An Outlet for Dissent: Artistic Link in Ben Shahn’s Postwar Illustrations

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Abstract

This study reexamined the long-neglected illustration works of American social realist artist Ben Shahn. During the specific historical period between World War II and the Cold War, Shahn employed illustrations as a means to demonstrate his dissent through artistic practice. With the editorial illustration commissions based on specific texts, Shahn created a link of images among illustration, painting, and photography, which also functioned as a multi-material artistic link aimed at conveying dissent. As a result, Shahn succeeded in establishing an interactive space between art and society and offering a comprehensive response to a number of unresolved political issues and social phenomena in postwar America. His works therefore became classic public images in defense of dissent and served as an outlet for the artist’s dissent during the Cold War period.

Keywords: Ben Shahn, dissent, artistic link, editorial illustration, social realist art

1.0 Introduction

As a representative artist of American social realist art in the 1930s, Ben Shahn’s prewar creations covered all kinds of materials, such as paintings, murals, photographs, and posters. However, after the war he began to take on a large number of commercial art commissions, including magazine illustrations, advertisement, pamphlets, and cover design, which occupied the majority of his postwar creations. It was not out of sheer fortuity that Shahn devoted himself to illustration. Prior to the war, he did not receive any commissions or intentionally engage himself in illustration. It was when he worked as the editor of Art Fort in the 1930s that he provided two illustrations based on his personal experiences.
Most of the current studies focused on the artist’s paintings, photographs, and murals, whereas few researchers studying Shahn’s postwar creations regarded the illustrations merely as communication platforms or work materials and thus neglected the particularity of the illustration per se (Pohl, 1989; Prescott, 1982). Although Shahn’s illustrations were frequently mentioned in graphic design history or illustration history, these works were mostly introduced simply with images. With an in-depth analysis of Shahn’s postwar creations, this study found that the artist started taking on a great number of illustration commissions from the mass media after the war, especially editorial illustrations for magazines. These illustrations emerged during specific historical moments and retained their realistic and representational style. Despite their distinct references to certain political and social issues, these works had never received sufficient attention from scholars.

In view of this, this study probed into the course of Shahn’s postwar artistic creation as well as how he coordinated his dual role as a left-wing artist and an illustrator. Furthermore, it also investigated the relationships among the artist, the clients from different magazines, the texts, and the illustrations, in hopes of providing an insight into how Shahn linked his illustrations to contemporary issues and utilized them as a vehicle for expressing dissent. Lastly, the study examined how Shahn created an image-appropriating artistic link among illustration, painting, and photography by means of editorial illustration commissions based on specific texts, developing a practical artistic strategy that was effective and safe. In this way, Shahn succeeded in rebuilding an interactive space between art and society after the war and offering a comprehensive response to numerous unresolved postwar political issues and social phenomena. His illustrations thus were regarded as classic public images symbolizing the defense of dissent and provided him with an outlet for dissent during the Cold War period.

2.0 The Troubles of Being A Left-Wing Artist

Shahn devoted himself to illustration at the beginning of the Red Scare and witch hunts following the war, during which dissidents against the government were reckoned as potential communists or anti-American saboteurs. Many artists who took part in the New Deal in the 1930s were suspected to be supporters of communism because of the alliance between the New Deal and the Communist Party. Some of them were even blacklisted due to their works that touched upon social issues and were thus regarded as subversive activities against America. Despite being a determined anti-communist in support of democracy and liberty, Shahn’s identity as a well-known left-wing artist and New Deal supporter still put him on the blacklist. The FBI reckoned him as an overt Red and kept monitoring his residence and activities from the 1940s to 1966 (Mitgang, 1988).
Shahn was put on the blacklist not only because of his works that touched upon socialism and the labor movement and his overt identity as a New Deal supporter, but also his participation in the radical communist-leaning organization in the 1930s. Moreover, his identity as an RA/FSA photographer was also considered anti-American. Prior to the war, the FSA photographs were adored by the public due to their authentic representation of the era, which realistically captured the dilemmas in America caused by the Great Depression. Nevertheless, owing to the anti-communist atmosphere and the political stunts, these photographs were then regarded as anti-American propaganda utilized by left-wing socialists to purposely exhibit the most destitute condition of the Americans (Davenport, 1999). As a result, Shahn’s artistic practice once endorsed by the authorities and the public ended up communist and anti-American after the war.

In addition, Shahn was also a regular target of art censorship after the war. In 1946, the Advancing American Art exhibition at the MoMA was cancelled because it was attacked for not being able to honor America (Dossin, 2015). On top of that, Shahn’s exhibition works were also purposely published by *Look* in its article, “Your Money Bought These Paintings,” which exemplified the mass media’s hostility toward Shahn’s creations. During the same year, Shahn’s mural titled *The Meaning of Social Security* was accused of being full of negative social emotions and demanded to be removed or destroyed. From the abovementioned, it was evident that the ruling authority was unable to take up a modest stance toward the social reality the artist depicted for fear of exacerbating people’s dissatisfaction with the government.

George Dondero, a senator loathing the contemporary European art, seemed to intentionally target Shahn and publicly accused him of befriending the Communist Party (Dondero, 1949a). He even criticized the galleries and curators who supported Shahn in order to attack the artist and his supporters (Dondero, 1949b). Dondero’s attack on Shahn showed that he was well aware of Shahn’s influence on the public. As a matter of fact, the artist was at his peak during his retrospective exhibition at the MoMA from 1947 to 1948, where his creations were on display in almost all of the important galleries. His popularity during the 1950s testified to his works’ authentic depiction of numerous significant aspects of the public’s common experiences in postwar America as well as the artist’s strong influence on the people. Nevertheless, the public accusations against Shahn of being a Red still resulted in the cancellation of several art exhibitions in which Shahn was involved. Even after McCarthy’s resignation, the seemingly loosened anti-communist awareness still existed in right-wing parties and populist organizations. Shahn was still unable to fully detach himself from the Communist Party, and was even accused of being involved in the subversive communist activity by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1959. It was not difficult to imagine
the challenges Shahn encountered in maintaining his continual and passionate political participation and fulfilling his social responsibilities as an artist.

3.0 The Dual Role As An Illustrator and An Artist

Since the Cold War had forced socialists, communists, and all kinds of left-wing radicals to the margins of American society, left-wing artists during the 1930s like Shahn would need new artistic practice strategies in order to retain their position. This study contended that the mass media illustrations placed within the context of commercial art equipped Shahn to survive in the postwar era.

Shahn had been aware early on of the transformation of visual culture and the mass media’s lack of credibility, which was shown in his furious criticism of the mass media’s illusion in 1951: “All the wheels of business and advertising are turning night and day to prove the colossal falsehood that America is smiling. And they want me to add my 2%. Hell, no!” (“Baffling Ben,” 1951). On top of that, Shahn even purposely announced that he would leave his works to the copywriters, the widely-circulated slicks, and Hollywood, showing that he was fully conscious of his role as a producer of public image.

After World War II, Shahn began taking on illustration requests in a well-planned fashion, rejecting gallery intervention and accepting commissions only from acquaintances in order to abide by his role as a freelancer (Shahn, 1954). Accepting commissions from acquaintances and paying attention to the work subject rather than commercial interests ensured that the artist and the client shared similar values. If the client refused to accept the completed work or wanted to make changes to it, Shahn would begin looking for other opportunities to present his work or have it displayed and sold by galleries in order to manifest the artistic value of the illustration. In this respect, Rodman (1951) highlighted Shahn’s principles in accepting illustration commissions: “Unless there is, in the objective situation which he is about to paint, some element which, on the one hand, may offer him a challenge as to an aesthetic solution; or, unless there is a human or personal problem which he feels the need to present and interpret,” which demonstrated Shahn’s illustrations as an artistic form of self-realization (p. 41).

In some occasions, the illustration commissions were also employed as a resistance weapon. During the controversial removal of the Advancing American Art exhibition in 1946, Hearst Papers accused the event of featuring several Communist artists in the exhibition. Later when the same publisher Town and Country commissioned Shahn to create an illustration cover, Shahn deliberately accepted the commission with a lower charge, for he felt that if he were accused of being a Communist, those who published his works would subsequently get themselves into trouble or invite humiliation (Shahn, 1968).
In other words, in the production of public images, Shahn overstepped the regular production order of public images by consciously selecting his clients, making it his own form of rebellion.

Taking on the illustration commissions with an artist’s mentality, Shahn maintained that there should be no boundary between commercial art and fine art, criticizing the formalist aesthetic standards and taste at the time. His progressive idea regarding illustration happened to match that of a group of postwar magazine art directors, who were weary of the mechanical visual image of illustration and fervently sought for an artistic intervention in hopes of a renaissance of illustration (Arisman & Heller, 2004). With two-thirds of them being illustration clients of Shahn’s acquaintances, these art directors hoped to not only call viewers’ attention to commercials or publications by means of illustration but enhance the artistic value of illustration works.

Instead of following the conventional piece-rate system or editorial regulations for commercial illustrators, Shahn often completed the cases without the editor’s review and even volunteered to reduce the price of the works he was particularly fond of. If an illustration ended up unused by the editor, Shahn would send it to the gallery exhibition for another opportunity to have the work displayed without making alterations in it. Unlike some artists, he was not opposed to putting his own signature on his commercial work and always put his personal signature identical to that on his paintings on each illustration. In other words, unlike most illustrators who were subject to the clients, Shahn viewed illustration as an independent form of artistic creation and elevated it to a higher artistic level. Instead of catering to mainstream tastes and styles commonly seen in trendy magazines, the artist demonstrated a high level of originality with his simple and representational contours, daring and powerful thorn-like strokes, and the characteristics of wood engraving.

Shahn had a particular liking for magazine illustration commissions, especially editorial illustrations, which were mostly commissioned by editors or art directors and focused on detailed description in a strongly personalized manner similar to that of subject coverage. During the commission process, Shahn would conduct an evaluation on how appropriate the text was, while the editor provided visual materials relevant to the text or assisted Shahn in communicating with the author and field investigation. These editorial illustrations for magazines directly touched upon certain sensitive postwar social and political issues, such as the mining accident, social events, labor rights, and civil appeals. Based on specific texts, these illustrations extended themselves beyond the original text and allowed their viewers to immediately grasp the essence of the story and the artist’s viewpoints, creating a space for visual imagination that objective magazine photographs could not replace.
All in all, it was true that for the commercial artists and potential illustrators in the 1950s, Shahn exemplified the courage of a free creator and the possibility of artistic autonomy.

4.0 Editorial Illustration: Linking Contemporary Issues and Expressing Dissent

After the war, internal conflicts in American society intensified. The Cold War gave rise to the hysterical anti-communist clamor. Moreover, due to theHUAC’s and the FBI’s score settling activities and McCarthyism that followed, many left-wing intellectuals chose to avert themselves from controversial issues. Although Shahn also became more cautious with his creations, he did not detach himself from social topics. In 1951, he published the article “What Are You Doing Out There?” (Fig.1) in *New York Times* at his own expense for the purpose of calling on artists to express their ideas and advocating the freedom of speech (Shahn, 1951). The illustration commissions happened to offer him a means to express his observations on the political and social reality. The editorial illustrations for magazines that this study examined in particular created a powerful association between contemporary issues and the expression of dissent, for they delivered specific political matters and social texts.

4.01 Fortune and the Labor Movement

Shahn’s very first illustration commission was closely related to the labor movement. In 1946, *Fortune* commissioned Shahn to create editorial illustrations for “Labor Drives South,” an article on the CIO’s predicaments in the Southern labor movement. *Fortune’s* then art managing editors were Shahn’s friends in the OWI. They were fond of Shahn’s works and often exchanged political views, ensuring that the commissions matched Shahn’s political beliefs (Rodman, 1951). *Fortune* paved the way for Shahn’s concern for public media images. When on a go-along interview to the South, the artist realized that the poster he created for the labor movement failed to touch the feelings of the working class. As a result, he was determined to familiarize himself with those who were eager to have their voice heard.

While the Southern labor movement in 1946 involved trade unions of different industries, Shahn intentionally selected the tobacco workers and the Atomic Union as materials to express his support for the black community and his anti-nuclear political stance. In this respect, *Fortune* and Shahn were on the same side of the fence, for they were both liberalists standing against racial discrimination in the South and labor inequality. In a series of illustrations for “Labor Drives South,” Shahn offered an illustration portraying the local sheriff from behind to criticize the authorities’ connivance at the illicit violent behaviors during the labor movement. However, the illustration ended up unused by the editors. Shahn was opposed to the harmonious tone in the article’s narration of the Southern trade union’s situation. He perceived the tension on the spot, hence his depiction of the back view of the sheriff confronting the workers at the headquarters of the trade union (Shahn, 1957a).
In other words, Shahn’s illustration was not merely a combination of text and image, but an independently thinking subject derived from the artist’s self-expression and critical gaze.

It was during the beginning of the Cold War where the anti-communist sentiment was rampant that the organizational competition between the CIO and the AFL dragged in political conflicts. Shahn demonstrated the conflict of ideologies implied by the contention between the CIO and the AFL with his illustration *Oak Ridge Atom Workers* (Fig.2). The “vote for the CIO” slogan on the tobacco house in the illustration underscored the tobacco workers’ stance, while the words “Be American—Join the American Federation of Labor” on the wire pole on the right signified that of the atom workers. Without portraying the workers’ appearances, Shahn effortlessly gave a clear clarification of the complicated controversy with the Southern trade unions. In addition, the sign that read “protect secrets!” in the middle hinted at the oppression of patriotism on the political stance of the trade unions, criticizing the AFL’s attack on the CIO’s Communists, which resembled that from the Republican Party, for the purpose of winning the support from the majority of the workers, as well as how it threatened the Southern workers that joining the CIO equated to joining the Communist Party, both of which were deemed unpatriotic and anti-American. The distorted anti-communist consciousness had a direct impact on the development of the labor movement, worsening the exploitation on the workers caused by capitalism and making the Cold War a dark era for the laborers.

### 4.02 Political Magazines Raising Their Voices

Since the 1920s, both *The Nation* and *New Republic* had defined themselves as a left-leaning and liberalist magazine and held sway among left-wing political magazines. They regarded themselves as a liberalist and, with their political stance in support of progressivism, had long served as critical magazines on politics and art. Both *New Republic* and *The Nation* demonstrated the ideal of an intellectual aiming for social justice and liberal human rights, with their content covering a number of aspects overlooked by the mainstream media, such as the labor movement and McCarthy’s oppression of civil liberties. Their publishers, writers, and editors saw the magazine not merely as a means of making money but a way to express themselves and affect others, as well as a combination of guidance, entertainment, and knowledge that could have a positive impact on society.

After the trip to the South with *Fortune*, Shahn became more radical in his magazine illustrations and started to frequently collaborate with the political magazine *New Republic*, with an intense focus on the sensitive political issues at the time. The editor of the magazine Henry Wallace was also a friend of Shahn’s.
In 1947, Wallace left the job for his presidential campaign as the Progressive Party candidate, and later Shahn also became a member of his campaign group. The artist once discussed his intention to collaborate with *New Republic*: “[…] art dose belong on the pages of a mainly political journal. I am in fullest agreement with this point of view, believing as I do that artists are superb political theorists, and that if our service had been solicited, the country would have been many steps in advance of where it is today” (Shahn, 1964, p. 212). The account demonstrated Shahn’s desire to bravely speak up about political issues and his faith in art’s power to bring forth the progress of the era.

The illustrations in *New Republic* also touched upon a great number of issues regarding the labor movement, in which the portraits of the furious workers and the CIO leader Philip Murray functioned as the symbols in Shahn’s examination of the labor movement. These illustrations depicted the workers, the union leaders, and the scene of the gathering in an intense narrative fashion, making these evident figures and sites a visual image with the media characteristics that reminded the viewers of the authorities’ oppression and the feelings of the workers.

Regarding itself as a liberalist and holding a political stance in support of progressivism, *New Republic* held sway among left-wing magazines. During his collaboration with *New Republic*, Shahn was strongly opposed to the HUAC witch hunt, which he straightforwardly criticized not in his paintings but in his illustrations. In 1948, Shahn was accused of propagandizing communism through his creations. As a result, he held grudge against the public opinion produced by the anti-communist consciousness, hence his illustrations for the article “Guilt by Gossip” published in the same year, through which he offered a rigorous political criticism of the witch hunt.

In the eight illustrations Shahn produced for the article, the artist deliberately portrayed the main figures taking part in the purge in a detailed manner in order to enable the viewers to identify them. During the same year, the artist was accused of the inclination to communism in his works. In the face of cynicism and the public opinion following it, Shahn depicted three figures (Fig.3) whispering to one another to criticize those friendly witnesses who brought accusations against others as an act of self-protection under the pressure of the blacklist. The purge then was directed against not only the communists but all those contributing to social progress who were considered as saboteurs. With the image of a stamp surrounded by fire and the capitalized word *SUBVERSIVE* (Fig.4), Shahn depicted the predicament of the left-wingers who were expelled because of the title of saboteur they were forced to take on. The fire, which symbolized the Red Scare and the witch hunt initiated by the authorities, signified the authorities’ violent and random accusations of communism and their chilling effect, making itself a significant symbol in Shahn’s creations during the Cold War period.
Shahn used illustration as an action station where he expressed his political views. His illustrations also became more radical. Apart from his criticism of the labor movement and the witch hunt, his illustrations also probed into the radical postwar anti-Semitism. Being a Jew himself, Shahn rarely expressed intense anti-Semitic emotions and chose to portray the traumatic feelings surrounding the Holocaust or the Jewish identity using metaphorical Hebrew words. In two consecutive articles on anti-Semitism in *New Republic*, Shahn, in a radically critical manner, pictured Hitler (Fig.5) being seized by a giant hand in order to criticize the anti-Semitic stance of the radical right-wingers in America at that time. Moreover, Shahn also portrayed the anti-Semitic politicians mentioned in the articles, most of whom he disliked, as grinning or visually disproportionate figures who all raised their right hand by chance as a token of their “loyalty” to the radical right-wing authorities in America.

In 1952, when McCarthyism was rampant, the HUAC initiated the witch hunt with the aim of eliminating communism. Combined with McCarthy's provocative accusations, the Red Scare had transformed itself from an ideology to virtual political hunting. The American government’s oppression of the liberalists and the left-wingers, as well as its discrimination against dissidents and blasphemy against human rights, had started to become intolerable. In 1952, Shahn was accused by the anti-communist magazine *Counterattack* of leaning toward communism. As a result, CBS terminated its television commercial collaboration with Shahn and put the artist on the blacklist.

It was worth noting that *The Nation*, which had not worked with Shahn at that time, invited Shahn to design the cover for its 1952 special issue “How Free is Free,” (Fig.6) an article examining the importance of safeguarding the basic rights under McCarthyism (Kirchwey, 1952). Likewise, another editor of *Fortune* who had never worked with Shahn also instantly offered the artist an illustration commission. Such expressions of support from these magazines seemed to be a protest against the false accusation. It also evinced that Shahn’s postwar identity as a left-wing artist had been approved by the left-wing groups. As opposed to the silence and attacks in the artistic circles, the mass magazines, which tended to be regarded as kitsch, stood against the hysterical McCarthyism by means of practical commissions.

In a letter written by the editor of *The Nation* to Shahn, the editor put forth his idea that the cover for “How Free is Free” could manifest the impact of the witch hunt on the civil liberties in America (McWilliams, 1952). Shahn eventually selected the Statue of Liberty as the subject matter. Considering that the statue was the symbol of liberty in America, Shahn purposely had the statue’s eyes closed and its raised left hand holding a torch cut off in the illustration, in response to the impact McCarthyism had on liberty in America. Most of the illustrations Shahn created for *The Nation* were for political reviews, featuring
right-wingers related to McCarthyism such as politicians and media professionals. Shahn also created his first political portrait of McCarthy, whose cunning expression and malicious smile reflected the artist's habitual method of depicting depraved politicians. In consideration of the upright politicians portrayed in other illustrations for The Nation, such as Walter White, who had long been an ardent supporter of the NAACP and was pictured as a solemn intellectual, Shahn succeeded in establishing a visual identification system for opposite stances, through which he expressed his distaste for and criticism of McCarthyism.

5.0 Images Without Boundaries: Artistic Link in Illustrations

A number of Shahn's illustrations were inspired by the FSA photographs in the 1930s, with some of them taken by the artist himself. Shahn had long been accustomed to developing his illustrations based on photographs or public images. After the war, he became part of the public media images by taking on illustration commissions and integrated the images into his works. This study contended that during the Cold War period, the magazine illustrations provided Shahn with a secure means of interpretation that tallied with his ostensibly passive yet entirely proactive artistic autonomy. By means of image appropriation of magazine illustrations and paintings, the illustrations functioned as visual social texts linking issues of the texts to contemporary events and transformed them into subject matters and symbols. In this way, the illustrations surmounted the political and social predicaments in postwar America and laid bare the hidden side of the nation to the public.

5.01 Fortune vs. New Republic

Shahn's first collaboration with New Republic involved the reappearance of an illustration rejected by Fortune in its article “Labor Drives South,” which was then used as an illustration for “The CIO Takes a Long Lease In The South,” (Fig.7) an article in support of the CIO labor movement. As opposed to Fortune's fear of being involved in radical criticism, the article in New Republic straightforwardly criticized the federal government’s manipulation and racial discrimination against the black community that impacted the Southern labor movement. In the rejected illustration, Shahn used the image of the sheriff turning his back on the scene of the strike as criticism of the bureaucratic connivance of the then ruling Democratic Party as a result of political interests. The inspiration of the illustration was a photograph (Fig.8) taken by Shahn during his go-along interview with Fortune in the South, and the image was repeatedly adopted in his paintings. It was first seen in Laissez-faire (Fig.9), which featured a distinct depiction of the conflicts between management and labor and the back view of the sheriff who refused to be involved in the disputes.
On top of that, another image from a news photograph (Fig.10) of the Ford strike in 1937 could also be seen in the work. In the photograph, the company’s representative could be seen beating the union leader, which reflected the violence imposed on the union members during the CIO labor movement. Later in Trouble (Fig.11), the figure of the sheriff was replaced with a voting booth representing politics. The official stance represented by the sheriff was thus extended to the poll's political impact as a way of reminding the viewers that in order to avert the authorities the sheriff represented, they must make good use of their votes. When Shahn was put on the blacklist by the anti-communist magazine Counterattack in 1951, Container Corporation commissioned him for a poster, in which he again pictured the voting booth (Fig.12), asserting that ignorant and emotional votes would eventually give rise to catastrophes: “Where the voting booth is present government cannot for long pursue ends other than those of the public good […]” (Rodman, 1951, p. 47). The transition from the sheriff in the Southern labor movement to the voting booth indicated Shahn’s persistent criticism of the ruling government. What’s more, the artistic link generated by the interrelated images in the illustrations demonstrated the synchronicity of the images and disclosed the cardinal significance of the creations.

5.02 Editorial Illustrations in Harper's

The collaboration between Shahn and Harper's was the most well-known example of the artistic link created by the artist by means of illustration images. During their collaboration, seven series of illustrations were produced, including five editorial illustrations and two magazine covers, with two of the editorial illustrations on the Chicago fire and the hydrogen bomb controversy later being used in paintings and becoming the artist’s prominent creations.

While Shahn’s wife was already a collaborative illustrator of Harper's at that time, it was his friend John Bartlow Martin, a journalist who happened to be writing an article on the mining accident titled “The Blast in Centralia No.5: A Mine Disaster No One Stopped,” who contributed to the collaboration. According to the account of the mining accident, one hundred and ten miners were killed due to the proprietor's abominable negligence and the bureaucracy. Infuriated by the miners’ tragedy, Shahn voluntarily reduced his own wages and created almost sixty illustrations. Although only twenty-four of them ended up being used, he regarded it as an ideal way to disseminate the injustice many suffered (Greenfeld, 1998). The article eventually caused a sensation and facilitated the subsequent legislation on labor safety.
The illustration reproduced one of Life’s news photographs (Fig.13) in its 1947 article, in which the miner’s wife was waiting for information on her husband in the locker room at the entrance of the pit (Fig.14). Another photograph (Fig.15) of the family of the deceased in the article was also reproduced in two paintings, Miner’s Wives (Fig.16) and Death of Miner (Fig.17), both of which integrated three of the illustrations in Harper’s. As opposed to the emphasis on the characters and the course of the incident in the text illustrations, Shahn called viewers’ attention to the family of the deceased, considering the ninety-eight widows and seventy-eight children left without fathers after the Centralia explosion. The image retained several identifiable details, such as the death scene of the miners, the sorrowful family members, and the place they lived and worked in, which constituted a visual space with the alienating effect of a collage in which images carrying multiple significance were interrelated.

The clenched fists of the miner’s wife directly conveyed the miner’s silent endurance and his sense of despair, which gave rise to powerful pictorial tension. The two figures in black suits which repeated their appearance in the illustration symbolized the accusations of the collusion in neglecting labor safety against the bureaucracy and the proprietor, underscoring the deficiencies in labor politics and the social system at that time. What’s more, it was worth noting that the officials and the police officers in Shahn’s illustrations were deprived of their social function, which demonstrated the artist’s intense distrust of the then government, or, more frankly put, his criticism of the Truman government.

Nevertheless, the most famous editorial illustration Shahn created for Harper’s was for “The Hickman Story” published in August 1948. The article revolved around a tragic fire accident in Chicago. A black man named John Hickman, after rejecting the landlord’s malicious demand for removal, lost his four children in a fire deliberately set to his residence. Out of fury, the man killed the landlord with a gun (Martin, 1948). The accusation of murder against Hickman gave rise to collective protest and anger in the black slum community. Local radical political organizations and black civil rights organizations took part in public defense of Hickman, making him a victim of social injustice rather than a criminal in order to demonstrate their protest against the poverty and racial discrimination suffered by the black people in Chicago. Hickman eventually won the victory and was released, and the trial succeeded in calling the whole nation’s attention to the racial injustice issues.

Both Martin and Shahn were inclined to portray Hickman’s personal story instead of giving a simple account of the incident. Shahn even renounced the visual reference materials related to the event, for he felt that the significance of the incident had surpassed what a story could present, in consideration of the universal property of tragedy that could move more people (Shahn, 1957b). As a result, he depicted Hickman’s life as a Southern tenant farmer and his living environment in Chicago, through which he hoped
the viewers could gain an insight of the impact of the racist residential system on a black family that truly existed. Shahn eventually offered sixteen editorial illustrations in three weeks at the price of $250 dollars, which was approximately one-tenth of the regular price for his works.

The multi-material artistic link could once again be seen in Shahn’s illustrations through the image appropriation strategy. The mourning portrait of Hickman grieving for his children was inspired by Shahn’s 1946 painting *Sing Sorrow*, which captured the universal feeling of grief the artist aimed to convey. In addition, the image of the Southern black female cotton picker represented by Hickman’s wife was a reproduction of a mural created during the New Deal era, and it embodied the situation of the Southern black workers in a tender and feminine manner. Furthermore, the conspicuous image of the four children (Fig.18) who lost their lives in the fire was inspired by the news photograph of the massacre during World War II (Fig.19). In the illustration (see Fig.18), it read: “Paper was made to burn, coal and rags. Not people. People wasn’t made to burn” (Martin, 1948, p. 47). Through the interrelated text and image, the black Americans’ intense accusation against their destiny was clearly evinced.

According to Shahn’s own narrative, after he completed the illustration, the four children who died in the story reminded him of his childhood fear of fire, and therefore he wanted to create the emotional tone surrounding disaster experiences (Shahn, 1957b). Inspired by the illustration, he created the painting *Allegory* (Fig.20), which contained a great number of inner symbols regarding the artist’s own life experiences, and he even completed the work “The Biography of a Painting” as a self-narrative of the course of his artistic creations. The fire in Hickman’s apartment signified the artist’s childhood memory of fire during the time he lived in the New York slums. What’s more, the red beast surrounded by fire was likely to be a combination of the fire-breathing monster Chimera in Greek mythology and the she-wolf in Roman mythology. On top of that, Hickman’s deceased children lying beneath the burning beast might represent either the Jewish children of the massacre or Shahn’s own siblings. By means of these inner experiences and the collaged images, the artist constituted an emotional base that was independent of the incident’s reality yet revolved around the universal property of disaster experiences.

This study particularly called attention to the dissent of the era demonstrated by the image-appropriating artistic link in *Allegory*. The red flames surrounding the red monster, which reproduced the burning apartment in the Hickman illustration (Fig.21), directly indicated the cause of the fire in the Hickman story and served as a political criticism of the racist Jim Crow laws and the residential segregation system in Chicago. The symbolic association between the fire and the disaster was also endorsed by most of the scholars in their discussion of *Allegory*.
As a matter of fact, the first origin of the fire in Allegory was the fire of politics as a criticism of the accusations against the saboteurs led by the authorities in the illustration for “Guilt by Gossip” in New Republic (see Fig.4). The oppressive fire symbolizing the government continued to repeat itself in Shahn's later works and became the artist’s obscure symbol in his criticism of the ruling regime. Other examples included the painting Death of Miner (see Fig.17), which was inspired by the artist’s illustration on the mining accident created for Harper’s. Above the surviving miner on the left who ran to the scene of the accident was a giant red flame which corresponded to the red skin of the representatives of the bureaucracy, indicating that what Shahn’s fire truly represented was “a political disaster,” and the fire therefore could be reckoned as a pictorial symbol of the artist’s political criticism.

The fire's significance as the political disaster was even more distinct in Shahn's 1953 Second Allegory (Fig.22). It featured a silenced figure lying on the ground and an accusing hand reaching out from the red flame above, which reproduced the hand of the authorities making accusations against the saboteurs in the illustration for “Guilt by Gossip.” (Fig.23) On top of that, the atomic symbols on the left indicated the lying man's identity as a scientist. Through the work, Shahn manifested his concern for the inconceivable impact that science without moral standards would have on human beings, criticizing the Truman government for forcibly silencing a number of scientists who expressed their severe concern for the nuclear arms and the hydrogen bomb testing.

Despite Shahn’s efforts to avert unnecessary political attacks and accusations by using obscure symbols derived from his illustrations in his paintings during the Cold War, in 1948, Allegory was accused by Shahn’s art-critic friend Henry McBride of carrying red symbols of Moscow owing to the plentiful red patterns in it. Shahn immediately retorted the accusation with “The Biography of a Painting,” an account of the course of his personal creations, as well as by contending that Allegory was derived from the illustration produced for “The Hickman Story” in Harper’s. The accusation ended up dismissed, and with the aid of the freedom of the mass media, Shahn was able to obtain a secure means of interpretation, through which he utilized the illustration images of the mass media as an effective outlet for dissent.

The third editorial illustration Shahn created for Harper's extended the subject from domestic dissent in America to contemporary global dissent. In Ralph Lapp’s “The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon” published between 1957 and 1958, the three articles referred to a highly publicized incident in which a Japanese fishing boat called the Daigo Fukuryū Maru – the Lucky Dragon No. 5 – was contaminated by the 1954 Bikini Atoll atomic testing. The twenty-three fishermen on board, who strayed within the bomb testing area near the Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean in March 1954, ended up the first group of victims of the American hydrogen bomb testing.
Half a year later, one of the fishermen, Aikichi Kuboyama, died of disease caused by the fallout.

Spending a great deal of time interviewing the survivors of disease caused by the fallout of the hydrogen bomb and those involved in the incident, in his articles for Harper's, Lapp laid emphasis on depicting the predicaments encountered by certain Japanese fishing communities (Lapp, 1957, 1958). According to Shahn’s self-narrative, he found that there was no need to resort to other literature after reading Lapp’s accounts, considering that the deceased Japanese fishermen were just like any living human being, who could not entirely abstain themselves from monstrous fear (Kuh, 1962). Shahn created eleven illustrations for the series, and in order to attain universality, he left out the facial details and portrayed the characters using the minimal amount of black lines.

Although Shahn remarked that there was no need to refer to other literature, he still borrowed images from contemporary news photographs and illustrations for his own illustration works. For instance, the mushroom cloud in The Beast of the Atoll (Fig.24) and The Beast (Fig.25) was a reproduction of the flame in the Hickman illustration that combined the image of a malicious and grinning monster or that of an ominous dragon. The fact that the deformation and dispersal of the flame-shaped nuclear cloud seemed to be controlled by the monster behind it hinted at the government’s corruptive manipulation of the nuclear weapons. During that time, the McCarthy era was at its peak, and the nuclear arms race of the Cold War had just begun. Many of those against the action were accused of anti-patriotism, such as Oppenheimer, who was opposed to nuclear arms.

The illustration was almost entirely reproduced by Shahn in the painting We Did Not Know What Happened To Us (Fig.26), in which the two contrasting figures in the lower area respectively represented the opposite stances on the development of the hydrogen bomb. The man on the left who was forced to be silenced could be easily identified as the scientist in Second Allegory, while the other red-faced figure raising his hands to the air demonstrated Shahn’s coloring method that he once adopted when portraying the authorities’ position in Death of Miner. In this way, the illustration conveyed a universal sense of terror stronger than that of Allegory, taking the power of emotional contagion to another level.

In another work inspired by an illustration The Lucky Dragon (Fig.27), Shahn portrayed Kuboyama, the first victim whose death was caused by the hydrogen bomb, holding a piece of paper containing his own narrative of the whole incident leading to his death. The image manifested the moral issues of science that people were unwilling to face as well as the artist’s belief in world peace, which indicated the remarkable value of Shahn’s works. Through the powerful and realistic narrative style of his creations, the artist offered
a complete, authentic, and pictorial description of the world we inhabited, allowing us to utilize art as a vehicle for introspection.

6.0 Conclusion

The illustration commissions enabled Shahn to take part in the postwar American reality and the global development. Despite being blacklisted and facing political censorship and the accusations made by the pro-communists after the war, the left-wing artist was not deterred from engaging himself in social issues with the aid of a new approach for artistic practice that introduced his illustrations to the mass media. An artist and illustrator, Shahn succeeded in elevating illustration works to a higher artistic level and breaking the boundary between the commercial art and the fine art. In addition, by means of the editorial illustration commissions based on specific texts, Shahn provided a comprehensive response to a number of unresolved postwar political issues and social phenomena, including the labor movement, the socially vulnerable workers, the issues of the black community, and the humane issues of the opposition of nuclear power. On top of that, he also offered a severe political criticism of the witch hunt and McCarthyism through his illustrations in the political magazines, which overthrew the notion that he had withdrawn himself from political discussion after the war.

Most importantly, Shahn succeeded in creating a multi-material and image-appropriating artistic link among illustration, painting, and photography. In this way, he transferred the interaction between the artist and the viewer to the mass media and the galleries, laying bare the many hidden aspects of the American reality to the public. These illustrations based on specific texts and the paintings inspired by them precisely captured Shahn’s ideas and the time he lived in. They not only served as an outlet for dissent for Shahn, but also made him one of the few great artists who had the courage to unflinchingly express dissent during the Cold War.

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Fig. 1
Ben Shahn, *What Are You Doing Out There?*, 1951, Brush and ink, Print unknown. New York Time, January 15, 1951, p. 9. © New York Time.

Fig. 2
Ben Shahn, *Oak Ridge Atom Workers*, 1946, Print on color, Print unknown, From “Labor Drives South”, *Fortune magazine*, November 1946, p. 141. © Fortune magazine.

Fig. 3
Ben Shahn, *Guilt by Gossip*, 1948, Brush and ink, Print unknown. From “Guilt by Gossip”, *New Republic*, May 31, 1948, p. 18. © New Republic.
Fig. 4
Ben Shahn, *Guilt by Gossip*, 1948, Brush and ink, Print unknown. From “Guilt by Gossip”, *New Republic*, May 31, 1948, p.27. ©New Republic.

Fig. 5
Ben Shahn, *U.S. Anti-Semitism Today*, 1947, Brush and ink, Print unknown. From *New Republic*, November 3, 1947, p.17. ©New Republic.
Fig. 6
Ben Shahn, *How Free is Free*, 1952. Brush and ink, Print unknown. From *The Nation*, June 28, 1952, cover. © *The Nation*.

Fig. 7
Ben Shahn, *The CIO Takes a Long Lease in the South*, 1947. Brush and ink, Print unknown. *New Republic*, January 1947, p. 21. ©New Republic.
**Fig. 8**
Ben Shahn, Untitled (Bessemer City, North Carolina), May 1946-August 1946, photograph, negative, 2.4 x 3.6 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Bernada Bryson Shahn. Artwork © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

![Figure 8](image)

**Fig. 9**
Ben Shahn, *Laissez-Faire*, 1947. Print, 42.5 x 58.2 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Stephen Lee Taller Ben Shahn Archive, Gift of Dolores Taller. Artwork © Estate of Ben Shahn / Licensed by VAGA, NY.

![Figure 9](image)

**Fig. 10**
Ford Employees Attacking C.I.O. Leader Yesterday, May 27, 1937. Photographers unknown. Ben Shahn papers, 1879-1990, bulk 1933-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. ©2020 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
Fig. 11
Ben Shahn, *Trouble*, 1947. Tempera on wood, 61 x 91 cm. University of Nebraska, Lincoln F.M. Hall Collection. Art © University of Nebraska.

Fig. 12
Ben Shahn, *Voting Booths*, 1950, Gouache on canvas, 40.2 x 30.4 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Container Corporation of America. Art © Smithsonian American Art Museum.
Fig. 13

“Coal Mine Disaster”, 1947. Photograph. From *Life*, April 7, 1947, p. 40. © Life Magazine.

Fig. 14

Ben Shahn, *Miner’s Wives*, 1948. Brush and ink, Print unknown. From “The Blast in Centralia No.5: A Mine Disaster No One Stopped”, *Harper’s Magazine*, March 1948, p.195. © Harper’s Magazine Foundation.

Fig. 15

“Coal Mine Disaster”, 1947. Photograph. From *Life*, April 7, 1947, p. 41. © Life Magazine.
Fig. 16

Ben Shahn, *Miners' Wives*, c. 1948, Tempera on panel, 121.9 x 91.4 cm, The Philadelphia Museum of Art © Estate of Ben Shahn/ Licensed by VAGA, New York.

Fig. 17

Ben Shahn, *Death of a Miner*, 1949, Tempera on paper attached to muslin on wood, 68.6 x 121.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1950. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 18

Ben Shahn, *The Hickman story*, 1948. Brush and ink, Print unknown. *Harper's Magazine*, August 1948, p.49. © Harper's Magazine Foundation.
Fig. 19
“Secret”. photograph from Conditions in Greece: Confidential Photographic Record (Official Publication of The Royal Hellenic Government, 1942). Photographer unknown. Ben Shahn papers, 1879-1990, bulk 1933-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. ©2020 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig. 20
Ben Shahn, Allegory, 1948. Tempera on panel, 91.8 x 112.2 cm, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of William P. Bomar Jr. in Memory of Mrs. Jewel Nail Bomar and Mr. Andrew Chilton Phillips. Artwork © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.
Fig. 21

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

Fig. 22

Ben Shahn, *Second Allegory*, 1953. Tempera on Masonite, 151x 98 cm, Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois on behalf of its Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois Purchase, Festival of Arts Purchase Fund, 1953-7-1. Art ©Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.
Fig. 23

Ben Shahn, *Guilt by Gossip*, 1948, Brush and ink, Print unknown. *New Republic*, May 31, 1948, p. 15. ©New Republic.

Fig. 24

Ben Shahn, *The Beast of the Atoll*, Brush and ink, Print unknown. From “The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon”, *Harper’s Magazine*, December 1957, p.30. © Harper’s Magazine Foundation.
Fig. 25

Ben Shahn, *The Beast*, 1958. Brush and ink, Print unknown. From “The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon”, *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1958, p. 72. © Harper’s Magazine Foundation.

Fig. 26

Ben Shahn, *We Did Not Know What Happened to Us*, ca. 1960, tempera on wood, 121.9 x 183.2 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. Art © Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Fig. 27

Ben Shahn, *The Lucky Dragon*, 1960. Tempera on cotton mounted on board, 213.4 x 122cm. Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art. Art ©Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.