

Illuminating Arthur Szyk: An Interview with Irvin Ungar

Written by Steven Heller

Published on November 24, 2010

Filed in Voice: Journal of Design

Arthur Szyk (1894–1951) was a Polish Jew who immigrated to America in 1940 in the wake of the Holocaust, and went on to become the leading anti-Nazi artist in the United States during World War II. Irvin Ungar is a rare book dealer, former rabbi and founder of The Arthur Szyk Society. Szyk (pronounced “shick”) painstakingly devoted such incredible energy to a single illuminated caricature because he wanted his art to last—and live on, it does, thanks in part to Ungar. “Through his unique style, which combines use of color with a miniaturist’s attention to detail, Szyk departs from all schools of art and yet embraces many of them,” Ungar notes. “I would say, then, that Szyk’s prodigious output—illustrated books, and magazine and newspaper political art, as well as nationalistic portraits and illuminated religious works—would together qualify him as a school of art in his own right.” The Szyk Haggadah, his exquisite Passover prayer book, is still in demand today: Ungar published a luxury limited edition through his business, *Historicana*, and Abrams Books will publish new (and less extravagant) hardcover and paperback versions in April 2011. And this December 4, an exhibition of his work will open at San Francisco’s Legion of Honor museum. Szyk’s legacy demonstrates that one need not be part of any movement, nor spawn any school, to achieve international recognition and prominence for his messages as well as his art, in his own time and for all time. I spoke to Ungar about Szyk’s lasting importance as an artist and commentator.

Heller: How did you become involved with Arthur Szyk and his work?

Ungar: I first discovered Szyk’s art when I was seeking gifts for people in my wedding party some 35 years ago. I purchased copies of his blue-velvet-bound illustrated Passover *Haggadah*, and that was the beginning. Some 15 years later, I discovered Szyk Jewish holiday prints in a Pittsburgh antique shop. I once again fell in love with his colors. Eventually I became familiar with his popular illustrated *Andersen’s Fairy Tales*, but it was his anti-Nazi book *The New Order* that really caught my attention. The idea that Szyk, who to me at the time was a religious artist, was actually first and foremost a political artist, really fascinated me.

As I learned about the artist, I also realized that he was once famous, both in the United States and abroad—Poland, France, England, Canada, Israel—but was virtually forgotten after his death. I often found that books about Jewish artists left out Szyk, and that books about WW II political art did likewise. It seemed to me Arthur Szyk was a genius, and he should be reclaimed by the art world as well as by the peoples he loved—the Jews, Poles, Americans—and anyone interested in social justice.

If, more than one-half century after his death, I could convince a museum to show Szyk's work again, then perhaps his prominence would be on the road to being restored. In 1998–99, it happened: I curated my first exhibition, "Justice Illuminated: The Art of Arthur Szyk," at the Spertus Museum in Chicago. Then followed with numerous one-man exhibitions, each with different themes and works of art: "Arthur Szyk: Artist for Freedom" at the Library of Congress (2000), "The Art & Politics of Arthur Szyk" at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2002), a traveling exhibition to three cities in Poland (2005), and "Arthur Szyk: Drawings Against National Socialism and Terror" at the German Historical Museum, Berlin (2008). This December "Arthur Szyk: Miniature Paintings and Illuminations" will open at the Legion of Honor, one of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Over the years I acquired all of the family archives, developed a personal world-class collection of Szyk's art, wrote and published books about Szyk, lectured worldwide and on U.S. college campuses, and made two documentary films. And there is still more to do...much more.

Heller: You've developed a Szyk society, which has spawned books and exhibitions. I know you were a rabbi. So is this a kind of religious mission?

Ungar: It's true, I was a pulpit rabbi for 13 years, and then entered the business world as an antiquarian bookseller in 1987. My work with Arthur Szyk is not a personal religious mission, but in a sense, his art does reflect my own value system as a Jew. I have always been taught that one should care about one's religious tradition and determine how the best of that tradition can advocate for humanity at large. And that is precisely what Szyk's art does in the area of social justice. He fought passionately against tyranny and oppression directed toward the Jews, and for freedom and justice, and translated these values into democratic ideals for humankind. During WW II Szyk engaged in a "one-man war" against Hitler's war on the Jews, and also served as a "one-man army" against the Axis as Roosevelt's "soldier in art." He raised money for the Chinese and the Czechs, for the displaced Poles and the tattered Brits, and the soldiers of the Commonwealth of Australia and New Zealand. During the war and afterwards, his art drew attention to the Native Americans and to the racism directed toward the African Americans, and even defended the Muslims in Indonesia against the Dutch in 1948.

In Arthur Szyk I have found a model for my own life, and yet his message is for all of us. On a broader scale, this activist-artist teaches each of us to care about our own people, our own nation, our own tradition, and our own religion, and then to use the best of our heritage to make the world a better place. If social justice is a religious mission, then yes, Szyk's art and hopefully all of us are on that mission.

Heller: What does Szyk's work tell us about yesterday, today and tomorrow? In other words, why should people be interested in him aside from your passion?

Ungar: I do think this artist's work is eternal. As I mentioned earlier, why else would an artist spend so much time on detail, when pressing social issues demanded an immediate response? For Szyk, it was because those immediate issues were also timeless ones. Indeed, the same problems of Szyk's day—injustice and abuse of individual rights and collective freedoms—are still with us and still need to be addressed. His art can serve as a mirror for society today, causing us to reflect upon the past while using its lessons to enlighten us on paths not yet traveled.

Heller: Szyk’s work runs the gamut from polemical attacks on the Axis to Judaica (he’s illustrated an amazing *Haggadah*) to fantasy to patriotic. What do all these have in common other than style?

Ungar: While Szyk’s style oftentimes is similar from one subject area to another (compare his political image of *Satan Leads the Ball* with his *Andersen’s Fairy Tales* cover image, or his illuminated Americana image of *Washington with his Soldiers* to his religious yet militant “Modern Moses”—one fact remains clear: in the artist’s own words, “Art is not my aim, it is my means.” And although several of Szyk’s illustrated books [for example, his pre-War fantasy of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1926), his post-War *The Canterbury Tales* (1947), and *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* (1954)] carried no message of social justice, most of his illustrated books, did in fact attempt to transmit a political or social message.

His *Revolution in Germany* (1919) was a satire against Germany and its negative influences on Poland. *Le Livre d’Esther* [The Book of Esther] (1925) was his first religious book to show Jews standing up to threatened annihilation, and *The Haggadah* (1940), wherein he portrayed the Nazis as the ancient Egyptians of the Exodus narrative, warned a new generation of centuries-old hatred. Almost without exception, Szyk’s art was never ambiguous or abstract. It almost always had a common theme: freedom, not tyranny; justice, not oppression—which, when combined with the uniqueness of his style, is why Szyk became one of the leading political artists of the first half of the 20th century.

Heller: I know that Szyk drew covers for *Collier’s* and other leading American magazines. How was he considered during his lifetime?

Ungar: While Norman Rockwell was illustrating the covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Szyk regularly illustrated covers for *Collier’s* magazine, oftentimes for major holidays or anniversaries. Two of his 1942 covers serve as examples. His Labor Day illustration motivated American workers to fight the Nazi serpent strangling the pillars of democracy, and his December cover for the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor engendered hatred of the enemy, represented by an ugly bomb-carrying Japanese bat. There was nothing subtle about Szyk’s art, and it was clear that he was a hater of hate. For this reason, his contemporaries recognized him as a “citizen-soldier of the free world” and the American military showed his art at over 500 USO bases for every GI heading overseas to see.

Let the following two quotes, then, summarize how Szyk was honored in his own day: “There is no one more certain to be alive two hundred years from now. Just as we turn back to Hogarth and Goya for the living images of their age, so our descendants will turn back to Arthur Szyk for the most graphic history of Hitler and Hirohito and Mussolini. Here is the damning essence of what has happened; here is the piercing summary of what men have thought and felt.” (Carl Van Doren, contemporary art critic, 1946.)

Following the war, Szyk created several important works of Americana. Chief among them was his illuminated Declaration of Independence, which was dedicated in festive ceremony on July 4, 1950 in New Canaan, CT (the year before Szyk died). At that event the chairman called Arthur Szyk “one of the world’s great free men who has dedicated his life and art to the preservation of freedom.”

Heller: Szyk engaged in some racial stereotyping of Japanese war leaders. How do you feel about these images in context and in light of today?

Ungar: Yes, it is clear that Szyk engaged in racial stereotyping, particularly with regard to the Japanese. However, what is also clear is that his art, particularly in this instance, must be seen within its historic context. One high school student a few years ago told me, while looking at the Collier's cover where Hirohito looks like an ape, that one should focus more to Szyk's point of the monstrous things that the Japanese were, at that time, doing to humanity. Considering that 10–20 million Chinese died as a result of Japanese racial hatred in the 1930s and '40s, anything Szyk could do to dehumanize this enemy, and thereby motivate Americans to respond to Japanese brutality, would serve his end. Interestingly enough, three years ago a Japanese historian published in Tokyo a book about Szyk for the Japanese people, hoping that Szyk's works would serve as a mirror for them to see their past, and help them come to terms with their WWII atrocities.

Heller: What, in your research, has been the biggest revelation about Szyk?

Ungar: Let me tell you first what does not surprise me: the depth of Szyk's passion, his independence of thought and uncompromising stand against injustice, and his infinite love of humanity. I am no longer surprised by his vast knowledge of history and nations, or by how widely conversant he was with current political events or Arabian tales or Chinese symbolism of dynasties long ago. And while I am not surprised, I never ever cease to be amazed. My biggest revelation about Szyk continues to be that his knowledge—and awareness and response—is without end. Just when I think I have seen everything in a particular subject area, another work is rediscovered, and not just any work, but a startlingly noteworthy piece that sheds new light on Szyk's remarkable vision, tolerance and sense of justice.

Here's an example. As I was preparing my essay for the Berlin exhibition catalogue in 2008, and reviewing Szyk's artwork that defended the declaration of Israeli statehood in 1948 against the five Arab nations that went to war with the newly born country, I came across a 1948 artwork that defended the Indonesian Muslims who were being attacked by the Dutch. How is it that an artist of Szyk's deep commitment to the people of Israel and who was perpetually absorbed with their survival would have time to care about what was happening to the Muslims in Indonesia, let alone create a work of art defending their rights? Entitled "Dutch Christmas in Indonesia" his pen and ink drawing was published in the *New York Post* on Christmas Eve, 1948. It is inscribed to the people of Indonesia "in ardent sympathy and love, Arthur Szyk." I really have come to see the much of the world through Szyk's eyes, whether my view is stimulated by the beauty of his art represented by its luminous colors and its intricacy of detail—or by his messages and approach to social issues and justice in its most isolated or broadest sense. His work is never tiring, always inspiring; demanding, yet always expanding my vision.

Heller: Finally, what do you get out of this advocacy of the man and the artist?

Ungar: To be honest, I really feel a sense of purpose. Hardly a day goes by that I don't try to do something to move Arthur Szyk forward in the world. I really do see Szyk as a heroic figure, an American icon worthy of recognition among the elite of the world as well as the common man and woman. Equal to the pleasure that I get out of seeing, researching or writing about Szyk's art every day is the pleasure I feel every time I witness someone discovering Szyk's art for the first time. And what is more, once one sees his art, I know they will never forget it and never confuse Arthur Szyk with any other artist. In that sense, then, I consider Arthur Szyk memorable, his art alive, and myself privileged to be part of that process.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. www.hellerbooks.com