

# BEN



# SHAHN

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



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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 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



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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 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).

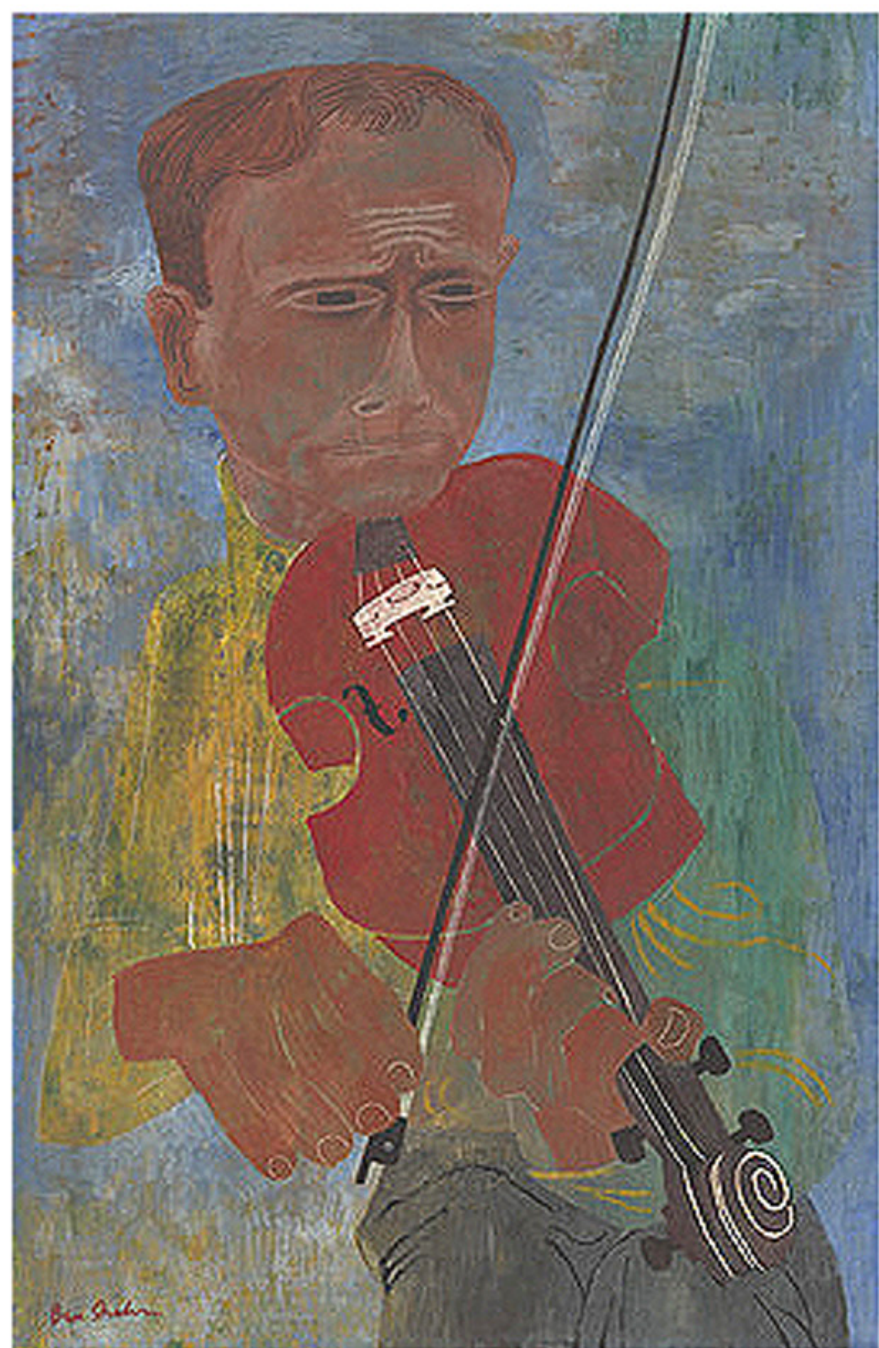
And through a comparable process, details from certain of his paintings swell in his imagination until they emerge as full-scale works, often in a quite different context. The boy in *Hunger* was



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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



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



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



**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**



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