

Ben Shahn Haggadah

1931

United States

Ben Shahn (1898–1969) was born in Kovno, Lithuania and came to the United States with his family when he was eight. He worked as an apprentice in lithography and studied at the Educational Alliance, the National Academy of Design, and the Art Students League in New York. After traveling to North Africa and Europe, Shahn settled in Brooklyn, New York.

Kovno was a center of socialism, and Shahn became involved in social issues revolving around discrimination. He produced a series of works relating to the infamous Dreyfus trial of 1894, depicting various people connected with it. In the 1930s, Shahn painted a series of pictures to protest the trials and subsequent execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927.

The period after the first World War saw a return to the use of recognizable figural imagery in art. However, abstraction and collage had released the artist from the traditional need to arrange figures in sequential narrative.

In Shahn's *Haggadah* we see elements associated with the traditional story of Passover juxtaposed for maximum visual impact rather than being laid out in obvious visual sequence. Among the elements of the story seen in this image are the slaying of the firstborn of the Egyptians, last of the ten plagues, and Moses, staff upraised, confronting the serpent of the pharaoh's magicians.

Other contemporary elements of Shahn's style include the use of flat areas of color, decorative patterning, and shallow space. The *haggadah* illustrates a fight against oppression which occurred

in the past. Yet each generation is called upon in the *haggadah* to view the release from Egypt as if it happened in its own time. By illustrating the *haggadah* in a contemporary style, Shahn expressed his interest in social issues and his Jewish identity through the medium of current artistic vocabulary.

This is one of the earliest works by Shahn which has both a Jewish theme and incorporates calligraphy. Later, he was to produce many fine works joining both in his personal, innovative style, including his version of a *ketubbah* (a Jewish marriage contract) and a book on the Hebrew alphabet called *The Alphabet of Creation*.

Printed *haggadah*.

15 3/8 × 11 3/8 in. (39 × 4.45 cm).

Courtesy of Mrs. Ben Shahn.

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