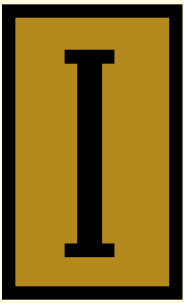


The Civil Rights Art of Arthur Szyk

by Paul Von Blum

In the midst of fighting Nazism, America's prominent WWII political artist attacks racism on the home front. In 1942, Szyk responded to a journalist who asked him about his postwar plans: "Only time will tell what my new mission will be," he replied. "It may be complete Negro enfranchisement and social equality. Who knows? That is a subject dear to my heart."



In her ground breaking 1999 book *Mutual Reflections: Jews and Blacks in American Art*, Israeli art historian Milly Heyd revealed how African American and Jewish artists in the United States have used paintings, drawings, cartoons, sculptures, and other visual forms to offer perceptive observations about each

other's communities. This meticulously researched effort detailed the long and complex relationships between Jews and African Americans by examining the visual dimensions of these relationships. Jewish/Black history in America has often involved cooperation, conflict, and coexistence (and sometimes elements of all three). Artists of both backgrounds during the past century have viewed each other in multilayered fashion, ranging from visions of tremendous sympathy to visions of modest tension and disillusionment. Not surprisingly, the former visions prevail, reflecting the actual art historical record from the late 1890s to the present. Their works largely communicated strong bonds, interethnic sympathy, mutual respect, and even intense affection.

Arthur Szyk joins the huge tradition of Jewish artists in America whose works simultaneously support the long African American freedom struggle and portray people of African ancestry with dignity and respect. Throughout his distinguished career, Szyk elevated human rights to the top of his thematic agenda. Deeply concerned about Nazi genocide and the future survival of his own people, he never forgot that racism in any form was an unmitigated evil requiring vigorous scrutiny and relentless public opposition.

Following his permanent arrival in America in 1940, Szyk came to understand the depths of American prejudice, discrimination, and violence against African Americans. Throughout his career, he used his magnificent artistic skills to rouse public awareness of domestic racism. His cartoons and illustrations repeatedly addressed the plight of the African American population, always from the morally engaged position of a powerful anti-racist visual artist in the Jewish tradition.

A fuller account of that art historical tradition underscores Szyk's well-deserved recognition as one of the finest socially conscious artists of the 20th century. As Professor Heyd has shown, American Jewish artists were in the forefront of visual anti-racist resistance. A key theme of their collected works

coincided with the major item on the early 20th century civil rights agenda: the massive extent and unspeakable barbarism of lynching—the gruesome spectacle where alcohol-fueled white mobs, acting as if cold-blooded murder were a festive affair, murdered thousands of black men, women, and even children. African American leaders like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Robeson, and many others worked tirelessly to remind America of this shameful reality. Their efforts galvanized the attention of visual artists throughout the nation; their trenchant criticism and occasionally gruesome imagery became an integral part of the anti-lynching crusade. African American artists like

Meta Fuller, Aaron Douglas, Lois M. Jones, John

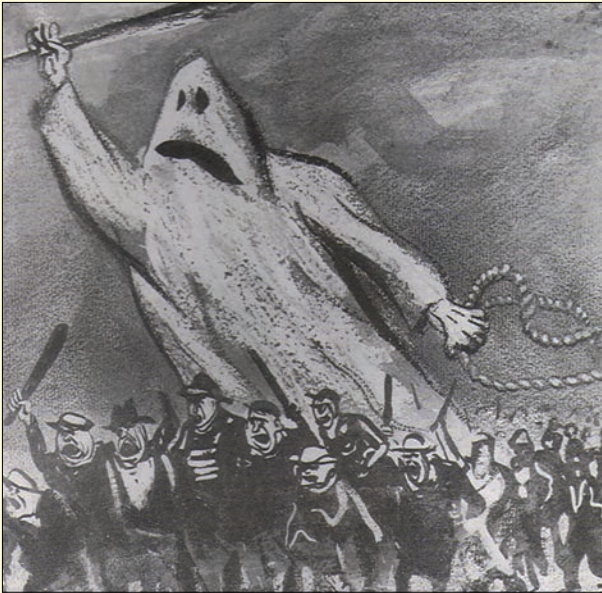
Biggers, and several others set the tone for their Jewish counterparts in this historic struggle.

The efforts of Jewish anti-lynching artists in the early 20th century are well documented in American art history. Figures like Julius Bloch (1888-1966), Aaron Goodelman (1890-1978), Louis Lozowick (1892-1974), William Gropper (1897-1977), Seymour Lipton (1903-1986), Harry Sternberg (1904-2001), Philip Guston (1913-1980), and Larry Rivers (1923-2002) all produced powerful artworks condemning the lynching of African

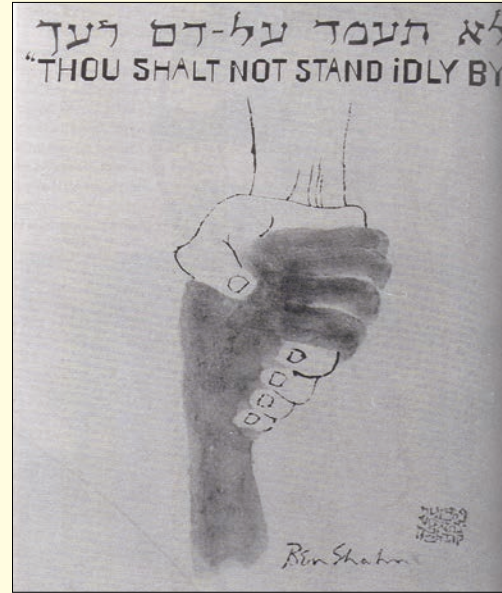
Americans. Even now, their works are chilling reminders of America's troubled racial history. They serve too as valuable historical correctives, especially for students who rarely encounter extended treatments of lynching in mainstream educational institutions and texts.

Other Jewish artists mobilized their efforts to condemn specific instances of racist injustices. Hugo Gellert (1892-1934), for example, drew a poster condemning the trials and death sentences of the nine young African American boys falsely accused of rape in Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931. The premier American Social Realist Ben Shahn (1898-1969), among his many civil rights artworks, produced moving memorial portraits of Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee activists James Cheney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, murdered by police and Ku Klux Klansmen in Mississippi in 1964. Jack Levine (1915-) created his famous painting "Birmingham" in response to the egregious use of fire hoses and vicious police dogs by Birmingham, Alabama police officials against youthful civil rights demonstrators in 1963.





William Gropper. "Political Cartoon," 1930.



Ben Shahn. "Thou Shalt Not Stand Idly By," 1965.

An equally powerful strain of American Jewish art, including the work of Arthur Szyk, involves depictions of African Americans as dignified contributors to American society and culture. Acclaimed figures like painter and printmaker Raphael Soyer (1899-1987), his twin brother, painter Moses Soyer (1899-1974), sculptor Chaim Gross (1904-1991), muralist Lucienne Bloch (1909-1999), among several others, created artworks of both anonymous and celebrated African Americans repudiating the stereotypical racist images pervading American popular culture.

Cumulatively, their distinguished legacy provides the context for appreciating the civil rights art of Arthur Szyk. Like these other Jewish artists, Szyk well understood the Jewish foundation of his artwork about racial justice. Always cognizant of his "outsider" status as a Jewish immigrant, he realized that there were some troubling similarities between European fascism and American racism: both promoted outrageous theories of racial superiority and both, more ominously, demeaned and even destroyed members of "inferior" racial populations.

Through his art, Szyk fought back eloquently, reminding his viewers of the urgent necessity of recognizing and combating the dual dangers of international fascism and domestic oppression against the black population. His artistic efforts from the Second World War remain among his finest and most enduring of his career.



Most well known for his savage caricatures of German, Italian, and Japanese war leaders and Axis collaborators, Szyk established a reputation as a front-rank visual satirist in the tradition of William Hogarth, Honore Daumier, Thomas Nast, and George Grosz. His depictions of Nazi luminaries Adolf Hitler, Herman Goring, and Joseph Goebbels, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, Japanese Admiral Isuroko Yamamoto and Emperor Hideki Hirohito, and French collaborators Henri Petain and Pierre Laval set the qualitative standard for anti-fascist, pro-democracy visual satire at the time.

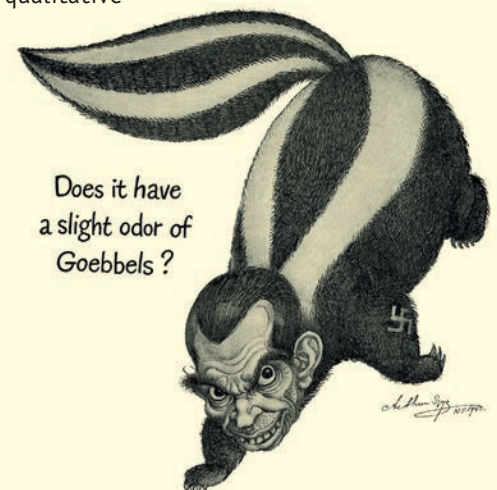




Figure 1 And what would you do with Hitler? New York, 1944.

Szyk augmented his exemplary record by producing several cartoons about American racism during the same period. His 1944 cartoon “And What Would You Do With Hitler” (Figure 1) reflects the overwhelming sentiments of African Americans during the war. Like his African American cartoonist counterpart Oliver Harrington, Szyk demanded a two-front struggle from 1941 to 1945: the military defeat of the Axis powers and the political defeat of American Jim Crow attitudes and actions. In this image, the artist depicts two American soldiers, one white and the other black. The white soldier asks “What would you do with Hitler?” The black soldier’s response pointedly reflects the prevailing African American sentiment at the time—and Arthur Szyk’s passionate agreement: “I would have made him a Negro and dropped him somewhere in the USA.”

Eschewing subtlety, the artist contributes a civil rights masterpiece to the long critical tradition of political cartooning. Viewers immediately understand that the African American soldier makes a direct and accurate comparison between racism in Nazi Germany and at home in the United States.

“What would you do with Hitler?”

“I would have made him a Negro and dropped him somewhere in the USA.”

His clear implication is that American whites would do to a black Adolf Hitler what the Nazi dictator and his henchmen have done to the Jews, Gypsies, and others in the infamous concentration and extermination camps throughout Europe. Although the cartoon uses figurative imagery

alone, it reminds its audiences of the ubiquitous symbol of black America during WWII: the double “V” for victory, signifying the need to defeat fascism abroad and racism at home.

The drawing similarly calls attention to another disturbing reality during World War II. The German soldiers in the background of the cartoon are prisoners of war, captured in battle. Ironically, these prisoners, led by an arrogant Nazi officer, generally received better treatment in American POW camps than most African American citizens received on the job and in the streets, the workplaces, the hotels and restaurants, the entertainment venues, and elsewhere in 1940s America, especially but not exclusively in the South.

Another drawing from 1944 reinforced Szyk's artistic expression of this disconcerting reality. Exhibited in New York in December, 1944, Philadelphia in 1945, published in *Ink & Blood* (1946), and later exhibited in Toronto in 1954, "Racial Humiliation" (Figure 2) features four figures, one a high-ranking German officer, two lower ranking German POWs in the background, and an African American GI at the center of the composition. The black soldier's rifle contrasts starkly with the Nazi officer's iron cross and other military decorations. At the superficial level, the soldier's weapon prevails; the German prisoners are captives, ostensibly subject to the American soldier's commands.

The artist, however, invites his viewers to reflect more deeply about this image. The officer's facial expression reveals his obvious contempt for his captor. From his perspective, he remains the superior human being resulting from his Aryan background.

His upraised hand signifies his internal refusal to accept his captured status; it suggests too that a black GI is a racial inferior, worthy of nothing more than racist invective and summary dismissal. The GI himself seemingly recognizes his captive's all too familiar attitude of white supremacy and racial entitlement, suggesting that the Nazi officer is no different from every other white authority he has encountered throughout his young life.

A year earlier in 1943, Szyk created an untitled drawing that reflected his vision of strong African American military participation in the Allied war effort. Known also as "Black, White, and Jew United in Common Cause" (Figure 3), the artwork shows three men working assiduously in loading and equipping a tank. Solemn and determined, they reveal that through vigorous interracial and interethnic cooperation can Allied forces repel the Axis threat. This drawing is one of many others during the War highlighting a vision of racial harmony in wartime, including several posters by Ben Shahn.



Figure 2 Racial Humiliation. New York, 1944.

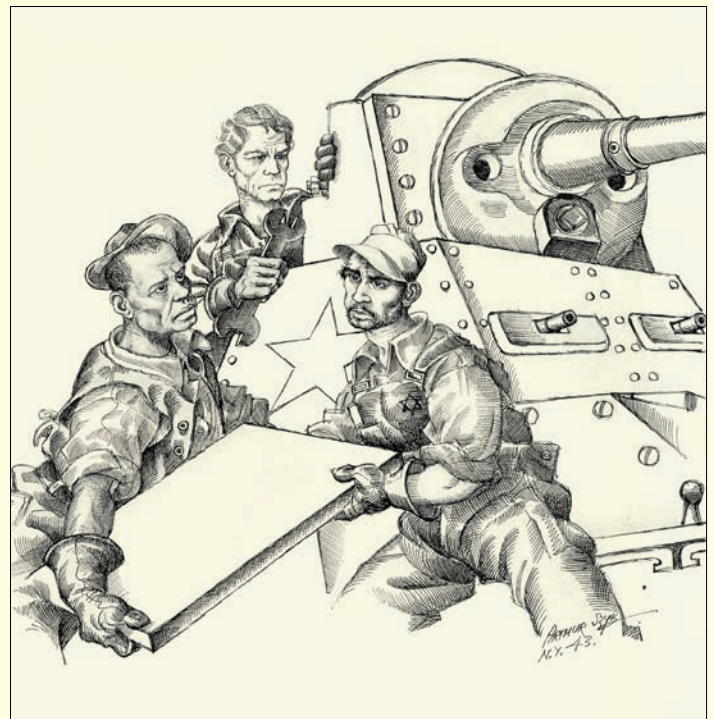


Figure 3 Black, White, and Jew United in Common Cause. New York, 1943.

Doubtless, Szyk realized that his effort could contribute to a romanticized view of American race relations, especially in the armed forces. Government officials desperately wanted to project a glowing view of America in its struggle with European and Japanese totalitarianism. By expressing his image of racial unity and fraternization, the artist used his own talent to promote policies that would narrow the gap between racial ideals and racial practices in the U.S. military. Like all socially conscious artists, he well understood that utopian visions need constant expression as part of an overall strategy of social change.

Compositionally, the parallel positions of the African American and Jewish soldiers in the front of the drawing also reveal Szyk's deeper critique of American racial and ethnic hierarchy. Both the black soldier at the left and the Jewish soldier (clearly identified with a Star of David) on the right are positioned subordinately to the white soldier holding the wrench. The African American and Jew, moreover, carry a heavy object, in contrast to the smaller burden of the white soldier above them. Szyk's drawing is a perceptive reminder of the outsider status of both Jews and African Americans. It likewise identifies the Jewish figure as one of the "others," never fully accepted as part of the majority white population in America. Although Szyk believed passionately in racial equality and dignity, his work reminds audiences of the huge gap between those admirable ideals and the disappointing American reality.

Four years after the Allied victory, Szyk produced one of the most trenchant civil rights artworks of his entire career. In a June 12, 1949 edition of the *New York Sunday Compass* newspaper, he published a cartoon with the caption "Do NOT forgive them, Oh Lord, for they DO know what they do! . . ." (Figure 4). Reminiscent of the finest and most striking visual critiques of racial violence and injustice from African American, Jewish, and other artists, this effort called dramatic public attention to the disgraceful post-war violence directed against black servicemen who served honorably in World War II. After fighting bravely and at great personal risk, many black veterans returned to the same Jim Crow restrictions and humiliations they had endured before their military service. In some cases, vicious beatings and even murders befell recently discharged black soldiers and sailors.

This cartoon focuses on a bound black soldier, brutalized by two hooded, robed, and armed Klansmen in the background.



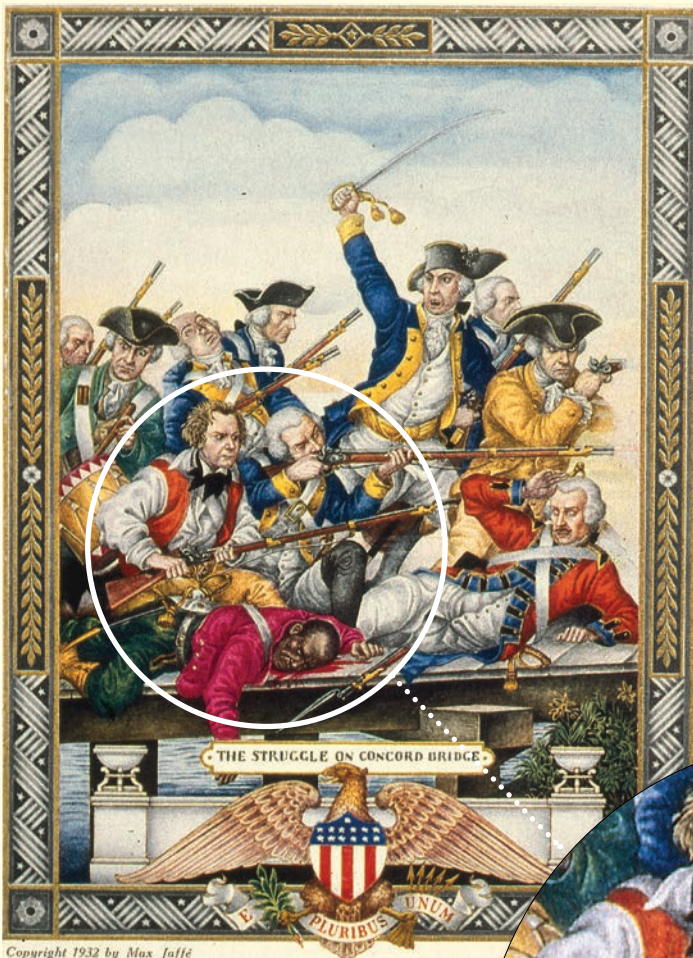
Figure 4 Do not forgive them, Oh Lord, for they do know what they do! New Canaan, 1949.

Appeared in *New York Sunday Compass* newspaper on June 12, 1949.

“Each negro lynching is a national disaster, is a stab in the back to our government in its desperate struggle for democracy...”

Szyk's uses visual detail effectively to underscore his unambiguous anti-racist theme. The soldier wears a purple heart medal, indicative of his personal sacrifice that ironically provides no protection from the unspeakable racist brutality that he and hundreds must endure. The cross around his neck likewise offers no immunity from racist attacks; his

symbol, moreover, is a scathing reminder of the outrageous hypocrisy of the Christian pretensions of the Klan and other white supremacist groups and individuals. The caption bluntly reminds viewers that those who betray their religious principles deserve strong condemnation, not forgiveness. Above all, Szyk's disconcerting cartoon demands that America face its embarrassing inadequacy to respond aggressively to its racist past and present. The nation that defended freedom and democracy against fascist aggression and genocide must get its own affairs in order, especially in treating its citizens of color in accordance with its Constitutional guarantees and with international human rights standards. As if to give added emphasis to this point, Szyk adds another caption at the bottom of his visual statement: "Each Negro lynching is a national disaster, is a stab in the back to our government in its desperate struggle for democracy..."



Copyright 1932 by Max Jaffe

Figure 5 *The Struggle on Concord Bridge*. Paris, 1930.

Like many other American Jewish artists, Arthur Szyk also deepened his civil rights vision with numerous depictions of African Americans as dignified and accomplished members of the human family. Such images are no less political than more topical artworks that criticize specific social and political issues; humane portrayals of oppressed people are themselves powerful antidotes to racist stereotypes.

As early as 1930, Szyk painted “The Struggle on Concord Bridge” (Figure 5) in Paris, and published (1932) as part of his series of paintings on the history of the American Revolution. With his characteristic visual detail and meticulous draftsmanship, he emphasized the fallen African American militiaman Prince Estabrook, strategically placed near the center of the composition. Szyk used the painting to provide a compelling vision of African American participation in the American struggle for independence.

His objective was to reveal that black men as well as white men played a significant role in the early struggles against British domination. Prince Estabrook, like many other African American casualties, died in the battle for freedom, a goal that has remained elusive and problematic for minority groups in the United States for well over 200 years.

“The Struggle on Concord Bridge” serves as a dramatic historical corrective to the continuing neglect of black contributions to the development of American society. Even now, after the modern civil rights struggle, African American history remains seriously marginalized. Students throughout the country too often learn little of the comprehensive black participation in every facet of American life. Instead, they hear superficial and romanticized accounts of Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and a few others. Szyk’s historical painting contributes to an extensive

American art historical tradition of artworks offering audiences

an alternative educational perspective. Like Ben

Shahn’s series on the Sacco/Vanzetti case and Jacob Lawrence’s series on Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, Szyk’s effort provides a profound educational service.

It also adds to his stature as a major figure of American civil rights art.

Almost 75 years after he painted this work, students

and others can derive substantial value

from his racially inclusive vision.





Figure 6 Christmas and New Year Wishes. New Canaan, 1946.

“This image is dedicated to the brotherhood of men...”

Images of dignity and respect pervaded Szyk’s art until his death. His 1946 Christmas card (*Figure 6*), for example, features the traditional greeting “peace on earth & goodwill to men.” At the top left and right corners, the artist added text that reflected a principle to which he devoted his life: “This image is dedicated to the brotherhood of men.” Directly to the right of Mary and the baby Jesus in the center of the card are three men: one Asian, one black, and one white. Here Szyk adds an intricately detailed figurative expression of that admirable but largely unfulfilled principle.

And through the use of a Christmas card, the artist conveys his humane message in a major medium of popular culture. Throughout his artistic career, Arthur Szyk went far beyond the traditional constraints of elitist fine art. Through cartoons, posters, greeting cards, and postage stamps, he disseminated his socially conscious themes to larger audiences—a democratic artistic approach that most politically engaged artists have shared for many centuries.



In 1945, Szyk embarked on one of his most ambitious artistic projects. Canadian entrepreneur Kasimir Bileski commissioned him to produce brightly colored, exquisitely detailed visual histories of the founding and early member countries of the United Nations. These lithographs were to serve as cover pages for international stamp albums. He intended to produce pictorial histories of sixty countries, but could only complete nine of them before his death in 1951: United States; Great Britain; Israel; France; Canada; China; Poland; Switzerland; and the U.S.S.R. Because the project was unfinished, the lithographs were packed and stored and were only recently rediscovered and once again made more publicly available to collectors, scholars, and others.



[Szyk] adds a more inclusive vision of the American dream to his remarkable record of artistic creativity.

To underscore that ideal, Szyk places two figures below and to the left and right of the eagle. At the right is an American Indian and to the left is an African American, a former slave freed during the Civil War. The artist positions both figures near the top of the composition, an expression of his continuing portrayals of ethnic and racial minorities who have struggled, with marginal success, to participate fully in American political, social, and economic life.

The other details of this stunning visual history highlight some of the elements of American industrial accomplishment, including Hoover Dam, the New York City skyline, and the Golden Gate Bridge. Likewise, it features such iconic symbols of American economic development as the Pony Express, the steamboat, the locomotive, and the airplane as well as generic images of a soldier, a sailor, and a farmer. The artist celebrates American achievements and success even as he reminds audiences that they must be open to all American residents, regardless of race and ethnic and national origin. In so doing, he adds a more inclusive vision of the American dream to his remarkable record of artistic creativity.

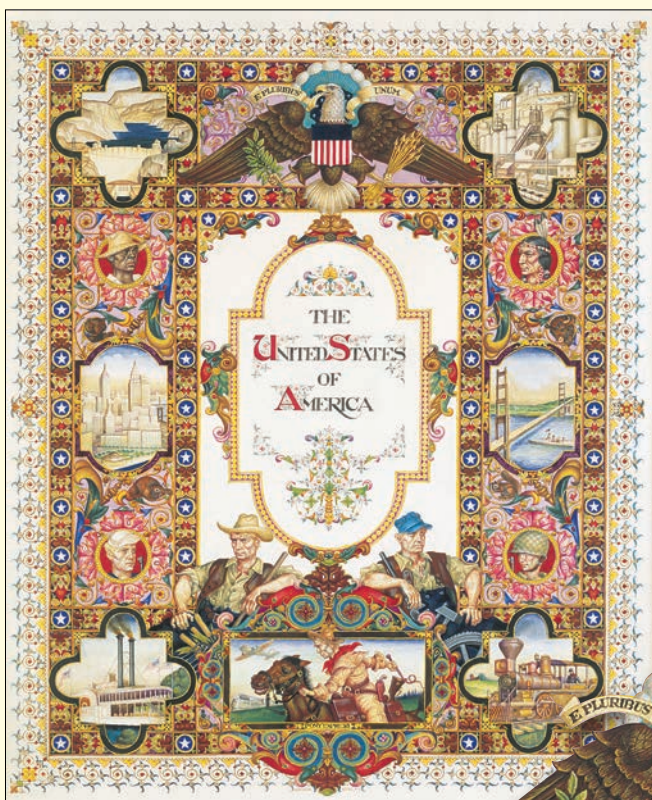


Figure 7 Visual History of the United States of America. New York, 1945.

Each of these 8" x 6" artworks (only the USA measures 12" x 10") contains Szyk's characteristically brilliant fusion of visual detail and text, especially its figurative elements that provide a unique multicultural vision long before the term became popular in America several decades later. His visual history of the United States (Figure 7) is an exemplar of the entire series. At the top of the image, an American bald eagle with the familiar words "E Pluribus Unum" (one from many), signifies a land of freedom, opportunity, and justice for all.





Figure 8 Four Freedoms Prayer. New Canaan, 1949.

One of Szyk's most striking portrayals of an African American is in his 1949 "Four Freedoms Prayer" (Figure 8). Again combining magnificent calligraphy and elaborate visual detail, he provides a dramatic contrast to Norman Rockwell's famous Four Freedoms series from 1943, inspired by President Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address. Rockwell's four paintings, reflecting traditional American values of freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear, nevertheless expressed an exclusive vision of white America. Until he painted his magnificent work on school integration in 1964, "The Problem We All Live With," Rockwell celebrated white middle class Americans, ignoring the diverse populations that truly transformed the nation into a political, economic, and cultural superpower.

Arthur Szyk, in contrast, pursued a multiracial and multicultural artistic agenda from the outset of his career. In this effort, he places an African American at the center (Figure 9), reinforcing his commitment to genuine racial equality in America. Directly to his left, he reproduces Abraham

"Four Freedoms Prayer" should be seen as both a great work of art and as a supreme act of personal courage.



Figure 9 Detail: Four Freedoms Prayer.

Lincoln's stirring words from his Gettysburg Address: "that the government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." His meaning is unmistakable. American democracy demands the full participation of all the people, not only the wealthy and privileged among them. The man's expression reinforces the message. Looking beleaguered and apprehensive, he reflects the troubled status of all minority groups in America in the immediate post-war era.

A fuller understanding of this exemplary artwork requires a close examination of the specific historical context surrounding its creation.

By 1949, the anti-communist hysteria known variously as the "red scare" and McCarthyism had taken strong hold throughout the nation. Progressive thought and action became deeply suspect. The Truman administration initiated a series of loyalty programs that flew in the face of Constitutional guarantees and the values of a free society. Federal and state "Un-American" activities committees hounded people and catalyzed the infamous blacklist that caused hundreds of thousands of Americans to lose jobs, careers, and even their lives. FBI harassment, institutional cowardice, and ubiquitous fear and irrationality pervaded the political life of the nation for well over a decade after the end of World War II. Among other politically suspect positions, the advocacy of racial dignity and equality could well make people outcasts in their own land.

Like thousands of artists, writers, and intellectuals—a veritable elite of 20th century American cultural accomplishment—Arthur Szyk was tainted by this wave of political persecution and paranoia. Investigated by the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee, he nevertheless used his art to express his unshakable vision of genuine racial equality. In 1949, that was a truly dangerous position to articulate in the United States. Accordingly, "Four Freedoms Prayer" should be seen as both a great work of art and as a supreme act of personal courage.

Szyk added an international dimension to his vision when he designed a series of six postage stamps for the African nation of Liberia in 1949. Despite his travails with reactionary political authorities in America,

he persisted in creating visual works of extraordinary technical brilliance and serious historical content. His Liberian stamps feature historical, cultural, and economic scenes. Above all, they depict Africans in ordinary settings and as dignified human beings.

Figures 10A (1 cent), 10B (2 cent), and 10C (3 cent) are typical, offering postal customers views of Liberians tilling the land and creating their new nation. Despite the turmoil that has beset Liberia in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Szyk's mid-century stamps promote a realistic view of Africa and its people that dramatically counters the absurd yet pervasive view of Africa as a backward continent containing savage and uncivilized inhabitants.

Figure 10A Liberia Postage 1 cent stamp. New Canaan, 1949.

Figure 10B Liberia Postage 2 cent stamp. New Canaan, 1949.

Figure 10C Liberia Postage 3 cent stamp. New Canaan, 1949.

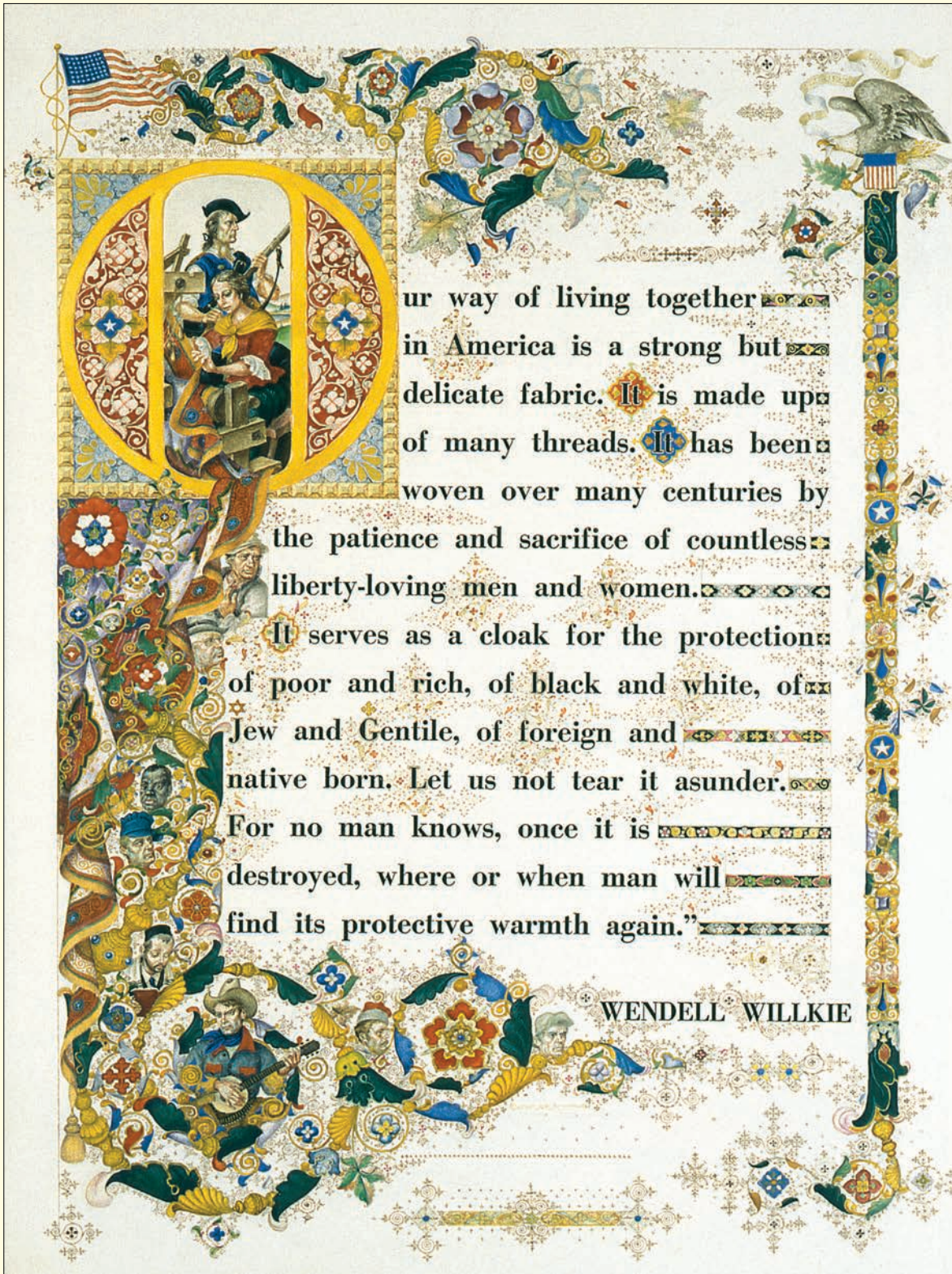


Arthur Szyk's untimely death at 57 in 1951 meant that he missed the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s. Doubtless, he would have been a loud and active supporter, lending his artwork and personal voice to the greatest moral crusade in America of the late 20th century. Still, his fearless and relentless commitment to the struggles of African Americans for freedom, justice, and opportunity has inspired a younger generation of artists, many Jewish, to continue his impressive legacy of socially committed art. In the post-war period, such luminaries as painter/printmaker Ben Shahn, printmaker/sculptor Leonard Baskin, cartoonist Jules Feiffer, photographer Milton Rogovin, muralists Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, Mark Rogovin, Mike Alewitz, and Jill Ansell, poster artist Robbie Conal and many others have added powerful and enduring works to civil rights art history.

Through his remarkable efforts, Arthur Szyk set the tone for these impressive artistic developments. In the process, he fulfilled the passionate biblical mandate expressed in Deuteronomy 16:20, the fundamental foundation for the entire history of Jewish socially conscious art throughout the centuries: "Justice, justice, you shall pursue." Justice, justice Szyk did pursue, with an eloquence and consistency seldom found in the history of artistic expression.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Von Blum has taught at the University of California for 37 years and is currently Senior Lecturer in African American Studies, Communication Studies, and Art History at UCLA. He has received Distinguished Teaching Awards at UC Berkeley and UCLA. He is the author of numerous publications about art, politics, and history. His art historical books are THE ART OF SOCIAL CONSCIENCE (1976); THE CRITICAL VISION: A HISTORY OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ART IN THE U.S. (1982); OTHER VISIONS, OTHER VOICES; WOMEN POLITICAL ARTISTS IN GREATER LOS ANGELES (1995); and RESISTANCE, DIGNITY, AND PRIDE: AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS IN LOS ANGELES (2004). He has also published numerous articles, reviews, and catalogue essays. He curated the South African photography exhibition at the California African American Museum in 2004/2005 entitled "Deconstructing Apartheid: The Photography of Peter Magubane." He has had a long record of civil rights and political activism, which informs his teaching and research.



*The Fabric of American Life,
Illuminated by Arthur Szyk.
New Canaan, 1950.*

ur way of living together
in America is a strong but
delicate fabric. It is made up
of many threads. It has been
woven over many centuries by
the patience and sacrifice of countless
liberty-loving men and women.
It serves as a cloak for the protection
of poor and rich, of black and white, of
Jew and Gentile, of foreign and
native born. Let us not tear it asunder.
For no man knows, once it is
destroyed, where or when man will
find its protective warmth again.”

WENDELL WILLKIE

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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: Irvin@szyk.org.

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