

BEN SHAHN

IT is sometimes perplexing to come face to face with the opinions that contemporaries of past periods had of their artists, and to check up on the final allotment of fame as ratified by posterity. Gigantic figures, pricked, dwindled like balloons, while from some corner obscurely related to fine arts, a fashion-plate designer like Moreau-le-jeune, a newspaper reporter like Guys, emerge as the indisputable mouth-pieces of their epoch. Thus, on the ground of experience, we may prophesy the deflation of our own giants of modern art, and start hunting through improbable corners of garrets and cellars for more authentic geniuses dyed deep enough to suit the taste of our grandsons.

Why is it that contemporaries of the artists usually guess wrong as to their respective merits. We associate the idea of greatness with the term "old masters" and those are for us elders with long beards who live and work in an ivory tower suggested by the museum atmosphere in which their pictures are now buried. We forget that those old masters were young, and that they achieved international fame only by clinging tenaciously to their own earthly boundaries and

mental idiosyncrasies. Thus Brueghel, after a trip to Italy at the time that Michael Angelo was painting the Sistine, came back home steeped deeper than ever in the atmosphere of his own Dutch peasantry and his distaste for the Spanish invaders. Siding with one's own moment, country, party or hamlet, diving into the social turmoil, using pencil and brushes to club your opponents is paradoxically one of the surest ways to remain in posterity's consciousness as a master whose work did transcend all limitations of time and space.

We can safely look at Ben Shahn as a most valuable witness to our epoch. Both his language and subject matter are unmistakably contemporary. He is indeed a painter of historical tableaux as much as Emmanuel Leutze or the Baron Gros, and if his pictures are so dissimilar from theirs, it is a further proof of how genuinely Shahn is of his time. The sources of Shahn's art, that is, the technical sources, its grammar, are to be found in this school of Paris whose aims differed so entirely from his own. Flippant Dufy and Catholic Rouault contributed indirectly to his vocabulary those broad washes of gouache which in an apparently accidental way create the volumes, but not this tense, grimy city atmosphere which remains peculiarly his. On this loosely brushed background a line as keen as the sharpest silver-point superposes its own version of the subject, sometimes in agreement with the mass modelling, but more often unbinding itself from it and creating a version of its own. It is a palimpsest, two texts perceived simultaneously, whose concordancies and discrepancies create a third image, forcefully dynamic, which is the picture.

Much of Shahn's plastic is explainable by his aims. Being a story-teller, his source material consists mainly of newspaper reports, his models being the photographs of rotogravure sections and tabloid sheets. Degas also used photographs, but depurated, stylized, lifted to the plane of

his art. Shahn, on the contrary, delights in what is peculiarly accidental, cynical, and ungentlemanly in camera work. The gymnastics of inhibition by which we immediately substitute for any given spectacle a more anthropomorphic version in which hands and heads will be given the leading role, do not fool the camera, nor Shahn. For them a man, however intellectually eminent, will exist mainly through the bunch of folds and creases which are his clothes, his buttons, his shoe-laces, his grotesque shadow on a brick wall, the baroque mouldings on the arm of his chair, while his mouth and eyes may be summed up by three inconspicuous slits. Such an ousting of our lawful vision is a slap to the highly orderly and satisfying implications that this vision symbolizes. Yet the more one grows accustomed to this new version of the world, the more is one able to perceive in it a new order. The overgrown canine teeth of Governor Rolph, the bittersweet dimple at the corner of Mooney's mouth are enough to reassure one that this apparently mechanical vision is as heavily loaded with moral values as the more conservative and antiquated version.

JEAN CHARLOT



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BEN SHAHN

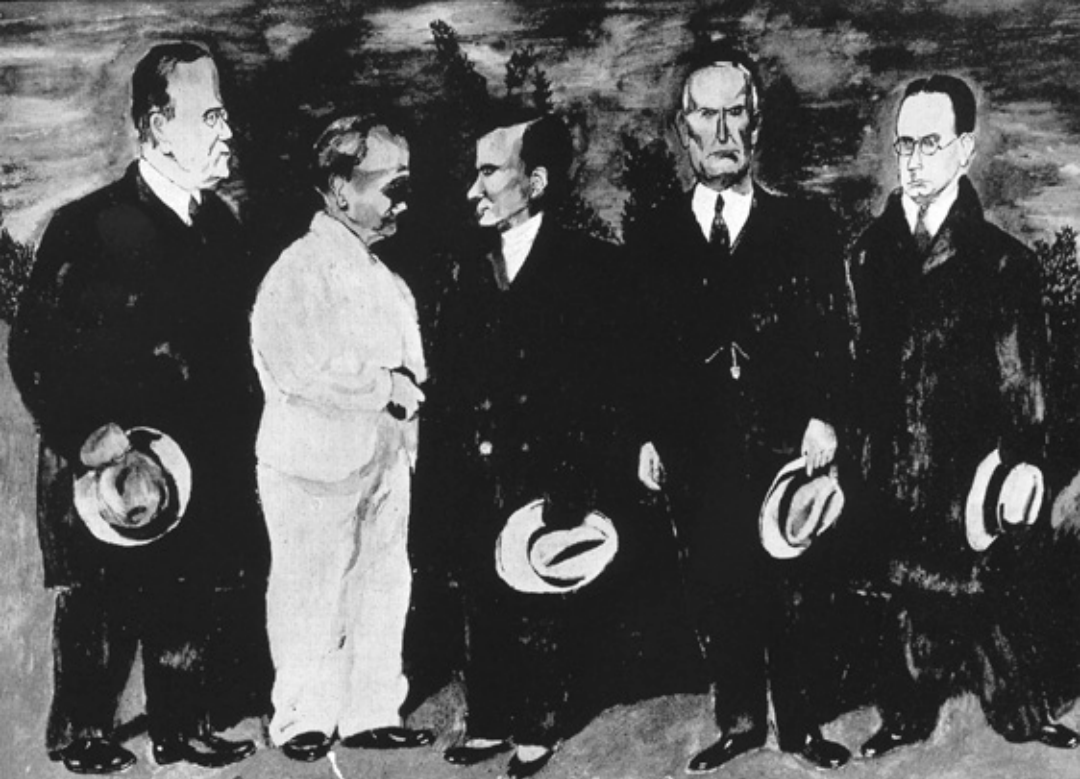
Brush Drawing



EX-GOVERNOR YOUNG OF CALIFORNIA

BEN SHAHN

Brush Drawing

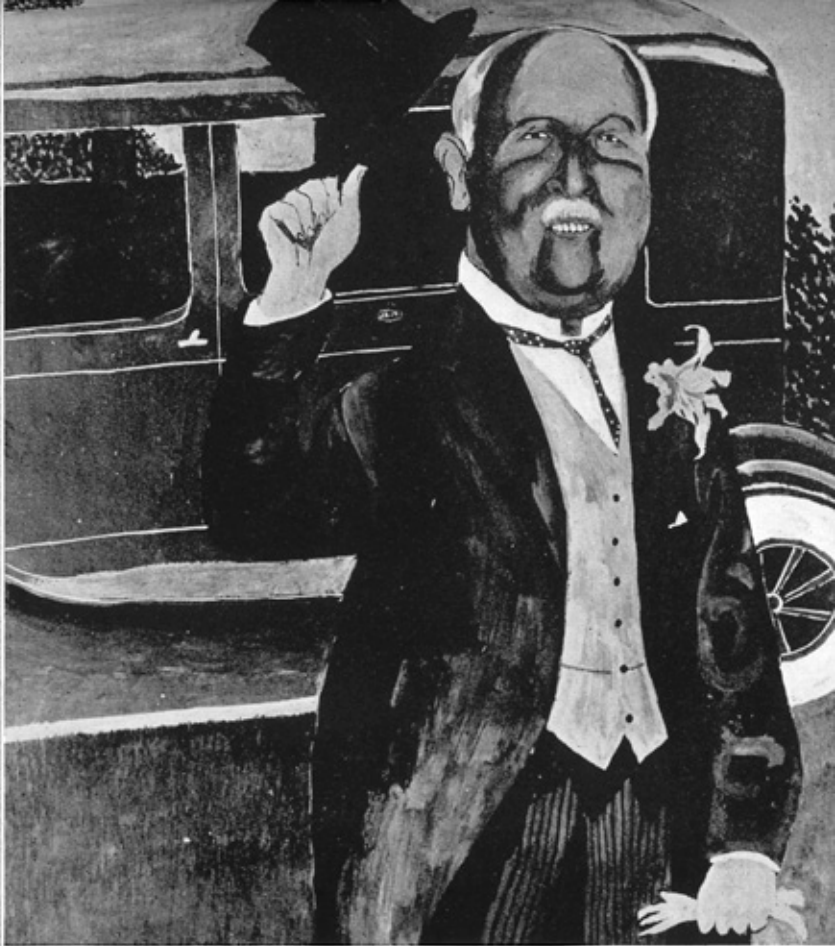


MAYOR WALKER SHAKES TOM MOONEY'S HAND
MOONEY AND HIS WARDEN, J. B. HOLOHAN

BEN SHAHN
(TEMPERA)



WALKER GREET'S MOTHER OF MOONEY
(TEMPERA)



GOVERNOR JAMES ROLPH, JR., OF CALIFORNIA
BEN SHAHN



THE SUPREME COURT OF CALIFORNIA

MOONEY
APOTHEOSIS
(Panel in Tempera)

TOM MOONEY'S MOTHER
BEN SHAHN

HOUND &

HORN

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