class citizens," the only common factor uniting them all was Catholicism (Hughes, The United States and Italy, p. 167).

⁴⁷The American government's responsibility lay, ultimately, in its refusal to stay the executions of the two Italian-Americans. According to Katharine

Porter, Mussolini even sent a personal letter to Governor Fuller requesting such a stay of execution (Katharine Anne Porter, "The Never-Ending Wrong," Atlantic Monthly 23 (June 1977), p. 56).

⁴⁸Barr, "Gli Stati Uniti," p. 64.

⁴⁹Hughes, in The United States and Italy, documents, among other things, the nature and extent of this poverty and unemployment in Italy in 1953.

⁵⁰Barr, "Gli Stati Uniti," pp. 64-65.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 65.

⁵²New York, Museum of Modern Art, "Two Painters and Three Sculptors From the United States, Shown at the XXVII Biennale, Venice, June 19-October 17, 1954," New York, 1 October 1956, p. 3. (Mimeographed) The Museum refused these requests because many of the paintings in the Biennale exhibition had already been travelling in Europe since early 1953 as part of MOMA's exhibition "Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors," and the Museum felt it would be unreasonable to request the lenders for a further extension of these loans (ibid.).

⁵³H. Lester Cooke to Porter McCray, 20 December 1954, in Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D148.

There was, according to MOMA's press review, a certain amount of negative press accompanying Shahn's exhibition. "Art d'Aujourd'hui described him as "more or less of a New Yorker illustrator but with a rather sombre humor" while . . . a Milenese critic stated, "He is more of a humourist than a real painter," and a London correspondent complained that "he sees the world from a gutter." (p. 15) Clement Greenberg also commented: "At the Biennale in Venice in 1954, I saw how de Kooning's exhibition put to shame not only the neighboring one of Ben Shahn, but that of every other painter his age or under in the other pavilions" (Greenberg, Art and Culture, p. 229). But the majority of the response to Shahn's exhibition was highly favourable.

⁵⁴MOMA, "Press Reaction," pp. 11-12.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 13. This Americanism was in contrast to the universalism and internationalism seen in de Kooning's art. While de Kooning's art did represent certain aspects of American life, they were not as obvious as the recognizably American content of Shahn's art. They were rather such notions as aggression, individualism, and ruggedness.

⁵⁶Lisa Licitra Ponti, "Ben Shahn a Venezia," Domus, no. 298 (Settembre 1954):37.

⁵⁷Franco Catania, Corriere di Sicilia, 24 Agosto 1954, quoted in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 14. MOMA lists this paper as an "independent" daily.

⁵⁸For a list of Shahn's works appearing at the 1954 Venice Biennale see Appendix B. Washington and gangsters could enter indirectly into the Sacco and Vanzetti and Tom Mooney works, and into his post-war paintings, but not in the positive manner suggested by Catania.

⁵⁹Alain Jouffroy, Arts-Spectacles, 29 Juillet 1954, quoted in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 14. The title and page of the article were not given. Jouffroy was a supporter of surrealist art and the notion that art could act as a social critic.

⁶⁰Hughes, The United States and Italy, p. 232.

⁶¹Catania, in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 12.

⁶²Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, The Fifties: The Way We Really Were (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1977), p. 406. Roberto Longhi also compared Shahn to Chaplin in L'Europeo (Milan) on 4 July 1954 (quoted in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 10).

⁶³Shahn did drawings of these hearings for the cover of the 15 May 1954 issue of Nation and for an article appearing in this issue by Edgar Kemler entitled "Will Joe Bolt the G.O.P.?" (pp. 419-21).

⁶⁴Catania, in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 12.

⁶⁵Pilon Ugo to Ben Shahn, 15 September 1954, translated by Leo Lionni, Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D148.

⁶⁶Cooke, report to MOMA, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 4. This contrast between "dignified" and "ox-like" presentations of workers and peasants resembles a similar contrast one hundred years earlier in France between the work of Millet and Courbet. Millet's acceptance was due largely to his passive depiction of the French peasantry, a depiction in keeping with the French bourgeoisies's desired image of what, in the middle of the nineteenth century, was a far from docile section of the populace (see Eric J. Hobsbawn, Age of Capital, 1848-1875 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975)). Courbet, in retaining all the coarseness of features and middle-class aspirations of this same peasantry in his paintings of the late 1840s and early 1850s, threatened to destroy this image (see T.J. Clark, Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic 1848-1851 (Greenwich, Conn.: N.Y. Graphic Society, 1973)). Shahn, like Millet, upheld the illusions of the powerful liberal middle class, as well as those of the peasants and workers themselves; communist painters such as Carlo Levi and Renato Guttuso attempted to dispell these illusions. One of the major retrospective exhibitions in the Italian pavilion was of the work of Courbet, made respectable by the passage of time.

⁶⁸MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 12.

⁶⁹Maria Poma, L'Ora (Palermo), 24 June 1954, quoted in MOMA, "Press Reaction," pp. 12-13. The title and page of the article were not given.

⁷⁰See Donald Drew Egbert, Socialism and American Art In the Light of European Utopianism, Marxism, and Anarchism, revised and expanded ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 136.

⁷¹Harrison E. Salisbury, "Russia's Art Reflects Trends in Russia," New York Times Magazine, 12 September 1954, pp. 8-9.

⁷²John Berger, "Renato Guttuso," Apollo 61 (March 1955):70.

⁷³"Party-Line Painter," Time, 30 November 1953, p. 74.

⁷⁴Ibid..

⁷⁵Paoli, "Ben Shahn," p. 1. That Handball and not one of Shahn's posters illustrated this article was probably due to the fact that the Museum only made available to the press reproductions of a limited number of Shahn's works.

⁷⁶MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 13. The posters were not listed individually in MOMA's catalogue, as they were in the large Biennale catalogue, but were listed merely as "A group of posters and prints."

⁷⁷Paoli, "Ben Shahn," p. 1.

⁷⁸For illustrations of and information about all of these posters see Kenneth W. Prescott, The Complete Graphic Works of Ben Shahn (New York: Quandrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1973), pp. 117-32.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 121. The same problem arose with Shahn's Sacco-Vanzetti series in 1932. The Sacco-Vanzetti Club in Little Italy in New York refused Edith Halpert's offer to sell them one of the paintings for \$10 because "they thought the pictures were grotesque." The buyers of the works "from the Rockefellerers on down, were from the other side of the tracks--or, politically speaking, fence" (Selden Rodman, Portrait of the Artist As an American, Ben Shahn: A Biography With Pictures (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951), p. 119).

⁸⁰Rodman, Portrait, p. 63. The Museum's status as a private institution would have protected it from most such prohibitions.

The poster Nazi Brutality dealt with the execution of all male inhabitants and 56 women of the village of Lidice, Czechoslovakia, and the placement of the remaining women in concentration camps and children in correction schools. All buildings were then levelled to the ground. All this was done because the Germans suspected some of the inhabitants of this village of being involved in the killing of the German Police General and Reichsprotektor for Bohemia and Moravia. Many of Shahn's CIO posters were also left unused because of union leaders' objections to their militancy (Ibid., p. 55).

⁸¹H. Lester Cooke, report to MOMA, p. 2.

⁸²MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 11.

⁸³Rodman, Portrait, p. 144.

⁸⁴The fact that MOMA made reproductions of Shahn's works available to the press may have contributed somewhat to the number of times his work appeared in magazines and newspapers.

⁸⁵MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 4.

⁸⁶Cooke, report to MOMA, p. 5.

⁸⁷Crane Brinton, John B. Christopher, and Robert Lee Wolff, A History of Civilization. Volume Two: 1715 to the Present, second ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1960), p. 577. This quote is part of the description of a full page color reproduction, on the opposite page, of Liberation, a reproduction that introduced the section on the Cold War.

⁸⁸John D. Morse, "Ben Shahn: An Interview," Magazine of Art 37 (April 1944):138.

⁸⁹Rodman, Portrait, p. 62. The pole in Shahn's painting could also represent the same sense of ambiguity and futility as the 'mats de cocagne' in Manet's 1862 lithograph The Balloon. A 'mat de cocagne' was a greased pole at the top of which were various gifts. In Manet's print there are five of these poles, the outside two being climbed by young children. Sitting in the center foreground, though, is a crippled child who is unable to enjoy the gifts at the top of the pole. A large balloon occupies the center of the engraving, a sign of progress and momentary escape from the sufferings of the poor and crippled who will not benefit from such progress. The similarities between the poles in Manet's and Shahn's paintings was pointed out to me in a conversation with Serge Guilbaut. Also see Brad Collins, "Manet's 'Rue Mosnier decked with Flags' and the Flâneur Concept," Burlington Magazine 117 (November 1975):713.

⁹⁰Ugo, letter to Shahn.

⁹¹Marini, in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 11.

⁹²Heinz Keller, "XXVII biennale," Werk 41 (August 1954):sup. 191.

⁹³For Greenberg, abstract expressionism's lack of recognizable content resulted in its "radical inadaptability to the uses of any interest, ideological or institutional," thus guaranteeing "the truth with which it expresses us" (see footnote 79, Chapter One).

⁹⁴Quoted in Cooke, report to MOMA, p. 4.

⁹⁵M.W.B., Corriere Militare, 19-25 December 1954, quoted in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 11. The Corriere Militare was the bulletin of the armed forces in Rome.

⁹⁶LaFeber, Cold War, p. 108.

⁹⁷Piovene, "Ungrateful Europe," pp. 121-22.

⁹⁸LaFeber, Cold War, pp. 169-70.

⁹⁹Piovene, "Ungrateful Europe," pp. 126-28.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁰¹These men were found guilty of conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the U.S. government by force.

¹⁰²The American government had to continue its extreme anti-communist

pronouncements up until 1954 because of the pressures of McCarthyism. After McCarthy's censure in 1954 the government was able to relax this extremism somewhat.

¹⁰³Ugo, letter to Shahn.

¹⁰⁴Manet's work depicts the festivities of 30 June 1878, the first holiday celebrated since France had entered and been defeated in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. While the speed with which it had repaid its enormous reparations and rebuilt its economy undoubtedly contributed to the joyousness of the occasion, the one-legged war veteran served "as a reminder of the human cost of war, of the price in life and limb exacted by such conflicts" (Collins, "Rue Mosnier," pp. 710, 713). Italy, as well, was faced after WWII with the rebuilding of its economy and with the payment of 360 million dollars to Russia, Greece, Yugoslavia, Albania and Ethiopia. These countries had refused to follow the lead of the Western powers in renouncing any claim to reparations (Hughes, The United States and Italy, p. 212).

¹⁰⁵This figure also appears in Shahn's painting Self-Portrait Among Church-Goers of 1939. His presence here could refer to the evils caused by the intolerance present in much orthodox Christianity.

¹⁰⁶The Stonebreakers by Courbet was destroyed by fire during WWII.

¹⁰⁷Ponti describes Shahn as "a graphic artist of exceptional talent, whose satirical forms are derived from surrealism" (Ponti, "Pittura alla Biennale," Domus, no. 298 (Settembre 1954):30).

¹⁰⁸The painting by Leonardo also includes the placement of two stairways against the half-destroyed wall, though they are situated perpendicular rather than parallel to the wall. The broken-wall motif appears in many fourteenth and fifteenth-century paintings. Another example can be found in Maso di Banco's St. Sylvester Resuscitating Two Deceased Romans of c. 1340 in the Bardi di Vernio Chapel, Sta. Croce, Florence.

¹⁰⁹Corriere Militare, quoted in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 11; Alberto Martini, "Ben Shahn," Paragone, no. 57 (Settembre 1954):63; and "XXVIIa Biennale di Venezia: Ben Shahn," Sele Arte, no. 12 (May-June 1954):32. The author of the Sele Arte article also compares Shahn to Grosz and Vivin, while Martini compares him to Grosz and Klee. In a letter to Shahn dated 31 October 1954 two Italian art students also described the children in Liberation as "angel-like" and found that Cherubs and Children reminded them of Fra Angelico da Fiesole. They went on to compare the weeping figures in Death of a Miner to the depictions of the taking down of Christ from the cross by Italian primitives and the walls in May 5 to the "voids" and "plentitudes" of Maso di Banco's St. Silvestro stories (Marisa Volpi and Carla Lonzi to Ben Shahn, Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D148).

¹¹⁰"Aftermath of War: A Portfolio of Paintings by Ben Shahn," Fortune 32 (December 1945):169.

¹¹¹See the previous discussion of this image of Italy in Chapter Two, pages 45-46 of this paper.

¹¹²Quoted in Rodman, Portrait, p. 39. Shahn later devoted a whole book, The Biography of a Painting (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Fogg Art Museum, 1956) to an explanation of the non-political motivations behind Allegory.

While the particular color and structure of the stairway could well have been interpreted in Italy in 1954 as symbolizing the futility of following the path of communism, it is less certain whether this was Shahn's original intention in 1944. He was working at the time for the Political Action Committee of the CIO, and though he was not a communist, he was a strong supporter of the leader of the left wing of the Democratic Party, Henry Wallace. Russia, also, was still viewed as America's ally and the battle against communism had yet to surface in America as a major concern. A look at Shahn's work as a whole reveals a constant use of the colour red to signify a general sense of danger and foreboding, whether in the trees of Peter and the Wolf (1943) and Father and Child (1946), the blood of Death on the Beach (1945) or the large lion of Allegory (1948). His near death in a fire when he was a child may have added to the significance this colour held for him. It would be more reasonable, then, to suggest that Shahn intended the red stairway to symbolize the futility and horror of war in general, rather than of communism in particular.

¹¹³"Aftermath," p. 169.

¹¹⁴Cooke, report to MOMA, p. 3.

¹¹⁵Rodman, Portrait, p. 58.

¹¹⁶Italian critics saw references to other European artists in Shahn's works, in addition to those discussed in this paper. According to Cooke, the correspondent for Incom, the weekly Roman magazine, commented that Shahn "has learned the lessons of Matisse, Rouault, Chagall and Klee, and still emerges with a personality of style which is entirely his own" (Cooke, report to MOMA, p. 4).

CONCLUSION

What is this world against which the art of de Kooning rages with such fury? We have observed with true interest (we would not dare say with any sense of identification) his series of female figures

G. Mario Marini, in Notiziario d'Arte, 1954

A Roman lawyer told me, 'The American has become for us the foreigner par excellence. It used to be the Englishman whose wealth we saw and envied, now it is you. We often think of Americans as rich, friendly, but slightly irresponsible children, who have not experienced enough hardship to be adult in our sense of the word. It comes as a surprise, therefore, and in a way it is flattering, to see an American painter with such a deep understanding of life here in Italy Shahn sees things from the inside; we feel he is one of us.'

H. Lester Cooke, Director of the American Pavilion, 1954

Success and Failure at the XXVII Venice Biennale

The Museum of Modern Art chose to send to Venice two painters described by Barr in La Biennale as having not only radically different personalities, but as leading "two antagonistic styles of American art."¹ In the promotional literature their differences were further emphasized. De Kooning was discussed solely in terms of his art and position in the avant-garde of the art world, Shahn in terms of his politics and his relationship to Italy. There was a difference in the tenor of these discussions as well. The descriptions of de Kooning's art were vague and esoteric, filled with phrases such as 'tensions between space and things', 'juxtapositions of organic and inorganic phenomena', and 'suggestive and associative ambiguity'.² Shahn, on the other hand, was described in an informal, almost chatty, manner, a manner used to relate anecdotes from his childhood, his concern for the poor and oppressed, and the nature of his vast acceptance and financial success in America. These differences can be explained in terms of the audiences

at which the work and personalities of these two artists were aimed.

De Kooning's art was presented as proof to the avant-garde of the European art world that, contrary to the general climate of opinion in Europe and Russia, America was not only cultured, but in the forefront of contemporary artistic developments. While this art may have succeeded in proving the former, it did not, as was seen earlier, convince its audience of the latter. Indeed, whatever successes de Kooning's art might have enjoyed in the more advanced European art circles were more than offset by the negative impression the aggressiveness of this art made on the more general viewing public. It was with this public that Shahn's work found exceptional favour, a public composed of industrial workers, peasants, intellectuals, Christian Democrat government officials, liberal and conservative art critics, and a few slightly reluctant communist writers.

In spite of all their differences, there was one common factor that united these two "antagonistic" painters: they were both representatives of freedom and individualism in America—de Kooning the freedom to be unconventional, Shahn the freedom to be critical. How Shahn chose to exercise his freedom formed the basis of his popularity in Italy. He appeared as the champion of the poor and oppressed, as an honest, sincere, concerned artist who harshly criticized right and left-wing encroachments on the liberal-democratic ideal that constituted the heart of the "American dream." He won the approval of the Italian public by proving that he was far from irresponsible, that he had experienced enough hardships to be able to empathize with their concerns and to portray the "beauty" and "dignity" of their poverty.

In spite of all this success it is difficult, if not impossible, to say how much of an affect Shahn's exhibition actually had on Italian-American relations. His paintings were only one small part of a large, intensive

barrage of American ideas and images aimed at Europe by both private and governmental agencies. And while his status as a fine artist may have added a certain element of 'truthfulness' to the messages presented in his work, their limited number and circulation could not hope to compete with such sources of information as radio, cinema, the Church, and labour organizations. America's propaganda effort infiltrated all of these media as well,³ and yet its ability to maintain a positive, peace and freedom-loving image of America abroad was complicated by many factors. The most notable of these were the American government's continued nuclear and arms build-up and its military ventures in such countries as Korea and Vietnam.⁴ In the same manner Russia could either shore up the American image, such as by suppressing the 1956 Hungarian revolution, or deflate it with its political and cultural peace offensive.

In Italy the Christian Democrat Party continued to rule throughout the 1950s, with the power of right-wing parties diminishing drastically by 1958.⁵ Yet the Communist Party maintained its hold on approximately one quarter of the Italian electorate. Indeed, the longest-lasting of De Gasperi's four immediate successors was Antonio Segni, a member of the left wing of the Christian Democrats who ruled twenty-two months from 1955 to 1957. Another indication of the growing influence of the Left was the April 1955 election of Giovanni Gronchi, an elderly leader of the Christian Democrat Left, to the position of President of the Republic.⁶ American attempts, therefore, to check the power of the Left in Italy were largely ineffectual. The strength of this Left was too deeply rooted in Italy's past. It was, as Piovene pointed out, "part of our history, a piece in our game."⁷ It was a strength based on a large and organized industrial working class who saw the Communist Party as its only hope of raising its standard of living.⁸

The effect of the Italian government's 'opening to the left' was not an advantageous one for America in the area of foreign policy. It contributed to a growing belief in Italy that "the leftist menace was a bogey inherited from the past, that in the late 1950's and early 1960's there was not the remotest chance of a Soviet invasion welcomed by Italian Communist embraces."⁹ Such a belief challenged the ideological rationale behind De Gasperi's policy of cooperation with the United States and other countries of Western Europe. The left-wing supporters of this view within the government felt that Italy's demographic and economic needs should maintain priority over foreign policy concerns and that less money should be spent on a military build-up meant to combat an illusory Russian threat. And while they agreed that Italy should remain within NATO, particularly after the Russian suppression of Hungary in 1956, they were violently opposed to American missile bases in Italy and to the American project of a European Multilateral nuclear force.¹⁰ Segni, a left-wing Christian Democrat, was also responsible during his term as head of the government for the passing of a law restricting American exploitation of gas and oil in favour of the Italian public corporation, the Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi.¹¹

Ben Shahn fared better than the American government in Italy after the 1954 Biennale, as evidenced by the numerous requests for exhibitions of his work by both governmental and private agencies, and by the translation of his biography by Selden Rodman into Italian.¹² He also maintained his popularity within American government and art establishment circles, appearing in an Italian-U.S. exchange exhibition organized by the Boston Public Library in 1954; the XXVIII Venice Biennale, along with de Kooning and thirty-three other artists sent over to illustrate the theme "America Paints the City"; and the 1959 USIA exhibition "U.S. Prints To Italy."¹³ And he also continued in his

role as official representative of America, being invited in 1956 to sit on the jury for the selection of Fulbright candidates in Italy, and appearing, three years later, on one of the most well-known and revered of America's national symbols--the American postage stamp.¹⁴

Shahn remained, as well, in the center of the American government's attempts to deal with left and right-wing attacks on its liberal policies. Russia's peace offensive had taken the edge off its image as a threat to world freedom and peace, thus forcing the American government to respond favourably to this offensive in order to counter the growing feeling that America's intransigent opposition to communism was working against world peace. But the improvement of American relations with Russia in the latter half of the 1950s was complicated by the Cold War atmosphere which the American government had so effectively established at home. Even though Senator McCarthy had been silenced in 1954, the machinery of McCarthyism continued to operate for the remainder of the decade, largely through the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). It was in answering certain of the accusations of this Committee that Shahn again appeared as the critical representative and defender of a liberal American democracy.¹⁵

In 1959 the USIA included an exhibition of American paintings as part of the first official American trade fair ever sent to Russia.¹⁶ The presence of works by Shahn and other artists with alleged records of communist affiliations prompted the inevitable protests from reactionary artists such as Wheeler Williams, sculptor and President of the American Artists' Professional League, and from the chairman of the HUAC, Francis E. Walter. On 1 July 1959 Shahn was called before the Committee to defend the inclusion of his work in this exhibition.¹⁷ In his statement he praised the efforts of the American government to establish cultural relations with Russia and reaffirmed the

anti-reactionary sentiments expressed in his article "The Artist and the Politician:"

The governments of the United States and Russia seeking to attain peace and understanding for their peoples have arranged for the interchange of cultural, scientific and other exhibitions

Whatever this Committee may succeed in dragging out of the remote past of any artist it interviews, I believe that its chief purpose is not to serve this democracy or the public welfare, but that it is to vilify and humiliate a certain group of artists whose work is in the vanguard, and whose thinking is fresh and experimental.

Whatever its temporary successes at home, the world effect of the Un-American Activities Committee has been more than once to turn us into an international laughing-stock, to lose us respect and friendship on every hand, to earn us the reputation of being a Philistine nation—which we are not.

The artists whom it is about to crucify are, on the other hand among our greatest international assets. Their names are known and honored in every country in Europe. Their works are coveted, their approach and understanding of art is studied. Just how, and to what extent will the present interrogation serve the National interest?¹⁸

How and to what extent will it serve the National interest?—such was the basis of America's cultural propaganda offensive during the Cold War.¹⁹ De Kooning's art failed to serve this interest in Europe in 1954. Even though it represented the same liberal democracy as did the art of Shahn, the particular aspects of this democracy that it emphasized—aggression and innovation—were seen as either undesirable or unconvincing, creating anger or boredom but seldom praise. Ben Shahn's exhibiton at the 1954 Venice Biennale could have done nothing but serve the National interest. So thorough was the creation—through publicity and through the particular works that appeared at the Biennale—of an image of him as an honest, humanitarian, socially-conscious, liberal American artist that it was hard to see the paintings for the preconceptions.²⁰ Of all these qualities, that which made the strongest impression was his Americanness. As Dr. L.J.F. Wijsenbeck, Director of the Municipal Museum at the Hague, wrote to Porter McCray in September 1954:

"I am very much in favor of showing Ben Shahn's work in this country. He is in my opinion one of the greatest phenomena of modern art and absolutely American."²¹ Standing in front of his paintings in 1954, one could almost have heard the words Shahn spoke fourteen years later, a year before his death:

I tell you, I think I am the most American of all American painters. This is a novel thing to say. It is said without modesty. Maybe because I came to America and its culture and was sort of swallowing it by the cupful.²²

It was this predilection for the cultural spirits of American democracy that made Shahn its ideal representative. No matter how much he may have disagreed with the unfortunate inequalities within this democracy, he still found it, in his own words, "the most appealing idea the world has yet known."²³

Footnotes

¹Barr, "Gli Stati Uniti," p. 64.

²Ibid., p. 66.

³These infiltrations took the form of the USIA radio station Voice of America, Hollywood movies, the encouragement of Catholic anti-communism, and the attempts to purge unions in France and Italy of communist elements.

⁴Such a military build-up required an even more intensive effort to convince the world of America's peaceful intentions. A part of this effort was the USIA's international "Atoms For Peace" exhibitions. See USIA, Third Review of Operations, pp. 1-3, 16.

⁵One cause of the Right's decline was the settlement in late 1954 of Italy's dispute with Yugoslavia over the city of Trieste, a settlement which deprived the extreme nationalists of their most reliable attack on the Christian Democrat government. (Hughes, The United States and Italy, revised ed., p. 152).

⁶Ibid., p. 203. The Christian Democrats' political machine had chosen a conservative non-party candidate but had been outvoted by a coalition of Communists, Socialists and left-wing Christian Democrats.

⁷See quote by Piovene in Chapter Two, page 92.

⁸The Communist Party had also gained increasing support from the peasant populations of the South in the 1950s.

⁹Hughes, The United States and Italy, revised ed., p. 255.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 223-25.

¹²In addition to the requests for his work mentioned in Chapter Two on page 58, Shahn was invited to send works for inclusion in the national painting exhibition in Rome Prize of La Spezia in 1958. He also continued to be the focus of articles in Italian art magazines, such as the twenty-page piece by Carla Lonzi and Marisa Volpi in Paragone 69 (Settembre 1955): 38-61. Late in the decade Mirella Bentivoglio began her book on Ben Shahn which was published in 1963 (Ben Shahn (Rome: de Luca Editore, 1963)).

¹³The print Phoenix was included in the Boston Public Library exhibition (Arthur W. Heintzelman to Ben Shahn, 12 February 1954, Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D143). The exhibition of forty-nine paintings at the XXVIII Biennale was organized by MOMA and the Institute of Art, Chicago. One of Shahn's photographs also appeared in MOMA's 1955 Family of Man international photography exhibition. The prints Supermarket and Alphabet of Creation appeared in the USIA exhibition. Shahn was also included in a USIA-sponsored Art

Directors Club International Exhibition in 1958 (Art Directors Club to Ben Shahn, n.d., Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D143).

¹⁴The other two members of this Fulbright jury were Lionello Venturi and the Italian painter Afro (Richard Downar, American Commission for Cultural Relations with Italy, to Ben Shahn, 1 March 1954, Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D144). His appearance on a U.S. postage stamp was referred to in a letter from E.C. Gregory to Ben Shahn, 27 January 1959, Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D145.

¹⁵He was also involved in the controversy over the "Sport in Art" exhibition assembled by the American Federation of Art in 1956 for Sports Illustrated and destined to appear at that year's Olympics in Australia under the auspices of the USIA. While touring the States prior to its departure reactionary citizens in Dallas demanded the removal of four paintings because of the communist affiliations of the artists. These four artists were Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Leon Kroll, William Zorach, and Ben Shahn. The exhibition was not sent to the Olympics (see de Hart Matthews, "Art and Politics," pp. 769-70).

¹⁶USIA, Eleventh Review of Operations (1 July-31 December 1958):5-6.

¹⁷The session was held in camera. Shahn had also signed a petition to Congress to abolish the HUAC that was published in the 7 January 1959 issue of the Washington Post.

¹⁸Ben Shahn, "Statement of Ben Shahn," pp. 1-2, in Ben Shahn Papers, Reel D148. Shahn was also one of the sponsors of an ad in the 16 October 1959 issue of the New York Times (p. 40) calling for an end to the Cold War and the formation of a new American foreign policy based on detente.

¹⁹Thomson and Laves restate this question and its implications in their 1963 review of the relations between culture and U.S. foreign policy: "Underlying all these question (regarding size, funding, etc. of America's cultural program abroad), and in a sense conditioning the answers to all of them, are the fundamental questions: What are the over-riding objectives of United States foreign policy? Can cultural programs contribute to their advancement? If so, how?" (Thomson and Laves, Cultural Relations, p. 137).

²⁰See Appendix B for a discussion of the selection of Shahn's works.

²¹Quoted in MOMA, "Press Reaction," p. 17.

²²"Interview: Ben Shahn Talks With Forrest Selvig," Archives of American Art Journal 17, no. 3 (1977):18.

²³Shahn, "The Artist and the Politician," Art News, p. 67.

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APPENDIX A

Text of James T. Soby's essay on Ben Shahn and Ben Shahn's statement
 (in Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2 Pittori: de Kooning, Shahn; 3
Scultori: Lachaise, Lassaw, Smith, catalogue for the XXVII Vencie
 Biennale, 1954, American exhibition, n.p.)

James T. Soby:

"It is appropriate that Ben Shahn's art should now be exhibited in Italy. He has felt for that country a profound affection and respect ever since the day in childhood when, newly arrived in America from his native Russia, he went with his father to a barbershop where the men were discussing the recent eruption of Mount Etna. Shahn could not understand why the inhabitants of the Etna region were moving back to it promptly, when at any moment the volcano might begin to rumble again. An Italian barber gave him an explanation he has never forgotten: "When you have planted so much in one place, you have to go back to it." Later, in the mid-1920's, Shahn traveled in Italy, fascinated by its superb visual heritage in the arts and loving the dignity and grace of the people. During the early 1940's, his grief over the disasters of war tended to focus on Italy, and he painted a number of pictures in which Italian children, unquenchably imaginative, explore the new ruins of ancient buildings. "Like most artists," he wrote recently, "I look upon Italy as 'the home place'."

Growing up in the poorer sections of Brooklyn, New York, Shahn learned to draw by making sidewalk sketches of figures in the world of sports who were the idols of his critical and insistent audience of local toughs. His mature career began around 1930 with the realization that art-for-its-own-sake interested him less than narrative commentary on the life and social issues of his time. He then painted a series of pictures depicting episodes in the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti (significantly, both Italian-Americans) and in the trial of the labor leader, Tom Mooney. His sympathies always have been with the oppressed, though he has vigorously repudiated the cure for their ills proposed by Communism. He thinks of art as being ideally a public service, and he has used his great talents in painting murals for Federal buildings and designing posters for various causes in which he has believed.

The paradox of this public-social activity is that Shahn has remained at the same time one of the most private and individual of American easel painters. His extraordinary lyricism of vision, his pictorial invention, his gifts as draftsman and colorist—these have resulted in a host of pictures which have been bought avidly for American collections, public and private, from one coast to the other. The respect we in this country feel for him has already begun to extend abroad. It is our hope that it will now be shared in Italy."

Ben Shahn:

"So much that we live with and experience today has become devoid of personality. Objects that we handle and use are mass produced, our clothing, mass designed But art is still the citadel of the individual. It is one of the few remaining outposts of free speech—unprocessed speech. The personal touch of the artist's hand remains ineradicably upon his canvas. Whatever he says or feels is communicated directly and without modification to those who look at his work.

"But I think that artists ought to recognize this, that there is no moral reason why art ought to go on if it has nothing further to express Art is important only if it essays to be important Society needs more than anything else to be reminded that man is, in himself, ultimate value. It needs to be reminded that neither the pressure of events nor the exigencies of diplomacy can warrant the final debasement of man Art, because it is the innate expression of man, speaks also in final values, tends to reaffirm the individual. Art is neither use, nor appointed task; but given human compulsion, some intellectual stature and great competence, it can perhaps bring man back into focus as being of supreme importance."

APPENDIX B

List of Paintings, Drawings, Prints, and Posters by Ben Shahn at the XXVII Venice Biennale

Paintings:

Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco, 1932.Two Witnesses (Tom Mooney Series), 1932.Vacant Lot, 1939.Handball, 1939."Pretty Girl Milking the Cow", 1940.Peter and the Wolf, 1943.Italian Landscape, 1943-44.The Red Stairway, 1944.Cherubs and Children, 1944.Four Piece Orchestra, 1944.Pacific Landscape, 1945.The Blind Accordion Player, 1945.Liberation, 1945.Father and Child, 1946.Spring, 1947.The Violin Player, 1947.Miners' Wives, 1948.Sound in the Mulberry Trees, 1948.Still Music, 1948.Nocturne, 1949.Summertime, 1949.Convention, 1949.Composition with Clarinet and Tin Horn, 1951.City of Dreadful Night, 1951.Anger, 1952.Beatitudes, 1952.Second Allegory, 1952.Age of Anxiety, 1953.

Homeric Struggle, 1953.

Girl Jumping Rope, 1943.

Drawings:

Susannah and the Elders, 1947.

Dancers, 1947.

Bicycle Act, 1950.

Man Picking Wheat, 1950.

Clarinets, 1951.

The Alphabet, 1954.

Prints:

Where There is a Book, There is not a Sword, 1950.

Musical Chairs, 1951.

Phoenix, 1952.

Triple Dip, 1952.

Patterson, New Jersey, I, 1953.

Patterson, New Jersey, II, 1953.

Posters:

This Is Nazi Brutality, 1942.

For Full Employment After the War--Register Vote, 1944.

We French Workers Warn You, 1942.

Break Reactions Grip--Register Vote, 1946

We Demand the National Textiles Act, 1935.

We Want Peace--Register Vote, 1946.

For All These Rights We've Just Begun to Fight, 1946.

Warning--Inflation Means Depression--Register Vote, 1946.

Shahn's paintings at the Biennale appear to have been chosen to illustrate two major themes: play/leisure time and disaster/injustice. It has been shown in the text of this paper how certain of the works in the latter category--Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco, Two Witnesses, Italian Landscape, The Red Stairway, Pacific Landscape, Liberation--related specifically to Italian concerns in 1954. A large number of them also contributed to the creation of the image of Shahn as a "American" painter with their settings

costumes—Vacant Lot, Handball, Pretty Girl Milking a Cow, Blind Accordion Player, Summertime, Sound in the Mulberry Trees.

The combination of the two themes of play/leisure and disaster/injustice create that general sense of balance so important to Shahn and American liberalism. America appears, through Shahn's paintings and drawings, as both a country of relaxation and good times and a country concerned with injustice and inequality. While his paintings present these concerns in an abstract passive sense, his posters present them in a more active revolutionary way. But even these posters are connected with the liberal American administration through the two elections for which they were created.

Cooke, in his report to MOMA, noted that "none of the works painted after 1949 has received the approval of the Italian public, perhaps because the themes are more esoterically American, or perhaps because the passionate conviction of the earlier paintings is lacking. City of the Dreadful Night, Convention, Age of Anxiety are passed by with a shrug" (p. 5). The lack of explicit Italian, as well as American, subject matter in Shahn's later paintings would certainly have contributed to their lesser popularity. They also did not contain the less explicit references to religion, reconstruction, family, etc. that were present in such paintings as Liberation and The Red Stairway. The lack of passionate conviction in Shahn's paintings of the early 1950s was also noted by Life magazine in an article entitled "Ben Shahn: Painter of Protest Turns to Reflection" (4 October 1954, pp. 96-100).