



Arthur Szyk: Heraldic Artist

by David F. Phillips

Arthur Szyk's use of heraldic imagery is a distinctive feature of his work. Like iconography, heraldic art has the power to communicate very specific meanings without words—useful for making a complex visual statement in a limited space. Szyk's accurate, skillful and creative application of this medieval tradition places him among the most accomplished heraldic artists of the 20th century.

Introduction

Almost sixty years after his death in 1951, Arthur Szyk's fame as an artist rests principally on his anti-Nazi polemical art of the 1930s and 1940s, and on his vivid compositions on Polish, Jewish and American patriotic themes. Those more familiar with his work think also of his masterpiece, the famous Haggadah, and of his paintings in the Art Deco and Bezael styles, his cartoons and illustrations and advertising, and his modern adaptation of the techniques of medieval and Renaissance illumination.



Arthur Szyk. Paris, circa 1930s.
Photo by Louvre Studio, Paris.

Szyk's use of heraldic imagery is a distinctive feature of his work. Heraldic art has its origins in the banners and painted shields that medieval European warriors used for recognition. This visual system began in the 12th century and quickly developed a vocabulary of geometric forms and stylized images still in use today.

In its narrowest sense heraldry is based on a decorated shield

whose pattern, like a modern logo, signifies a particular person, place or institution. In a broader sense it includes all the associations of the shield, its independent design elements, and its accessories such as crests, crowns and animal supporters. In the broadest sense it includes all this as well as a wider range of badges, insignia, and other emblems and motifs which have specific meanings communicated without words. At its outer edges heraldry overlaps iconography, the key to the identification and interpretation of images in art.

Szyk trained as an artist at the Académie Julian in Paris, where teachers encouraged students to study and copy at the Louvre. Heraldry had been an important element of decorative art in every province of western and central Europe for centuries, so he would certainly have found many examples to learn from at the Louvre and elsewhere.



Figure 1 *Croquis de Paris (recto)*. Paris, 1911.

Also Paris itself was full of armorial monuments, such as the magnificent heraldic decoration inside the Gothic chapel of Sainte-Chapelle. Indeed, an early design for a sketchbook cover (Figure 1) demonstrates Szyk's familiarity with the courtyard of the medieval Hôtel de Cluny. In his training as an illuminator, it is almost certain that he encountered the coats of arms which were a frequent element of medieval and Renaissance illumination, for example in Christian devotional books. In 1909, the year he began his training, not only was a wide selection of treatises, pattern books, facsimiles and other study aids available in Paris, but heraldic decoration was still in active use in architecture, in printing and advertising, and in many other media. The young artist would have seen heraldic art all around him.

We can only speculate why this historic art form attracted Szyk. Most of its features and techniques are characteristic of his work as a mature artist, whether heraldic or not. Heraldic art is based on bright colors and clear boundaries between color fields, vivid forms and moving lines, and clear allusions. It is made effective by harmonious proportions among the elements of a composition, a satisfying balance between figure and ground, imaginative interplay between two- and three-dimensional imagery, and skillful stylization (that is, departing from nature to express the essence of the thing portrayed). Like iconography, heraldic art has the power to communicate very specific meanings without words—useful for making a complex visual statement in a limited space. Arthur Szyk's accurate, skillful and creative application of this medieval tradition places him among the most accomplished heraldic artists of the 20th century.

The Visual History of Nations

The *Visual History of Nations* series was commissioned in 1945 by a Canadian philatelist and publisher, to be full-page frontispieces for postage stamp albums. Of the projected set of 60 paintings, one for each country of the United Nations, Szyk completed only nine (the United States of America, Canada, Poland, France, Great Britain, the USSR, China, Switzerland, and Israel) before he died. These gave him a chance to show his skill as a heraldic artist in a most exuberant way.

The page for France (Figure 2), for example, is a *tour de force* of heraldic art. It presents a brilliant mosaic of 90 panels, each showing the arms of one of the chief towns of France. These correspond, although not exactly, to the prefectures of the *départements* (administrative divisions) of the country. They are arranged in rows and columns only one panel wide, forming borders around other pictorial elements such as portraits of French heroes. On the left-hand side, for example, is a portrait of Molière, the 17th century playwright. Around it, reading clockwise from upper left, are the arms of the cities of Digne-les-Bains, Grenoble, Tours, Chambéry, Évreux, Chartres, Quimper, Châteauroux, Foix, Privas, Nice and Bastia.



Detail, Molière encircled by city arms

Szyk sometimes varied the city arms slightly, as he did here with those of Tours. The arms of Tours, like many French cities, include at the top of the shield a *chief of France*, a horizontal compartment containing the royal arms (golden fleurs-de-lys on blue). See for example the chief of France in the large arms of Paris at the base of the composition. But Szyk omits Tours' chief of France, showing only the lower section of the shield (three white towers on black). He might have simplified the arms because of the restricted space; or perhaps he was avoiding too many repetitions of the same motif. Whatever his intentions, these variations were certainly deliberate choices by this careful artist, rather than errors.



Figure 2 Visual History of France. New Canaan, 1947.

The composition contains many thoughtful details. Lafayette is shown wearing the uniform (blue coat, buff facings) of an officer in the American Revolution. The scientist Pasteur has the red rosette of the Legion of Honor on his lapel. The two figures at the bottom are emblematic of the French forces fighting against the Germans inside and outside France. We know from his cap badge and sleeve chevrons that the soldier at right is a sergeant of marines. On his left breast (on the right as we look at him) is the *croix de guerre* [war cross], a decoration for being mentioned in dispatches; on his right breast is the badge of the Free French forces, originally raised from the colonies by de Gaulle. His civilian counterpart at left represents the underground Resistance, called during the war the French Forces of the Interior. Note the military shirt beneath his cloak. The shield at the top of the composition bears the letters "R. F.," which stand for *République Française*. (The French Republic does not have an official coat of arms.) On either side of the shield are French flags; tied around the flagstuffs are cravats in the national colors, of the type used to decorate French military and veterans' flags. The national motto of France—"Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité" [Liberty, Equality, Fraternity]—is shown on a scroll around the top of the shield.



Figure 3 Visual History of Canada. New Canaan, 1946.

Although not all the paintings of the *Visual History of Nations* are primarily heraldic, some are. The “Visual History of Canada” (Figure 3) depicts the arms of Canada and its provinces within an elaborate border featuring the plant badges of the European founding peoples. The English rose, Scottish thistle, Irish shamrock and French lily share space with the Canadian maple leaf. Like the French fighters mentioned above, two figures flank a coat of arms: an Indian and a Canadian mounted policeman stand alongside the prewar arms of Québec. The Polish, Swiss and British paintings likewise show heraldic work of the highest order. Although the other countries in the series lack significant heraldic traditions, Szyk nevertheless made prominent use of their national symbols.

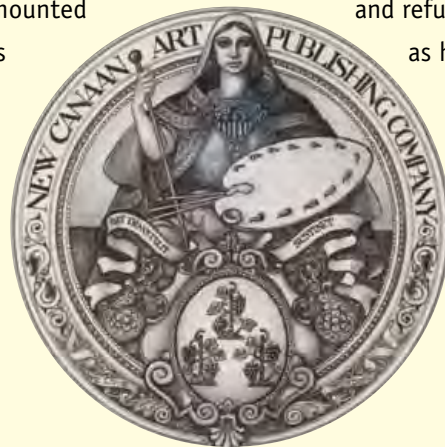
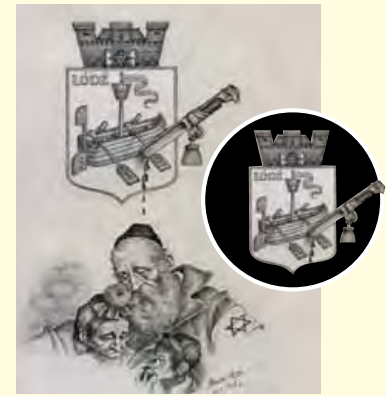


Figure 5 New Canaan Art Publishing Company Medallion. New Canaan, nd.

Beyond the *Visual History of Nations* series, Szyk used city arms extensively in other works, often to establish location (Figure 4). Examples include the arms of his home town of Łódź in *The Yizkor Book*, of Lwów in “The Family at the Seder Table” (*The Haggadah*), of Warsaw in “Samson in the Ghetto,” and of Geneva in “Pacte de la Société des Nations” [Pact of the League of Nations].

The arms of Connecticut, where Szyk settled in 1945, appear in the beautiful design he created for his New Canaan Art Publishing Company (Figure 5). The state motto *Qui Transtulit Sustenit* [He who brought us over sustains us], in use since the 17th century, referred originally to the English settlers of North America, but here (and again in the 1949 illumination “The Four Freedoms Prayer”) it plainly includes later immigrants and refugees such as himself.

Figures 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d



4a Lodz'sher Yizkor-Bukh. New York, 1943.



4b The Family at the Seder, The Haggadah. Łódź, 1936.



4c Samson in the Ghetto. New York, 1945.



4d Pacte de la Société des Nations. Paris, 1931.

The English Dedication Page of The Szyk Haggadah



Figure 6 Dedication to King George VI, *The Haggadah*. Łódź, 1936.

The armorial pages in the *Visual History of Nations* series are unusual in Szyk's work in that the compositions are primarily heraldic. Much more often Szyk used heraldic details to add support and elaboration to his main subjects. An excellent example is the "Dedication Page to King George VI" (Figure 6), dated 1936, which he painted for *The Haggadah*. The British royal arms appear in their traditional form in the lower left portion of the main panel. At their center is a quartered shield representing the nations of the United Kingdom: England, Scotland and Ireland. Above the shield is the crest of England: the English crown with a crowned lion standing across it. On either side are supporters: the lion of England, wearing the same crown, and the unicorn of Scotland, with a coronet in distinctively British form around its neck. (The alternation of crosses and fleurs-de-llys in a crown or coronet marks it as British; compare the crown on the head of the Polish eagle at bottom right). In addition to representing England and Scotland, the golden lion and silver unicorn are solar and lunar symbols, corresponding to day and night, male and female, active and passive, *yang* and *yin*; shown together they represent dominion over opposites, or universal dominion.

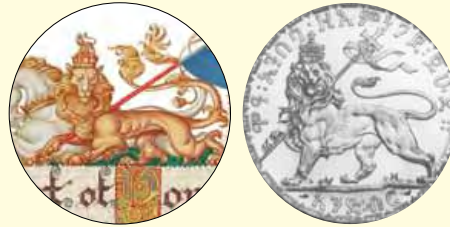


Figure 7 Silver birr of Emperor Menelik II. Ethiopia, 1900.

At the top of the frame the lion and unicorn appear again, free now of the rigid composition of the royal arms; the lion carries a flag over its shoulder. A lion in this posture is called a *Lion of Judah*. It was used as an emblem of state by Emperors of Ethiopia because they claimed descent from King Solomon, who was of the tribe of Judah through his father King David (1 Chronicles 27:18). The Ethiopian version of the Lion of Judah wears the Ethiopian crown and carries the Ethiopian flag (Figure 7), but Szyk's lion wears instead the English royal crest, which can be recognized by the smaller lion on top. The lion's flag is in the Jewish national colors of blue and white, used on Zionist flags long before the State of Israel, but with the British union device in the canton.

The Lion of Judah is also a symbol of Jewish sovereignty, traditionally seen on menorahs and Torah shields. Szyk used it often in a Jewish context, for example in "Israel Bonds" (Figure 8).



Figure 8 State of Israel Bond Certificate. New Canaan, 1950.

It refers to Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49:10 ("The sceptre shall not depart from Judah..."). Christians use this symbol also. Like King Solomon, Jesus was descended from King David, and is described in Revelation 5:5 as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David." As the lion is both a Jewish and an English royal emblem, Szyk uses it to allude to both nations at once, appropriate on a page dedicating a Jewish religious book to an English king. The lion appears twice more on this page—below the word "Israel" and facing out at the far left of the whole composition.

King Władysław II Jagiełło

To the left of the main text, a mounted figure in the illuminated capital “A” spears a dragon with a lance. He is St. George, the patron saint of England, the king’s namesake and the model of Christian chivalry. St. George, who was a Roman officer, is always shown in art as a mounted warrior killing a dragon with a lance through the mouth. This tableau of St. George and the dragon is a British royal emblem used in many contexts—for example on military medals, on stamps and coins (see Figure 9), on the batons of British field marshals, as insignia for the Order of the Garter, and even as a radiator ornament for the royal limousine. Like the lion and unicorn, this image has a deeper meaning: it represents the triumph of good over evil, of God over Satan, of higher impulses over base ones, and in many works by Szyk it represents victory over the Nazis. Here, unusually, St. George has a menorah for a crest, and a Jewish star on his shield instead of the customary red cross on white. These details suggest an ancient Jewish warrior, synthesized here with the saint identified by the dragon and the English context.



St. George postage stamp.
Great Britain, 1929.
Design by Harold Nelson.



Figure 9
Double sovereign (verso).
Great Britain, 1911.
Design by Benedetto Pistrucchi.

At the top of the composition the unicorn, still with its coronet and chain, menaces a dragon. Its horn, pointed toward the dragon’s mouth, echoes the dragon-killer image below. At the bottom right is the white eagle of Poland—*Orzeł Biały*—identified by the red background, golden crown, and distinctive golden accents on its wings and tail. This eagle has been the emblem of the Polish nation since medieval times; it was already a well-established symbol in 1320 when it appeared with all these attributes on the Polish coronation sword *Szczerbiec*. Next to the eagle, Szyk shows himself leaning against the composition.¹

This full-length portrait of King Władysław II Jagiełło (Figure 10) was part of a wartime series of paintings honoring the nations allied against Nazi Germany. Each one featured a national hero: Joan of Arc (France), Peter the Great (Russia), Elizabeth I (England), and King Władysław (Poland). Szyk’s skill and fluency as a heraldic artist show clearly in this portrait, especially in the shield of Poland in the lower left. This basic image, as noted more or less unchanged for 700 years, has all the same structural elements as the Polish eagles in the Haggadah’s “Dedication to King George VI” and elsewhere. The eagle is still white, the accents still gold, the background still red. But close examination reveals much more (see enlarged detail below). As with poetry, the freedom to vary the rendition of fixed elements gives the heraldic artist scope for his talent and imagination.

Note, for instance, the expressive character of the eagle’s face. On its body, the feathers vary from skillfully graduated rhomboids (on the breast and legs) to luxuriant curves (on the shoulders and tail) to nearly natural pinions, and to stylized squares (across the wings) that have no counterpart in nature, but echo the forms of the gold wing-bone accents. Round and angular elements play off each other throughout the composition. The eagle’s outline could be reconstructed just from the placement of the gold accents.



Heraldic art is essentially two-dimensional, but this eagle is so deeply modeled as to challenge this convention without quite defying it. Szyk’s eagle balances figure and ground with exquisite harmony; note especially how the tail-feathers fill the base of the shield, and the elaboration of the wing in the upper right-hand corner. Compare the similar but subtly different solutions to the eagle’s posture and figure-ground balance in the other white eagle shields on the small plaques on the king’s breast and shoulder.

An imaginary *palar line* runs vertically from the center of the shield's upper edge to the point at its base, bisecting the eagle precisely down to its last tail-feather. The head is the only asymmetrical element, but observe that the neck is inclined slightly back to allow the line to pass through the eye, a medieval technical device which shows the depth of Szyk's learning in the field. The eagle's talons actually extend beyond the field of the shield itself, another subtle but dramatic and deliberate violation of the two-dimensional heraldic convention.

Szyk could not have expected that every observer of this design, which is itself only a subsidiary element of the painting, would notice all these things. Only a connoisseur would notice even a few of them.

But great artists do not necessarily need their viewers to understand how they achieve their effects. It is sufficient that Szyk created a heraldic image of great power and presence, to complement the same attributes in the king who is the main subject of the work. Never mind, for most viewers, how he did it. Few will be consciously aware of the echo and support this eagle lends to the portrait of the king, but the effect is there even if its means are invisible to most viewers. And noticing even some of it helps us better understand Szyk's art.



Figure 10 Jagiełło, King of Poland. New York, 1942.

Beyond the shield, this composition is particularly rich in heraldic detail. In the upper left-hand corner is an image of a horseman with a double-barred cross on his shield. Called *Pogoń* [the Pursuit], this image forms the arms of Lithuania still in use. King Władysław (1362?-1434) was Grand Duke of Lithuania; his marriage to Queen Jadwiga of Poland in 1385 led to the dynastic union of the two countries, forming one of the largest territories in Europe. The Polish eagle and the *Pogoń* were borne on the same shield through much of Polish history.

The *Pogoń* reappears on a plaque on Władysław's shoulder, and the cross of the *Virtuti Militari*,

Poland's highest decoration for valor (not actually created until 1792), is seen above his waist. On the left and right borders of the painting are red and white quartered shields. This design, within a square, was the symbol of Polish military aviation; it appears on the wings of the warplane (like the medal a deliberate anachronism) visible through the window in the upper right. Below the plane a mounted Polish soldier carries an army regimental flag with the *Orzeł Biały*. In the bottom left of the composition a German shield, and other German military symbols including swastikas, are shown captured and destroyed.²

Portrait of General Sikorski

Szyk's portrait of his friend General Władysław Sikorski (1881–1943), prime minister and military commander of the Polish government in exile (Figure 11), shows again how much depth of meaning Szyk is able to evoke with heraldic design elements. It is bordered with the arms of the ancient provinces and districts of Poland. This motif, found on the seals of medieval Polish kings, denotes national authority; a 16th century woodcut of the Polish king meeting his Senate (Figure 12) shows many of the same arms. In the upper right of the portrait is another Polish eagle.

At the bottom center are the arms of the French city of Angers, the seat of Sikorski's government before it withdrew to London in 1940. On the curtain in the upper corner of the composition Szyk has included an arm holding a scimitar, a traditional emblem of Polish military power found on flags as far back as the 17th century and still used on the modern Polish naval jack. In the corners of the border note the cross of the *Virtuti Militari*, also worn on Sikorski's tunic. The general received this decoration—Poland's highest military honor—for his valor against the Bolsheviks in the Battle of Warsaw (1920). Szyk served under Sikorski in the Polish army from 1919 to 1920.



Figure 11 General Władysław Sikorski. Np, nd.

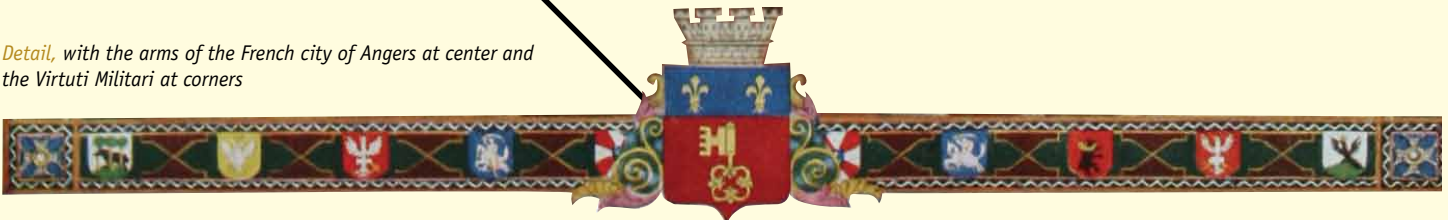


Figure 12 Frontispiece, Statuty Laskiego. Krakow, 1506. Colored woodcut.



Detail, Virtuti Militari

Detail, with the arms of the French city of Angers at center and the Virtuti Militari at corners



Uniforms, Insignia and Decorations

Like heraldic design elements, military uniforms, insignia and decorations are precise and unambiguous non-verbal graphic indicators of specific factual, historical, military and political circumstances. Szyk had a keen eye for these elements. The portrait of General Sikorski, mentioned above, is a good example among many others—see for example Szyk’s “Retreat” (Figure 13).



Figure 13 *Retreat*, 1939. London, 1939.
Courtesy United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Note also the vividly detailed period Polish and Austrian uniforms in “The Death of Berek Joselewicz” (Figure 14). Below the action scene in this painting is a Polish eagle with a curved oblong shield on its breast.

This distinctive composition was, and still is, the emblem of the Polish army, used for flags, cap badges, and many other purposes. But here the shield bears the name of God in Hebrew.



Figure 14
The Death of Berek Joselewicz,
Statute of Kalisz. Paris, 1927.



Detail, Polish eagle with
gold shield bearing the
name of God



Figure 15 Satan Leads the Ball (detail).
New York, 1942.

Szyk's signature use of uniform details is in his wartime caricatures, where the insignia of the Nazis and their allies are exaggerated to the point of burlesque. Szyk took care, though, to mix authentic details with fanciful ones. In "Satan Leads the Ball" (Figure 15), the military cap of Marshal Pétain, leader of the collaborationist French state, is shown

with its correct braid, and the seven stars on his sleeve are his proper insignia as a Marshal of France. But Pétain's cap and epaulet have swastikas on them, and he wears a Nazi Party armband. These details are polemical rather than historically accurate. The images of Mussolini, French Prime Minister Laval, and the allegorical figure of Germania/Brunhilde get similar treatment. Swastikas and death's heads are added liberally to Axis uniforms of all kinds (the SS really did use the death's head as a cap badge). A close view of the cuff braid from Szyk's portrait of King George VI (Figure 16) shows how lush and sensuous he could make his uniform details.

Szyk was not the only artist to use the Nazis' excessive uniform accessories as a point of ridicule. But he did it best, and most luxuriantly, and with the most precision. It is worth mentioning that in almost every one of Szyk's lampoon images of Axis leaders in uniform, he showed them wearing German, Italian and Japanese decorations, to emphasize that all three powers shared responsibility for the war and associated outrages.

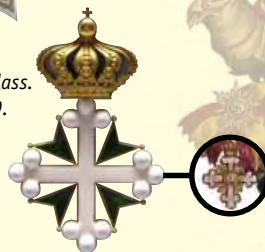


Figure 16 King George VI. London, 1938.

Mocking the Axis: World War II Medals in Szyk's "Hispanidad"



Iron Cross, 2nd Class.
Germany, 1939.



Order of SS, Maurice and Lazarus, Comandeur.
Italy, before 1946.



Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum.
Japan, since 1876.

Image of the Iron Cross courtesy Quintus Fabius Maximus, Wikimedia Commons. Image of the Order of SS, Maurice and Lazarus courtesy Seraphin74, Wikimedia Commons; licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/deed.en>). Image of the Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum Medal courtesy Liverpool Medal Company Ltd (www.liverpoolmedals.com).

For instance “Hispanidad” (Figure 17) is an image of Francisco Franco, the Fascist dictator of Spain, informally allied with the Axis although neutral in the war. Among many authentic uniform details, and others in burlesque, Franco wears an approximation of a German Iron Cross, another of the Italian Order of SS. Maurice and Lazarus, and a third decoration with the Japanese imperial chrysanthemum crest (see analysis on opposite page). All of these suggest, without exactly duplicating, genuine decorations of the Axis powers. This combination of fanciful but distinctive decorations is repeated in one form or another in many other Szyk wartime caricatures.

Figure 17
Hispanidad [Franco].
New York, 1943.



Szyk used heraldic details to say something else about Germany: that the Nazi regime of the Third Reich continued the militarism characteristic of the Second Reich (1871–1918) under Bismarck and the Hohenzollern Kaisers. He made this point explicitly in paintings like “La Grande Tradition,” but also more subtly by modifying the heraldic crown of the second Reich—with swastikas and death’s heads, and placing it on the figure of Germania in paintings such as “I Need Peace Now.” In satiric drawings like “Valhalla” and “Wagner,” (Figure 18) Szyk put characters into Second Reich uniforms, including the well-known *Pickelhaube* spiked helmet.

In “Wagner,” Death wears a World War I German uniform with Kaiser Wilhelm II’s monogram on the epaulets (see magnified detail below). The vulture, Szyk’s recurrent symbol for the German air force, always wears a Second Reich crown; e.g. in the frontispiece of *Ink & Blood*, a vulture with the German air force emblem on its wings is pierced by arrows bearing the emblems of the British, Russian and American air forces. (Figure 19)



Figure 19 *Ink & Blood*,
frontispiece



Figure 18 *Wagner, Niebelungen series*. New York, 1942.

Szyk also designed some medals and badges himself, although none of them was ever adopted. His design for the “Sign of the British American Ambulance Corps” (Figure 20) is a striking example.

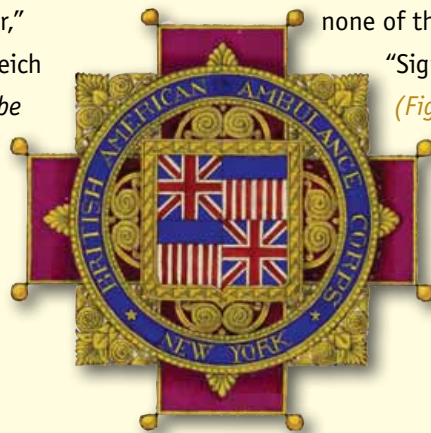


Figure 20
Sign of the British American
Ambulance Corps.
New York, 1941.

Conclusion

Arthur Szyk worked in two dimensions, but he was more than a two-dimensional artist. Heraldic allusions add references to time and place, and historical and sometimes political commentary, to his images.

In his 1842 book *The Pursuivant of Arms* the English heraldist J. R. Planché called heraldry “the short hand of history.” As a graphic artist Szyk used heraldic imagery in just that way, to make political claims and show historical connections in visual shorthand that would have been cumbersome to make by other means. He used it as a decorative element, but also to enhance meaning and to add subtext, allusion and depth to his narrative. The associations evoked by his heraldic details help us understand Szyk’s paintings, much as references in poetry reveal depths and resonances not obvious on the surface. For instance, the portrait of Sikorski does not show him at the head of the Polish government in exile, but the shield of Angers brings this to mind (for those who recognize it) without an explicit reference.

We cannot fully appreciate Szyk’s technical reach and accomplishments without a feel for his heraldic vocabulary. One of the elements that gave Szyk’s art its unique flavor was his modern application of medieval and Renaissance illumination. He studied this conservative, indeed archaic, technique and its associated conventions with seriousness and deliberation, and applied them with modern sensibility and political engagement. His heraldic expression likewise deliberately reaches back to the style and method of an earlier time, and adapts it for current purposes.

The examples of Szyk’s work as a heraldic craftsman and artist mentioned in this paper are just that, examples, selections from a much richer store. A study of his skill and range in this area reveals an unexpected dimension to his art. He taught himself this specialized technique and vocabulary and used its ancient methods to powerful effect in his modern works. He was the only 20th century artist other than heraldic specialists to do so on any significant scale. Although not a specialist, he ranks nevertheless as a major heraldic artist. Here, as with so much else in Szyk’s work, the more you know to look for, the more you see. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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EDITOR’S NOTES

1 At the bottom of the page, a group of weary Jewish refugees moves toward a walled city labeled “Zion” (in Hebrew) but is blocked by a British naval ship. When this somber image is combined with the artist’s calligraphic text and the heraldic allusions to the British empire, the Jewish people, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil, Szyk’s overall message to King George VI becomes clear: he is asking the United Kingdom to help the Jews battle oppression by facilitating their immigration to Palestine. Had he attempted to express this point without the rich vocabulary of heraldic art, the Dedication would have required far more than 29 words (“At the feet of Your Most Gracious Majesty, I humbly lay these works of my hands, shewing forth the afflictions of my people Israel. / Arthur Szyk, illuminator of Poland.”).

2 Note the massive ax inscribed with the words “Polish ax. German head.” Several other inscriptions in Polish and German further amplify the contemporary context of the work. The king’s shield reads: “We will not give up the land from which we came. We will not let the Polish Nation be Germanized by force...” The yellow and black German shield reads: “You will not escape the people’s vengeance.” In showing one of Poland’s most famous kings triumphing over Germany (still a mortal threat in 1942), the artist argues that Polish heroism is not relegated to history but alive and well—and more than capable of defeating the enemy. As in other works, Szyk borrows freely from the past and present to shape his vision of the ideal future.



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The Arthur Szyk Society, a not-for-profit organization founded in 1991, is dedicated to preserving the artistic legacy of Arthur Szyk (1894–1951) as a cultural hero and national treasure. The Society presents the artist’s prolific body of works for broad and diverse audiences in the U.S. and worldwide. The goals of The Society are to: commemorate the art and messages of Arthur Szyk; facilitate scholarly research in art history and other fields of humanities related to the life and art of Arthur Szyk; promote public awareness of Szyk’s life and works through exhibitions, publications, and education outreach to teachers, students, their families and communities; and catalyze social action through the arts.

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The Arthur Szyk Society is soliciting papers for publication on works of art by Arthur Szyk. Proposals should include your name, address, phone number, email address, institution, title for your paper and a one-paragraph summary, and a 25 word personal bio. Please email your proposals to: info@szyk.org.

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