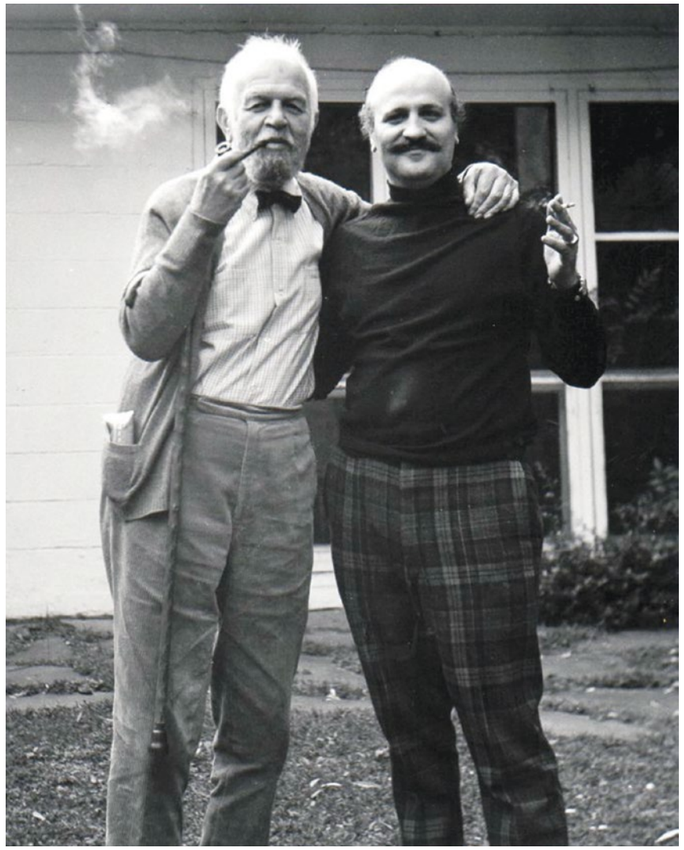

Ben Shahn (left)
and Peter Paone

Alienation, 1943
Oil on Canvas, 23 x 36 in,
by Ben Shahn (1898–1969)

PETER PAONE

Ben Shahn

A master artist accepts a young apprentice

As I look back over my life, I realize that my late teens set the standards for my lifestyle. In those early years I repeatedly met important artists and accumulated friendships that formed my deep, uncompromising commitment to my life as an artist. The first of these was Ben Shahn. Between 1954 and 1958, Shahn's daughter Suzie was a student with me at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art. At the time, all art schools in America took their orders from the Manhattan School of Painting, where an art style known as the abstract expressionist movement originated. The influence of this movement was everywhere and it overtook the entire art world.

There was never a problem with the movement's concept. The problem was that it did not allow for anything else to exist. This put the art world at war with the two existing schools of thought, the figurative and nonfigurative artists, especially in the art schools. Lesser artists with thin careers followed this fashion and taught it in the hopes of making some kind of mark that their work alone could not make. As Adolph Gottlieb said, "We are going to have perhaps a thousand years of nonrepresentational painting." The first step they took was to remove drawing from the classrooms. This lack of a drawing foundation weakened the basic art education system. The second step was to remove any representation of the figure as a subject, making paint the subject. Last was to ban the use of perspective or any device that would penetrate the picture plane to indicate depth; all painting was "up front."

Young artists like myself walked the halls hugging corridor walls, carrying only drawing pencils and looking for classes that had models. We had to cross the border into more friendly camps to find freedom, like in the Illustration Department. In occupied Manhattan, there were small bands of figurative resistance fighters holding their grounds. I would later join this group in the sixties, fighting my battles on the Avenue of Madison armed with exhibitions of content.

* * *

The chief spokesman for this small army was Ben Shahn. Shahn was articulate, intelligent, witty, and a master at sarcasm. He was often pitted against the spokesman for abstract expressionist school Robert Motherwell. Both, in their own way, were well informed about the other's

movement, although they defined their own camp beautifully. I witnessed this at my college in a lecture series called The Creative Process. These lectures were designed to bring in the leading artists and tastemakers in their fields of discipline to speak about the creative process.

In the Department of Fine Arts, the lectures were organized in the form of panels. The first included abstractionists Motherwell, Philip Guston, and Elaine de Kooning. Representing the figurative artists was Shahn. The abstractionists were badly outnumbered. Manual Benson, dean of the college, coordinated these lectures and invited Shahn through his daughter Suzie. During the week that the lectures took place, they hung student work in an exhibition representing each department. The gallery was placed in such a way that the speakers and audience had to walk through it to reach the big painting studio where the lectures were being held. For that occasion, I was asked to hang five drawings. This was a rare request, as those shows never had drawings or any kind of figurative work in them, the examples were always abstract.

I am sure I was asked because they wanted to show Shahn that they had students who could also draw. When Shahn arrived, he was met by Benson and Suzie and guided through the gallery to the large studio. Suzie sidetracked him to my wall of drawings by way of introducing him to the work of her friend. After the lecture, he returned to the wall and purchased all of my drawings for my asking price of ten dollars each. He asked to meet me, but I had left school for my studio and missed meeting him. About two months passed before he called and invited me to his studio in Roosevelt, New Jersey.

* * *

I was humbled by the invitation by the great man, but had mixed feelings. During his debate with Robert Motherwell, I was impressed with his intellect, his self- assurance, and his worldliness. What could I offer such a person? Compared to him, my talent was raw, my education was limited, and I was from the streets of South Philadelphia. I would make a fool of myself in his company. I didn't want to go. But for all of those reasons I had to go. I had to do better. A door had opened and I had to walk through it or I might as well go back onto the streets. So I accepted.

* * *

I used the money from my drawing sales to take the train to Princeton Junction. I was met by a friend of Shahn's and we drove to Roosevelt. The house was, at the time, a small one-story building. And about seventy-five feet behind it was his studio.

I knocked on the door and Shahn answered with a brush between his teeth. He mumbled, "Can I help you?"

Having never met before, I introduced myself and he invited me into the studio. He told me that was the way he greeted people when he was working.

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The studio was a large square room with an extra room off the main square. To the right was a small table with a typewriter on it and in the middle of the same wall was a fireplace. He told me he started fires with other people's bad drawings, and I told him wood would have been cheaper than the five drawings he bought from me. He suddenly panicked and produced the drawings saying that's not what he meant. For some reason that little exchange put me at ease, and I realized that I could keep up with him. The wall over the fireplace was lined with the drawings of other artists, Baskin, Kearns, his son Jonathan's, and soon one of mine. The back wall contained shelves very meticulously arranged, with file folders laid flat and neatly stacked. These housed drawings, old prints, watercolors, photographs, and ideas. In front of the sleeves stood his easel, which he rarely used, as much of his work was done flat on a large drawing table by the window. Beside the easel were two wicker chairs where we eventually sat and talked. From the ceiling hung a bare lightbulb with a long cord tied in a knot at the appropriate height. The studio had an order of importance, to it. But at the same time it displayed the brain of its master.

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It was the fall of 1957, Ben Shahn was in his fifties and I had just turned twenty. Although I felt better after having made the drawing joke, I was still uneasy about having any in-depth conversation with him. We started to talk and I was put at ease by his genuine warmth and interest in me. I now think about those moments alone with Shahn in his studio, just months after having had the same privilege with Georges Braque in his studio, as a major gift to be given to me at such a young age.

* * *

He gave me a good deal of advice with a wonderful dry sense of humor, something we both shared, like telling me to be a professional.

I asked, "What's a professional artist?"

He paused and said, "One whose wife works."

Or one of his favorite lines, which I heard for the first time that day, "Look British, think Yiddish."

He then asked what was in my paper bag and I told him my lunch. We shared my modest sandwich before we went into the house to meet his wife Bernarda and have a real lunch. Bernarda was wonderful; alive, curious, intelligent, gifted, and completely devoid of any outward negative aspects.

By mid-afternoon, some of the townspeople dropped in. Leonard Baskin and his friends drove from New York, and before long it was dinnertime. We all sat around the round dinner table under a Calder mobile and Shahn held forth with stories. He loved to tell stories. He and Baskin got into a discussion about drawing, and it didn't end until well into the night. It got so late that Shahn insisted I spend the night. In the morning he drove me to the station in his wooden station wagon. En route, he asked if I would visit again to perhaps help him around the studio. I was so impressed by him that I was thrilled at the opportunity to return.

I started visiting him about once a month or more frequently when I was needed for a project. My studio tasks were simple and they were good learning opportunities, preparing painting panels, enlarging drawings for mosaics, helping to print silk screens or hand-watercolored prints. But what was most memorable for me were our conversations and listening to him read me drafts of his reading. My payment was all I could learn, and I was well paid. From time to time, he would give me a print and once he hand watercolored an exhibition invitation for me. One day while he was having lunch with a friend and I was alone in the studio, I sat at his drawing table and did a drawing of him after all of my chores were done. I wrote on the bottom "Homage to Ben Shahn." When Shahn returned, he liked what I did so much that he sat down and did a self-portrait holding a palette and wrote on the bottom "Homage to Ben Shahn."

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He then tacked both of them up and said, "Two homages to me in one day is just too much."

I was hoping that during my visits I would get to see paintings in progress. I did not expect him to paint while I was there; I knew how solitary painting had to be. In 1959, I saw the large painting *When the Morning Stars* developed, but toward the end he was mostly assembling drawings into small books. I asked him why he was doing that and not painting. He got very angry and said that it was all his art. In 1958, Shahn did a silk screen print, which I helped with, on the subject of Sacco and Vanzetti. I asked him why he would recreate a subject he had dealt with twenty-seven years prior.

He replied, "Once I create an image, it's mine for life to use any time I need to."

That idea has stuck with me, and I have applied it to my own work. It is something the artist has that is totally his or her own, like a signature.

* * *

There are other stories about people I remember clearly. We got into a conversation about artists' rights and creativity. Ben Shahn told me a story in which he was asked to do a commissioned work for N.W. Ayer & Son advertising agency in Philadelphia by the art director, Charles Coiner. When Shahn delivered the finished work, Coiner suggested a number of changes. Shahn did them and returned to Coiner with the work. Coiner was very pleased and accepted the work with the new revisions. Shahn told me that at that point, he took the work and tore it in half. He told Coiner that the reason he liked it so much was because he turned his design into a Coiner design and it was no longer a Shahn and he didn't want it used.

He loved to tell stories about people he knew. One of his favorites was about meeting Albert Einstein on the steps of the Firestone Library on the Princeton campus.

After having spoken together for ten or fifteen minutes, Einstein asked him, "When we met, was I coming from that direction or from that direction?" pointing with his finger.

Shahn said, "From that direction."

"Good," said Einstein, "that means I have been home and have had lunch."

* * *

One of my chores was to shift pages of prints while Shahn signed them. They were a mixed group of images he was getting ready to send to the Downtown Gallery.

He looked up at me, smiled, and said, "Did I ever tell you what Selden Rodman did after he finished the book about me?"

"No," I replied.

"Selden was in the studio and he admired a painting I did, so I gave it to him. A few weeks later, Selden took it to Downtown Gallery to sell. I was furious and hurt as it had been a gift. So now when I give away a print, I write on it Nonnegotiable."

The painting was called *Swimming Pool* and I assumed he gave it to Rodman out of appreciation, but it was never clear why.

* * *

One day, he said to me that I should start showing in New York. Three years had passed since my first visit to Roosevelt, and I was just beginning to teach at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute so I already had a foothold in New York. He called Joe Grippi, the owner of the Gallery G between 3RD and Lexington Avenue, and told him he should give me a show. Grippi was a framer with a gallery attached on the second floor of the shop and Shahn was one of his clients. At times Shahn would trade a print or drawing for framing, giving Grippi some Shahns to sell. I had my first New York show at Grippi's in 1959 and continued for eight years with Gallery G. Two years later it became Grippi Gallery on 72ND and Madison Avenue. Shahn repeatedly helped me after I returned from living in London in 1969. He called his own art dealer, Larry Fleischman, the owner of Kennedy Galleries, and asked him to look at my work. This resulted in three more shows for me and another long-term relationship with a New York gallery.

Before I left for Europe, I went to say goodbye to the Shahns. I had received a Guggenheim grant and wanted to live somewhere else for a while, so my return to America was open-ended. As such, I was not sure when I would see them again. As I entered the town of Roosevelt and turned onto Tamara Drive, I saw black smoke coming from behind the Shahns' house. I rushed over only to find Shahn with boxes of small drawings, posters, and other papers burning them, box by box. He was depressed because his art dealer of thirty-five years, Edith Halpert, had died. He felt forgotten and saw no reason to keep things no one wanted. I asked if I could have them, and he said I could take what I wanted. I was able to load four boxes into my small car. While visiting, I tried to talk him out of destroying what remained, but as I drove off I could see the new smoke. I had an idea that I thought might help. I contacted my friend Keeland McNulty, curator of prints and drawings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. McNulty and I, at one point, had discussed a print exhibition of Shahn. He wanted to have one, but didn't know if Shahn would be interested. I called McNulty and asked if he was still interested; if so, now was a good time to talk to Shahn. He was interested, so I called Shahn, who was excited to know he was still sought after despite the loss of Halpert's representation. I arranged to take McNulty to Roosevelt to meet Shahn and discuss it in person. They were both happy about the prospect, and in 1967 McNulty opened the exhibition Ben Shahn Graphics.

I was in Europe for three years and never saw the exhibition. When I returned to America, I called Shahn. He was happy because he was showing with his new dealer at Kennedy Galleries and asked me to come out to see him right away. The next day, I loaded the four boxes of his things that I had rescued the day of his fire and returned them to him. The burning was never mentioned again.

* * *

It is difficult to determine the duration of a talent. Some artists' creative powers are spent in the first ten years of their career and for the remainder of their lives their work is recognized only by style. Others struggle for years exploring ideas, styles, and media in the hopes of elevating their work to the highest levels. Yet, others are content with working in small bursts of motivation as exhibitions demand. In Ben Shahn's case, he was the best in the middle years of his career. After exploring all the "isms" of modern art, he placed his political interest and his aesthetic interest into the same picture. The Sacco-Vanzetti series was the first to show the success of this marriage.

In the twenty or so years that followed the Sacco-Vanzetti series, Shahn was to produce some of the most innervated works in the history of American modernism. The originality of his images and his compassion for the human condition made him, in my opinion, one of the most important artists in the figurative tradition in America. He was an original! Shahn was inspired by current events, politics, and world injustice. The critic Hilton Kramer said that his interest in current politics placed him in the category of illustration. At the height of abstract expressionism, when that statement was made, anything representational was illustration. Degas was an anti-Semitic and violently against Dreyfus—the Sacco and Vanzetti case of his time—which produced the ballet dancers. In his book *The Third Man*, Graham Greene states that the Medicis were assassins and thieves that produced the Renaissance. The Swiss, after five hundred years of peace and tranquility, produced the cuckoo clock. We cannot hold Shahn's interest in politics as art against him. If we do so, then we must question Uccello's paintings of the battle of San Romano, Goya's *The Disasters of War*, or Picasso's *Guernica*—all images of current events!

Unfortunately his late works, like Picasso's, were made during the last twenty years of his life. These were the works of a famous man, not a famous artist. The talent was spent and the residue of it was used and reused; the fight, the protest, and the bite were gone. Even his last major effort, "The Saga of the Lucky Dragon," which I witnessed in the making, was empty and decorative.

* * *

Ben Shahn, like his contemporaries, Picasso, Matisse, Dali, Chagall, and Calder, were all products of the twentieth century. Brilliant artists who gave way to fame and celebratory status; the silent killer to a generation brought up on wars and depressions. To an artist made of the "stuff" of humans, mass media, mass publications, worldwide exhibitions, and instant TV interviews seen by millions were just too much. Be that as it may, history will sort out the great from the good enough. When an artist's last works are so inferior to his or her earlier works, it is much more difficult to realize the accomplishments of a lifetime achievement.

A word about Bernarda; after Shahn died I went to see her. It was sad, Shahn's presence was everywhere. During that entire visit I expected him to appear from the studio or to come through the kitchen door and sit at the round table in the living room to light his pipe. Toward the end of the visit, Bernarda told me that she thought I should have something of Shahn's and handed me his raincoat. It was a Brooks Brothers coat and he was rarely without it. There is a wonderful photograph of Shahn and Bernarda and in it he is wearing that coat.

I was so touched; she could have given me a book, a print, a brush, or a photograph, but she gave me his raincoat. It was something personal that he felt good in, which was not part of the "profession" but was part of Ben Shahn, the man that I connected with for ten years. There could not have been a better gift to express the fact that she knew how close we were, and that meant all the more to me.

* * *

My friendship with Ben Shahn only lasted a short ten years before he died. But his presence in my life is still a current event. Perhaps, had he lived longer, I would have had difficulty accepting his late works and it may have affected our relationship. But there is no way of knowing. Although there is one thing I do know for sure, I would sit at my drawing table and make another portrait of him and note on the bottom "Homage to Ben Shahn."

Peter Paone was born in Philadelphia and educated at the Philadelphia College of Art. He has taught at the Pratt Institute in New York, the National Academy of Design in New York, and since1978 at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.. The artist has received numerous grants and awards, including two Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grants and three years in London on a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. His work has been featured in fifty-two solo shows in New York, London, and elsewhere. His work is collected by several museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Victoria and Albert Museum; the British Museum; the National Gallery of Art; the Library of Congress; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Art Institute of Chicago; the National Academy of Design; and others.