

PRESSING ISSUES

PRINTMAKING AS SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN 1930S UNITED STATES

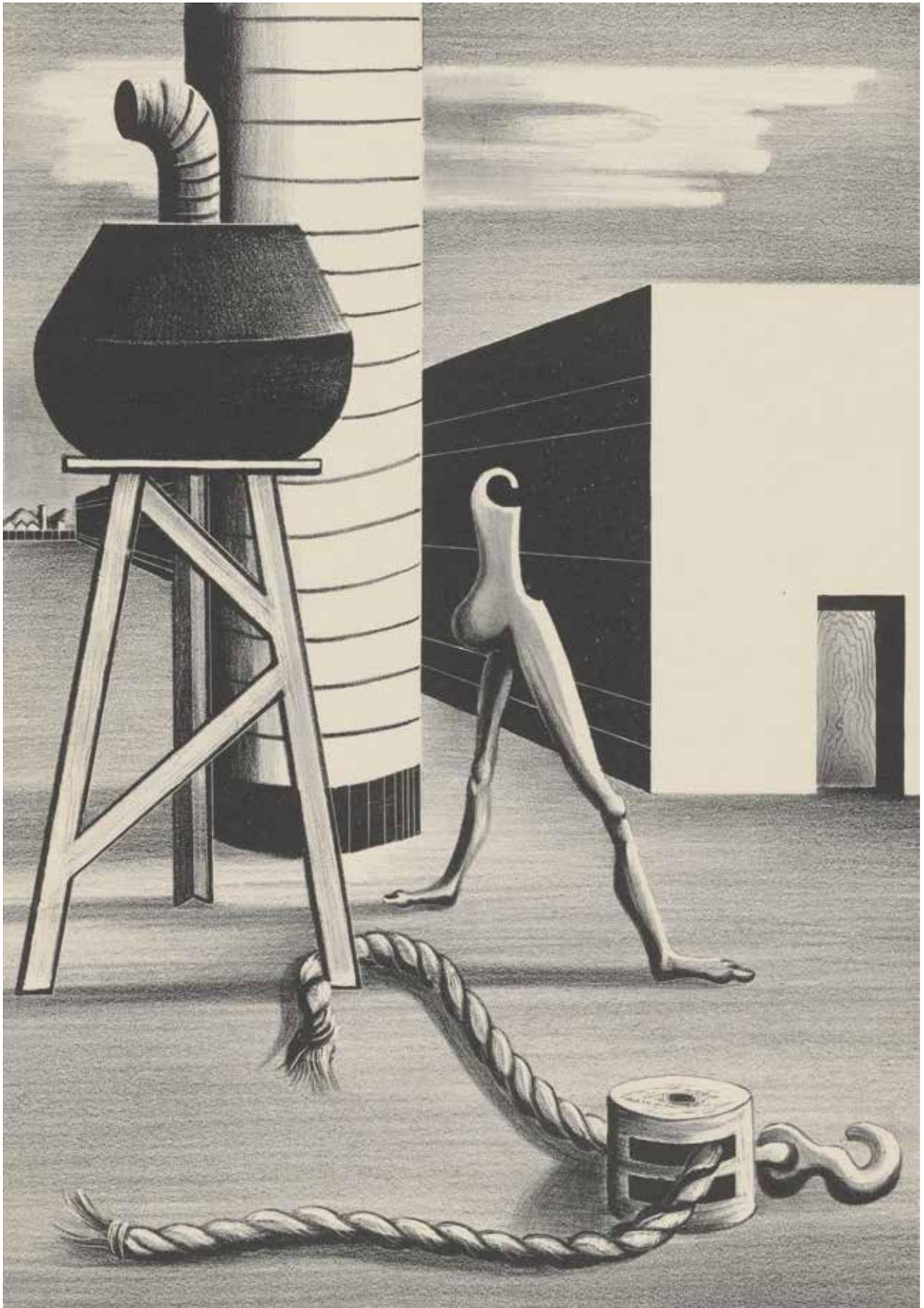


Fig. 1

P R E S S I N G I S S U E S

PRINTMAKING AS SOCIAL JUSTICE IN 1930S UNITED STATES

Kathryn Koca Polite

In the midst of the Great Depression, visual artists in the United States were put to work through the relief efforts of the New Deal not only to provide a living wage, but also to bolster the spirits of the general public. Many artists 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. Others directed their viewers' attention to the economic crisis and key social issues, producing critical commentaries on the social injustices plaguing the country. This exhibition features works addressing those issues of injustice.

The stock market crash of 1929 brought about the Great Depression (1929–1939), the worst economic downturn in the history of the United States. Industrial production and consumer spending slowed, employment opportunities dwindled, banks failed, financial investments vanished, and breadlines surged. By early 1933, nearly 12 million people were unemployed in the United States.

Within the first 100 days of taking office in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt enacted the New Deal—a series of programs, public work projects, regulations, and financial reforms that aimed to bring economic stability through relief, reform, and recovery. At the urging of his friend, the artist George Biddle, Roosevelt established the Federal Art Project One (FAP), an arm of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA), which provided jobs to visual artists, musicians, actors, and writers. The program employed 8.5 million people between 1935 and 1943.

While artists in the mural and easel divisions of the WPA/FAP produced social realist works that addressed anxieties of everyday life, perhaps the most formidable critiques of the government and society came from the Graphic Arts Division. The graphic workshops employed a large number of women artists as well as immigrant artists and African American printmakers, although the program was far from equitable in terms of opportunities for women and people of color. Dedicated to the democratization of art, many artists chose

lithography, a printmaking technique of the commercial world that had a low production cost, a potential for the largest editions, and was not considered too high-brow or academic for a mass audience. Accessibility was essential, not only in terms of content but also availability. Prints were exhibited in WPA/FAP exhibitions that toured the country and were hung in public facilities—government buildings, schools, libraries, and hospitals—on display for all to see.

One of the most prevalent themes in art during the Great Depression was labor, whether it was politicized through the imagery of the heroic male worker or expressed in sentimental terms, focused 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 the harsh and exploitative labor conditions through their prints, often visiting coal mines and factories to document these circumstances if they could not draw from their own experiences as laborers. Printmakers made work that depicted and commented critically on child labor, economic hardships of those barely scraping by, and inadequate working conditions—all with the intention to effect real change.

Some of the most pointed critiques focus on labor strikes, such as Herman Volz's 1937 lithograph *Scab* (Fig. 1). Volz relies on modernist visual strategies in his critique of workers who are desperate enough to cross the picket line. Evocative of Salvador Dalí's surrealist figures and Giorgio de Chirico's desolate landscapes, Volz 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. As part of the National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act) of 1935, workers were given the right to organize unions and to bargain collectively with their employers. Scabs and strikebreakers were seen to undercut collective bargaining for the union by making themselves available and willing to take the place of workers on strike, breaking not only the solidarity of the workers but the dignity of their work as well. The

scab stands in a bleak, non-descript, and severely rendered industrial environment. A pulley lies on the ground, with the rope severed on both ends, alluding to a broken system that is amplified by those who choose to work for less and are uninterested in unionizing. 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 (the hooked torso cannot function without the hook on the pulley) and making the building inaccessible (there are no doorknobs for entry).

Nan Lurie addresses race and joblessness in her surrealist-inspired lithograph *Technological Improvements* (1936–1939; Fig. 2). 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 satirically titled lithograph refers to the new technologies that caused layoffs and reduced the need for new hires. An anthropomorphized construction claw spits out three ghostlike men in the back of the formed line—they are no longer needed, reinforced by the wheelbarrow leaned up against the brick wall. The dynamic composition and 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.

While depictions of the male laborer abound in paintings, murals, prints, and illustrations from the 1930s, representations of



Fig. 3

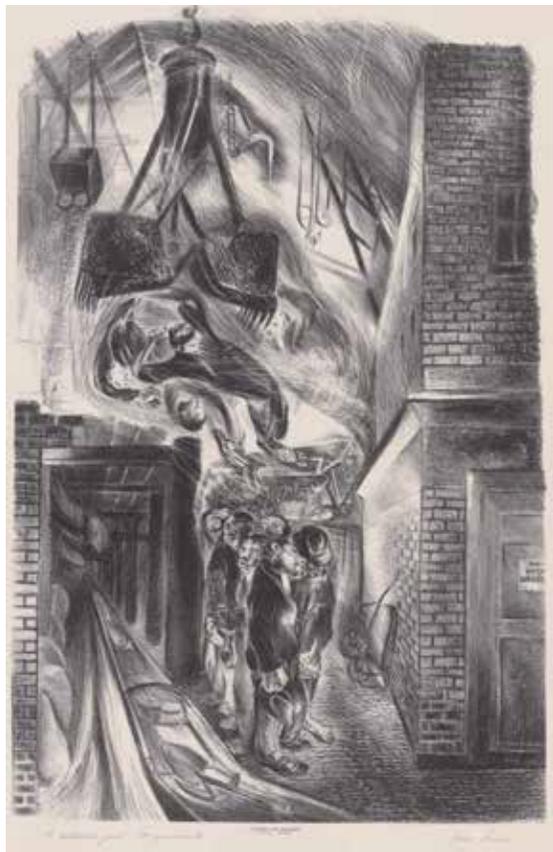


Fig. 2

women in the workforce are particularly absent in prints, reflecting the gender discrimination at play during this tumultuous era. Although more than ten million women factored into the US labor force in the 1930s, they faced challenging obstacles, particularly the idea that women were stealing jobs from eligible male workers. Before they became a major factor in the working economy in the 1940s, employed largely as part of the war effort, women were confined to a small number of gendered positions—teachers, nurses, and manufacturing (sewing, textiles, garments)—positions that those in power deemed appropriate for, in their view, unskilled women. Sewing rooms were the largest component of the WPA program for women, in which old clothing was repaired or remodeled, and new garments were made from surplus fabrics for distribution to families on relief. In 1936, fifty-six percent of all women employed by the WPA worked in sewing rooms.

Prints that documented and gave a voice to women workers were often produced by women artists, such as Minetta Good, Riva Helfond, Kyra Markham, and Charlotte Rothstein. Helfond experienced the factory conditions first-hand for a brief period in New York, working at a textile factory while studying art. In *Custom Made* (1938; Fig. 3), Helfond depicts a seamstress slumped over a sewing machine, working late into the night on garments that she brought home to earn extra, albeit meager, wages. Hair pulled back, she appears completely defeated and tired, almost resting her head on the sewing machine as her foot gently works the pedal below. 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. *Custom Made* was produced the same year as the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, a labor law that established minimum wage, overtime pay over forty hours of work a week, and restrictions on child employment. The lithograph also comments on the endless hours of tedious labor and fatigue as well as the grim determination of women who accepted employment that often paid very little.

In addition to the pictorial language of class conflict and working conditions, artists in the 1930s condemned discrimination and racial violence. Prints by Florence Kent, Chet La More, and Joseph Leboit depict the plight of Jewish refugees fleeing Germany, fearful of the horrific conditions of rising fascism, and the discrimination they encountered during a period of national isolationism. In *Refugees* (ca. 1936; Fig. 4), Leboit creates a harrowing scene of refugees struggling to find their way with no help or guidance. Centrally located 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. Leboit's print exudes the psychological anguish and agony over the violent anti-Semitism in Europe and comments on the growing isolationism during this period in the United States.

During this tumultuous decade, printmakers produced socially conscious prints to expose and condemn the injustices they experienced and witnessed around them. Given the social upheaval and the persistent systemic inequities experienced in the United States in the last decade, numerous connections to this past emerge. The current political climate, amplified by the global pandemic, is fomenting similar strains of isolationism and nationalism, the rise of fascist ideologies, and violence against immigrants and people of color. 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.



Fig. 4

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Cover: Hale Woodruff, *Coming Home* from *Selections From the Atlanta Period* (detail), 1931–1946; printed 1996. Linocut. Edition 20/75. Museum Purchase with funds provided by Krannert Art Museum Council Acquired Taste Celebration, 2019-14-1.3. © 2020 Estate of Hale Woodruff / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

Back cover: Ida Abelman, *My Father Reminisces*, 1937. Lithograph. Allocated by the US Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects, 1943-4-1.

Fig. 1: Herman Volz, *Scab*, 1937. Lithograph. Allocated by the US Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects, 1943-4-452.

Fig. 2: Nan Lurie, *Technological Improvements*, 1936–39. Lithograph. Allocated by the US Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects, 1943-4-267.

Fig. 3: Riva Helfond, *Custom Made*, 1938. Lithograph. Museum Purchase through the Richard M. and Rosann Gelvin Noel Krannert Art Museum Fund, 2020-3-1.

Fig. 4: Joseph Leboit, *Refugees*, ca. 1936. Lithograph. Allocated by the US Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects, 1943-4-254.

