

FROM ALAN WOF SY FINE ARTS

BEN SHAHN

Psalm 150/ Hallelujah Suite

I

In the late sixties, Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Smith and Mr. and Mrs. Robert P. Kogod of the Washington, D.C., area invited Shahn to create a mosaic mural for a Jewish community center in Rockville, Maryland. They gave him free rein in selection of theme, design, and installation of the mural. Shahn responded enthusiastically and prepared a series of magnificent drawings of musicians with ancient instruments, inspired by the exultant lines in Psalm 150, "A Hallelujah Chorus":

Praise ye the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary:

praise him in the firmament of power:

Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness.

Praise him with the sound of trumpet:

praise him with psaltery and harp.

Praise him with the timbrel and dance:

praise him with the stringed instruments and organs.

Praise him upon the loud cymbals:

praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.

Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.

Praise ye the Lord.

Unfortunately, the plans for the mural never went beyond the drawing stage because of Shahn's untimely death in 1969. However, the executors of the Ben Shahn Estate authorized the posthumous publication of a series of eight large format lithographs taken from the mural drawings. Faithfully reproduced in exact size by the celebrated lithographer Mourlot for Kennedy Graphics of New York, the lithographs, together with the Hallelujah Suite, add an important concluding dimension to the graphic work of Ben Shahn.

In the same manner in which he had collaborated with Shahn on earlier editions, Jacques Mourlot executed the series of eight, making copies of the drawings on transfer paper in preparation for the lithographic printing from zinc plates.

These individual lithographs were published during 1970 in an edition of 125 impressions each on Vélin d'Arches paper. The few remaining impressions are being distributed by Alan Wofsy Fine Arts of San Francisco.

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II

In addition to the large format individual lithographs, there are fifty smaller lithographs (including images and calligraphy) in the Hallelujah Suite, bound in a book form in a deluxe edition of 240 numbered copies. There are also ten copies lettered A to J. The series illustrates, in picture and calligraphy, Psalm 150 of the Old Testament. The typography was arranged and printed at The Spiral Press, and the binding cases executed

by the Moroquain Bindery, New York.

Just prior to his death, Ben Shahn completed all drawings for this work and arranged them in a mock-up, indicating in detail how he wished to have them produced and assembled. Kennedy Graphics, Inc., New York, with the permission of the executors of the Shahn Estate, published this last work in 1970, faithfully following Shahn's instructions.

In preparing the suite, Shahn used many of the same motifs as in the drawings for an unfinished mural intended for a community center in Rockville, Maryland. However, most of the Hallelujah Suite drawings differ from the earlier versions and are particularly important because they represent Shahn's last work. From his original drawings (measuring roughly 8 3/4 x 7 1/2") and their related calligraphy, Shahn made photostatic enlargements, which he planned to redraw on transfer paper for preparation of the lithographic plates. But he died before this last stage could be accomplished. Jacques Mourlot, who had been working closely with Shahn on the project, completed the transfer and supervised the production of the edition by his staff artisans.

On the back cover of the Hallelujah Suite, and on the slipcase, is a black square of simulated leather with the Hebrew characters for "Hallelujah" and Ben Shahn's signature reproduced in gold. The design is taken from Shahn's drawing for the Hebrew title. The suite is intended to be read from back to front, in Hebrew tradition. On the front cover, "Hallelujah" appears in Roman lettering, again in gold on a black background, and accompanied by Shahn's signature. When discussing production procedures with Jacques Mourlot, Shahn had been concerned that the size of his compositions would leave unused space at the bottom of the expensive paper. He therefore proposed to make photostatic copies of the drawings in a reduced size, which would be transferred to the plates and printed at the same time as the full-sized lithographs. Shahn thought that the smaller lithographs would be useful in promotion of the suite and as gifts to friends.

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His wishes in this respects were also followed and resulted in two (unpublished) editions of miniatures. One is the unbound edition of Hallelujah Miniatures No.1 with Calligraphy, (Prescott nos. 284-309). The other is the unbound edition of Hallelujah Miniatures No. 2 without Calligraphy (Prescott nos. 310-333).

The artist's wife, Bernarda Bryson Shahn, was especially desirous that the Hallelujah Suite drawings be published "exactly as Ben wanted them." In her introduction, she discusses Shahn's return to religious themes:

During the last years of Ben's life there was a certain resurgence of religious imagery in his work. It seemed to me that since he had rather emphatically cast off his religious ties and traditions during his youth, he could now return to them freely with a fresh eye, and without the sense of a moral burden and entrapment that they once held for him. He rediscovered myth and story and the holy spirit that had once offended him but that now held tremendous charm, even amusement, and that he could now depict with a light touch and with affectionate tenderness...

The publication of the Hallelujah Suite was a fitting culmination to Shahn's friendship with Fernand Mourlot and his son Jacques, which began in Paris in 1963 when three of Shahn's lithographs were produced in the elder Mourlot's atelier. The introduction to the Hallelujah Suite includes a warmly emotional letter from Fernand Mourlot in which he draws attention to Shahn's thoroughness in planning this last work.

III

The twenty-six lithographs, Hallelujah Miniatures No.1 with Calligraphy (counting the Hebrew and English title pages), are reduced versions of the full-sized Hallelujah Suite. They were printed on Arches Grand Vélín in an edition of 250, using both sides of the lower portion of the sheets on which the full-sized lithographs were printed. Whereas the Hallelujah Suite is in book form, these prints are loose. The sheets measure 7 1/4 x 15 1/4 inches.

The Hallelujah Miniatures were never published and remained in unopened containers for 24 years. Alan Wofsy Fine Arts of San Francisco has now been charged with publication of these Miniature Suites. The remaining suites, numbering fewer than 200, will be gathered together in an elegant cloth portfolio and published during 1995, on their 25th anniversary.

Adapted from *The Complete Graphic Works of Ben Shahn* by Kenneth W. Prescott

FROM ALAN WOF SY FINE ARTS

BEN SHAHN

Psalm 150/ Hallelujah Suite *Miniatures with Calligraphy*



ILLUSTRATION

MAN PLAYING ORGAN

PSALTERY

YOUNG MAN PLAYING SISTRUM

YOUNG MAN PLAYING DOUBLE FLUTE

MAN SOUNDING SHOFAR

MAN PLAYING KETHARAH

MAN PLAYING CITHARA

YOUTH PLAYING VIOLIN

OLD MAN PLAYING CROWTH

YOUTH SOUNDING TRUMPET

YOUTH PLAYING TWIN REEDS

LUTE

YOUTH WITH LYRE

MAN STRIKING CHIME-BELLS

DANCING VIRGIN

YOUNG MAN PLAYING LYRE

WIND INSTRUMENTS

MAN SOUNDING JUBILEE TRUMPET

MAIDEN WITH LOUD-SOUNDING CYMBALS

SMALL BOY PLAYING "VIOLIN"

CLANGING CYMBALS

YOUNG MAN PLAYING DOUBLE OBOE

MAN PLAYING TAMBORINE

YOUTH PLAYING CITHARA

VERSE

הללויה
Hallelujah (Hebrew)

הללו-אל
Praise God

בקדשו
In his sanctuary

הללוהו
Praise Him

ברקיע עזו
In the firmament of his power

הללוהו
Praise Him

בגבורתיו
For His mighty acts

הללוהו
Praise Him

כרב גדלו
According to His abundant greatness

הללוהו
Praise Him

בתקע שופר
With the blast of the horn

הללוהו
Praise Him

בנבל וכנור
With the psaltery and harp

הללוהו
Praise Him

בתף ומחול
With the timbrel and dance

הללוהו
Praise Him

במנים ועגב
With stringed instruments and the pipe

הללוהו
Praise Him

בצלצלי-שמע
With the loud-sounding cymbals

הללוהו
Praise Him

בצלצלי תרועה
With the clanging cymbals

כל הנשמה
Let every thing that hath breath

תהלל יה
Praise the Lord

הללויה
Halleljulah (English)

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