

the Art and Politics of Arthur Szyk

VIEWING ACTIVITY

These pages are intended to help you interpret Arthur Szyk's artwork. The questions highlight the exhibition's three sections and prompt you to examine a particular work of art in each.

Jewish Artist



Moses, Aaron, and Hur, 1935
From *The Haggadah*
Watercolor, gouache, graphite, and ink on paper
Forest Group LLC (Janger Family Collection), Chicago

Note the many biblical themes and characters Szyk used to convey messages about contemporary events. Look carefully at the three men in the painting illustrated at the left. The man in the center is Moses, who led the Israelites out of Egypt. To the left is his brother Aaron, the High Priest, and to the right is Hur, a military leader.

How does Szyk direct your eye toward Moses?

Aaron and Hur are holding up Moses' arms. According to the Bible (Exodus 17:8–13), as long as Moses held up his arms, the Israelites would win the battle against their enemy, the Amalekites; but if Moses lowered his arms, the Israelites would be defeated.

Although the characters in this illumination are biblical figures, how might they have represented issues facing Jews living in Europe in 1939?

- For hundreds of years, Jewish and Christian artists have used illuminations to decorate religious and secular texts.
- The Haggadah is a Jewish religious text that is read each year during the holiday of Passover and tells the story of the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt.
- Szyk originally planned to dedicate his version of *The Haggadah* to Germany's Jews and to paint a swastika on every Egyptian; however, printers, concerned about the political implications, forced Szyk to remove the swastikas.
- The words around the picture are in Hebrew.

Wartime Caricaturist



Anti-Christ, 1942
Watercolor, gouache, graphite, and ink on paper
Rinjiro Sodei, Japan

The second section of the exhibition has examples of how Szyk used ridicule and exaggeration to portray the wartime enemies of the United States. Like Szyk's other work, *Anti-Christ* (left) is filled with many details and images. What do you notice first in this illustration?

Why do you think Szyk wanted to call attention to these details?

How do the images and symbols in this picture relate to the idea of an Anti-Christ?

Is there another title you could give this illustration?

- In some Christian traditions, the "Anti-Christ" was the terrible enemy of Jesus and the Christian church. The Anti-Christ was expected to appear before the end of the world to undermine the power of the Christian church and eventually destroy Christianity.
- One of the many places this image appeared was in the January 1945 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.
- Hidden in Hitler's hair are the Latin words *Vae victis*, which mean "woe to the vanquished."
- The banner in the top left-hand corner reads, "Today Europe, tomorrow the world."

Action—Not Pity



United Palestine Appeal 1941 yearbook
Dr. Samuel Halperin, Washington, D.C.

The third section of the exhibition looks at Szyk's work as an activist. Note the various issues addressed and the causes championed by Szyk in his art.

What clues can you find regarding the identity of the soldier in the image at the left?

How does Szyk show you what the soldier is feeling?

What is the relationship between the soldier and the other people?

Szyk made this poster to mobilize public opinion for a Jewish army. Whom does he want to mobilize?

How is he trying to convince them?

Does he convince you?

What might you have done to convince people?

- The United Palestine Appeal was a mainstream Zionist advocacy and fundraising organization.
- Zionism evolved as a movement in the late 19th century to promote the establishment of a Jewish homeland; the primary focus of Zionist hopes was the area known as Palestine, the site of ancient Israel, and currently, the modern State of Israel.
- Arthur Szyk designed this cover early in the war to publicize and mobilize support for the creation of a Jewish army to fight against the Axis powers, to defend Palestine, and to rescue persecuted Jews in Europe.