

SEEING AMERICA: William Gropper's *The Opposition*, 1942

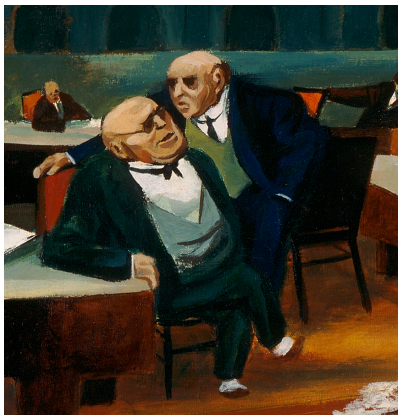
William Gropper fiercely satirizes the corruption and hypocrisy of the American Congress.



William Gropper (1897 – 1977)
The Opposition, 1942
Oil on canvas
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.5
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester
Courtesy of Heritage Gallery, CA

The Art

At first glance *The Opposition* might be a dubious tribute to the vitality of the democratic process. An antiquated senator vigorously waves his legislation. He dominates the space, his raised right hand bisecting the dynamic diagonal curve of the gallery balcony. With his torso, arm, and chin thrust dramatically forward, he towers over the other legislators. Energy is also conveyed in the sweep of the balcony, the juxtaposition of the geometric shapes with the biomorphic forms, and the vibrating contrast of the Prussian blue suits against the burnt orange of the wood.



But of course the orator's audience, already meager, is either asleep or inattentive. Ancient bald heads predominate, with the dome in the foreground strikingly outsized. The two members on the left, huddled conspiratorially, are wearing dark glasses.

The suits, an iridescent blue-purple, are just too shiny. The orator himself is portrayed as grotesque. In short, everything is exaggerated. The resulting caricature is Gropper's means of expressing his moral indignation.



William Gropper (1897 - 1977)
A New Bill, 1940
Lithograph
Gift of Betty Dennis Burt, Alfred Crimi and Sister
Magdalen LaRow, by exchange, 96.31
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And what are we to make of the suggestion of a cross in one of the medieval-style windows of the chamber? Considering the satiric tone of the painting, might Gropper be implying his concern about religion and its relationship to politics?

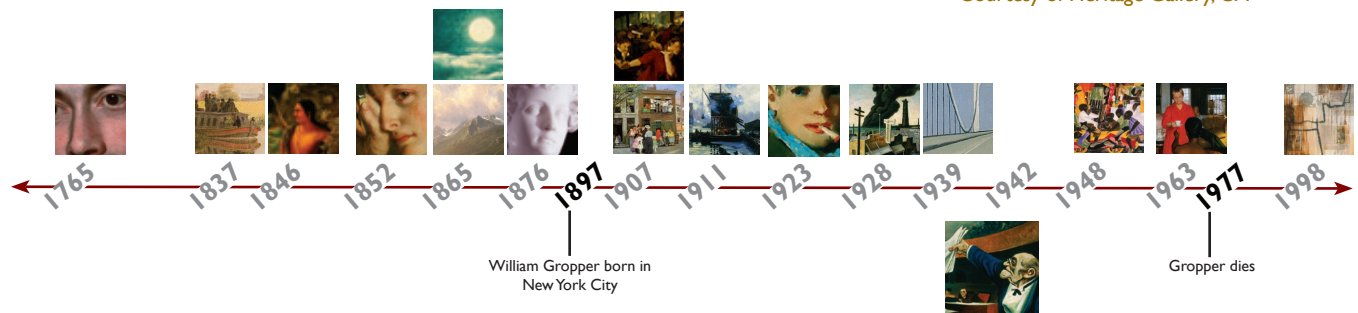
This painting and two lithographs in the Gallery’s collection are based on sketches Gropper did between 1934 and 1942. The lithographs are part of a series, “Sowers of the Senatorial Winds,” begun in 1930 when he started “covering” the United States Senate for *Vanity Fair*. Images from these prints were incorporated into the oil painting, *The Opposition*, completed in 1942. Art historians continue their attempts to identify the individual senators portrayed in Gropper’s paintings.



William Gropper (1897 – 1977)
The Opposition, 1942
 Lithograph

Gift of the Print Club of Rochester; by exchange, 89.59
 Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
 University of Rochester
 Courtesy of Heritage Gallery, CA

The Artist



You don't paint with color—you paint with conviction, freedom, love and heartaches—with what you have. The other end is the technique, the equipment with which you convey that.¹

William Gropper was born in 1897 in the Russian-Jewish ghetto of New York’s Lower East Side and lived his entire life in or near New York City. While poverty forced him to drop out of high school, Gropper did manage to study part time with realist artists Robert Henri and George Bellows. In 1917 he was hired as a staff artist at the *New York Tribune* and later for several radical magazines.

Gropper’s social consciousness grew out of his impoverished childhood and his work as a teenager in the garment district sweatshops. In 1927–28 he visited Soviet Russia with American authors Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis as delegates to the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution which put the Bolsheviks and Lenin in power. This experience reinforced his commitment to exposing social injustice and class inequality through his art. He believed art could induce political change in a democratic society, and his caricatures of America’s wealthy and powerful politicians and captains of industry were meant to educate the American people. During his entire career he produced political cartoons and satirical drawings exposing the abuses and scandals he witnessed.



William Gropper (1897 – 1977)
Tax Cut
 Courtesy of Heritage Gallery, CA

“I have portrayed the type of representative that is opposed to progress and culture,” Gropper wrote (*Seeing America*, 256). Politically active artists deliberately selected the medium of lithography because images could be produced cheaply enough that people could afford to buy them. His litho-

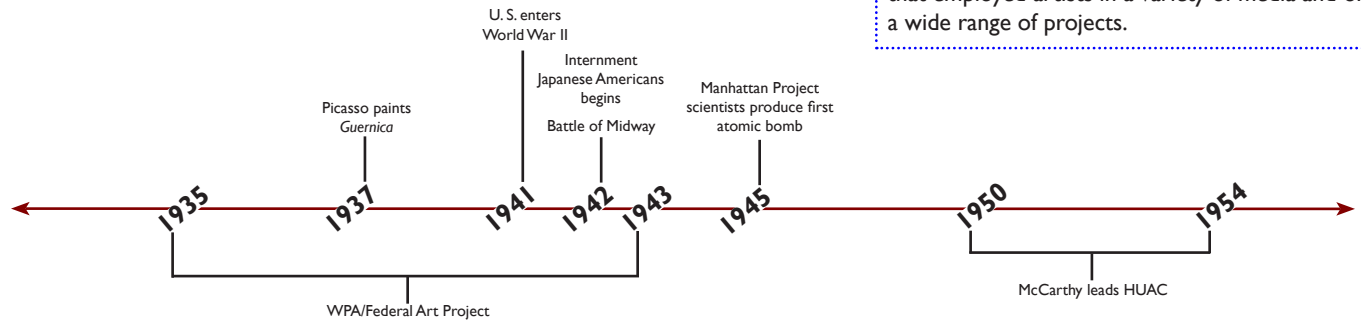
graphs appeared in the leftist publications *New Masses* and *Freiheit* as well as the *New York Herald-Tribune* and the *New Yorker*. In 1953 he was questioned about his politics by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Gropper was among the first American artists and intellectuals to be blacklisted by the senator. Although sympathetic to socialism and active in many leftist organizations, Gropper never joined the Communist Party and abhorred the violence of the Bolsheviks.

Although best known for his cartoons, satirical drawings, and illustrations, William Gropper was a successful painter and exhibited his work in several one-man shows. Over his fifty-year career Gropper concentrated on portraying the people of America as he saw them, not always kindly, but with “conviction, freedom, love and heartaches.”



Hugo Gellert
Coal Miner, 1926
 Cover of *New Masses*, May 1926

America



Glossary

WPA/Federal Art Project: During the Great Depression of the 1930s, a government agency that employed artists in a variety of media and on a wide range of projects.

The Great Depression affected artists in fundamental ways, just as it challenged all institutions in America. The “art for art’s sake” attitude of the 1920s had emphasized individual expression and development of new styles of art. In the 1930s, artists found themselves in a precarious position as their regular patrons disappeared and support for public art projects required art styles that the tax payers would approve. As the Depression exacerbated the economic inequalities in America, many artists turned to social and political issues as the focus of their work. These social commentators portrayed dust-bowl farmers, urban poverty, racial injustice, and hapless government officials. Some artists documented events, others made statements of protest, and others created intense and vehement personal expressions. William Gropper painted several murals for the **WPA/Federal Art Project** in the 1930s. Angered when the Senate eliminated these relief programs for artists, he responded with his painting, *The Opposition*.



Ben Shahn
Years of Dust, Resettlement Administration, 1937
 Photolithograph
 Franklin D. Roosevelt Library,
 National Archives and Records Administration
 MO 90-10

¹William Gropper, quoted in August L. Freundlich, *William Gropper: Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue (Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery of the University of Miami, and the Phoenix Art Museum, 1968), 13.

See also Roberta K. Tarbell, “William Gropper: The Opposition (1942),” in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 254–57.

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you where and when this is?

How does knowing the title, *The Opposition*, shape the meaning in this painting?

William Gropper wrote, "I have portrayed the type of representative that is opposed to progress and culture" (*Seeing America*, 256). How does the artist convey his feeling in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

William Gropper sketched the members of the Senate for many years and produced a number of prints and paintings. What elements and details of the prints can be found in the 1942 painting *The Opposition*? How would you describe Gropper's artistic style?



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The Opposition, 1942

Lithograph

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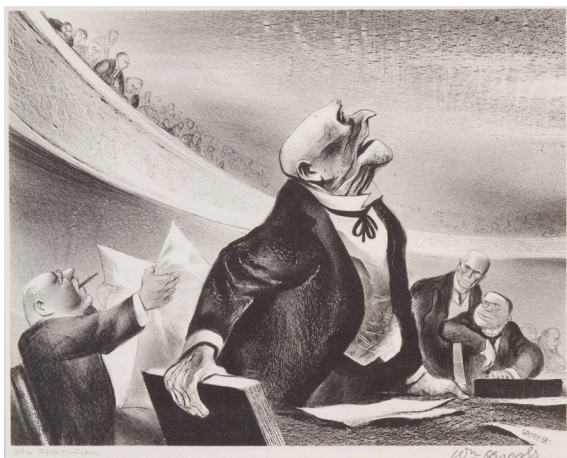
Courtesy of Heritage Gallery, CA

Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist and America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

Reading and Interpreting Visual Language/Comparing and Contrasting

William Gropper and Joseph Keppler continued a long American tradition of politically active artists. William Gropper's lithograph, *The Opposition*, was part of a series, "Sowers of the Senatorial Winds," published in *Vanity Fair* in the 1940s. Austrian-born Keppler (1838-1894) moved to America in 1867 and after drawing cover cartoons for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, he established the humorous weekly magazine *Puck* and drew all of its cartoons. Compare Gropper's choice of visual imagery in the lithograph with that of Joseph Keppler in his 1889 political cartoon, *The Bosses of the Senate*.



William Gropper (1897 – 1977)

The Opposition, 1942

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Joseph Keppler

The Bosses of the Senate, 1889

Colored lithograph

PUCK, January 23, 1889

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