The retrospective exhibition of Ben Shahn (1898-1969) will examine the career of this multifaceted artist, known to history as one of the great representatives of North American social realism of the Great Depression era. Born to a Jewish Lithuanian family who in 1906 settled in immigrant neighborhoods of Brooklyn, New York, Shahn grew up imbued with the socialist ideals of his craftsman father and his working-class environment. As a young man, he trained as a commercial lithographer in Manhattan. Later, in the 1920s, he would complete two formative stays in Europe; his works from that time show the influence of the School of Paris, in particular that of Henri Matisse and George Rouault.
In the early thirties, Shahn’s work turned towards realism, as the artist focused on themes of poverty and unemployment caused by the economic crisis of 1929. At the same time, his political commitment grew: in 1933 he assisted Mexican muralist Diego Rivera on the latter’s controversial fresco for Rockefeller Center, and thereafter engaged in several public mural projects on subjects such as Prohibition, prison reform, and immigration. He served as an editor of the progressive magazine Art Front. As a painter, Shahn embraced the causes célèbres of his day, including the trial and execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, creating a series in 1931-1932 on the Italian American immigrants who suffered a grave injustice. During the New Deal and the Second World War years, Shahn was employed both as a photographer and as a graphic artist, first by the Resettlement Administration-Farm Security Administration (RA-FSA) and then by the Office of War Information (OWI), for which he made anti-Nazi posters. In the mid-forties, he designed posters to support the cause of organized labour for the Congress of Industrial Organizations-Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC).

In the fifties, Shahn was an enormously popular artist, and was selected to represent the United States, along with Willem de Kooning, at the 1954 Venice Biennale. Yet at this same moment, with the ascendency of abstract expressionism and other non-objective artforms, his figurative art fell out of favor with certain New York critics and curators. These were also the years of “McCarthyism,” when progressive artists including Shahn were attacked for their suspected communist activity. Using allegory and veiled symbolism, Shahn responded to these accusations with paintings such as Discord (1953) and Second Allegory (1953), which refer to states of conflict, distrust and fear. Even as his postwar work became increasingly abstract, his overall artistic production maintained its social focus, addressing a whole spectrum of humanist causes, from anti-colonial struggles to civil rights. His most lyrical and spiritual works, incorporating stories and texts from the Hebrew Bible, are also infused with socially conscious content.

The exhibition, which will cover Shahn’s career thematically, includes many of the media in which he worked: paintings and mural studies in watercolor, gouache, and his unique type of tempera; lithographs and screen prints; drawings; and photographs. To enrich and contextualise this art, the show will feature examples of Shahn’s commercial design work and archival ephemera: illustrated and hand-scripted books and magazines as well as press and newspaper images that he collected, catalogued, and continually repurposed. As for his photographic work, the exhibition will highlight his documentary photographs not only as compelling stand-alone works of art, but also as visual source material for his paintings and posters. The presentation thus makes it possible to appreciate from contemporary perspectives Shahn’s extraordinarily inventive and ever-fascinating translation between media, which was so characteristic of the artist’s wide-ranging and experimental practice.

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