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How Free is Free? Ben Shahn, the Statue of Liberty, and the History of American Art

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In 1952, Ben Shahn (1898–1969) created a cover design for the June 28 issue of *The Nation*, which was devoted to the state of civil liberties in the United States (fig. 1). This cover is filled with a drawing of the head and part of the raised right arm of the French sculptor Auguste Bartholdi’s 1886 Statue of Liberty (*Liberty Enlightening the World*), located on Bedloe Island in New York Harbor. The journal’s title appears above the drawing and, above that, the question, “How Free is Free?” The rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy the previous year as spokesperson for the virulent anticommunism and right-wing political repression that marked the post–World War II decade had resulted in attacks on the civil liberties of liberals and communists alike—and on those who professed any sort of criticism of the political, social, or economic status quo.[1]

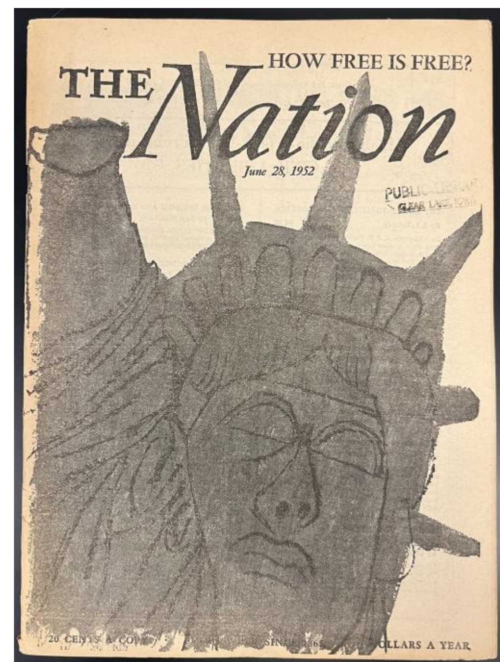

Fig. 1. Ben Shahn, cover for *The Nation,* June 28, 1952. From *The Nation*. © 1952 The Nation Company. All rights reserved. Used under license; © 2024 Estate of Ben Shahn / CARCC Ottawa; Photo: Stephen Lee Taller Ben Shahn Archive, Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University

Shahn’s drawing acknowledges the power of the statue as a symbol of the ideal of freedom for many in the United States. He does not attack the statue as a false symbol nor celebrate it uncritically; he recognizes its significance while presenting it as a troubled icon, representative of the personal anxieties and feelings of powerlessness (the torch-bearing arm is severed above the elbow) felt by many of those persecuted for living lives and holding beliefs that were anathema to McCarthy and those who agreed with him. At the same time, by contributing his drawing to a politically progressive journal, Shahn recognized that fighting the repression of the Cold War and political repression in general—racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia—required involvement in political activism.

This association between the Statue of Liberty and political repression had appeared over a decade earlier in the mural Shahn created in 1936–38 for the new, federally constructed town of Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey (now Roosevelt). In depicting the history of the immigrant Jewish garment workers who resided in Jersey Homesteads, Shahn included the

statue as a tiny sculpture in the small window at the back of the main hall of the Ellis Island immigration-processing station, located near Bedloe Island, where Shahn himself had arrived in 1906 as a young Jewish immigrant (fig. 2). Above are coffins containing the bodies of the working-class Italian American anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, victims of the nativist, reactionary politics of the 1920s; filing past the coffins are Jews fleeing Nazi Germany to the United States. In an early study for the mural, the coffins contained the bodies of two young African American men. In considering the treatment of African Americans and Italian Americans as interchangeable signs of injustice in the United States, and in associating both with discrimination against Jews, Shahn recognized the complicated and interconnected natures of racial, religious, class, and ethnic hierarchies in the early twentieth century, a time when immigrants from eastern and southern Europe (Italians and Jews among them) were considered less White than (and by) those of Anglo-Saxon descent.[2]

Fig. 2. Ben Shahn, Jersey Homesteads mural (now Roosevelt, NJ), detail, 1936–38. Fresco. © 2024 Estate of Ben Shahn / CARCC Ottawa

Thus, Shahn's images of the Statue of Liberty were part of both his personal history and his larger political and aesthetic projects. He wanted to create a vibrant and accessible visual language that could engage a broad public on both an individual and community level in the fight for justice. To achieve this goal, he cast his net wide, drawing on the worlds of art, religion, science, and politics, among others. He also placed his images in both fine art and mass-media venues, utilizing traditional painterly techniques and media (such as fresco and tempera) as well as the iconography and graphic art and design traditions of mass media and popular culture.

How is the work of historians of American art similar to Shahn's, and what additional lessons can be learned from the artist's approach to the Statue of Liberty? Like Shahn, historians of American art have re-examined Bartholdi's statue, revealing its visual and narrative power and its constantly shifting meaning within both a national and international arena. For example, Bartholdi originally intended the statue not as a symbol of liberty welcoming immigrants into New York Harbor but as a statement of French imperial power at the southern end of the Suez Canal.[3] In addition, the hundreds of thousands of workers who went on strike in 1886, as well as African Americans facing the dismantling of the social, economic, and political gains of Reconstruction, viewed the statue in a different light than the wealthy White men and women who facilitated its commission.[4]

The scholarly and pedagogical work of historians of American art is also, like Shahn's efforts, interdisciplinary and often draws on authors' personal experiences and political commitments to guide new interpretations. In addition, historians of American art are engaged in a search for ways in which to speak meaningfully and broadly about contested traditions and about both the promises and limits of the country's national iconography and history, to a nation fragmented along racial, ethnic, class, and religious lines. Our training and research allow us to provide valuable insights into a world saturated with images, where symbols like the Statue of Liberty are often drawn into highly contentious debates about the nature of freedom and what it means to be American.

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Notes

[1] Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947–1954* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

[2] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) I have capitalized White, as well as Black, in order to emphasize that race is a social construction. As the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah states: "Conventions of capitalization can help signal that races aren't natural categories, to be discovered in the world, but products of social forces" ("The Case for Capitalizing the *B* in Black," *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2020, http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159).

[3] Francesca Lidia Viano, *Sentinel: The Unlikely Origins of the Statue of Liberty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 2.

[4] Albert Boime, *Hollow Icons: The Politics of Sculpture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1987).