Provocative cartoonist illuminates at FAU

By JOHN THOMASON

Arthur Szyk’s work is not modern art.
This, his daughter, Alexandra Bracie, insists, with more than a hint of frustration over the state of modern art today.

"[My father’s work] requires your interest," said Bracie, who lives in Highland Beach. "You can walk into a modern art gallery without stopping. With Szyk, you have to stop in front of each painting, look at them and digest them."

But in the most literal definition of the term, the art of Arthur Szyk (pronounced "Shik") was incredibly modern. Still shocking, relevant and vital 50 years of after his death, his miniature illuminations, political cartoons, religious iconography and re-creations of historical scenes and documents were generally unprecedented for his time. And he’s seen few, if any, parallels since.

"His work was very specific and unique," Bracie said. "He was unusual in design and drawing and in execution."

Anyone interested in the convergence of art and history needs to see just how exceptional Szyk was at the overwhelming retrospective of his work on display through Dec. 30 at the S.E. Wimberly Library on the Florida Atlantic University campus in Boca Raton.

The exhibit sprawls three floors, from the introduction to Szyk on the ground level to some of his most priceless prints and personal belongings under glass in the newly built Jaffe Center for the Book Arts.

Arthur Jaffe, founder and curator of the elegant third-floor room, followed Szyk’s career for 30 years and remembers when his controversial cartoons graced the pages of Colliers and Time.

"He was one of a kind," Jaffe said. "There was nobody even remotely close to kind of work he did stylistically."

Szyk always had a one-of-a-kind artistic eye, but it wasn’t until World War II that he emerged as a figure of provocation and an advocate for liberty. Vilifying the Axis Powers — even equating Hitler with Satan — in work after work, he became known as “Franklin Roosevelt’s Soldier in Art.”

His artistic ideology is best expressed in his darkly comic self-portrait "Ink and Blood," which depicts him artistically ridiculing grotesque caricatures of Hitler, Goebbels, Tojo and Mussolini. Figures of evil crawl from his wastebasket and are pinned down by his acrid brush.

Szyk had a personal stake in the war effort, having lost his mother to a Polish concentration camp in 1943. The vitriol in his cartoons is politically vicious and vivid, detailed — genius bits of impassioned agitprop that are at once complex and bluntly simple to comprehend.

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED In illuminator Arthur Szyk’s self-portrait "Ink and Blood," on display at FAU’s S.E. Wimberly Library, Szyk disposes of his fascist enemies.

Submitted photo
But they were far from all of his oeuvre. Many of his famous works extolled the virtues of America and Israel. He created a 38-part series to commemorate the bicentennial of George Washington’s birth, earning him the George Washington Medal and an exhibition at the Library of Congress.

He was fond of immortalizing important documents through art. He printed the entire Declaration of Independence, for instance, accompanied by the florid accouterments and ancillary illuminations. He did the same for the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel and an inspirational quote from Abraham Lincoln.

Prior to his political invectives, Szyk was known primarily as a literature illuminator on works such as “The Canterbury Tales” and Hans Christian Anderson’s “Fairy Tales.” All of these aspects of Szyk’s career were fleshed in remarkable detail in FAU’s loving exhibit.

Jaffe best encapsulated Szyk’s specific appeal. “Other political cartoons were much less insightful,” he said. “His insights were expressed through the cartoons and in style in which he did them. They were done like medieval Bibles — sardonic and at the same time almost beautiful.”

“Justice Illuminated: The Art of Arthur Szyk” is on display at FAU’s S.E. Wimberly Library. Visit www.fau.edu/library.