Learning from Arthur Szyk at The Magnes Collection

Dr. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

MAGNES


NAZI PROPAGANDA
ALL HOPE ABANDON
HEUTE GEHÖRT UNS EUROPA
MORGEN DIE GE
NZE WELT
ARTHUR SZYK
N.Y. SEPT. 4
"MADNESS"

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Keynote Lecture on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition
In Real Times. Arthur Szyk: Art & Human Rights (1926-1951)
The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, University of California at Berkeley
February 19, 2020

Dr. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is a world-renowned scholar, cultural anthropologist, author, and museologist. Her work merges performance studies, history, and museum design. She is the Ronald S. Lauder Chief Curator of the award-winning POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in Warsaw. She is also Professor Emerita of Performance Studies at New York University. A recipient of many awards and honorary doctorates, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2017. In 2020, she was honored with the Dan David Prize.

It was my great pleasure to deliver this address on the occasion of *In Real Times. Arthur Szyk. Art and Human Rights (1926-1951)*," an exhibition at The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life. I would like to applaud Dr. Francesco Spagnolo for this innovative exhibition. I would also like to express my appreciation to Tad Taube and his family for establishing the Arthur Szyk collection at The Magnes. Tad has not only supported The Magnes, but he has also played a critical role in the development and success of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in Warsaw. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not add that I am an alumna of the University of California, Berkeley, where I earned my A.B. and M.A. during the fateful years between 1965 and 1967.

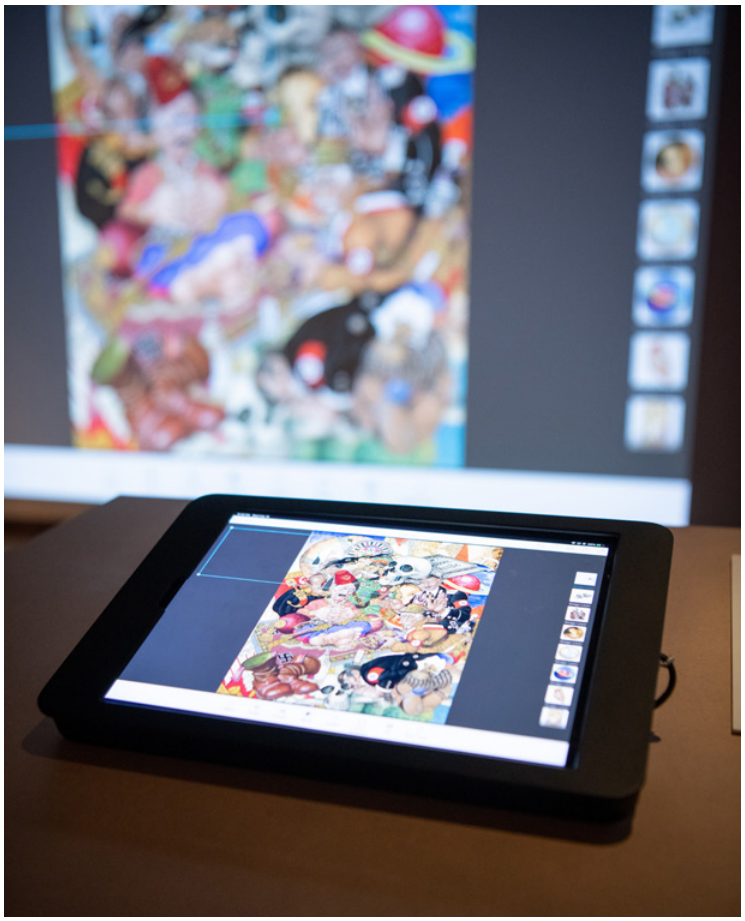
In contrast with POLIN Museum, The Magnes Collection is part of the University of California and as such offers the larger university a unique opportunity. It is under the aegis of the Center for Jewish Studies, whose mission is to gather faculty, students, and visiting academics for research and debate across the wide scholarly landscape of Jewish studies. The Center is interdisciplinary and builds upon Berkeley's long tradition of collaboration across departments and with other institutions in the Bay Area and beyond. Among the fields represented by the faculty and courses at the Center are comparative literature, Near Eastern studies, history, sociology, law, political science, journalism, rhetoric, and music, to name a few.

I propose that scholars in every single one of those fields would find material in the Szyk collection relevant to their field and to the most vexing issues of our times. My goal here is to explore, on the basis of this exhibition, just how that potential might be realized. ■

21st-Century Competencies

While museums and exhibitions are not unique in cultivating "21st-century competencies," they are uniquely positioned to do so. In a university context, they are especially prepared to engage undergraduates in such competencies as critical thinking, media literacy, emotional intelligence, and creativity, among others. First, **critical thinking**. This is an exhibition that encourages visitors to closely examine Szyk's densely coded images and to think critically about them and about his critical stance to history in the distant past and to history that was being made before his very eyes, especially the devastating impact of fascism in Europe and racism in America. The direct mode of address in combination with densely coded details in Szyk's images speaks powerfully to the viewer and rewards close attention. He thought critically about his time – and he took action – and we have the opportunity to align ourselves with his critique while also looking critically at this work.

The digital tablets in the exhibition allow access not just to the selected works on display in the gallery – many of them are detailed miniatures that must be viewed in low light, for conservation reasons – but also to the entire collection: all 450 works. Visitors in the gallery can magnify images, not simply on a personal tablet, but on a massive video wall that everyone in the gallery can view. They can compare and juxtapose images and even make their own compositions from elements in Szyk's images. This digital tool encourages visitors to pay close attention to an object that would otherwise be so small, so detailed, so dense, so fastidious, and so obsessive, that without a magnifying glass or a microscope and better lighting, its details would be all but invisible.



Second, **media literacy**. If there was ever a time for the public to understand what they see, hear, and read, whether it's in the press, on TV, or on social media, it is now. The way Szyk deconstructs the enemy's codes and subverts them is a master lesson in media literacy. Understanding what we see is closely tied to a third competency, **emotional intelligence**. Although I was familiar with Szyk's work, it was only when viewing this extensive exhibition that I became conscious of its emotional range and intensity. It offers a lexicon of feeling. Szyk's images are never neutral. They inform us intellectually, and they confound us emotionally. Szyk gives visual expression to emotions that include very dark and very bright ones. They range from despair to hope, from empathy to disgust. Fourth, **creativity**, which brings us to Szyk as an artist. To its credit, the exhibition does not take a linear or historical approach to Szyk as an artist, but rather organizes the material thematically to reveal how Szyk confronted evil and defended human rights in impassioned images of evil, totalitarianism, the plight of refugees and trauma of migration, but also how he used Biblical iconography to communicate hope and redemption. ■

Something for Every Discipline

Historians would find in Arthur Szyk a fascinating subject. He lived through the major conflicts of the 20th century and, taken as a whole, Szyk's work might be considered a barometer of the eras through which he lived. He was born in 1894 in Łódź, which was in Congress Poland, the most Polish part of the Russian partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Szyk was inspired by the period of the "Polish-Jewish brotherhood" in the 1860s and 1870s to imagine a fraternity or brotherhood of nations, an important theme in his work and point of reference for the Poland he loved. He fought in the Polish army during the First World War and lived and worked in the Second Polish Republic, which was established in 1918. He studied art in Paris during the 1920s and worked with Jewish aid organizations in London in the 1930s.

Making connections between disparate times and places, Szyk's oeuvre can be seen as an exercise in "creative anachronism," an approach that raises fascinating questions about the historical imagination and the potential and limitations of historical analogies. Consider his treatment of the Statute of Kalisz, dated 1264, the first written charter granting Jews the right to settle in Poland. Based on the original text, which is no longer than a page, Szyk created a folio of 47 leaves in nine languages including Polish, English, and Yiddish. Other than the title page, their exact order is unclear. The iconography on a given leaf is specific to the language of that leaf. For example, at the very bottom of a leaf in English, Saint George slaying the dragon is flanked on the left by Casimir Pulaski, with a caption stating that he was a Polish nobleman who gave his life for American independence, and on the right by Haym Salomon, a Polish Jew who sacrificed his fortune by subsidizing the American army during the revolution. What Syzk has done is to layer later historical events onto the 1264 delineation of rights, obligations, and protections, thereby creating bridges across time for the values of peaceful coexistence, liberty, independence, and national self-determination that he championed and for those who defended those values. This treatment, in the form of detailed miniatures, links the Statute of Kalisz to the Magna Carta and the American Revolution. Elsewhere, Szyk links the situation in Poland with Thomas Jefferson's oath to make a point about the dangers of tyranny, totalitarianism, and the violation of human rights.

Art historians would also find Szyk a worthy subject. Szyk is not only part of the history of art, but also he mined the history of art and visual culture more broadly to give visual expression to his "creative anachronisms." Szyk was attracted to historical charters, statutes, declarations, and heraldry for a visual style that would give modern documents a distinguished lineage and communicate gravitas and legal authority. He also liked to work in miniature, drawing on the conventions of Renaissance portraiture, Persian miniatures, and northern European manuscript illumination, even for such subjects as the Warsaw ghetto and the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

His series, *Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto* and *Songs of the Ghetto* – one in color,

the other in black and white – exemplify two approaches in Szyk's work. One series draws on the northern European miniaturist tradition, with its precise attention to minute detail, while the other draws on comics and caricature, with their over-the-top use of exaggeration and distortion. Close attention to these densely coded images rewards a viewer who plumbs the depth of meaning in each minute detail. The same can be said of his 1943 *De Profundi*, a visual meditation on the massacre of Jews during the Second World War, which draws on motifs from classical Jewish and Christian texts. Szyk has transformed these texts into visual symbols that form a visual commentary. Decoded, the imagery expands the meaning of the written word.

Szyk's caricatures and political cartoons bring to mind not only *Mad* magazine, but also Norman Rockwell (1894-1978). Like Rockwell, who did not confine himself to the idealistic images of American life that appeared on the covers of *Collier's* and for which he was most famous, Szyk also addressed racism, race relations, and the predicament of African Americans. He too operated between the poles of utopia and dystopia, celebrating the utopia of freedom, peace, and independence, and vilifying the dystopia of totalitarianism. Szyk's images were also popular and ubiquitous, and they too spoke to the American public from the pages of *Collier's* and the covers of *Time* magazine. Both artists developed popular cultural icons of good and evil but in very different styles. Rockwell was consistent in his realism. Szyk, although eclectic in his visual sources, was consistent in his penchant for dense coding, the illuminated miniature, and exaggeration inspired by caricature.

Media studies scholars, especially those interested in visual culture studies and semiotics, will find rich material in Szyk's penchant for grotesque distortion in his images of the enemy, a vision of evil reminiscent of *Mad* magazine. His work brings to mind Susan Sontag's *Fascinating Fascism* (1975), where she explores the

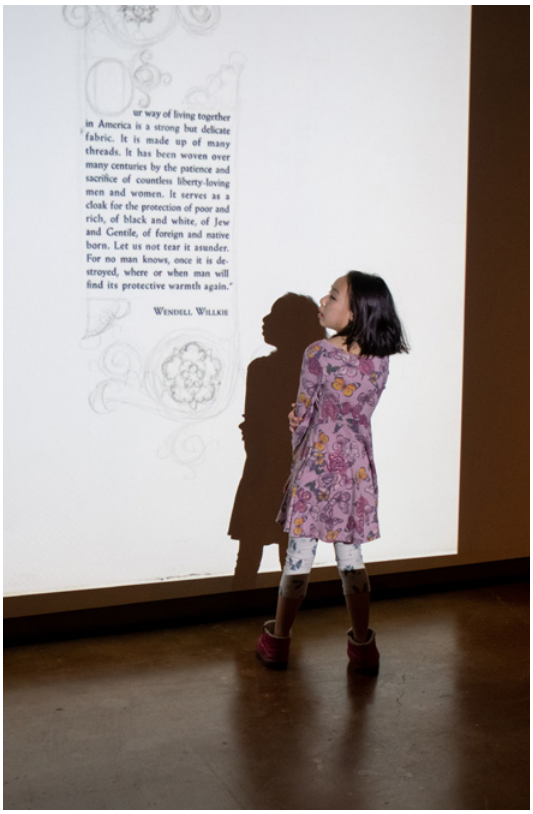
emotional charge of "evil" to unleash the imagination, in contrast with blander images of "good." Indeed, Szyk's most powerful and troubling work deals with evil, and it is the evil of fascism that brings forth Szyk's special genius and offers the greatest scope for research and teaching.

The most astonishing aspects of his political cartoons and caricatures is the way Szyk subverts symbols of power to make them images of humiliation and degradation. These works operate at the intersection of propaganda and art. In *Madness*, a cartoon that appeared on the cover of *Collier's* in 1941, the Nazi leaders Hitler, Goring, Himmler, and Goebbels, obese and bloated, pin Nazi flags on a globe threatened by an entwined Nazi rattlesnake to represent their megalomaniacal goal to rule the world. At their feet in a messy pile lie the collaborators, including Mussolini. Such extreme distortion reduces the fascist leadership to comic figures, though no less dangerous. The message: evil is grotesque, and in the tradition of *Mad* magazine, evil is not only grotesque, but also comic, in this case drawing on the tradition of gallows humor. These images reduce horror to the absurd, touching us where we fear to tread, a toxic cocktail of emotions, attracting and repelling us at the same time. That is Szyk. The mixture of horrific and comic permeates Szyk's iconography of power and totalitarianism.

Szyk worked closely with Jewish protest movements in the United States and drew the approving attention of Eleanor Roosevelt for his efforts to awaken American consciousness to the dangers of fascism. I am thinking here of images that he created before and after the United States entered the Second World War. An image created in 1939 portrays Hitler with skulls inside his eyes, the use of distortion to communicate evil, in contrast with his victims on the lower left of the image, who are rendered more realistically, a way to communicate their humanity. While specific to the evil of events in Poland, such images also communicated a universal message about tyranny and the importance of protesting oppression. In 1943, Szyk illustrated Ben Hecht's *Ballad of the Doomed Jews of Europe*. His depiction of

the annihilation of the Jews and portrayal of the indifference of the United Nations served the cause of raising awareness of Nazi crimes in the United States.

Last but not least, **gender studies** scholars might detect in Szyk's images of American soldiers an element of homo-eroticism reminiscent of the work of Tom of Finland, who was known for his hyper-masculinized homo-erotic images.



This collection and exhibition, which offer a broad sweep of Szyk's work, highlight the through line in his work, which is his commitment to the fight for independence, the struggle for freedom, social justice, human rights, and protest against injustice. This oeuvre is ripe for analysis, using the tools from various disciplines, while offering those disciplines rich material for study. The potential rewards are incalculable.

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