

## YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Contact: Marie N. Weltzien  
203.432.0611  
marie.weltzien@yale.edu

### **Artist Ben Shahn's Portrayal of The Sacco and Vanzetti Case**

#### **On View at the Yale Art Gallery**

*I got to thinking about the Sacco-Vanzetti case. . . . Ever since I could remember I'd wished that I'd been lucky enough to be alive at a great time—when something big was going on, like the Crucifixion. And suddenly I realized I was. Here I was living through another crucifixion. Here was something to paint!*

Ben Shahn

The trial and execution for murder of two Italian immigrants, both ardent anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, 75 years ago, inspired an outpouring of poetry, music, and visual art, in addition to vehement political protest. The most significant and sustained treatment of the case in fine art is Ben Shahn's (1898-1969) Sacco and Vanzetti series, the subject of *Justice on Trial: Ben Shahn's Case for Sacco and Vanzetti*, an exhibition at the Yale University Art Gallery from October 15 through December 29, 2002.

Two major paintings, both titled *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, are the highlights of the exhibition and shown with them, for the first time, are ten related gouaches and a print. Archival materials, including contemporary political pamphlets, photographs, newsreels, and newspaper accounts, place Shahn's work in context and give viewers further insight into the issues surrounding the trial and sentencing. The exhibition was organized by Robin Jaffee Frank, associate curator of American paintings and sculpture, with the assistance of Amy Kurtz Lansing, the Marcia Brady Tucker Curatorial Intern.

*Justice on Trial: Ben Shahn's Case for Sacco and Vanzetti* is offered in conjunction with a number of community discussions and performances during New Haven's marking of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the controversial case, which still informs

current debates on capital punishment, immigration policies, and ethnic and racial intolerance. The works come from private and public collections and the Yale University Art Gallery is grateful to the generous lenders. The exhibition is supported in part by funds made possible by a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

### **The Case**

The Sacco-Vanzetti case, described as “the most politically charged murder case in the history of American jurisprudence,” unfolded shortly after the end of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the First World War, during a period of intense xenophobia and anti-radical paranoia known as the “Red Scare.” On May 5, 1920, police in Brockton, Massachusetts arrested Sacco, a shoemaker, and Vanzetti, a fish peddler, charging them with being “suspicious characters.” Each man carried a loaded handgun and, under questioning, denied having anarchist beliefs. In fact, both were avowed anarchists and had been involved in labor strikes, political agitation, and anti-war propaganda. The authorities were seeking a gang—possibly with anarchist ties—responsible for the unsuccessful hold-up of a shoe factory payroll in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, on December 24, 1919, as well as the robbery and murder of a shoe factory paymaster and his guard in South Braintree, Massachusetts, on April 15, 1920. Vanzetti was charged and found guilty in the Bridgewater case. Both Sacco and Vanzetti were indicted on September 11, 1920, for the more serious South Braintree crime.

Their trial began on May 31, 1921, in an atmosphere of prejudice against immigrants-- particularly Italians-- and radicals. Six weeks later, on July 14, Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted. Numerous motions for a new trial were denied. Public outrage forced Massachusetts Governor Alvan T. Fuller to establish a committee headed by Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell to review defense demands for a new trial based on procedural injustices and the transparent bigotry of the presiding judge, Webster Thayer. The committee members declared that justice had been done. Sacco and Vanzetti were electrocuted at Charlestown State Prison just after midnight on August 23, 1927. Their executions ignited unprecedented mass demonstrations worldwide.

### **The Artist**

Ben Shahn was profoundly moved by the plight of Sacco and Vanzetti. Like them, he was an immigrant, born into a family of Jewish craftsmen who left Lithuania in 1906. The

family settled in New York, where Shahn worked as a lithographer before studying art at the National Academy of Design. After his marriage in 1922, he traveled to North Africa and Europe and followed the Sacco-Vanzetti case in Paris, where it made headlines and prompted protests. Following his return from Europe in 1925, Shahn participated in demonstrations in Boston, but after their execution he sought to defend and honor Sacco and Vanzetti in a more enduring way, through his art. In 1931-32, he created a series of gouaches (opaque watercolors) and tempera paintings basing his visual narrative on photographs from newspapers and political pamphlets, gathered over many months, selections of which are in the exhibition. "In his gouaches and paintings," said Robin Jaffee Frank, "Shahn wedded documentary detail to a modernist vocabulary of calligraphic lines, flat color areas, compressed space, and dramatic distortions to convey emotion. At a time," she continued, "when fear of immigrants and radicals dehumanized Sacco and Vanzetti, Shahn's portrayals of the defendants forced people to see them as he did, as martyred men."

The first exhibition of works from Shahn's Sacco-Vanzetti series at the Downtown Gallery, New York, and at the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art, Cambridge, in 1932 established Shahn's career. His work on the series shaped his life-long commitment to addressing themes of injustice and marked a turning point in the development of social realism in the United States.

### **Related Programs**

#### **Wednesday, October 16**

12:20 pm Art à la Carte, *Ben Shahn, Newspapers, and The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, Amy Kurtz Lansing, Marsha Brady Tucker Curatorial Intern in American Art

#### **Thursday, October 17**

5:30 pm, Keynote Lecture, *Mechanical Vision: Photography and Mass Media in Ben Shahn's Sacco and Vanzetti Series*, Laura Katzman, associate professor of art, Randolph Macon Woman's College and Senior Fulbright Scholar, University of Hamburg, Germany

#### **Thursday, November 7**

4:00 pm Art at Four *A Lawyer's Passion for the Sacco and Vanzetti Case*, Kenneth David Burrows, attorney-at-law. Followed by a tour of the exhibition led by its curator Robin Jaffee Frank and a film *Sacco and Vanzetti, 1921* from Court TV's "Landmark American Trials Series" (52 minutes)

**Thursday, November 14**

4:00 pm, Art at Four

A Conversation: *Sacco and Vanzetti and the Italian-American Community*, Patricia Klindienst, writer, and Neil Thomas Proto, attorney and adjunct professor, Georgetown University School of Public Policy. Followed by a tour of the exhibition led by Amy Kurtz Lansing, and a film *In Search of History: The True Story of Sacco and Vanzetti*, produced by The History Channel/A&E Television

**Wednesday, December 4**

4:00 pm Art à la Carte, *Justice on Trial: Ben Shahn's Case for Sacco and Vanzetti*, Robin Jaffee Frank, associate curator of American paintings and sculpture and organizer of the exhibition

**The Yale University Art Gallery**, located at Chapel and York Streets in New Haven, exhibits a permanent collection from every period in the history of art, with special changing exhibitions throughout the year.

**Gallery Hours:** Tuesday through Saturday 10 am to 5 pm, Thursday 10 am to 8 pm, Sunday 1 to 6 pm. Closed Mondays and major holidays

**Admission** to the Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden is free

An entrance for persons using wheelchairs is at 201 York Street, with an unmetered parking space nearby on York Street. For information, call (203) 432-0606.

**Recorded general and program information** (203) 432-0600

**Group and school tours** (203) 432-8479

**Museum Store** (203) 432-0601

**Website:** [www.yale.edu/artgallery](http://www.yale.edu/artgallery)

**Address:** Street address is 1111 Chapel Street (at York Street). The mailing address is P.O. Box 208271, New Haven CT, 06520



Yale University Art Gallery  
Fall 2002 **Calendar & News**





## 16 Wednesday 12:20

Art à la Carte, "Ben Shahn, Newspapers, and The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti"  
Amy Kurtz Lansing, Marsha Brady  
Tucker Fellow in American Art.

## 17 Thursday

### Museum-Wide Celebration

of the special exhibitions:

*Wood Turning in North America  
Since 1930*

*Yale Collects Wood: Gifts from  
the Collection of John  
and Robyn Horn  
&*

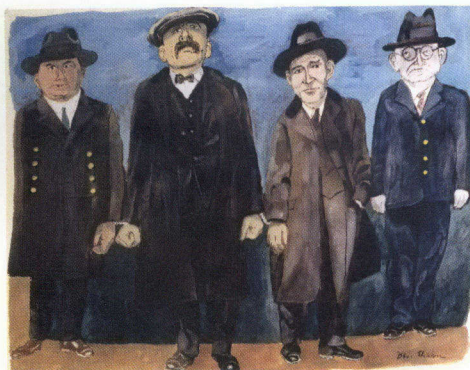
*Justice on Trial: Ben Shahn's Case  
for Sacco and Vanzetti*

5:30

Lecture, "Mechanical Vision:  
Photography and Mass Media in Ben  
Shahn's Sacco and Vanzetti Series,"  
Laura Katzman, associate professor  
of art and director of museum  
studies, Randolph-Macon Woman's  
College, McNeil Lecture Hall

6:30-7:30

Reception in the sculpture hall and  
music in the galleries



Ben Shahn, *Sacco and Vanzetti and Their Guards*, gouache and pen and ink on paper, 1931-32. Private Collection, © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

## 19 Saturday

10:30-12:00

Artful Tales, a hands-on program for 5 to 8 year olds accompanied by an adult. To register or for more information, please call 203.432.8459

1:30-4:30

Family Afternoon featuring demonstrations of quilting by Mozell Benson, and wood turning by Jim Kephart, Ernie Krubsack, John Lorch, Bill Brown, and Bud Poulin. The event also includes story telling, children's activities, and live music in conjunction with the special exhibitions *Wood Turning in North America Since 1930* and *Nine African-American Quilters*. Sculpture hall and sculpture garden

## 22 Tuesday

Members' Fall Bus Trip, Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme (see Membership page for details or call Linda Jerolmon at 203.432.9658)

## November

### 2 Saturday

Lecture/demonstration, "Wood Turning in North America Since 1930," Mark Sfirri, wood turner and furniture maker

11:00–12:30

Slide presentation, *McNeil Lecture Hall*

1:30–4:30

Spindle-turning lecture/demonstration, *sculpture hall*

### 5 Tuesday 2:00

Gallery Talk, "Vessels and Beyond," Peter Petrochko, wood artist, in conjunction with the exhibition *Yale Collects Wood*.

### 7 Thursday 4:00

Art at Four, "A Lawyer's Passion for the Sacco and Vanzetti Case," Kenneth David Burrows, attorney-at-law

### 14 Thursday 4:00

Art at Four, "A Conversation: Sacco and Vanzetti and the Italian-American Community" Patricia Klindienst, writer, and Neil Thomas Proto, attorney and adjunct professor, Georgetown University School of Public Policy

### 23 Saturday 2:30

"Wood Turning in North America Since 1930," Jon Sauer, ornamental wood turner, *McNeil Lecture Hall*

Winslow Homer, *Market Scene, Nassau*, watercolor and graphite, 1885

## December

### 4 Wednesday 12:20

Art à la Carte, "Justice on Trial: Ben Shahn's Case for Sacco and Vanzetti," Robin Jaffee Frank, associate curator of American paintings and sculpture and organizer of the exhibition



Ben Shahn, *Mrs. Sacco and Elizabeth Glendower Evans*, gouache on paper, 1931–32. Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum. Gift of Gertrude Lippincott. University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota. © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

### 11 Wednesday 12:20

Art à la Carte, "From Homer to Hopper: Masters of American Watercolor," Helen A. Cooper, the Holcombe T. Green Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture and curator of the exhibition

