

Illustration



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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY

PAUL LEHR
(1930–1998)

Illustration for the cover of
Infinite Worlds: The Fantastic
Visions of Science Fiction Art, 1997

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From the Editor...

I was first exposed to the work of Arthur Szyk in the mid-70s, when I was gifted a copy of Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales* that he illustrated. His images were strange, even frightening. The characters were alien, and they haunted me for many years. I knew nothing about the artist and didn't see any further examples of his work for decades. I was thrilled to finally discover his *Collier's* covers, and then so much more. My introductions to Paul Lehr and Boris Artzybasheff came along similar random paths—an old sci-fi paperback at a used bookstore, an old magazine ad in an antique mall—and in each case the work stuck long before I had any context for it.

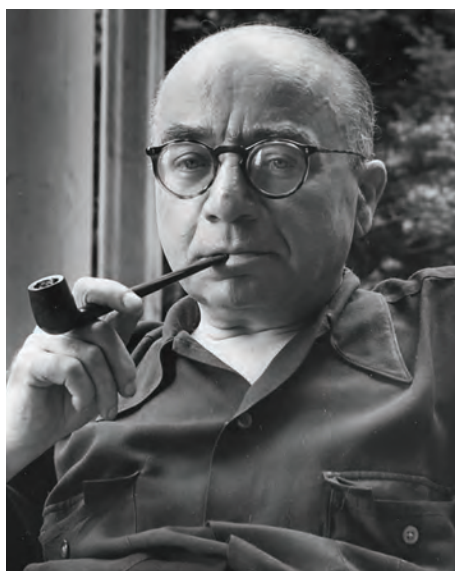
It's almost hard to remember the days when everything wasn't at your fingertips, when most illustrators were incredibly obscure and knowledge was so hard to find. The internet is fantastic today, sure—but at the same time a lot of the mystery is gone. When it's too easy, when you don't have to struggle and dig for the information, it's somehow not quite as special. It's almost disposable. I hope you will find the artists in this issue—Szyk, Lehr, and Artzybasheff—to be more than simply a brief distraction. Their unique worlds are worthy of your exploration. Enjoy the trip!

Daniel Zimmer, Publisher

INK AND BLOOD



Book frontispiece illustration for *Ink and Blood*, 1944. Watercolor and gouache on board



Arthur Szyk, 1946

ARTHUR SZYK

A SOLDIER IN ART

by Daniel Zimmer

On a December morning in 1941, just two weeks after the Japanese strike at Pearl Harbor, American newsstands offered a face that seemed to have crawled out of a 13th-century bestiary by way of a Tokyo war room. *Time* had given its first post-Pearl Harbor cover to a sallow, medal-encrusted caricature of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, his brow furrowed into a mask of cold calculation, the whole composition rendered with the obsessive precision of a Book of Hours. The drawing was the work of a 47-year-old Polish émigré who had landed in New York the year before with little English, a portfolio of book illuminations, and a private war to finish. His name was Arthur Szyk—pronounced, as he never tired of explaining, Shik—and within a few months of that *Time* cover he would be, by any reasonable measure, one of the most widely seen illustrators in America.

He was also the most curious. While Norman Rockwell was painting the Four Freedoms in the high-key *Saturday Evening Post* manner that would become the period's official memory of itself, Szyk was painting the same four freedoms as armored medieval knights on a quest, in opaque watercolor and gouache, every cuirass and chasuble fretted with detail you could read with a jeweler's loupe. While Bill Mauldin's Willie and Joe trudged through the cartoon mud of *Stars and Stripes*, Szyk was rendering Hitler as a degenerate Pharaoh, Goering as a porcine reincarnation of a Nuremberg burgher, and the Axis high command as a

drunken card game in which Death held the bank. He worked, his daughter Alexandra remembered, almost without pause, hunched at a small drafting table in thick spectacles, often with his nose six inches from the board. He worked like a man who knew what was at stake.

A great deal was at stake. Szyk's mother was being murdered at Chelmno even as he drew. His brother was in the Łódź ghetto. The Haggadah he had labored over for half a decade in Poland and London—already being called the most beautiful book of the 20th century—had reached print only after British censors made him paint over the swastikas. By 1944 he would have produced more art on the subject of the Holocaust than any other artist in the world, and one *Esquire* reporter would claim, with a straight face, that GIs preferred his Hitler caricatures to Betty Grable pin-ups on barracks walls. By 1951 he would be dead at 57, suspected of communism by HUAC, briefly forgotten, and ripe for the long, slow recovery that has gathered force across the past three decades and crested, this past December, in a major retrospective at New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage.

His work resists every category that illustration history is comfortable filing things in. He was a caricaturist who illuminated; an illuminator who caricatured. He was a fine artist working at commercial scale and a commercial artist working at illuminator's pace. He rejected modernism with the absolutism



David and Saul, 1921. Watercolor and gouache

of a convert, and yet his political imagery is harder, weirder, more psychologically pointed than anything his abstractionist contemporaries produced. He stands, in the long story of 20th-century illustration, as the great refusenik—the man who looked at Picasso and Léger and Klee and decided, instead, to paint like the Limbourg brothers.

ŁÓDŹ: 1894–1909

Artur Szyk was born on June 3, 1894, in Łódź, then a sooty textile boomtown in the Piotrków Governorate of Russian-ruled Congress Poland. The city was the Manchester of the East, a Babel of Poles, Germans, Jews, and Russians grown rich on cotton and cheap labor. His father, Solomon (Salomon) Szyk, was a textile-factory director—a respectable middle-class post that placed the family among the acculturated, secularizing Jewish bourgeoisie. The family had moved to Łódź only two years before Artur's birth, having left Moscow under the cloud of intensifying Russian antisemitism. His mother, Eugenia, presided over a comfortable household; Yiddish was heard but Polish was spoken; the holidays were observed but Orthodoxy was not.

The artistic vocation announced itself early and unmistakably. Szyk drew his family's dinner guests at four. At six he turned



The Song of Songs, 1924. Pen and ink

out, from imagination, sketches of the Boxer Rebellion in far-away China—already, in a six-year-old's hand, the foreign-policy cartoonist of his later life. By the time he was nine or ten he was filling notebooks with biblical scenes. The child's library of images that would furnish his adult work—Old Testament patriarchs, Persian shahs, mounted hussars, the high-finned helmets of European chivalry—was substantially in place before his bar mitzvah.

Then, in June 1905, an event occurred that would mark the family forever and, less obviously, mark the artist. During the Łódź insurrection—the bloody local upheaval of the 1905 Russian Revolution—one of Solomon Szyk's own factory workers threw acid in his face, blinding him permanently. The patriarch of a household given over to images, undone by a worker's act of class fury: it is hard not to see the trace of this trauma in the adult Szyk's lifelong, half-mystical conviction that the artist's task is to look unflinchingly at evil and to render it with such specificity that it can never disguise itself again.

PARIS AND KRAKÓW: 1909–1914

In 1909, on the recommendation of his teachers, 15-year-old Artur was sent west to Paris to study at the Académie Julian,



The Scribe, 1927. Watercolor and gouache, 8" x 6"



Portrait of Julia Szyk, 1926. Watercolor and gouache

the celebrated atelier on the Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis that had served generations of foreign students unable, or unwilling, to navigate the official Salon system. He studied under Marcel Baschet and Henri Royer. His fellow students in those years included a young Diego Rivera, the Alsatian Jean (Hans) Arp, and the future American regionalist Thomas Hart Benton—a roster that, in retrospect, reads like a casting call for everything Szyk would refuse to become.

For Paris in 1909 was already the Paris of the avant-garde. Picasso had painted the *Demoiselles* two years before; Matisse and Derain had set the salons growling over Fauvism; Cubism was about to break. Szyk, by every account that survives, looked at all of it and walked the other way. The Louvre's manuscript collection drew him; so did the medieval rooms at Cluny and the Persian miniatures at the Musée Guimet. He had decided, in that decade when nearly every serious young painter in Europe was deciding the opposite, that he would work in the tradition of the late-medieval and early-Renaissance illuminators—that he would devote himself, in other words, to the one technique modernism had most explicitly declared dead.

He did not, however, retreat from his own century. Through his Paris years he kept up a steady supply of caricatures and political drawings to the Łódź satirical weekly *Śmiech* ("Laughter"), where his teenage line—already crisp, already moralizing—found a public. He stayed close to the Hazamir Jewish Cultural Society, and at the start of 1914 joined a group of Polish-Jewish artists and writers on a formative trip to Ottoman Palestine. He drew settlers, watched the early Zionist agricultural colonies at work, and was acquiring the convictions that would harden into fervent, lifelong Zionism. Then, in August, war broke out, and Szyk, a Russian subject in Ottoman territory, was forced to scramble home.



Trumpeldor's Defense of Tel Hai, Łódź, 1936. Watercolor and gouache, 9" x 7.5"

TWO WARS AND A MARRIAGE: 1914–1921

Back in Poland he was promptly conscripted into the Imperial Russian Army and fought at the Battle of Łódź in late 1914. By early 1915 he had deserted—there is no other word for it—and lived out the war quietly in his home city, drawing his ex-comrades from memory and publishing the sketches as a series of postcards. In 1916 he married Julia Likerman, a marriage that would last to his death; their son George was born in 1917, their daughter Alexandra in 1922.

When Poland regained independence in 1918, Szyk threw himself into the new republic's image-making. With the poet Julian Tuwim he produced, in 1919, his first political picture book, *Revolucja w Niemczech* ("Revolution in Germany")—a satire on the well-disciplined German revolutionary, who needs a permit from the Kaiser before he can riot. The book is interesting less for itself than for what it foreshadows: the lifelong instinct to attack tyranny by attacking its absurdity. The same year he was back in uniform, this time in the Polish cavalry during the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–1920, where he served as artistic director of the army's propaganda department in Łódź. The boy who had drawn the Boxer Rebellion at six was now, at 25, a state propagandist. He never afterward thought of these two things as different jobs.

THE PARIS PERIOD: 1921–1933

In 1921 Szyk moved his young family to Paris and settled in for what would be 12 enormously productive years. The relocation marks the breakthrough of his mature manner. Until then his book illustrations—six volumes by 1925, three of them in Yiddish—had been black-and-white pen-and-ink. From 1925 onward he committed himself to color: opaque watercolor and gouache laid in jewel-toned layers over a graphite underdraw-



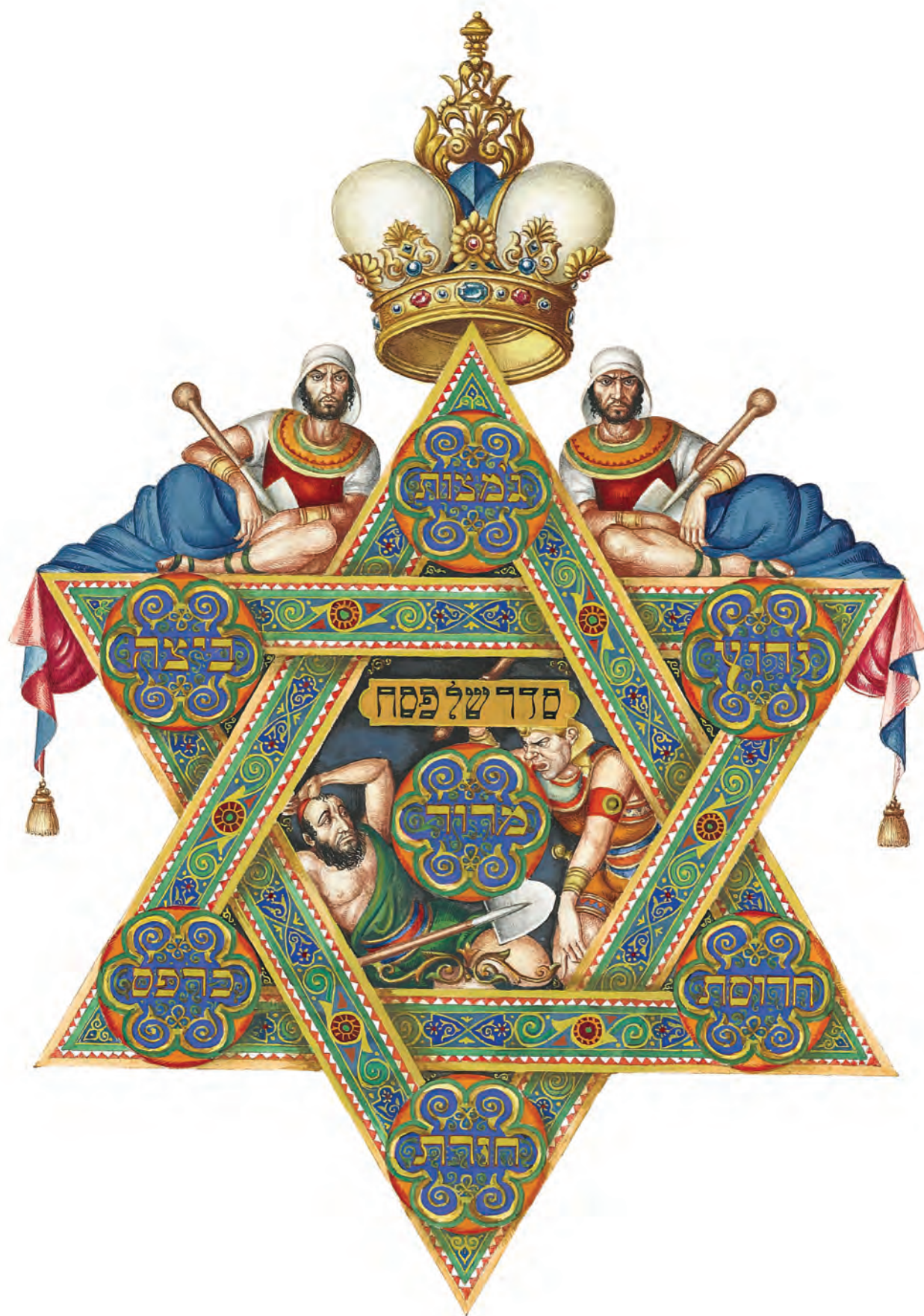
The Lionheart Lies in His Pavilion, 1927. Watercolor and gouache



Washington with His Soldiers, 1930. Watercolor and gouache



Washington, 1938



Book illustration for The Haggadah

ing, the whole composition fretted with calligraphic borders, historiated initials, marginalia, and inset roundels in deliberate emulation of 15th-century manuscript practice.

The first major statement was the *Book of Esther* (*Le livre d'Esther*) of 1925, published in Paris in a luxury limited edition produced by the pochoir stencil process on Japan paper. He followed it with Flaubert's *Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1926), Pierre Benoit's *Puits de Jacob* (1927), and the two-volume *Le juif qui rit* (1926–27), a collection of Jewish humor whose monochrome line—the only stylistic exception of the period—drew unfair charges of trafficking in stereotype. Editions ran to 250 copies, priced from 150 to 450 francs apiece; the Galeries Auguste Decour gave him three solo shows; the French Minister of Education and Fine Arts, Anatole de Monzie, bought drawings; so did the New York textile importer Harry Glemby, who would become an important early American patron.

In 1922 Szyk spent seven weeks in French Morocco, drew the Pasha of Marrakesh, and was decorated by the French government with the *Ordre des Palmes Académiques*—the first of three national honors he would receive in his life. In 1931 the League of Nations invited him to illuminate its founding statute, a project he began but abandoned in disgust at the League's drift through the early '30s. Even in disappointment, he was already working at the level of foreign ministries.

It was during these Paris years, too, that he produced the two great historical cycles that established his reputation as the painter of liberties. The first was the *Statut de Kalisz* (1926–1928), 45 illuminated pages glossing the 1264 charter by which Bolesław the Pious had granted civil and religious privileges to the Jews of his duchy. Szyk treated the document as a kind of Jewish Magna

Carta, weaving into its borders eight centuries of Jewish-Polish history—Jewish craftsmen and traders of medieval Kalisz, Jewish soldiers in Kościuszko's uprising, Jewish volunteers in Piłsudski's Legions of 1914—and dedicating the whole to Piłsudski himself. Published in book form in Munich in 1932, it earned him the Polish government's Gold Cross of Merit and traveled the country in a 14-city exhibition. The originals are now at the Jewish Museum in New York.

The companion cycle, begun in 1930, was *Washington and His Times*—38 watercolors on the American Revolutionary War, a subject Szyk approached with the gravity of a man who believed, fervently, that the American 18th century was a Polish-Jewish inheritance as well as an American one. Kościuszko and Pułaski feature prominently. The series was exhibited at the Library of Congress in 1934 (Szyk's first American show), brought him the George Washington Bicentennial Medal, and was eventually purchased by President Ignacy Mościcki of Poland and presented as a state gift to Franklin Roosevelt in 1935; the originals hung in the White House until 1941 and now reside at the FDR Library and Museum at Hyde Park. Few illustrators in any era have managed to give the same year's work to the King of Poland and the President of the United States.

THE HAGGADAH AND THE COMING STORM: 1934–1940

Szyk had returned to Łódź in 1933, the year Hitler took power, and he began drawing the Führer almost at once. The first surviving Hitler caricature, from that year, shows him as an ancient Egyptian Pharaoh—an image whose meaning becomes plain when one realizes that Szyk had already begun work on what would be his magnum opus, the Haggadah.



The Germain Authority in Poland, 1939. Ink and wash on board



Cartoon illustration, 1939. Ink and watercolor on board



Book illustration for The Haggadah



Book illustration for The Haggadah



Book illustration for The Haggadah

He worked on the manuscript from 1934 to 1936, in his home city and in London, producing 48 miniature paintings on the order of three to four inches square—the entire Passover narrative of the Exodus illuminated in the manner of a 15th-century Sephardic prayer book, but with a contemporary undertow that was anything but liturgical. Hitler is the Pharaoh; the Nazis are the Egyptians; the Wicked Son of the Four Sons parable wears Bavarian alpine dress and a small toothbrush moustache; in the original version, swastikas crawled along the red snakes of the Plagues. “As early as 1934,” Szyk told the American press, “an artist, and especially a Jewish artist, cannot remain neutral.” Hitler was the new Pharaoh; the Haggadah was a tract.

In 1937 Szyk moved to London to oversee the printing. The next three years were a slow agony of compromise. The publisher—and, it has been argued, the British government, in the throes of appeasement—required him to paint over the swastikas. He did so, reluctantly. When the Haggadah was finally published in 1940 by the Beaconsfield Press, edited and translated by the Anglo-Jewish historian Cecil Roth, it was the most expensive new book in the world: 250 vellum copies at 100 guineas (about \$520, the price of a modest automobile) apiece, and the deluxe edition dedicated by permission to King George VI. The *Times Literary Supplement* called it “worthy to be placed among the most beautiful of books that the hand of man has ever produced.”

The dedication that closes the volume is the artist’s own: “I am but a Jew, praying in art.”

The Haggadah is the central object of his career, and the one in which his artistic and political instincts fuse without seam. Looked at coolly, it is a piece of book design unlike anything in the modern history of the form: every page rebuilt as a small unified composition, the Hebrew calligraphy treated as integral ornament rather than as text to be decorated, the marginalia dense with symbol but never decorative for decoration’s sake. Looked at warmly, it is a wartime pamphlet disguised as a millennium-old religious art. Both are correct.

NEW YORK AND THE WAR: 1940–1945

Szyk had also, while in London, opened an exhibition called *War and “Kultur”* in Poland—72 caricatures of the September 1939 invasion, shown at the Fine Art Society in January 1940. The *Times*’s review captures the tone better than later commentary tends to: the show, the paper said, was held together by “the unrelenting pursuit of an evil so firmly grasped that it can be dwelt upon with artistic satisfaction.” That, almost exactly, is the Szyk wartime mode.

In July 1940, with the support of the British government and the Polish government-in-exile, Szyk sailed for North America to popularize the Allied cause in the New World. He went first



Marching, 1939

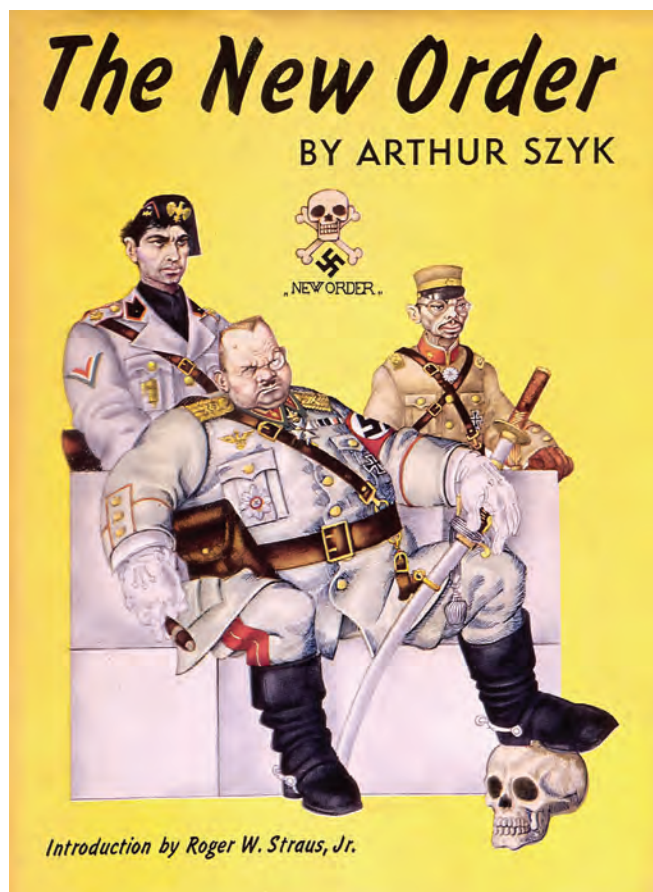


Illustration of a boy, 1940

to Canada—Halifax's *Morning Herald* reported, on possibly thin evidence, that Hitler had personally placed a bounty on his head—and then, in December, to New York, where he, Julia, and Alexandra would live for the next five years. George, the elder son, had enlisted in the Free French and was already in uniform under de Gaulle.

G. P. Putnam's Sons offered him a book within months of his arrival. The result, *The New Order* (1941), appeared on American newsstands a full five months before Pearl Harbor—among the very first anti-Nazi picture books published in the United States. Art critic Thomas Craven wrote the dust-jacket copy, and Craven, who was no easy mark, found himself reaching for the language of medieval art history to describe what was in front of him: Szyk, he wrote, “makes not only cartoons but beautifully composed pictures which suggest, in their curiously decorative quality, the inspired illuminations of the early religious manuscripts. His designs are as compact as a bomb.”

Then came Pearl Harbor, and Szyk's ascent into wartime celebrity was almost vertical. *Time* used him for its first post-attack cover (depicting Yamamoto, December 22, 1941). *Collier's* gave him cover after cover through 1942 and 1943. *Esquire* commissioned regularly. *PM*, the New York liberal tabloid, hired him as political cartoonist after Theodor Geisel—Dr. Seuss—left the post for the Army. He drew for the *New York Post*, the *Chicago Sun*, *Look*, *Liberty*, *Fortune*, the *American Mercury*, and *Saturday Review*. He produced posters for the War Department; he



The New Order, 1941

illustrated war-bond drives, USO bases, and the United States Steel and Coca-Cola advertising departments; he was on more than 500 USO walls; one of his images opened the Manhattan telephone book. The *Esquire* item about his outpolling Betty Grable in the barracks is probably true and certainly characteristic. By Eleanor Roosevelt's count in her “My Day” column of January 8, 1943, Szyk's miniatures “in [their] way fight the war against Hitlerism as truly as any of us who cannot actually be on the fighting fronts today.”

He worked, throughout, in opaque watercolor and gouache on paper or illustration board, often on sheets no larger than nine inches square. He was nearsighted to the point of disability—thick lenses, nose-to-the-paper distance—and worked without a magnifying glass; the famous anecdote, from a Library of Congress curator, has him being sternly reprimanded at one of his own openings by an attendant who didn't recognize him for getting too close to the pictures. Library examination of works like the *Four Freedoms Prayer* (1949) has shown him layering ultramarine in successive transparent washes to model drapery sculpturally rather than tonally, and incising fine highlights directly into the paper with a stylus. The underdrawing was apparently nearly the finished composition: pentimenti are vanishingly rare. He had the picture in mind before he drew it.

What distinguished his war work from that of every other Allied caricaturist was an almost obstinate refusal to depict the Allies. He drew the enemy—exhaustively, lovingly, even with what



Magazine cover illustration for *Collier's*, November 1, 1941. Watercolor and gouache on board



Magazine cover illustration for *Collier's*, January 17, 1942. Watercolor and goauche on board

Collier's

FEBRUARY 14, 1942 FIVE CENTS SEVEN CENTS IN CANADA

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COLLIER'S—THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE—WOMAN'S HOME COMPANION



**STUKA!
NEW AIR FIGHTERS
MENACE YOU
BY W. B. COURTNEY**



Poor Chap, Nobody is Scared of Him, 1941. Watercolor and gouache on board



A Stab in the Back...It's Tempting, 1941. Ink on board

The Times reviewer accurately called “artistic satisfaction”—and very rarely showed the soldiers and statesmen of his own side. The pictures are, in this sense, an extended forensic catalogue of fascism, executed with the precision of a man who believed that to render a thing exactly is to defeat it.

“ACTION—NOT PITY”

By 1943 Szyk had become America’s foremost artistic advocate for the rescue of European Jewry, and the work changed accordingly. Where *The New Order* had ridiculed, the work after 1942 increasingly mourned. He took up with Hillel Kook (Peter Bergson) and the Bergson Group’s emergency campaign to force American action on the Holocaust, contributing illustrations—sometimes captioned by the screenwriter Ben Hecht—to the full-page advertisements they ran in the *New York Times*. His mother Eugenia was murdered at Chełmno in 1942, very probably with her Polish Catholic companion. His brother was in the Łódź ghetto. The drawings of those years are not satire.

De Profundis (Cain, Where Is Abel Thy Brother?), published on the cover of the *Chicago Sun* in March 1943, is the central work. A bearded Jew in a tallit, broken on a heap of corpses, raises his arms toward a sky from which Christ on the Cross looks down—the deliberate Christian iconography meant to convict, by sympathy, an American audience that had thus far averted its gaze. *Tears of Rage*—“Action, Not Pity” appeared the same year in the *New York Times*. *Save Human Lives*, a 1944 booklet of poster stamps, was commissioned by the Bergson group’s Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe. *We’re Running Short of Jews*—a 1943 caricature of two



Hitler on the Throne, 1941. Ink on board

SS officers complaining of supply problems—bore Szyk’s private dedication to his mother. By any standard one cares to apply, he produced more art on the unfolding Holocaust during the war years than any artist anywhere.

He also pushed, alone among the major Allied caricaturists, against Allied failures. He attacked the British 1939 White Paper for capping Jewish immigration to Palestine at ten thousand a year; he attacked the apparent passivity of the established American-Jewish organizations; he attacked, in one striking 1943 drawing, the racial segregation of the U.S. Army with a black GI’s response to the question of what he would do with Hitler: “I would have made him a Negro and dropped him somewhere in the U.S.A.” The *Four Freedoms* suite of 1942—four medieval knights on quest for Speech, Religion, Want, and Fear—preceded Norman Rockwell’s celebrated *Saturday Evening Post* version by two years. The Roosevelts hung copies in the White House.

NEW CANAAN: 1945–1951

In 1945 the Szyks moved from Manhattan to a comfortable Connecticut farmhouse in New Canaan, where the artist would spend his remaining six years. The end of the war released him from the daily work of caricature; the Heritage Press collected his wartime drawings as *Ink and Blood: A Book of Drawings* (1946), and he turned, with evident relief, back to book illustration.

The postwar list is long and largely religious in subject. George Macy of the Limited Editions Club had already commissioned, in 1940, his illustrations for the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (published 1946), in which the Persian-miniaturist strain in his style finally found its proper subject. He went on to illustrate *Pathways*

★ Collier's

JUNE 20, 1942

TEN CENTS

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Yanks Down Under RADIOED FROM AUSTRALIA **By W. B. Courtney**

Collier's, June 20, 1942



Advertising illustration, 1942. Watercolor and gouache on board



A COMEDY TO BE ACTED BY YOUR BOY IN CAMP

The Doughboy's Dream • By Ben Hecht

Collier's, February 27, 1943

Through the Bible by Mortimer J. Cohen (1946), the *Book of Job* (1946), the *Book of Ruth* (1947), the *Ten Commandments* (1947), the *Story of Joseph and His Brothers* (1949), and *Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales* (1945). A *Mother Goose*, completed, was never published. *The Canterbury Tales* and *Arabian Nights* came out posthumously in 1954, and a long-delayed *Book of Esther* in 1974. He also designed stamp-album frontispieces for more than a dozen countries on commission from the Canadian philatelist Kasimir Bileski; the planned *Visual History of Nations* stamp series itself never appeared.

His political voice, however, did not soften. He attacked McCarthyism ("He Is Under Investigation, His Blood Is Red and His Heart Is Left of Center," 1949). He attacked southern lynching: a 1949 drawing shows two Klansmen advancing on a bound African American beneath the caption "Do not forgive them, oh Lord, for they do know what they do." In 1948, eight days before he received American citizenship on May 22, he completed what he called the happiest work of his life—an illuminated Hebrew text of the Israeli Declaration of Independence—and on July 4, 1950, he unveiled an even more lavish illuminated Declaration of Independence of the United States. His last completed work, in 1951, was an illumination of Thomas Jefferson's oath: "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Like many Popular Front sympathizers of the '30s—Szyk had supported every anti-fascist cause that came across his table—he was duly reported to the House Un-American Activities Committee, accused of membership in the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee and six other suspect organizations. His son George prepared a memorandum of his father's innocence for Judge

Simon H. Rifkind. Szyk himself repudiated the charge with the affront of a man who had spent his life fighting totalitarianism in both its colors. Before any further proceeding could occur, on September 13, 1951, in his New Canaan house, he died of a heart attack—his third in two years. He was 57.

ECLIPSE AND RECOVERY

The first decade after his death was punctuated by warm tributes—Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser at the funeral, Judge Rifkind in the courts, S. L. Shneiderman's Yiddish-language biography of 1980—but Szyk's reputation entered the kind of obscurity that often befalls illustrators whose work was too tied to topical reproduction to live easily on museum walls. Between roughly 1955 and 1990 he was almost absent from American exhibitions. Carl Van Doren had predicted in 1946 that "there is no one more certain to be alive two hundred years from now"; for 35 of those years Szyk did not look very alive at all.

The recovery has come in stages. In 1991 the Arthur Szyk Society was founded in Orange County by George Gooche; in 1997 the rabbi-turned-antiquarian Irvin Ungar took the helm and began the patient curatorial work of a Szyk renaissance. Major exhibitions followed at the Library of Congress (1999–2000), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2002, under the title "Action — Not Pity"), the German Historical Museum in Berlin (2008–09), the Legion of Honor in San Francisco (2010–11), the New-York Historical Society (2017–18), and the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life at UC Berkeley (2020–22). In 2008 Congress awarded Szyk a posthumous Congressional Gold Medal. In 2017 the Magnes acquired the Ungar collection—450 paintings, drawings, and sketches— or \$10.1 million, the largest single monetary gift to acquire art in UC Berkeley history.



No Asbestos, 1943. Watercolor and gouache on board, 9" x 14"



The Optimist is a German Who Studies English, the Pessimist Studies Russian, 1944. Ink and wash



"The Krauts" Through the Ages, 1944. Watercolor and gouache



Frontispiece illustration for *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, 1945. Watercolor and gouache



Book illustration for *The Canterbury Tales*, 1946

On December 7, 2025—the 84th anniversary of Pearl Harbor—the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Lower Manhattan opened the most ambitious exhibition of the artist yet mounted. *Art of Freedom: The Life & Work of Arthur Szyk* runs through July 26, 2026, and assembles more than 100 objects, including 18 never-before-exhibited works and the long-lost Paris sketchbook of 1928—Szyk's preparatory drawings of Revolutionary War uniforms, weaponry, and figures for *Washington and His Times*—which Ungar acquired only eight years ago. Curator Sara Softness's framing is the right one: Szyk as “a person of the world, with allegiance to many nations, religions and forms of justice advocacy who looked to history to make a parable for the present.” The *Times's* review, by Ralph Blumenthal, treated the show as the culmination of the recovery: a forgotten soldier-in-art finally fully back in view. Ungar's own memoir, *Reviving the Artist Who Fought Hitler: My Life with Arthur Szyk* (University of Texas Press, 2026), arrived in May.

SZYK'S LEGACY IN ILLUSTRATION

Szyk fits awkwardly within American Golden Age illustration in the conventional sense—he was not a Pyle student, not a Brandywine man, not a *Saturday Evening Post* regular in the Rockwell-Cornwell-Leyendecker line, though he sold to many of the same magazines. He stands closer, on the European side, to the great fin-de-siècle and interwar luxury-book illustrators—Edmund Dulac, Kay Nielsen, Boris Artzybasheff in his more decorative moods—but he is more political than any of them, more compositionally austere, and more willing to let calligraphy and ornament carry as much narrative weight as the figure.

His real cousins are perhaps Goya, in the obsessive forensic gaze upon political horror—Carl Van Doren made the comparison directly in 1946—and the medieval illuminators he studied as a boy, whose



Book illustration for *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, 1945. Watercolor and gouache



Book illustration for *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*, 1948. Watercolor and gouache



Book illustration for *The Canterbury Tales*, 1946



Cartoon, 1948

techniques he adopted with a thoroughness no other 20th-century practitioner approached. He used watercolor and gouache (almost never oil), quill pen and ink, sable brushes of varying sizes, and a graphite underdrawing so confident it functioned as a binding cartoon. He worked in miniature: the originals, when one finally sees them at exhibition, are almost always startlingly small. The reproduction was the point—the magazine cover, the war-bond stamp, the book page—but the original was always the one place where the line was perfectly itself.

And he was, in the end, an illustrator above all in the sense that mattered most to the Golden Age tradition: he understood the work as a public address. He drew for newsstands, for soldiers, for refugees, for kings, for school readers, for Passover tables. He believed every picture had something to say, and that the saying of it—clearly, beautifully, in a line firm enough to outlast the deadline that produced it—was the whole craft. In a century that increasingly asked the illustrator to choose between art and message, he held both at once. The medium, in our long view of it, is the richer for his stubbornness.

He once described himself, with the proud awkwardness of a man writing English as a second language, as “a soldier in art.” Three quarters of a century after his death—with European fascism back in the headlines and the Haggadah selling, in its current Historicana facsimile, faster than at any time in its long career—the description finally has the ring of plain description. He was a soldier. He fought with a brush. The line still holds. ❤️

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“Do not forgive them, oh Lord, for they do know what they do!”, 1949