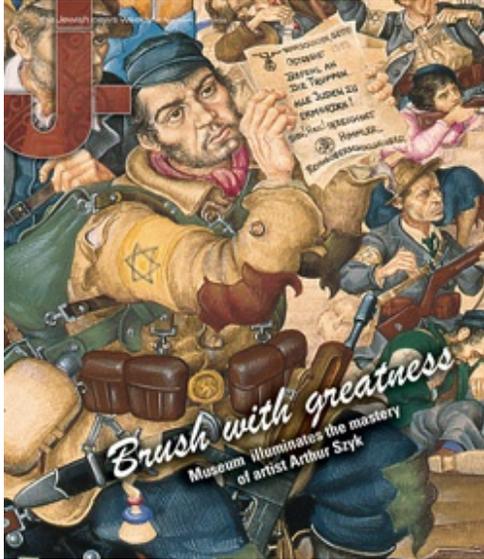


## Brush with greatness: Mastery of artist Arthur Szyk on display at S.F. museum Thursday, December 16, 2010 |

by Dan Pine



In stark black ink, the artist depicts the ongoing Holocaust using biblical imagery: Cain as a Nazi, Abel as his victimized Jewish brother, bodies piled against sooty brick.

He calls the drawing “De Profundis,” words culled from Psalm 130: “Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord/Lord, hear my voice.”

Throughout his career, Arthur Szyk, who died in 1951, cried out to the depths, using brush or pen as a lance to fight for a more just world.

Szyk (pronounced “Shick”) is best known for his dazzlingly colorful Passover haggadah, as well as his wartime caricatures lampooning Hitler. But

he was more than just an illustrator or cartoonist.

His champions say Szyk is finally getting recognition as a creator of serious art. A new exhibition, “Arthur Szyk: Miniature Paintings and Illuminations,” presented by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, reveals Szyk for the master painter he was.

That exhibition runs through March 27 at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. Lead exhibition support is provided by the Koret Foundation and the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture of the Jewish Community Endowment Fund. Additional support for the exhibition was provided by Bernard and Barbro Osher.

Because of his ardent politics, Szyk himself might not have been so eager to see his social views take a back seat to his technique.

“[Szyk] believed that art was not his aim, but his means,” says Irvin Ungar of the Burlingame-based Arthur Szyk Society. “He felt he was not a creator of art for art’s sake, but art with a message. Here the focus is to give an overview of his art, his illustrative books — he did over 30 — [and] his focus on miniatures from the Paris period of the 1920s through the postwar period Americana art.”

Organized chronologically, the exhibit contains more than 70 items, including 56 original works, copies of his illustrated books — including an original 1940 vellum edition of the Szyk haggadah, his Book of Esther and “Canterbury Tales” — as well as photos and documents.

While Szyk considered himself a partisan for all humanity, his special affinity for the Jewish people never wavered. That passion makes its way into the new exhibition, with works portraying the Holocaust, Israel and biblical scenes.

Arthur Szyk, 1930, in Paris photo/louvre studio

Even with those themes, the works on display were chosen to accent aesthetics over polemics.

“We are an art museum, so we wanted to think about his artistic role, and not just the social and political relevance,” says Colleen Terry, a curatorial assistant for the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts at the Fine Arts Museums.

An expert on prints and drawings, the graduate of Yale and London’s Royal College of Art found herself impressed with Szyk’s “highly detailed sophistication in his draftsmanship, his educated use of graphic symbols.”

The word “miniature” in the exhibition title was not chosen lightly. Szyk tackled big subjects on small canvases. The largest work tops out at 18-inches square, but most are no bigger than a sheet of letterhead.

The museum even placed magnifying glasses around the gallery so visitors can get a closer look.

In “The Scribe,” an elaborate piece painted in Paris in 1927, Szyk depicts a man dressed in medieval garb, sitting at a draftsman table and clutching a calligraphy pen. It all looks very Middle Ages, yet Szyk throws in a few jolting 20th-century references, such as a faux Picasso painting in the background.

The picture is a mash-up of modern and medieval “as if to show the world of the Renaissance is bumping against modernity,” Ungar notes. “You have planes and automobiles, two cherubs holding up the U.S. dollar.”

The medieval tropes fit right in with the Szyk approach. Adds Ungar: “During his lifetime, people said [Szyk] was the greatest illuminator in the style of the 16th century, illuminating text like monks in the Middle Ages.”

Two other Jewish pieces, “Repulsed Attack” from 1943 and “Samson in the Ghetto” from 1945, both depict the Warsaw Ghetto, the former painted the same year as the Ghetto uprising.

Terry and Ungar agree the most striking piece in the show is “De Profundis” from 1943. The figure of Cain wears a swastika, while his brother Abel is adorned with a Star of David. Among the dead is Jesus of Nazareth.

Arthur Szyk’s “De Profundis” from 1943 uses Bible imagery to depict the slaughter of European Jews.

The picture depicts “the atrocities in Germany,” says Terry. “It was published as part of a campaign for the textbook commission.”

Other Jewish-themed works on display include Szyk’s takes on biblical stories, such as Ruth and Naomi, and David and Saul.

Born in 1894, Arthur Szyk was a child prodigy who grew up in a well-to-do kosher home where Jewish identity mattered. He received his first training in his hometown of Lodz.

“At 5, he was creating art dealing with the Boxer Rebellion in China,” Ungar notes. “His work dealt with social issues in Poland while he was a teen.”

A tour of pre-state Israel when he was 18 locked in his lifelong love of the Jewish homeland, but the lure of Paris brought him to France for further art training. His first exhibitions were held in that city in the early 1920s and London in the 1930s.

Soon he was regarded in Europe as a master of manuscript illumination, with a reputation that spread across the Atlantic. In 1933 he visited the United States for the first time to attend exhibitions of his work in New York and Washington, D.C.

He also had an exhibition at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco exactly 70 years ago, which makes the current show a bit of a full circle moment.

Szyk returned to Lodz to complete his seminal work, the haggadah, then moved to London in 1937 to oversee the book’s laborious printing process. The timing of his move was fortuitous, as Hitler invaded Poland only two years later.

As the war heated up, and the scope of Nazi depravity became clear, Szyk and his family moved again, first to Canada and then on to the United States, in October 1940.

Already famous, he had no trouble finding work, especially creating art for the war effort. Eventually the diminutive artist became one of the leading anti-Nazi artists of the era, thanks to his searing caricatures.

“Israel” from Arthur Szyk’s “Visual History of Nations” series

“Eleanor Roosevelt saw him as a one-man army against the Axis,” Ungar says. “His art appeared in magazines, newspapers, museum and gallery exhibitions, and was shown at over 500 USO bases during the war years. This was an artist who fought against tyranny and injustice. That’s why his art was popular. Hitler had a price tag on his head.”

Szyk became an American citizen in 1948. But he was rocked in 1950 when he found himself in the crosshairs of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

His connection to various progressive organizations drew the committee's attention, and though he never was called to testify nor faced criminal charges, the mere hint of trouble caused him to lose some commissions.

The stress weighed on him, and in September 1951 Szyk died of a heart attack at his home in New Canaan, Conn. He was 57.

While Szyk's work never fell out of favor over the years, neither did he receive his due as a fine artist.

"He stands alone," Terry says, "particularly among his peers. He was doing something very different from what was going on around him: figurative miniatures at a time when the rest of the art world was working in a modernist style, abstraction even. For that reason he's been overlooked a lot in history of modern art."

Ungar believes that is changing, thanks to recent solo exhibits at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin.

A former pulpit rabbi and antiquarian bookseller by trade, Ungar first discovered Szyk's art many years ago while shopping for a wedding present. He came across a reproduction of the Szyk haggadah and was duly impressed.

Further research confirmed his high opinion.

"It became clear [to me] that this was an artist who was not only an advocate for the Jewish people, but for humanity at large," Ungar recalls. "The more I met museum curators, art dealers and collectors, it began to validate what I intuitively felt about Szyk as an artist."

Ungar not only helped Terry and her fellow Fine Arts Museum curator Karin Breuer assemble the exhibition, he will also give a few talks next month on the subject.

It's all part of his plan to keep the flame of Arthur Szyk alive. Says Ungar, "People don't know they're waiting to see his art."

**"Arthur Szyk: Miniature Paintings and Illuminations"** is on display through March 27 at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco's Lincoln Park. Information: (415) 750-3600 or [legionofhonor.famsf.org](http://legionofhonor.famsf.org).