

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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THE LEFT FRONT: RADICAL ART IN THE "RED DECADE," 1929–1940

Opens January 13, 2015

Exhibition features revolutionary American art from the era of the Great Depression, exploring the work, its milieu, and its implications for socially engaged art today

The Left Front: Radical Art in the "Red Decade," 1929–1940, a major exhibition devoted to American art during the decade following the stock market crash of 1929, **opens on January 13, 2015**, at the **Grey Art Gallery at New York University**. With some 100 works by forty artists, *The Left Front* examines the crucial moment in American history when artists took to their printing presses (and brushes and cameras) amid the economic and social devastation brought on by the Great Depression. Joining forces with writers and intellectuals, these men and women—who came together at the progressive John Reed Club, founded in New York City directly after the crash—were dedicated to creating work that tackled a range of socially conscious themes, including class struggle, labor organizing, immigration, socialist mysticism, utopian communities, racial justice, and the Spanish Civil War, among others.

Organized by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, *The Left Front* is the first exhibition to explore the visual arts legacy of the John Reed Club and its successor, the American Artists' Congress. The show features primarily prints, as well as drawings and watercolors, paintings, posters, photographs, books, film footage, and ephemera by artists ranging from Mabel Dwight to Louis Lozowick, Reginald Marsh, John Sloan, and Raphael Soyer. Many of the artists represented in the exhibition embraced the medium of printmaking because it not only countered the elitism and expense of painting, but also circumvented institutions such as galleries and museums, bringing art to a wider audience. The Grey Art Gallery presentation has been expanded with important documentary material from the unparalleled holdings of NYU's **Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives**, an internationally renowned center for the study of the history of Labor and the Left.



Mitchell Siporin (American, 1910–1976)
Workers Family, from the portfolio *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, 1937. Woodcut. Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, gift in part of Louise Dunn Yochim, 1997.30.15

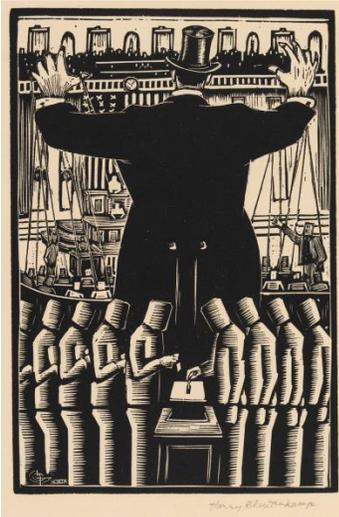
Speaking of the relevance of *The Left Front* to our own time, Grey Art Gallery Director Lynn Gumpert says, "In the wake of our recent 'Great Recession,' many artists today find themselves grappling with the same questions of art and activism raised by this exhibition. Indeed, *The Left Front* both opens a window onto a fascinating period in the history of American art and politics and brings to mind artistic responses to many of the very issues being confronted today, including alarming inequality in income and opportunity. In so doing, it asks what revolutionary art was during the turbulent 1930s, and what it can be in our own era."

The exhibition will remain on view through **April 4, 2015**.

Background

The so-called “left front” of artists was born at the Communist Party affiliated John Reed Club, where intellectuals and artists worked together to achieve radical social change. Artist members of the Club, many of whom were immigrants, painted public murals, held art exhibitions in working-class apartments, wrote political pamphlets, organized unions, marched on picket lines, and protested against social injustice. They were activists as well as artists, and their desire to make revolutionary art was indebted to the Club’s namesake—an American journalist, war correspondent, and poet who witnessed the Russian Revolution firsthand. Reed was a founder of the Communist Labor Party of America, and his firsthand account of the 1917 Russian Revolution, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (a copy of which is on view in the exhibition), describes how the Bolsheviks toppled the Tsarist empire and established the world’s first socialist state. Reed died of illness in Russia in 1920, just shy of his thirty-third birthday, and became a symbol of political activism and international Communism, inspiring the founding of the Club. The exhibition draws its title from the monthly publication of the Chicago chapter.

“Members of these collectives embraced the motto ‘art as a social weapon,’” said John Murphy, Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University and co-curator of the exhibition with former fellow graduate student Dr. Jill Bugajski. “They sought to redefine what it meant to be an artist working in the shadow of the Great Depression by making no distinction between art and political struggle.” While many of the artists featured in the exhibition are known for art they created in the Works Progress Administration programs, *The Left Front* brings their more provocative, political work to light. “In 1931, the John Reed Club organized an exhibition of American art to be shown in Moscow,” explained Bugajski. “Graphic themes of strikes, police brutality, racial conflict, and capitalist excess dominated the imagery. Yet the artists of the Club struggled to balance their politically-driven allegiance to Russia’s socialist realism with their interests in European modernism and devotion to forging an independent American aesthetics. They questioned the very definition and purpose of revolutionary art.”



Henry Glintenkamp (American, 1887–1946). *Voter Puppets*, 1929. Wood engraving. Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 1993.19

Exhibition

The Left Front is organized according to four major thematic sections that, taken together, illuminate both the causes championed by the artists and the diversity of approaches they took in their efforts to create both great art and social change.

The exhibition opens with ***Class Struggle***, establishing the avidly pro-worker and anti-capitalist identity of the left front artists through images of unemployed workers, rich industrialists, urban poverty, and other related subjects. Works here include *Voter Puppets*, a 1929 wood engraving by Henry Glintenkamp, who had been a student of Robert Henri during the first decade of the century and later shared a studio with Stuart Davis. Here Glintenkamp depicts, in a modernist style, a large, top-hatted industrialist manipulating the strings of marionettes on a stage, while behind him near-mechanical rows of stylized workers await their turn at the ballot box. Also in this section, Reginald Marsh’s 1930 watercolor *Chicago* depicts a row of delicate wood-framed tenements that seem to stand precariously, their curves and odd angles in contrast to the solid factory and smokestack that loom behind them. Documentary items in this section include a copy of *Left Front*, the monthly publication of the Chicago chapter of the John Reed Club, as well as Reed’s *Ten Days that*

Shook the World and Richard Wright’s influential novel *Native Son*. A Russian pamphlet for a 1931 exhibition in Moscow, *American Artists of the John Reed Club*, is designed in a distinctly Constructivist style.

From here, *The Left Front* moves on to ***Workers of the World, Unite!***, a large section that explores labor—its conditions, the place of workers in society at large, efforts to organize, race, and more. Rockwell Kent’s powerful 1937 woodcut *Workers of the World Unite* shows a monumentally scaled young man holding a shovel aloft in defense against two bayonets attacking him from outside the image. Harry

Gottlieb's 1940 color screenprint *The Strike is Won* depicts workers, black and white, as they rejoice over their victory, while Riva Helfond portrays the toll of coal mining through the worn faces of *Miner and Wife*, a 1937 lithograph. This section also addresses the incendiary 1931 rape case in Scottsboro, Alabama, involving false accusations by white plaintiffs, an all-white jury, and all-black defendants. Included here are Prentiss Taylor's lithograph illustrations for Langston Hughes's *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play in Verse* (New York, 1932), as well as the book's first edition.

What Is Revolutionary Art? addresses the question of style and the artists' very different opinions about how to convey the most effective messages. As seen in their work in this section, artists like Stuart Davis and Werner Drewes believed in the power of abstraction to provoke new ways of looking at the world. Davis's 1931 lithograph *Theater on the Beach* features an amalgam of real and fantastic architecture, while Werner Drewes's 1934 *Composition III: Arrows into Different Directions* depicts an abstracted image of arrows and geometric forms. Many left front artists believed that recognizable figures and objects were essential to creating an art that would promote social justice, but used a great variety of strategies. Boris Gorelick's *Sweat Shop*, a lithograph of 1938, forms a harrowing, surrealistic vision of emaciated seamstresses toiling at night. John Sloan's *Crouched Nude and Press*, a 1931 etching, shows a muscular woman seated next to a printing press, revolutionary artists' weapon of choice. Elizabeth Olds skewers modern art itself in *Picasso Study Club*, a 1940 lithograph depicting a group of elites looking at and discussing the artist's work. The Cézanne-esque *Still Life with Breakfast* by Louis Lowozick of 1930 represents yet another of the varied styles adopted by these artists.

Finally, **Popular Front** examines the American Artists' Congress, the less doctrinaire successor to the John Reed Club. Like the Club, the Congress was affiliated with the American Communist Party. However, the Depression, combined with the alarming growth of fascism in Europe, had led the Party to adopt a less rigid ideology to become, in the language of today, a bigger tent. Joining forces with non-Communist groups and individuals, the new organization, which called itself the Popular Front, founded the Congress in 1936. A highlight of this section of the *The Left Front* is a group of fifteen woodcuts from *A Gift to Biro-Bidjan*, a portfolio of prints created by fourteen artists to help Jews in Birobidzhan, a Jewish autonomous region in Siberia, newly established by the Soviet Union, where they could remain safe from the Nazis. The portfolio's prints depict a range of topics, not all of them overtly political.

In addition to a commitment to real-world politics and social justice, many of the artists in the exhibition also had a mystical bent. These include Rockwell Kent, whose four lithographs in this section, all from 1937, feature elements of science fiction. Three works focusing on the war use this surrealistic style to frightening effect: Bernece Berkman's drawing *Untitled (Figures with Gas Masks)*, from the 1930s; Werner Drewes's *Old Scarecrow—Hitler as Scarecrow*, a woodcut of c. 1937–43; and Spanish artist Julio de Diego's 1943 painting titled *Industry Becomes More Complex*. These are supplemented by a range of materials, including politically inspired publications by the American Artists' Congress, artist-designed posters, as well as film footage and photographs of political demonstrations from NYU's Tamiment Library and Labor Archives.



Hugo Gellert and Carl Lella on A.F.L. picket line, with placards accusing Saks Fifth Avenue of discriminating against American artists, 1930s. Photographer unknown. Gelatin silver print. Daily Worker and Daily World Photographs Collection, The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University

Publication

The Left Front is accompanied by an issue of the **Grey Gazette**, with essays by John Murphy, Ph.D. candidate, Northwestern University, and co-curator of the exhibition, tracing how painters and printmakers joined forces with writers and intellectuals to form a Left Front during the Great Depression; Jill Bugajski, co-curator and recent Ph.D. of Northwestern University, on Soviet-American relations in the visual arts during this era; Andrew Hemingway, Professor Emeritus of University College London, on the John Reed Clubs; Ezra Mendelsohn, Professor Emeritus of Hebrew University, on the "Jewishness" of radical Jewish artists; Rachel Sanders of the City Literary Institute in London on the relationship between *New Masses*

and the John Reed Clubs; Nathan Harpaz, Director of the Koehnline Museum of Art at Oakton Community College, on the Biro-Bidjan Portfolio; Rachel Shrock, Collections and Exhibitions Assistant at University of Illinois at Chicago's Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, on leftist artists and the Hull-House settlement community in Chicago; and Stephen F. Eisenman, Professor of Art History at Northwestern University, on revolutionary art, along with forewords by Lynn Gumpert and Lisa Corrin.

Sponsorship

The Left Front: Radical Art in the "Red Decade," 1929–1940 was organized by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University. Support for the exhibition is provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art, as well as the Terra Foundation on behalf of William Osborn and David Kabiller. Additional funding comes from the Myers Foundations and the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

The presentation of *The Left Front* at the Grey Art Gallery was made possible by support from the David Berg Foundation; the Goldstein-Goren Center for American Jewish History, Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University; the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust.

About the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine-arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information

Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003

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Hours

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm

OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm

Saturday: 11 am–5 pm

Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge