PRESSING ISSUES

Printmaking as Social Justice in 1930s United States

Pressing Issues brings together work by artists in the United States who, through their art, produced critical commentaries on the injustices plaguing the country during the 1930s. In the midst of the Great Depression, artists in the United States were put to work through the relief efforts of the New Deal not only to provide them a living wage but to bolster the spirits of the general public. Many used the opportunity to portray various scenes of everyday life in the United States through images of urban and rural landscapes, leisure activities, and industrial growth, while others directed their viewers' attention to economic toil and issues of social justice. Featuring rarely displayed Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) prints from KAM's collection, this exhibition addresses themes of labor unrest including exploitation, economic disparity, and gender inequalities, as well as racial violence and reactions to the rise of fascism.

Numerous connections between the present day and the 1930s are self-evident, given the escalating social and economic upheaval in the United States in the last decade. Our current political climate—intensified and exacerbated by the global pandemic—is fueling similar sorts of isolationism and nationalism, the rise of fascist ideologies, and brutal racism. Often overlooked, these prints from the 1930s provide a visceral and much needed reminder of how visual artists call attention to and combat oppression in all its forms.

FIGHTING FOR WORKERS' RIGHTS

One of the most prevalent themes in art during the Great Depression was labor. It was often politicized through imagery of a heroic male worker or expressed in sentimental terms, focusing on the rewarding value of manual labor. However, Ida Abelman, Leroy Flint, Boris Gorelick, Harry Gottlieb, and many other artists sought to raise awareness of harsh and exploitative labor conditions through their prints, often visiting coal mines and factories to document real-life circumstances if they were unable to draw from personal experiences. Printmakers made work that depicted and commented critically on child labor, the economic hardships of those barely scraping by, and inadequate working conditions—all with the intention to effect real change.

Ida Abelman
United States, 1910–2002
Child Labor, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-4

Two industries that often relied on child labor—textile factories and agriculture—are highlighted in this print. In the top half of the image, three girls sew in a textile mill, while two boys are picking vegetables and wheat below. The visual combination alludes to a dollar sign in the form of an "s"—critiquing how much money companies were making from child labor. Under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, regulation of employment for those under 16 and 18 years of age (the latter for more hazardous conditions) was established, which banned oppressive working conditions, set the minimum hourly wage at 25 cents, and limited the maximum workweek to 44 hours.

Ida Abelman
United States, 1910–2002
My Father Reminisces, 1937

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-1

In this print, Ida Abelman critiques gender and labor exploitation. Through the use of montage, the lives of garment workers are presented in a complex historical narrative, beginning with the arrival of immigrants on the left and moving through a review of poor working conditions in sweatshops, the formation of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911—one of the deadliest industrial disasters in US history. In the far right corner, Abelman charges the wealthy industrialists with complicity in perpetuating unsafe working conditions.

Ida Abelman
United States, 1910–2002
Wonders of Our Time, 1936

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-6

Reflecting upon the everyday world around her, Abelman utilizes the New York landscape to expose the plight of the urban poor. Children and adults crowd under the Brooklyn Bridge, filled with despair and uncertainty as to what might happen next. The bridge appears askew, with the shifting angles heightening the overall sense of anxiety.

Thomas Hart Benton
United States, 1889–1975
Mine Strike, 1934

Lithograph
Collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan
1935.2

This print depicts a common situation in the late 1920s and 1930s, where workers bravely fight for safer working conditions, higher wages, and other inequities. Four coal miners appear off-center, two with mouths open, holding an empty sign, while one is sprawled on the ground, either injured or dead. Two armed militiamen that are poised to fight are cast in the shadows. Faceless, one aims a gun at the strikers while the other stands ready in the foreground. While Benton's imagery portrays the mineworkers as heroes, he also critiques those workers who choose not to strike, as a silhouetted worker avoids the confrontational scene by quietly escaping in the far background.

Allan Freelon
United States, 1895–1960
Campaign Headquarters, ca. 1935; posthumously printed 2008

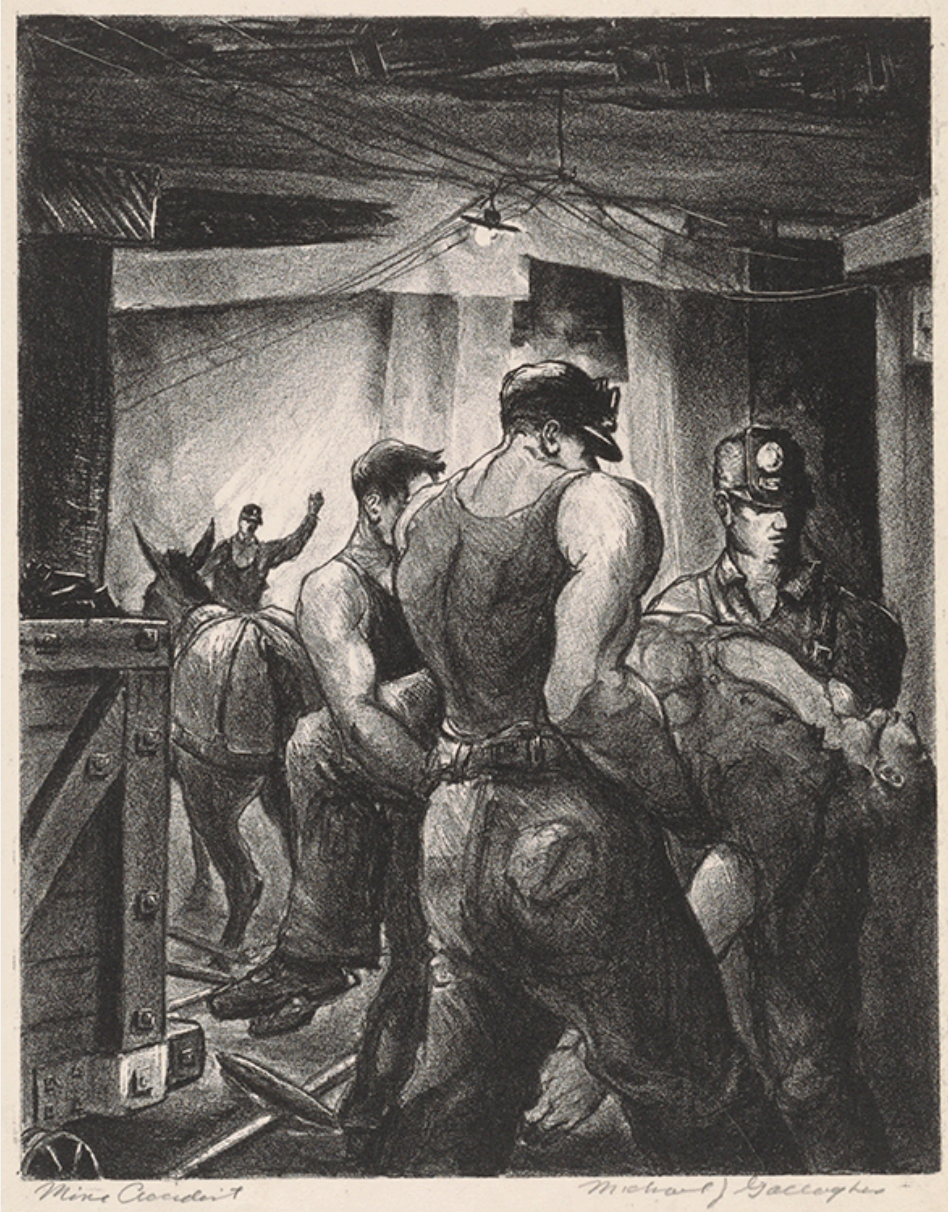
Aquatint on paper
Gift of Joel S. Dryer
2020-1-23

Campaign Headquarters places a smiling, sycophantic politician wringing his hands behind a microphone, speaking to a group of men. The crowd appears to have diverse economic and racial backgrounds, and yet all seem to be unconvinced by the politician's words. Several downtrodden individuals clothed in their work attire convey a sense of uneasiness, which was caused by the economic downturn of the Depression. More than a decade after he made this print, in 1949, Freelon ran unsuccessfully for the Pennsylvania state legislature on the Progressive Party ticket.

Leroy Flint
United States, 1900–1980
Strikebreakers, ca. 1930s

Etching with green tint
Bequest of George W. Sanford
1963-4-17

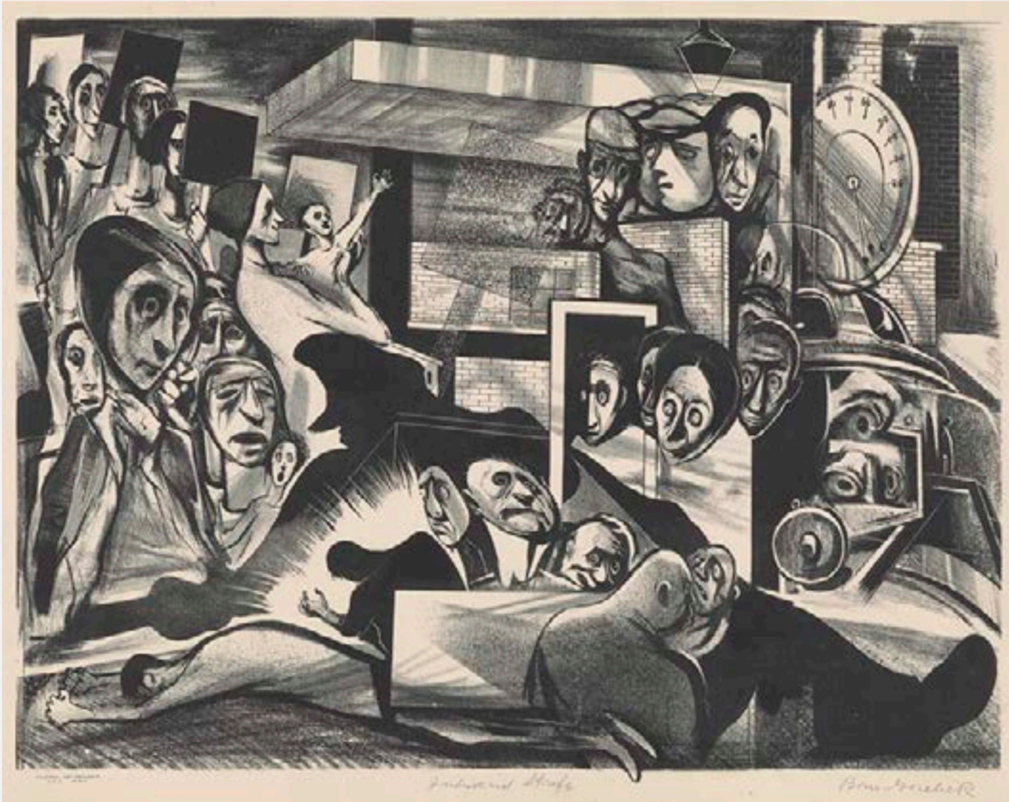
Five gritty-looking union busters walk with purpose toward the foreground. In their massive hands they brandish wooden batons. With worn faces and intimidating expressions, the men seem intent on inciting and engaging in hostile attacks against the striking workers. Flint places his social critique squarely on these individuals but also on industries and businesses that hired such men to obstruct the right to fight for fair and improved working conditions.



Michael J. Gallagher
United States, 1898–1965
Mine Accident, ca. 1935

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-126

In this unusual interior scene, three men carry an injured miner out of the mine, emphasizing the endurance of the workers in the face of hardship. By accentuating the figures’ musculature, Michael Gallagher asserts that poor working conditions contribute to unnecessary accidents that affect everyone. He often produced prints that depicted the lives of coal miners. He had been exposed to their experiences first-hand, as his father and brothers had made their living in the anthracite mines in Scranton, Pennsylvania.



Boris Gorelick
Russia, 1912–1984
Industrial Strife, 1938

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-138

In *Industrial Strife*, the artist uses the methods of surrealist montage to convey the psychological toll of labor inequities and to create an emotional cry for justice for industrial workers. Distorted figures of women and children appear on the left, workers on the right, and capitalist bosses in white collars in the center foreground. Above the latter, a silhouette of a worker explodes with a sense of anguish. The shadow of a policeman holding a club appears above a prone victim in a factory setting, as wheels, scales, and other machinery create the scenery. Through the swirling faces and exaggerated gestures of the downtrodden, Gorelick rebukes the strife and labor inequity perpetuated by industry.

Boris Gorelick
Russia, 1912–1984
Mine Disaster, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-140

In this print, Boris Gorelick asserts a pointed critique of hazardous working conditions for miners. An elongated and enlarged figure, presumably a casualty of the disaster, lies on the tracks of the coal mine while his wife and child stand atop his body, noticeably distraught. On the left, a line of distressed-looking workers enter the mine, while mourners carry a coffin on the right. Gorelick utilizes surrealist montage techniques to convey the anxiety and fear that many miners endured in order to feed themselves and their families during the Depression.

Harry Gottlieb
United States, born in Romania, 1895–1992
Booleg Coal Mining, 1937

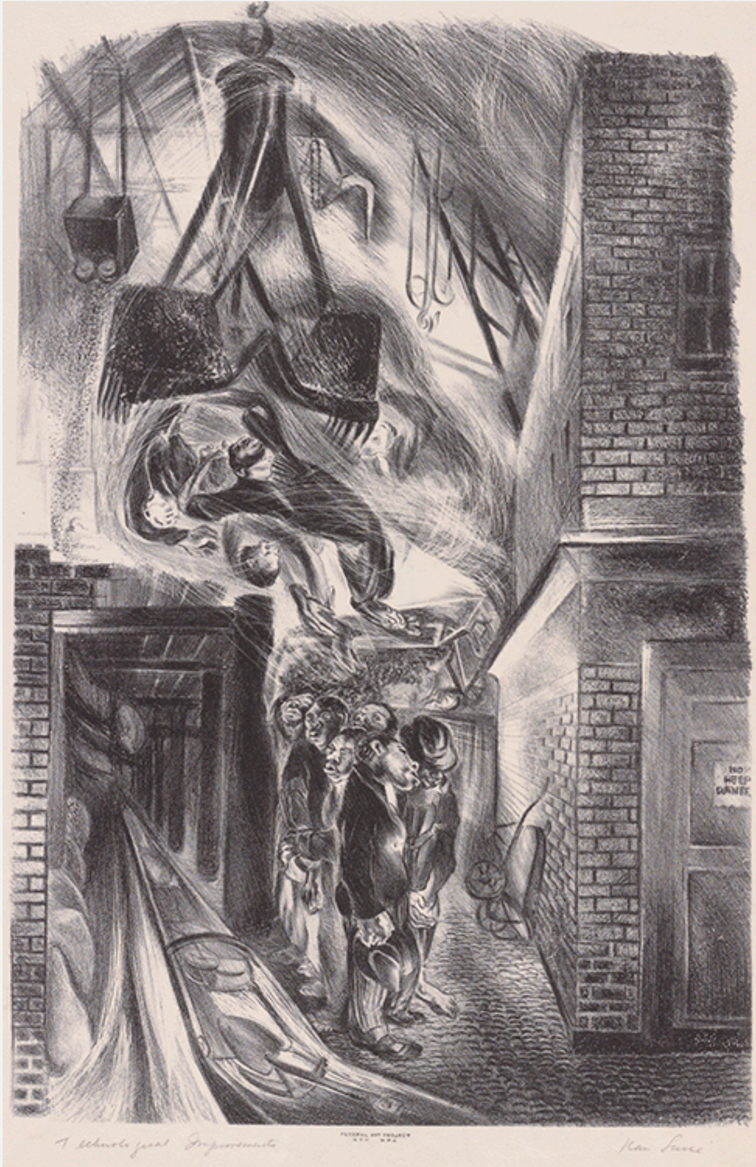
Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-142

This print depicts a relatively common theme for the time: coal miners from Pennsylvania who had lost their jobs at company-owned mines as a result of attempting to organize labor unions. Fighting against the economic system, the bootleg miners dig illegally from surface seams using serviceable but potentially dangerous equipment. The artist documented the bootleg coal miners’ activities only after he joined an independent miners’ union in a nearby town.

Jacob Kainen
United States, 1909–2001
Tenement Fire, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-205

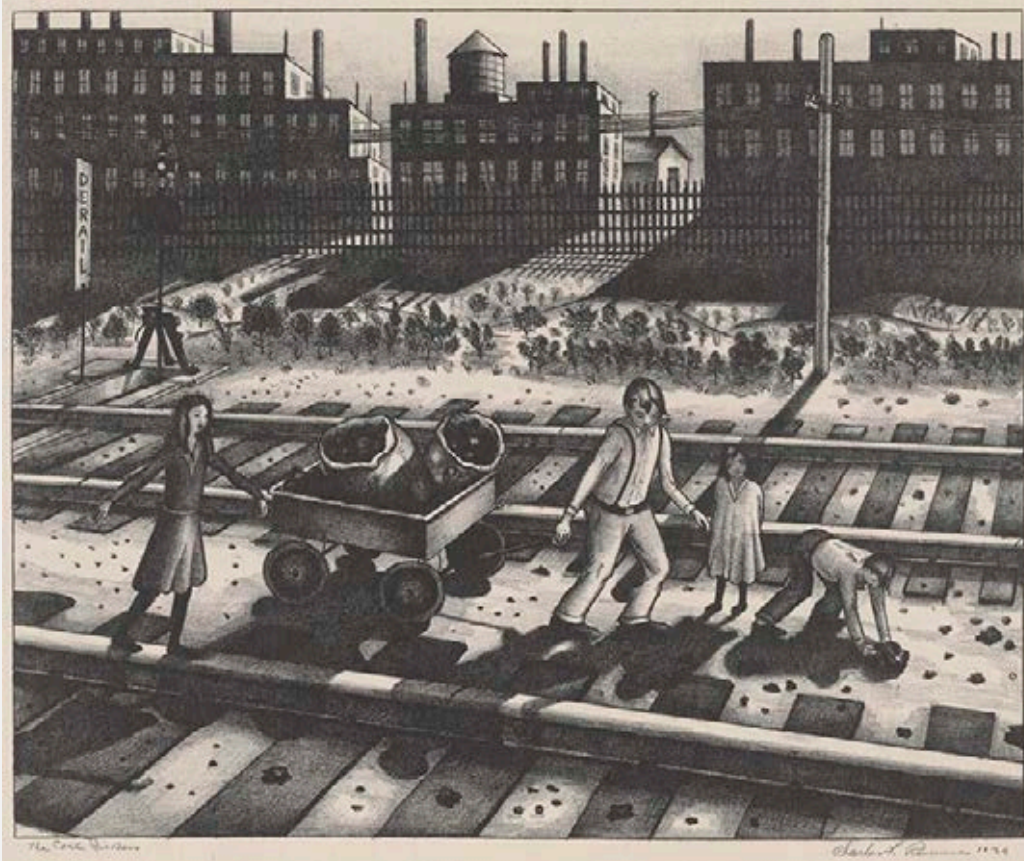
In the 1930s, Jacob Kainen produced expressive works in a social realist style that comment on various inequities, such as the slum conditions of tenement buildings. In this print, people gather in groups in the street and on the sidewalk, watching firefighters try to extinguish a catastrophic fire. The building buckles with people stranded on its fire escapes, waiting to be rescued. This can also be viewed as metaphor for the instability of the working class during the Great Depression.



Nan Lurie
United States, 1910–1985
Technological Improvements, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-267

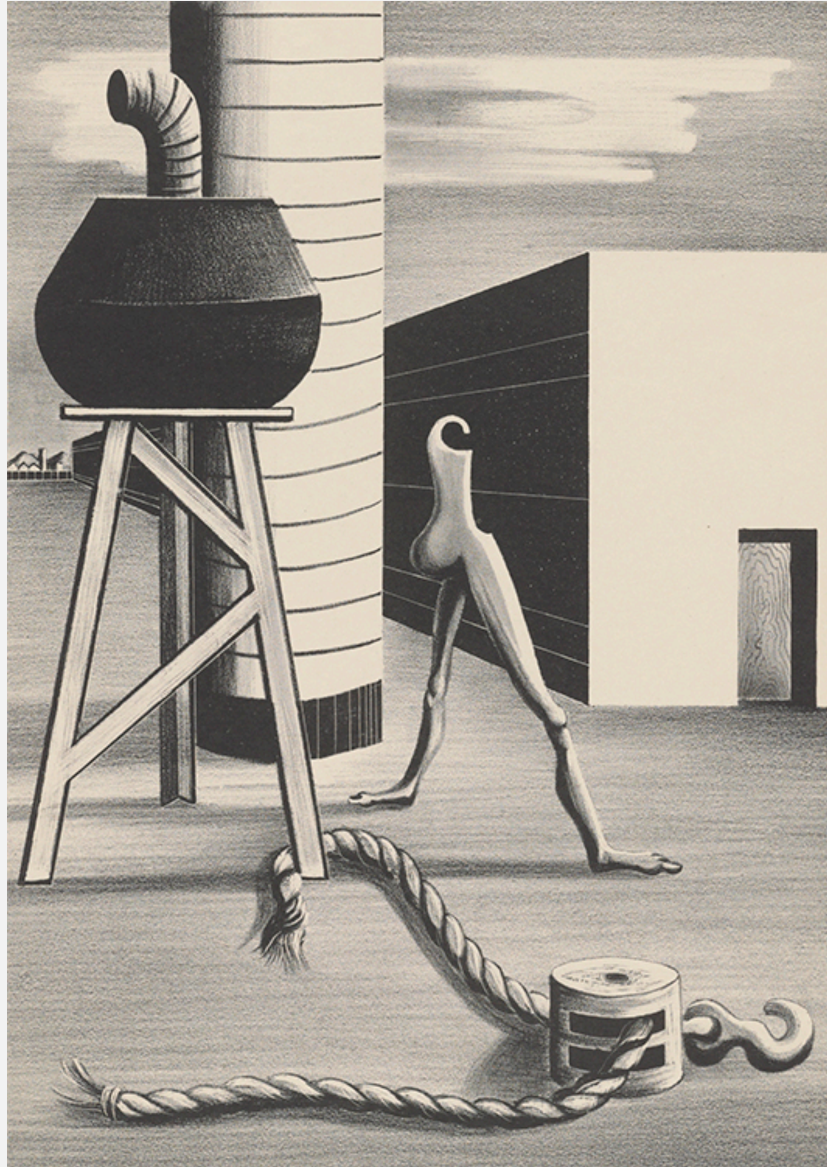
A line of African American men stand outside a brick building near a construction site, unaware that a sign around the corner states, "No Help Wanted." Lurie's satirical title "Technological Improvements" refers to the new machinery that caused layoffs and reduced the need for new hires. The dynamic composition and the nightmarish scene of machines spitting out humans creates a psychological tension, while condemning how industry has replaced the working class—here Black construction workers—with new technologies.



Charles Frederick Ramus
United States, 1902–1979
The Coal Pickers, 1939

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-356

This print references the conditions working poor families had to endure during the Depression. Children walk along the train tracks picking up loose bits of coal that have fallen out of coal cars, gathering these materials to bring home. While factories stand tall in the background, the older girl playfully balances on a track as the two boys provide the labor. Their clothes do not appear tattered and the older girl is smiling. The younger girl stares back almost inquisitively at the viewer.



Herman Volz
Switzerland, 1904–1990
Scab, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-452

In this print, the artist dehumanizes the figure by depicting the scab (a derogatory name for a strikebreaker) as a deformed body with a hooked torso and two legs pointed in opposite directions. Scabs and strikebreakers undercut collective bargaining efforts by the union by taking the place of workers on strike, degrading not only the solidarity of the workers but also the dignity of their work as well. Volz's absurd and dehumanizing depiction of the strikebreaker reinforces his critique of those who choose to undermine the union collective—by making the pulley inoperable and the building inaccessible.

Albert James Webb
United States, 1891–1975
Bronx Sharecroppers, 1939

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-460

The artist draws attention to the exploitation of the working class in *Bronx Sharecropper*, specifically the mistreatment of unemployed African American women. During the 1930s in New York City, and specifically in the Bronx, Black domestic workers gathered on street corners to offer their services to prospective employers who were most often white, middle-class women. A white woman stands with her son, looking down upon the group as she negotiates the services for the day. Employers sought the lowest possible wage, sometimes as low as fifteen or twenty cents an hour.

Paul Weller
United States, 1912–2000
Harvest Hands, ca. 1939

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-468

Carrying their belongings, five figures stand with their backs to the viewer, acting as universal symbols of the destitute and itinerant workers that were often searching for food, shelter, and employment during the Great Depression. They appear at the back of the train, perhaps waiting to hop on illegally before the train leaves. As with many farmhands during the 1930s, this family or group of workers will most likely ride the rails until they can find employment.

Hale Woodruff
United States, 1900–1980
Coming Home, 1931–1946; printed 1996

Linocut on mulberry paper chine collé onto rag paper
Museum Purchase with funds provided
by Krannert Art Museum Council Acquired
Taste Celebration 2019
2019-14-1.3

In *Coming Home*, Woodruff's weighted curves, angles, and stark contrasts convey the historic marginalization and poverty endured by many African American communities. The houses are supported by rickety wooden beams and panels are missing from their roofs. Ominous clouds appear overhead. However, Woodruff brings a sense of optimism to the scene. The woman gracefully climbs the stairs in her high-heeled shoes, dress, and hat, surrounded by thriving foliage, conveying hope and survival amidst economic precarity and hardship.

Lloyd William Wulf
United States, 1913–1965
Street Scene, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-484

Many workers and their supporters engaged in strikes during the 1930s. In *Street Scene*, a diverse group of men and women peacefully strike for workers' rights in front of an entrance to what looks to be a building for wealthy occupants, complete with a gated entrance, classical architectural elements, and lush foliage. From the appearance of figures hunched over, it seems as though the strike or protest has lasted awhile. Two police officers stand to the side, conversing with one another, as a woman in the center looks straight at the viewer. Her gaze grabs the viewer's attention, conveying her determination to affect change by demanding action.

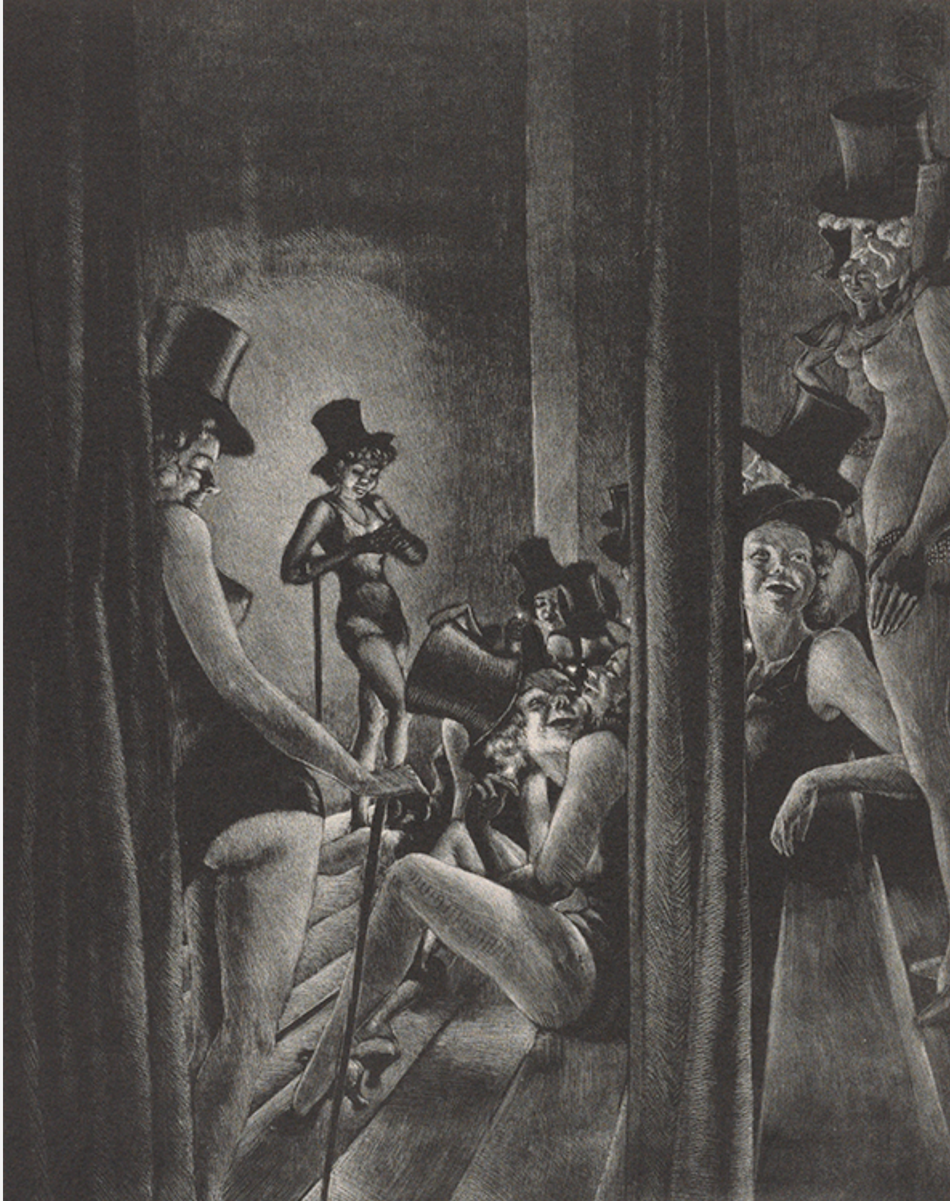
WOMEN AT WORK

While depictions of the male laborer abound in paintings, murals, prints, and illustrations from the 1930s, representations of women in the workforce are noticeably absent, reflecting the gender discrimination at play during this tumultuous era. The more than ten million women in the US labor force in the 1930s faced many obstacles, especially the misperception that they were stealing jobs from eligible men. Prior to the 1940s, when women were given jobs that supported the war effort, they were confined to a small number of gendered positions: teachers, nurses, and manufacturing positions in sewing, textile, and garment industries—jobs that those in power deemed appropriate for workers they viewed as unskilled. Sewing rooms were the largest component of the WPA program for women; in 1936, fifty-six percent of all women employed by the WPA worked in sewing rooms.

Minetta Good
United States, 1895–1946
Artist at Work, ca. 1935-1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-133

This lithograph celebrates the idea of artists as viable workers during the Great Depression, thanks to the efforts of the Federal Art Project under the auspices of the WPA. Good's self-portrait in her Greenwich Village apartment-studio shows her engaged in valuable creative work. She portrays her own contributions while also standing in for other women artists at that time (forty percent of WPA/FAP artists were women).



Kyra Markham
United States, 1891–1967
Burlycue, ca. 1934-1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-294

In *Burlycue*, the artist depicts an unusual image of burlesque women—instead of objectifying their bodies on stage as they perform, they are depicted as laborers with agency. Many women found employment in the entertainment industry during the Great Depression. The dancers appear backstage behind the curtains, enjoying jovial conversation and taking a break from their work. As a trained actress who had access to the theatre, Markham uses the topic of the entertainment industry to convey drama while also examining labor roles.

Jack Markow
England, UK, 1905–1983
Strip Girl, ca. 1934-1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-302

In contrast to Kyra Markham's *Burlycue*, this print is an example of how male artists typically portrayed women in the entertainment industry—as objects of male desire. A spotlight falls upon a single burlesque dancer in a theatre. Musicians perform in the orchestra pit as an audience of men leans forward in their seats to watch the dancer perform a striptease. Many women performed burlesque during the Great Depression, and it was the one type of work that women did that many male artists chose to depict.

Lillian Richter
United States, 1915–2000
Coal Miner's Wives, 1937-1939

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-362

In this print, Richter depicts an uncommon scene. Two miner's wives work on the surface, collecting buckets of coal. With their hair covered by bonnets or dustcaps, they sit with their backs to each other, silent and focused on the task at hand. This is probably a smaller mine that was owned by an independent company, not a larger company-controlled one, as smaller mines were more likely to grant women employment as above ground workers. The heavy application of black emphasizes the stress coal miners' wives endured during the Depression—their constant labor as wives, caretakers, and legitimate wage earners.

Charlotte Rothstein
United States, born in Poland, 1912
Sleeve Pressers, 1939

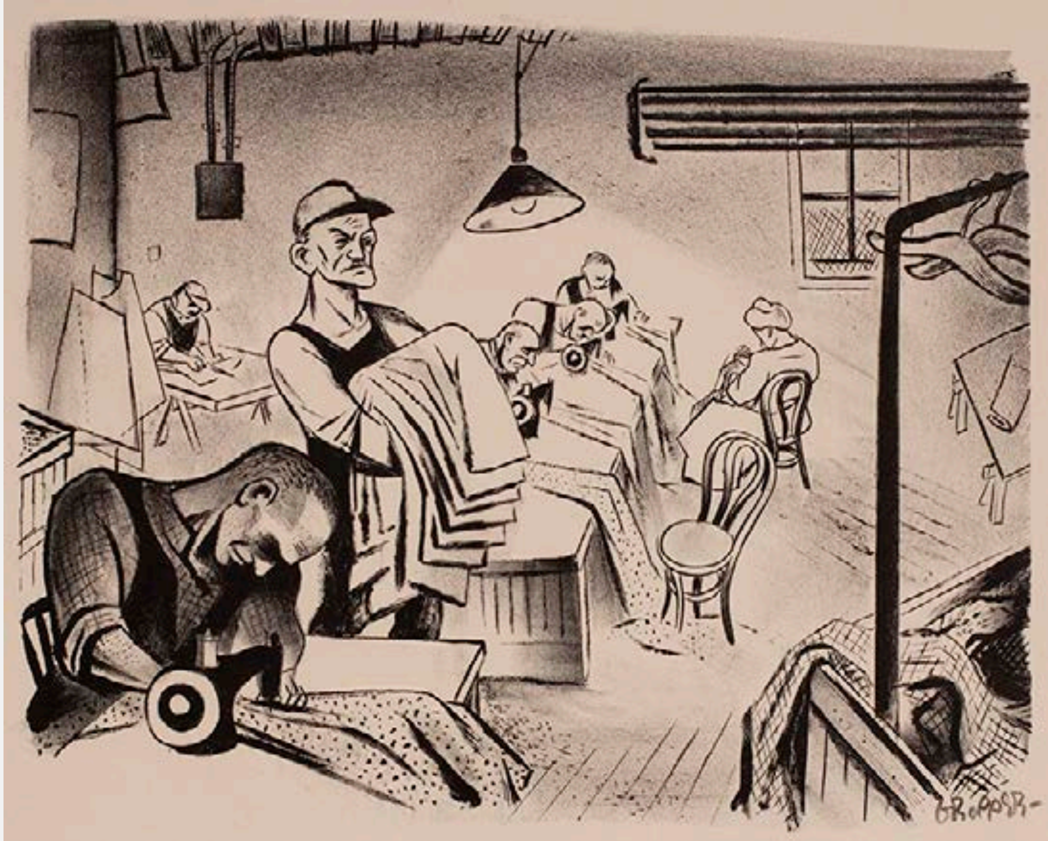
Lithograph
Museum Purchase Richard M. and Rosann Gelvin Noel Acquisition Fund
2020-3-2

African Americans entered the garment industry after World War I, as many moved their homes from Southern farms to Northern cities as part of the Great Migration. By 1930, approximately 32,000 African Americans were employed in the clothing industries, which had an overall work force of more than 400,000. As in other areas of work, they were often restricted to the poorer-paying occupations, though a number found work as pressers, one of the better-paid garment jobs.

Riva Helfond
United States, 1910–2002
Custom Made, 1938

Lithograph
Museum Purchase Richard M. and Rosann Gelvin Noel Acquisition Fund
2020-3-1

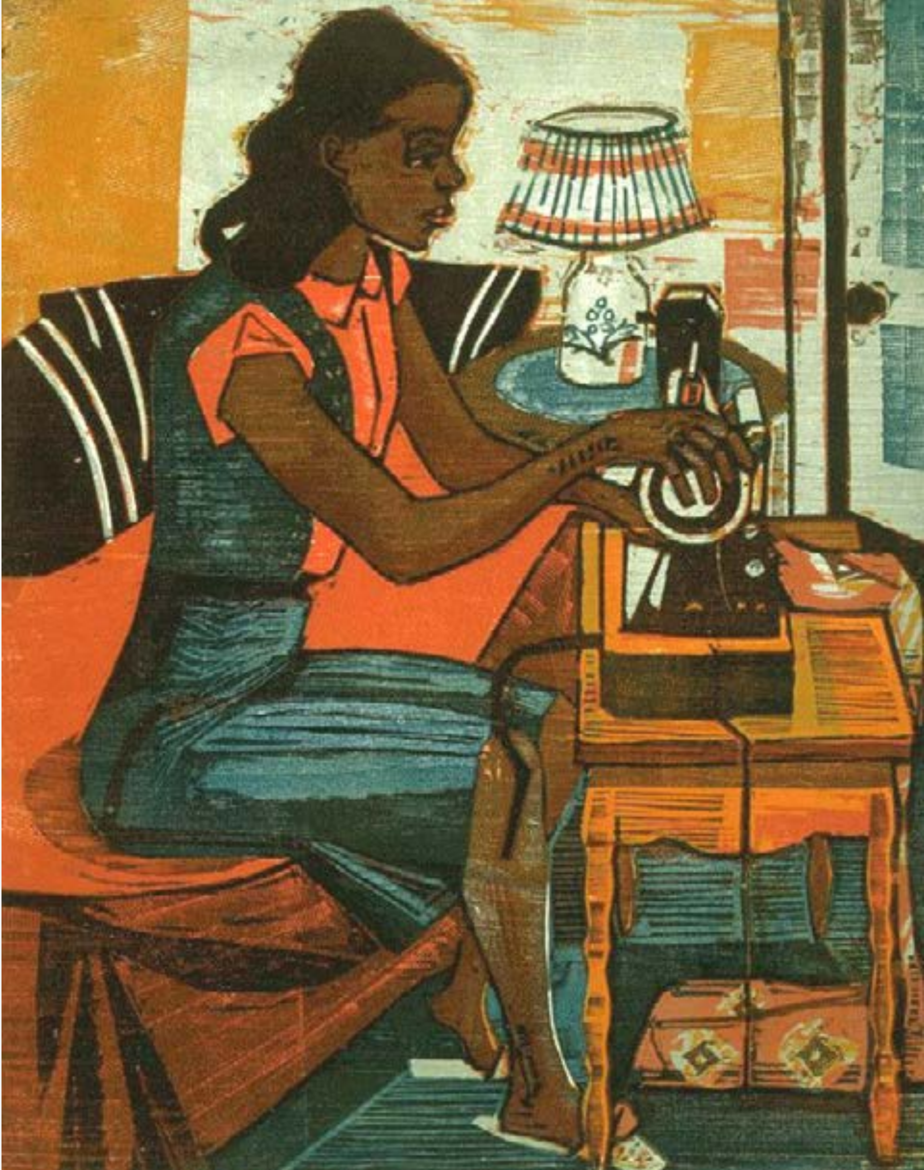
Custom Made explores the determination of women in the face of tedious, tiring labor in the garment industry, which was often poorly paid. A seamstress slumps over a sewing machine, working late into the night on garments that she brought home to earn additional meager wages. Hair pulled back, she appears completely defeated and tired. Helfond evokes a sense of anguish through the compressed space, the angular treatment of the figure's body, and the slightly distorted perspective. Without a face, the woman is emblematic of the exhausted woman worker.



William Gropper
United States, 1897–1977
Sweatshop, 1936

Lithograph
Museum Purchase Richard M. and Rosann Gelvin Noel Acquisition Fund
2020-3-3

Sweatshops were often a combination of the worst conditions of the factory and the tenement. In this print's somber tone, Gropper underscores the bitterness of life for the working classes and calls for social and political change. The male workers' faces look bleak—with wrinkles and darkened eye sockets—as they sit bent over their machines, working on seemingly never-ending garments. In the foreground, the man's arm disappears into the machine, intimating that the worker has merged with his machine.



Bernard Schardt
United States, 1904–1979
Girl Sewing, 1935

Woodcut
Collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan
1943.119

In *Girl Sewing*, the artist portrays a portrait of the working class, in this instance, a young woman who has brought extra sewing work home to make meager extra wages. The woman sits on a sofa, wearing slippers, while working on an electric sewing machine. This contrasts with other prints in this exhibition, such as *Custom Made* by Riva Helfond and *Sweatshop* by William Gropper, in that in those workers sew in anguish and in poor conditions.

Hugh Botts
United States, 1903–1964
Nana, 1938

Etching and aquatint, soft-ground
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-47

Botts' print subtly alludes to the gendered dynamics of labor. Nana, as the title suggests, wears an apron smock in a domestic space, ironing what looks like a man's dress shirt. Considered a luxury during the 1930s, she uses an electric iron to press her husband's shirt, further intimating that he worked while she stayed home. Married women were often discouraged or denied from applying for work relief under the New Deal's WPA programs, which stipulated that only one member of a family could receive work relief and that individual had to demonstrate their status as the principal breadwinner.

CONDEMNING RACIAL TERROR

The difficult and graphic imagery on view in this section asserts the complicity of white Americans in the racial terror that targeted African Americans in the 1930s. Mobs and the Ku Klux Klan used lynching as a powerful symbolic act to instill fear within the African American community and to attempt to enforce white supremacy and social segregation. State officials and local law enforcement did little to prevent these tragic events, rarely attempting to arrest the responsible parties to seek justice for the victims of lynching and their families.

In 1935, two significant exhibitions were organized to raise awareness of these crimes and to push for anti-lynching legislation. One of these, *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, was a collaboration between the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the College Art Association, which featured works by thirty-nine racially and ethnically diverse artists, including Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, Allan Freelon, and Hale Woodruff, whose prints are shown in this exhibition. Advocating for social justice, these artists produced works that condemned heinous acts, invoked the spiritual, and—by protesting through their works—demanded immediate and direct action.

John Steuart Curry
United States, 1897–1946
Manhunt, 1938

Lithograph
Collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art,
Ann Arbor, Michigan
1935.24

Manhunt focuses on the moral depravity of white mobs, many of which often searched for their lynching victims under the cover of night. Curry conveys this posse's fanaticism as they hunt their prey with a feverish sense of mission. This is evoked through the bloodhound lunging forward with its mouth open, the rearing horse, the forward movement of the figures, and various guns pointed in all directions, ready to shoot at any moment. Although photographs exist that capture the abhorrent communal spectacle of lynchings, Curry and other artists who focused on these unseen moments help implicate white militia, members of police, and other community members in deadly violence perpetrated against Black people.

Chet La More
United States, 1908–1980
Ku Kluxers, 1939

Lithograph
Collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art,
Ann Arbor, Michigan
1943.73

This print denounces the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist hate group that has and continues to conduct domestic terrorist acts against African Americans, Catholic and Jewish groups, immigrants, LGBTQ, and leftist groups throughout the United States. Through its simple, yet aggressive image of three hooded members, *Ku Kluxers* condemns the horror of lynching. In the aftermath of violence, the artist emphasizes the danger these hostile individuals propagated—red markings stain their gowns, while two figures stare out of their hoods with blood red eyes. This marks them as cowards, hiding their identity behind their hoods and taking cover in the widespread power of the hate group.

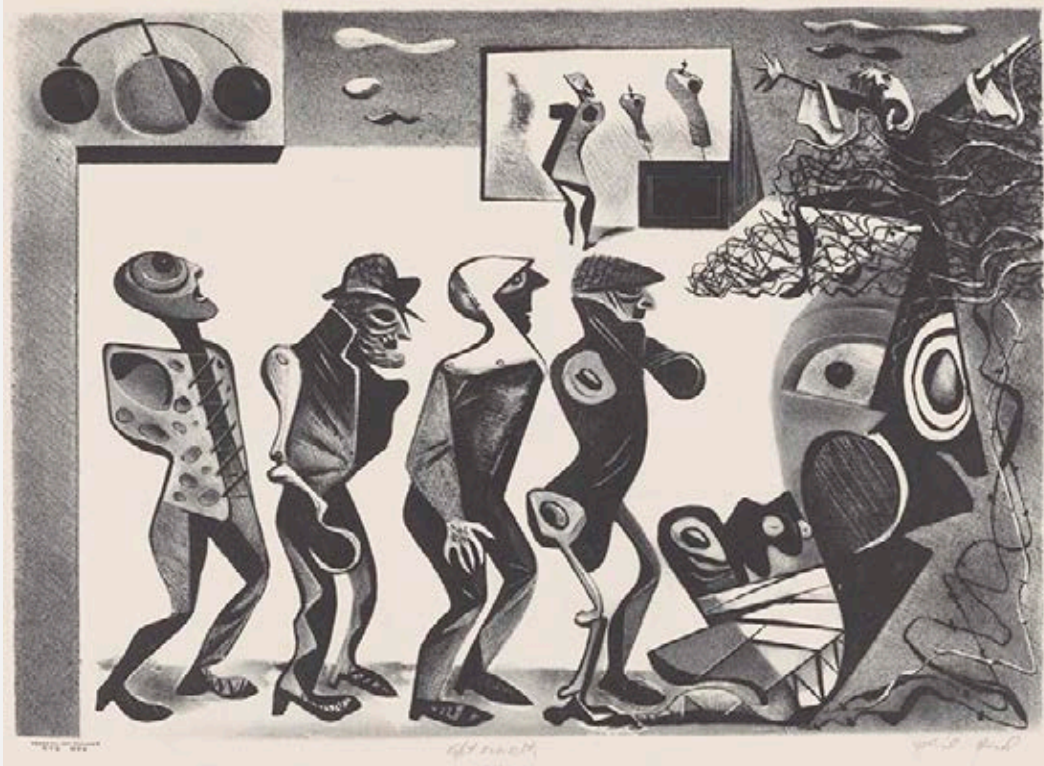
DENOUNCING FASCISM

The prints in this section emphasize the psychological stress of living in fear of the rise of fascism, and particularly the plight of Jewish refugees seeking exile in the United States. During the 1930s, fascist leaders rose to power in Spain, Italy, and Germany by forcibly and violently suppressing their opposition. After World War I, the United States positioned itself as non-interventionist, condemning the actions and ideologies of those authoritarian dictators while remaining isolationist. Leftist artists were among those concerned with the human suffering caused by these fascist uprisings—the rise of Nazi Germany (1933), the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935), and the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)—and they established the American Artists' Congress Against War and Fascism in 1935. These artists produced illustrations for journals and magazines, paintings, and prints that vehemently denounced such acts, often utilizing modernist visual strategies to heighten the viewers' emotional response.

Carlos Anderson
United States, 1904–1978
Aggression, 1939

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-15

In *Aggression*, Carlos Anderson critiques the hostile and violent behavior of war, most likely referencing the Spanish Civil War, and how it destroys beauty and life. A man sits slouched over a piano with destruction all around him. His musical composition is unfinished, while a classical statue of a woman and child sits broken in the back right. An emaciated animal and figure walk in a desolate town in the far right background, and fighter planes are in formation above the obliterated landscape.



Phil Bard
United States, 1912–1966
Aftermath, 1938

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-21

Aftermath employs abstracted surrealist elements to convey the suffering caused by the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Four dismembered figures stand with stitches, hooks, and rivets fusing their bodies together, further expressing the physical trauma and emotional distress caused by the conflict. The figures form a line in the foreground, reminiscent of the breadlines and unemployment lines that occurred during the Depression. In the upper right corner, a figure is tangled in barbed wire, positioned in a Christ-like pose, with white fabric hanging from his limbs. The composition evokes a loss of faith in humanity.

Boris Gorelick
United States, 1912–1984
Bombing, ca. 1937–1938

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-137

In this print, Gorelick utilized modernist styles to convey the horror and suffering of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Many artists sympathized with left-leaning Republican government officials who were fighting against the fascist Nationalists, which were under the direction of General Francisco Franco. Fragmented and distorted figures whirl amidst a scene of destruction—a bomb looms above a teary eye while a face and hand appear in a fiery blaze. Gorelick heightens the trauma through manière noire—a subtractive printmaking technique in which an image is made by scraping away ink on a black flat, leaving white areas that create the image.

Florence Kent
United States, 1917–1989
Jewish Refugees, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-210

Somewhat unusual for prints during this time, Florence Kent utilizes an expressive modernist style to convey the terror and anguish that Jewish refugees endured during their escape from Nazi Germany. Psychological tension is heightened through the compressed space that juxtaposes curvilinear sleeping figures with angular tents and trees that seem to sprout from the ground. On the left, a solemn-looking woman holds a younger individual in her arms, evocative of a pietà-like pose, perhaps to urge others to show compassion for those seeking exile from horrific anti-Semitic violence in the 1930s.

Chet La More
United States, 1908–1980
Children, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-238

As one of the only color lithographs in this exhibition, this print includes charged imagery of children in gas masks standing with their arms in the air. The scene is unnerving—expressive swaths of red, green, and blue ink create a frenzied atmosphere while sharp, black diagonals direct the viewer to the static figures and rectilinear structures. An empty noose hangs from a structure on the right, condemning the death of innocent children during military conflict, particularly the Spanish Civil War, prompting us to be concerned for their welfare.

Chet La More
United States, 1908–1980
Civilians, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-231

Civilians is a stark depiction of individuals wearing gas masks before venturing out for everyday activities, taking precautions against the fearful prospects of World War II. During the late 1930s into the 1940s, people in the United States—and more so in Britain and other countries—shared a concern for chemical warfare, resulting in a suggestion from the government that citizens use gas masks when possible. While learning to live with these new protections, a woman looks at herself in a cosmetic pocket mirror.

Chet La More
United States, 1908–1980
Refugees, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-237

Refugees depicts a family of six with their backs to the viewer, hunched over with bowed heads, carrying their essential possessions in sacks. The group consists of two men, three women, and a child clinging to her doll. The refugees slowly walk toward the vast and ambiguous horizon, unsure of where they are heading, with no shelter or aid to be found. The figures almost appear as geometric shapes, abstracted to the point where they cease to have an identity.

Joseph Leboit
United States, 1907–2002
Refugees, ca. 1934–1943

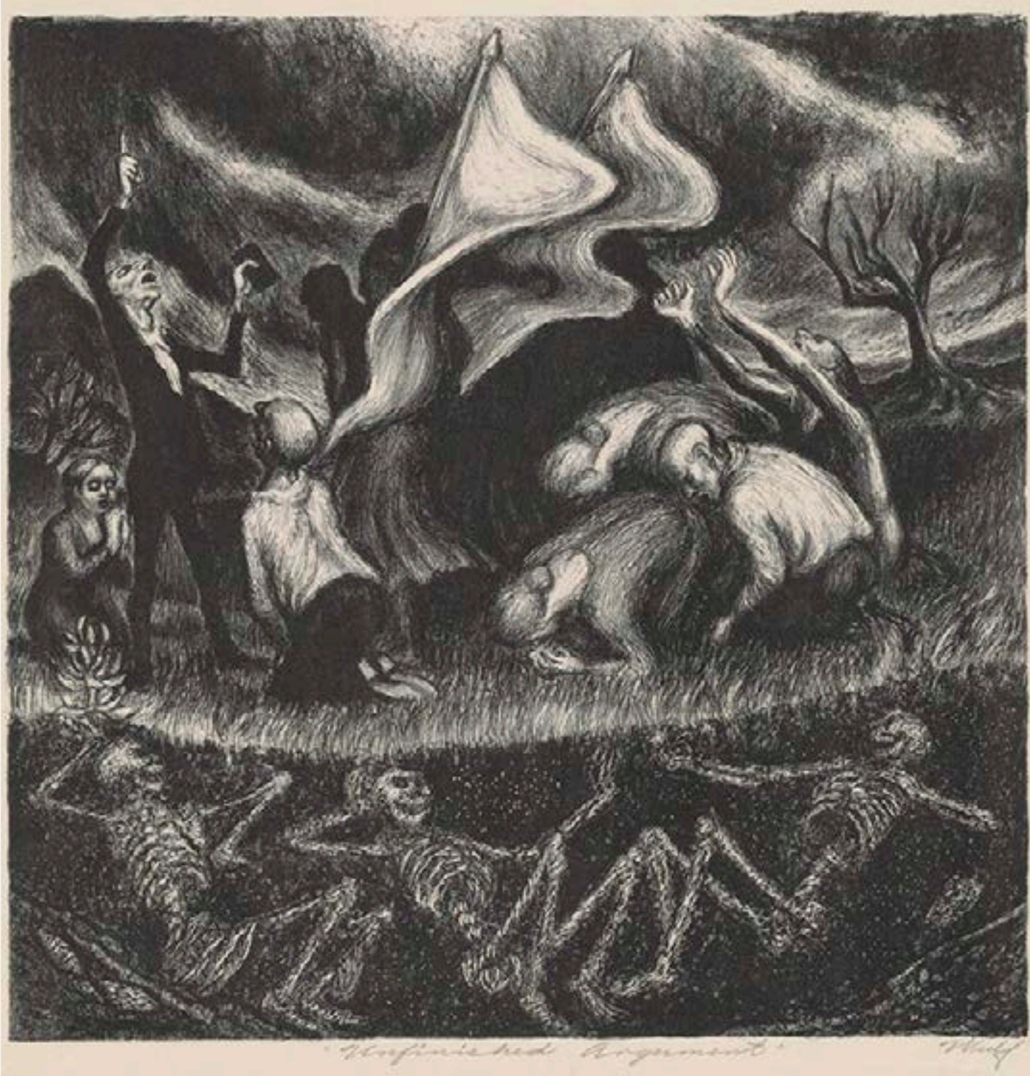
Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-254

Leboit depicts a harrowing scene of refugees struggling to find their way with no help or guidance. Located centrally in the print, two women and a child are hunched over, carrying their possessions in bags, while traversing a treacherous and lifeless terrain of dying trees, shells of buildings, and a ferocious wind. These forces work against the refugees, as the roots of the felled tree in the foreground almost entrap the women with their sharp tendrils, reinforcing the feeling of being estranged from their homeland and disenfranchised in their new country.

Hugh Miller
United States, 1911–1988
Receding Waters, 1937

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-312

At first unassuming, this print subtly condemns the dark history of the United States through imagery hidden in the stark landscape. In the aftermath of some type of destructive force, the waters recede, leaving overturned mine carts, felled trees and stumps, and the body of a pregnant woman whose head is covered by white fabric. Multiple faces emerge in the stump located in the foreground, while, in the background, a figure kneels in a position similar to the veiled tree.



Lloyd William Wulf
United States, 1913–1965
Unfinished Argument, ca. 1934–1943

Lithograph
Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-485

Although ambiguous, *Unfinished Argument* is imbued with emotional empathy for those who have lost their lives while engaged in some type of conflict. On the far left, a man points his finger up to the undulating, chaotic sky while conducting a sermon to people in various positions of prayer and mourning—standing, kneeling, falling down, and reaching out in anguish. Symbols of ceasefire and surrender, two white flags wave in the center of the print, might allude to the suffering caused by the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Three skeletons lay underground, almost reaching to get out, as if they hear the words and wails of the people above.

PRESSING ISSUES

PRINTMAKING AS SOCIAL JUSTICE IN 1930S UNITED STATES

Krannert Art Museum
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
October 3 – December 23, 2020

Weisman Art Museum
University of Minnesota
February – March 2020

Curated by Kathryn Koca Polite, Assistant Curator

Sponsored in part by the IFPDA Foundation, the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, and the College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.