63: William Gropper *The Opposition* (1942)

Roberta K. Tarbell

William Gropper's satirical interpretations of United States senators and other prominent political figures were memorable and inventive invectives.[1] In 1967, he recalled his first-hand experiences in Washington, D.C.:

> *A long time ago, I was assigned by Vanity Fair to cover the Senate. I stayed two or three weeks and painted the Senate as I saw it. I think the United States Senate is the best show in the world. If people saw it, they would know what their government is doing. The painting that I did [*The Senate, *1935] was rejected by every show I tried to get it into. Then it was brought back and the Museum of Modern Art had it and now it is in every show. I get bored, so I did one or two Senates, and now I will do a Senate only when a Senator makes a speech that makes me mad.*[2]

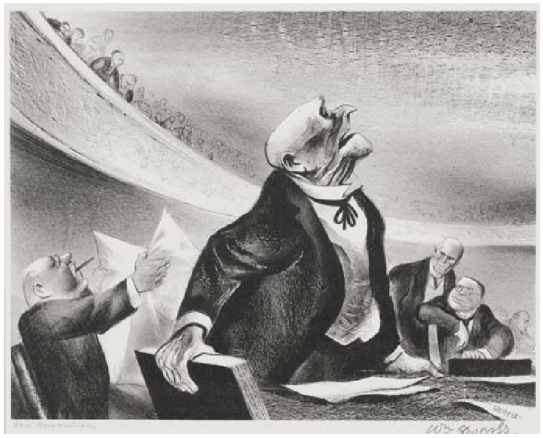
In 1934, Frank Crowninshield, editor of *Vanity Fair,* sent Gropper to the Senate to sketch legislators in action and printed the resulting caricatures as the "Sowers of the Senatorial Winds."[3] ("Those who agree with Disraeli that 'With words we govern men,'" Gropper wrote, "may take comfort, during this age of dictatorship, in the United States Senate, where phrases rather than deeds are still the rule."[4]) By1942, when he painted *The Opposition,* Gropper had exhibited and published dozens of drawings, paintings, prints, and cartoons of senators, and the descriptive portraits of 1934 had evolved to iconic anonymous caricatures—ancient orators, side-bar negotiators, recumbent dozers, and so on.

William Gropper,
1897–1977
The Opposition, 1942
Oil on canvas, 28 x 38 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
51.5
Courtesy of ACA Galleries,
New York

For thirty years, Gropper supported himself by executing—almost daily—political cartoons, satirical drawings, and illustrations, most of which pointed out how the burdens of global social dislocation were borne by the lower classes. As one of the most-traveled, best-informed, and most-published radical artists, Gropper clearly was not an isolationist or a regionalist. Nevertheless, his large Senate series, depicting a place shared by all citizens, contributed to the chauvinism and the nationalist spirit that dominated American art during the second quarter of the twentieth century. He filled his political cartoons with his passion for democratic and socialist solutions to world problems and created satirical images easily decoded by the average citizen. He joined international partisan and progressive organizations and journals while simultaneously staying aloof from the styles of the Eurocentric avant-garde in art.

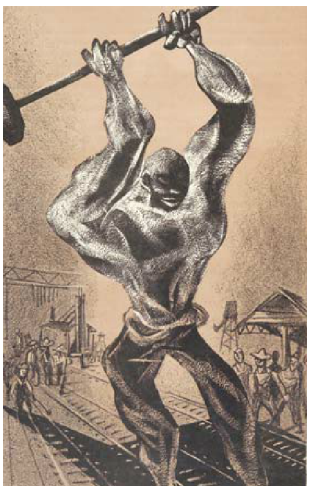
Born in a Lower East Side ghetto in 1897, William Gropper lived all of his life in New York City and its environs. He dropped out of high school because his Russian Jewish immigrant family needed his wages, but managed to study part time at the Ferrer School. His mentors there, realist painters Robert Henri and George Bellows, were philosophical anarchists more interested in individuals' freedom of expression than in the organized anarchist movement. They created art that was true to life, but not explicitly political. Although Gropper, like avowed socialist John Sloan, adopted the liberal, intellectual, and Marxist belief that art could induce political change, he did not embrace the revolutionary politics of the Russian Bolsheviks and never joined the Communist party.[5]

In 1917, *The New York Tribune* hired Gropper as a feature artist, and from 1918 to 1924 he was a regular contributor to *The Liberator,* successor to *The Masses,* the radical magazine that fearful federal officials had banned from the mails in 1917.[6] When *The New Masses* published its first issue in May 1926, Gropper was an executive board member and a contributor. He remained active in various leftist political organizations throughout his life, was one of the founders of the John Reed Club, and actively supported the purpose of the National Committee of the American Artists



William Gropper, 1897–1977
The Opposition, 1942
Lithograph, 12 1/4 x 17 in.
Gift of the Print Club of Rochester, by exchange, 89.59
Courtesy of ACA Galleries, New York

ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:
William Gropper, 1897–1977
John Henry, from the *American Folklore* portfolio, 1953
Color lithograph, 17 x 11 in.
Gift of Emille Allen, Nancy Buckett, Grant Holcomb, Robert Hursh, and Earl Kage in memory of Sylvan Cole, 2005.239.10
Courtesy of ACA Galleries, New York



Congress "to achieve unity of action among artists of recognized standing in their profession on all issues which concern their economic and cultural security and freedom, and to fight war, Fascism and reaction, destroyers of art and culture."[7]

Gropper often depicted victims of racism, war, economic depradations, and the hypocrisy of offending leaders. In 1937, for example, he dedicated his second, annual solo exhibition (at the ACA Gallery) of paintings of the protagonists in the Spanish Civil War to the defenders of democracy in Spain; the catalogue for the seventh ACA show in 1942, which included *The Opposition,* "was published for the benefit of the Russian War Relief."[8] Ten of the twenty-five paintings on view involved the European theater of war. For these, Gropper deliberately adopted the dark humor of Francisco de Goya and Honoré Daumier who, a century earlier, also courageously depicted war, death, and social injustice in politicized prints and paintings. All of them satirized men who abused power. Gropper was optimistic that his art could provoke social and political change.

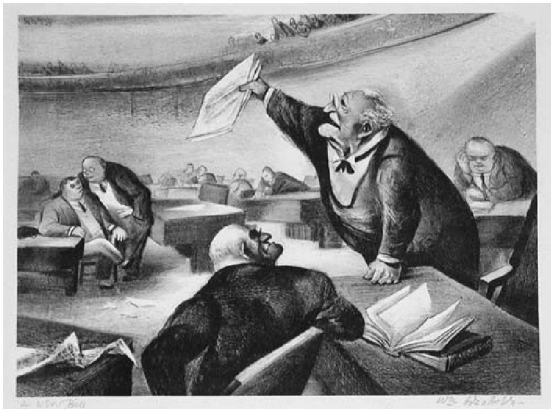
Gropper wrote about *The Opposition:*

> *I have portrayed the type of representative that is opposed to progress and culture. The U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives have had such an influence on American life, good and bad, that it has even affected the artist and the cultural development of our country. No matter how far removed from politics artists may be, it seems to strike home. Only recently one blasting speech of a reactionary representative resulted in not only doing away with the Section of Fine Art, but also dismissing the Graphic Division of the OWI [Office of War Information] and nullifying art reportage for the War Department.*[9]

Central to Senate debates in 1942, when Gropper painted *The Opposition,* was the demise of the largest-ever federal programs in support of the arts. Instead of concentrating on the pathos of the unemployed artists, Gropper chose to depict the well-fed, conservative legislators who imperiously decided to eliminate relief programs for artists. Although *The Opposition* at first appears to celebrate the importance to democracy of vigorous debate, one soon notices that most of the very few senators present in chambers are either asleep or inattentive. A Christian cross appears innocently as the mullions of a small medieval-style window (very little fresh light penetrates the darkened Senate), symbolizing Gropper's belief that organized religion was more political than beneficent. In 1934, Gropper had caricatured Senator McKellar haranguing with a paper in his lower, left hand and with his right fist raised and Huey Long energetically filibustering with both arms in the air. The unidentified, emaciated, and apparently senile ancient in *The Opposition* is neither of these vigorous polemical politicians.[10] (In 1949, Senator Guy M. Gillette from Iowa asked Gropper to identify the senator depicted in *Opposition;* unfortunately, we do not have Gropper's reply.[11])

Gropper's mastery of color and abstracted composition in such paintings as *The Senate* and *The Opposition* are unexpected. He usually drew in black and white, and although he had painted since 1920 he did not have a solo show of oil paintings until 1936. In *The Opposition,* Gropper juxtaposes the hard-edged segmental arch of burnt orange with the Prussian blue suits of the senators, setting into motion the visual vibrations of simultaneous contrast. He also skillfully establishes a modernist tension between interpenetrating geometric planes, biomorphic figures, and ambiguous space. Gropper's lithograph,

A New Bill (1940), and his painting and lithograph both entitled *The Opposition* (both 1942), demonstrate his habit of developing similar subjects and compositions in a series. In these three works (all in the collections of the Memorial Art Gallery), the sweeping horizontal curve of the Senate Gallery is bisected by a standing orating senator surrounded by his mostly disinterested colleagues. In the painting, Gropper retained relatively normal anatomical proportions of people to each other and to their ambient architecture. In the lithographs, however, he exaggerated the physiognomy and size of the senators—especially of the protagonist—in the manner of the superb political cartoonist that he was. In the graphic version of *The Opposition*, the artist moved away from representation toward caricature by delineating the aging bald and toothless orator with a hawk-like nose, deeply furrowed wrinkles, and an enormous arm that grips a heavy book. In the painting, *The Opposition*, and in *A New Bill* the speaker raises a less threatening sheaf of papers in his right hand, which intersects the flat segmental curve of the gallery positioned near the top of the pictorial space. In the print of *The Opposition*, the more pronounced curve of the balcony runs like a speeding train through the Senate chamber. This dynamic arc and the colossal proportions and exaggerations of the speaker loom over and dominate not only his smaller colleagues but the hall itself. By reducing the number of senators and increasing the empty space, Gropper amplified the visual and ideological impact.



William Gropper,
1897–1977
A New Bill, 1940
Lithograph,
13⅞ x 19⅜ in.
Gift of Betty Dennis Burt, Alfred Crimi and Sister Magdalen LaRow, by exchange, 96.31
Courtesy of ACA Galleries, New York

Gropper's Senate paintings and prints entered major museums and became familiar American icons. In 1949, because of the oppressive politics of the Cold War and the persecution of liberal artists by Senator McCarthy, Gropper ended his career as a regularly published political cartoonist and concentrated on further developing his paintings and prints, many with Senate iconography.[12]

Gropper's loyalty to the United States was challenged in 1949 by Congressman George Dondero and in 1953 by Joseph McCarthy's Senate Committee. In response, an angry Gropper drew *Capriccios*, a suite of fifty lithographs "inspired by the Caprichos of Goya who exposed the brutal inquisitions of his time."[13] In 1943, he had tried unsuccessfully to go abroad to see first hand the destruction of the war,[14] and in 1948 was a delegate to the international Congress of Intellectuals for Peace in Wroclaw, Poland, which Pablo Picasso and Paul Éluard also attended. Around this time Gropper had solo exhibitions in Paris, Moscow, and Prague, and he had frequent exhibitions at several galleries in New York and California. During the third quarter of the twentieth century, although realist art was in disfavor, Gropper's work sustained interest. His passionate messages ring true in our post-9/11 twenty-first century world:

> *There are moments in the course of our daily life when even the hardiest spirits are assailed by doubt, dismay, and despair as they watch what looks like an insane and precipitous march of mankind to collective suicide.*[15]

Informed by his keen intellect, Gropper communicated his anger at this state of affairs by the exaggerated stances and gestures and the fluid contour lines of his caricatures. Gropper is as important to the history of American cultural (especially political) identity, as he is to the history of art.

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