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Robert Fishko, *Director*

BEN SHAHN

(1898 – 1969)

The Phoenix, c.1952

gouache and ink on board

16 x 16 inches

signed lower right “*Ben Shahn*”



Provenance

Private Collection, New York, NY

Hiroko Saeki Fine Art, San Francisco, CA

Schillay Fine Art, New York, NY

Forum Gallery, New York, NY

Reference

Another example of this subject by Ben Shahn is reproduced in the Artist’s monograph published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1973, on page 223, titled *Phoenix*, 1956.

Note

The art of Ben Shahn is one of protest against injustice and prejudice. While his work is recognized for his commitment to social and political causes, it also resounds with deeply felt humanitarian concerns for the individual in society and the plight of the oppressed.

A young Jewish immigrant from Lithuania, Ben Shahn arrived with his family in Brooklyn at the age of eight. Between 1919 and 1922 he studied at New York University; the City College of New York; and the National Academy of Design. Sharing a studio in 1929 with photographer Walker Evans stimulated Shahn’s own interest in photography and he began photographing people and street scenes, first in New York and later around the country. These photographs served as the basis for many of his prints and paintings.

In the 1930s, Shahn submitted and executed mural proposals for the Public Works of Art Project, and he joined the Resettlement Administration in 1935 to document desperate conditions in the rural South while continuing his own work as an artist, designer and photographer. Shahn briefly joined the Office of War Information in 1942 to design posters and pamphlets and later in 1945, he worked for the Political Action Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations to help re-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt, serving as the CIO director of Graphic Arts.

Ben Shahn was deeply affected by the conflicts of World War II and created many war-themed paintings in the 1940s that tell stories of desolation and loneliness. In the years

that followed the war, Shahn continued to respond to the political circumstances of the times in artworks that gave voice to his feelings about warfare and to the atomic tests conducted in his lifetime.

Ben Shahn himself noted how his paintings during and following World War II expressed a new mode of perception. Shahn wrote that these works had become “much more private and more inward-looking. A symbolism which I might once have considered cryptic now became the only means by which I could formulate the sense of emptiness and waste that the war gave me, and the sense of the littleness of people trying to live on through the enormity of war.”ⁱ

About *The Phoenix*, c.1952, Ben Shahn author and scholar Kenneth W. Prescott discusses Shahn’s interest in the subject in a statement dated September 12, 1988:

“The Phoenix bird was a favorite subject of Ben Shahn's, dating back to the 1944 Downtown Gallery poster. There were subsequently many versions, including several of the 1960s. Typically, Shahn's phoenix faces to the left with open beak and partially raised wing. Many display colorful horizontal bands of color across the body.”

This work by Shahn featuring the phoenix was reproduced in 1962 by Capitol Records for the album cover of a recording of *Wagner: Prelude and Love Death and Strauss: Death and Transfiguration* performed by The Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra with Erich Leinsdorf conducting.

ⁱ Polcari, Stephen. Essay, *Ben Shahn and Postwar American Art*, in *Common Man Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn*, The Jewish Museum, 1999, p. 71-72