

# BEN SHAHN

**His paintings have the power of posters; his posters are works of art**



By JAMES THRALL SOBY

**R**EPRODUCED on these pages are several of Ben Shahn's posters as well as his paintings. The selection recognizes—as did the major showing given to him by the New York Museum of Modern Art—Shahn's double-barreled achievement as an artist. So interrelated are the two phases of his art that the posters here included exist also as easel pictures, and such a painting as *Father and Child* (inside the front cover) might become a memorable poster simply through the addition of lettering.

These images illustrate a fundamental of Shahn's philosophy: that there should be a minimum separation between the private and the public work of art. He believes

that the painter should speak with the same voice in the room and in the street. He is pleased by the criticism that his posters sometimes look like fragments of murals. "After all," he says, "the Renaissance frescoes were meant to tell a story, and many of their details could have been effective in poster form."

Ben Shahn brings to his poster-paintings the same kind of devotion and emotional force that characterize his easel pictures. He repudiates the modern conception

**James Thrall Soby** is chairman of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He is the author of studies of Picasso, Chirico, Dali, Klee, and, most recently, Shahn.

of the poster as a flat, brassy image, planned to seduce the eye but not to disturb the heart. He never paints anything with his left hand. Instead, he gives to whatever he undertakes, in whatever medium, his utmost conviction and pride. His hope, so evidently fulfilled, is that his painstaking sincerity will challenge both attentive connoisseurs and casual passers-by.

At the root of Shahn's art is his respect for reality, and it is significant that in his workshop, Sears Roebuck catalogues largely replace art books and manuals as sources of reference. He likes what people use and wear and build; he is a master of the actual detail of dress or place which gives the individual a heightened identity. He prefers to paint only what he has seen, or what he knows, from

documentary evidence, must certainly exist.

Yet even the hurried observer will be aware that Shahn is not simply a realist. He admires men like Picasso, Max Beckmann, and Paul Klee more than he does the genre artists of an earlier time. His own pictures abound in those distortions and elisions in which twentieth century art has been particularly rich. He does not blurt the truth, but tells it with vivid and trained eloquence.

Like every painter worth the name, Shahn cannot be defined exactly in terms of inspirational process. Nevertheless, there are a

**Hunger (1946), which needs no words to convey its message, was used by the CIO Political Action Committee as a poster addressed to the nation's voters. The label: We Want Peace**



*Shahn's technique: The sketch (left) is developed into this detail from his painting, Girl Jumping Rope (1943)*

The Violin Player (1947) symbolizes one of Shahn's preoccupations, the universal yearning for expression

few facts that may help us to understand how the works here reproduced came about. *The Violin Player*, for example, is based on a photograph taken by Shahn ten years before the painting was executed. During this long period the image haunted his memory as the symbol of a yearning which Shahn was astounded to find among people living in hopeless poverty (the Sears Roebuck catalogue is full of musical instruments, he says).

And through a comparable process, details from certain of his paintings swell in his imagination until they emerge as full-scale works, often in a quite different

context. The boy in *Hunger* was first a small sketch used for a food conservation drive in the federal housing development for garment workers where Shahn lives. The image grew with the times, so to speak, and in 1946 it served as a weapon of political propaganda and as an unforgettable plea against war.

A constant of Shahn's art is that it responds only to the deepest pressures on his consciousness. It is never hurried; it is never manufactured; it is never slick. This is the art of a man whose conscience keeps pace with his talent, who will not paint at all unless he can create an image, witty or tragic, lyric or harsh, in which he wholly believes. END

48

Pre-print

## WHAT LADY GODIVA WANTED

She would have liked to be a powerful queen, like Queen Boadicea who almost defeated the Romans and poisoned herself rather than survive her defeat; she would have liked to be a great magician, a second Melusina, and have men and beasts fawn at her feet; she would have liked to be a great lover like Isolde or Brunhilde of Neustria, or in more exalted moments, a great courtesan like Aspasia or Cleopatra. She dreamed of cunning and ruthless intrigues for domination like those of famed Fredegund of Austrasia. On other days, she wished to be a cherry-cheeked peasant girl waiting at a stile for her sweaty peasant lover: she fancied poverty, cold, starving children, an imprisoned husband, and her grim, lonely struggle in the dead of a bleak winter. She envied the oriental princesses who studied alchemy and astronomy and played so divinely on the lute that princes and sultans gathered from all points of the desert to listen, entranced, to their melodies. She wanted to be so many different types of women that she failed to be properly any one of them.

—Raoul Faure

From "Lady Godiva and Master Tom," Harper & Brothers. To be published soon.

OldMagazineArticles.com