



Ben Shahn and the Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti

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Between 1931 and 1932, painter Ben Shahn (1898–1969) created a series of twenty-three gouaches and temperas on the infamous trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested in 1920 for the murder of a guard during a robbery of a shoe factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts. The two men were Italian immigrants as well as committed anarchists. Their radicalism and their ethnicity, far more than the ambiguous evidence in the case, became the basis for the prosecution against them. In 1927, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed. Theirs was one of the most controversial trials of the twentieth century.

Identifying strongly with these men, Ben Shahn returned again and again to this subject. Spanning the early 1930s up through the end of his career, in 1967, he also produced paintings, an ink drawing, three serigraphs, and a mosaic mural on the trial.

From May through August 2001, the Jersey City Museum will present all paintings in existence from the 1931–32 series—17 in all—as a first-time event. Many of Shahn’s other Sacco and Vanzetti works will also be displayed. The exhibit will place the art within the context of the trial itself, as it will include photographs from the courtroom and the newspapers of the day.

With its twelve color and thirty-two black-and-white illustrations, Ben Shahn and “The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti” brings the exhibit—and the trial—to life. The catalog will include articles exploring such topics as the artist’s strong identification with the two men on trial; the 1930–32 series’ critical reception from the 1930s to today; and a historical overview of the case itself.

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