



Book Review: Irvin Ungar, *Reviving the Artist Who Fought Hitler: My Life with Arthur Szyk*

University of Texas Press, 2026, 65 color and 11 b&w illustrations, 368 pp.

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There is a particular kind of scholarly devotion that defies easy categorization—not quite the detached rigor of the archive and not quite the fervor of the advocate, but something that partakes of both. Irvin Ungar’s memoir-cum-critical-biography *Reviving the Artist Who Fought Hitler: My Life with Arthur Szyk* occupies precisely this unusual—and welcome—space. The book chronicles decades of an obsessive and often financially precarious, but ultimately triumphant effort to restore the underrecognized Polish–Jewish artist Arthur Szyk to his rightful place in the history of twentieth-century art. The result is at once personal testament, art-historical argument, meditation on cultural erasure, and history of collecting through the lens of one artist.

Born in Lodz, Poland, in 1894, Szyk became one of the best-known political artists of World War II, moving to the USA in 1940 after years in London, where his celebrated Haggadah was published. In America, Szyk’s scathing anti-Nazi art appeared in newspapers, magazines, exhibitions, books, and beyond. Yet despite this remarkable wartime prominence, after he died in 1951, Szyk was nearly forgotten; his signature miniature detailing fell out of step with the ascendant abstraction of postwar modernism. His political satire and intricate book illustrations—ranging from the Bible to classic literature—left him stranded outside the canon on several fronts. Szyk was written out of the standard histories of World War II visual culture, political art, illustration, and art history in general.

Ungar’s encounter with Szyk’s work began, as he recounts, entirely by chance. While living in New York in 1975, he walked into a bookstore in search of gifts for his wedding party. There he discovered Szyk’s brilliantly colored Haggadah, filled with his medieval-style illuminations. Intrigued but busy as a congregational rabbi, Ungar pressed on with his life. Over a decade later, Ungar embarked

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on a new career of collecting and selling rare historic Jewish books—a pivot that led to his newfound work as a custodian of Szyk’s art.

The book offers a candid account of the practical, institutional, and financial labors involved in reviving a forgotten artist. Eventually, Ungar founded the non-profit Arthur Szyk Society in 1991, published several monographs and catalogs, curated and contributed to exhibitions across borders, and produced documentary films, among other endeavors. Compelled by unflinching zeal, he took a second mortgage on his house in California and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars acquiring Szyk material. His steadfastness ultimately paid off when, in 2017, Taube Philanthropies made a multi-million-dollar gift to the Magnes Collection at UC Berkeley to purchase Szyk’s works from Ungar. Paraphrasing Benjamin Franklin, the author’s honesty about this financial dimension—his acknowledgment that “as a result of doing good, I also did well”—is one that will prove valuable to scholars thinking about the economics of artistic recovery (p. 254).

In this memoir and over the years in numerous publications, Ungar persuasively argues for Szyk’s importance in the visual culture of World War II and to the history of Holocaust representation. Early in his collecting, Ungar also encountered Szyk’s 1946 *Ink & Blood*, a compilation of his anti-Axis political cartoons. Ungar was first drawn to the book’s frontispiece, which he chose as the cover of this book. That trenchant image shows Szyk sitting at his desk completing a portrait of Hitler, who contorts uncomfortably under the artist’s mighty pen. Benito Mussolini, Pierre Laval (a prominent French politician and member of the Vichy regime), and Henri Petain (Chief of State in Vichy France), have been tossed in the trashcan, all overthrown officials who collaborated with the Nazis and whose regimes fell to the Allies. A tiny Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, stands atop the table holding a German News Bureau microphone, forced, it would seem, to broadcast the destruction of fascism, not the Jews. In front of the desk stands Hideki Tojo, Prime Minister of Japan; Hermann Goering, head of the German Air Force kneels; and Heinrich Himmler, head of the Nazi SS is squashed on the ground, his hand futilely grasping a bloody dagger. Spanish dictator Francisco Franco also lies underneath Szyk’s desk, fittingly tossed aside with the other Axis leaders. Three arrows, symbolizing the allied victory of the USA, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, skewer Nazi eagles flying above Szyk’s head. In Szyk’s hands, the pen was not a metaphor for the sword—it was one.

After the war, Szyk similarly committed himself to Zionism and aligned himself with its major figures, including Menachem Begin. Szyk’s support of Jewish statehood found its most jubilant expression in his illuminated rendering of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, a work that brought the force of his medieval-inspired artistry to bear on a modern founding document, framing the birth of the Jewish state with the same visual grandeur he had lavished on biblical texts. That celebration was entirely consonant with his ardent American patriotism; Szyk also treated the Declaration of Independence and the ideals of the American founding as sacred texts in their own right, with the reverential detail of a manuscript artist working in a house of worship. For Szyk, there was no contradiction between these two loyalties—the Jewish state and the American republic were twin expressions of the same

proposition that a people's freedom, dignity, and right to self-determination are not privileges to be granted but truths to be insisted upon.

Ungar is also alert to the breadth of Szyk's commitments. Over the years, Szyk's art drew attention to Native Americans and the racism directed toward African Americans—a dimension of his work that places him within a broader tradition of anti-fascist, humanist art that transcends any single community. This is one of the book's key contributions: Ungar rightly insists that Szyk was not only a “Jewish artist” but an artist for humanity eager to address universal questions of freedom.

As a memoir rather than a strictly academic study, the book operates within the natural constraints of its genre. The book is deeply personal, and Ungar's voice—that of a former pulpit rabbi and passionate advocate—occasionally takes precedence over the critical apparatus. Readers seeking rigorous formal analysis of Szyk's technique, a thorough accounting of his place within the broader history of political art, or a sustained engagement with the existing scholarly literature on mid-twentieth-century visual culture, will need to supplement this volume with more conventional monographs. In no way is this a criticism, merely a fact for readers seeking to delve deeply into Szyk's art—which they can do in other Ungar publications on his subject.

The book's dual purpose makes for an intriguing read. It is, after all, as much a memoir of Ungar as a study of Szyk, and the relationship between the two men across the barrier of death is one of the book's most compelling dimensions. *Reviving the Artist Who Fought Hitler* belongs to a growing body of scholarship that looks not only to artists and artworks but to the institutional and personal histories through which memory is made and unmade. Whether one approaches this book as art history, memoir, Holocaust studies, or a case study in the sociology of cultural recovery, it rewards careful reading. Thanks to Ungar, Szyk is now widely admired as “a soldier in art.” Ungar, as his memoir well shows, has been one, too.

Funding The authors have not disclosed any funding.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have not disclosed any conflicts of interest.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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