Art, 
Nationalism, 
Democracy, 
and Propaganda…
Some of the many ideas of American art between the World Wars…

American Art in the 1920s and 1930s was fully connected to the social and political context in which it was made. Artists were concerned with creating a truly American art, with integrating their artwork and political and social convictions, and with changing the role of the artist in society. They were also very concerned with surviving the Depression. Artists created propaganda, worked for the government, unionized and were in varying degrees politically and socially engaged. Some actively separated their art-making for money by creating illustrations, children’s books and other mass-market (even in a diminished market) publications while they published radical graphics in socialist magazines.

While for years this period of American art was considered un-important, it has recently been the subject of scholarly and popular recognition. More and more people are fascinated with the ways in which artists pictured the world they lived in, used their artwork for political purposes, and worked hard to create an art for everyman. The democratic urges of artists and government programs helped to create artwork which still holds power to communicate about art and history.

This history and this art have implications for your classroom.

- NYS Standards for Social Studies (Standards 1, 4, 5)
- This art is relevant to students lives and interests (visual learners and students with an interest in justice can be easily engaged).
- Reading the stories in art from this era helps students gain confidence in reading visual images and in understanding how (and why) artists speak to different audiences.
- Artwork created on federally funded art projects helps illuminate the rules and regulations of these programs and how America saw itself during Roosevelt’s New Deal era.
- These paintings and prints are fairly easily accessible primary sources which reward active looking and encourage critical reactions.

Rachael Baldanza

Memorial Art Gallery
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER
Support for the Gallery’s 2005-06 school programs is provided by Bank of America, Dominion, and the Mary W. Clark Trust. Additional support is provided by the Fred and Floy Willmott Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Judson Jr., the estate of Estelle B. Goldman and an anonymous donor for the McPherson Director of Education
Teaching American History Through American Art
Teacher In-Service
April 5, 2006

Presenter: Rachael Baldanza

Slides shown

View of The Armory Show, February 1913 New York City

Georgia O’Keeffe, City Night, 1926 oil/canvas. Collection of Minneapolis Institute of Art.

John Marin, Region of Brooklyn Bridge Fantasy, 1932. Watercolor on paper. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art. (hereafter referred to as WMAA because life is too short to type that much…)

Stuart Davis, Place pas de Loup, 1928 oil/ canvas. WMAA
Windshield mirror, 1928 oil on canvas. WMAA

John Steuart Curry, Baptism in Kansas, 1928. WMAA.

View of The Mural Show, March 1940 Rochester

Thomas Hart Benton, Self-Portrait, 1926 oil on canvas.
The Arts of Life in America: Speed, Unemployment, 1932 tempera and oil on wall
Both originally made for WMAA library wall

Ben Shahn, The Passion of Sacco & Vanzetti, 1931-32. Tempera on canvas. WMAA
Study for the Jersey Homestead Mural, c. 1936 tempera on board.

William Gropper, For the Record, 1936 lithograph

Jacob Lawrence, They arrived in Pittsburgh in large numbers…#45
One of the largest race riots…#52
Both from The Migration Series, 1940- 41, tempera paint on hardboard.

Coney Island Beach, etching

Peggy Bacon, The Bellows Class, 1918 drypoint etching. MAG collection.
Frenzied Effort, 1925 drypoint etching. MAG collection.

Mabel Dwight, Burlesque, 1933 lithograph.
The Children's Clinic #2, 1936 lithograph. MAG collection

Peggy Bacon, Aesthetic Pleasure 1936 etching. MAG collection
Some of the more obscure terms you may hear today…The Left

The Mexican Muralists: Diego Rivera, Clemente Orozco, etc. were famous for the success of mural paintings in Mexico, for strong socialist convictions, and for the scandal of the censored Rivera mural Man at the Crossroads at Radio City in Rockefeller Center. A number of young artists, including Ben Shahn, served as Rivera’s assistants at the time and were heavily influenced by his painting and his politics.

John Reed Clubs: the most radical of artists gathering spots, these clubs for artists, writers and cultural workers were funded by the Communist Party as part of the Popular Front initiative. John Reed clubs were held in many us cities and offered art classes for all, free of charge, including classes at the St. Louis chapter serving all children in the same de-segregated space. The JRCs were also responsible for a series of radical art shows aimed at presenting a people’s art.

The New Masses: was the re-incarnated version of The Masses, a radical paper which was active from 1911 to 1917, and edited by Max Eastman. The Masses featured drawings by John Sloan, Robert Minor and a few by Stuart Davis. The New Masses, was published between 1926 and 1948 and featured the writing and artwork of Max Eastman, Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson, Richard Wright, Ernest Hemingway, James Agee, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, Floyd Dell, Art Young, William Gropper, Albert Hirschfeld, Crockett Johnson, Carl Sandburg, Waldo Frank and Eugene O’Neill. By the mid 1930s the publication was essentially directed by Stalinist Russia. After the Hitler/Stalin pact of 1939, many writers and artists disassociated themselves with the publication.

http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/JmassesN.htm

Memorial Art Gallery
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

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Peggy Bacon, American (1895–1987)

Aesthetic Pleasure, 1936
Drypoint
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery

The only child of a pair of artists, Peggy Bacon apparently started drawing when young and never stopped. Although her parents discouraged her and in 1913 her own father committed suicide in his studio (sales and shows of his paintings had virtually stopped), Bacon at age 18 was determined to be an artist. She studied at a number of art schools and with the painter Jonas Lie, who set up her first solo show in his own studio. After working with Lie, she enrolled in classes at the Art Student’s League in New York, where she met a group of painters and printmakers many of whom also became leading artists of the day. While an art student, she began drawing caricatures of her fellow students and working with drypoint printmaking.

In 1920, she married fellow artist Alexander Brook with whom she had two children. She drew constantly and produced many prints which soon garnered her critical and popular success. She enjoyed writing and illustrating books and in 1927 Macmillan Press published the first of a series of children’s books, The Lion-Heated Kitten and Other Stories, based on the stories she told her own children.

Through the 1930s, Bacon continued to create witty prints which ridiculed the human condition or exaggerated the physical characteristics and foibles of well known artists, writers and politicians. In 1934, she was awarded a Guggenheim Artist’s Fellowship which allowed her to publish a book of caricatures of famous people, Off with Their Heads! In 1936, she began teaching at the Art Students League. Her books, illustrations, prints and teaching jobs were steady enough that when asked in a later interview how she was affected by the Depression, Bacon replied, “Not at all.”

![Self Portrait of Peggy Bacon, from Off With Their Heads! New York: Robert M. McBride, 1934. This print is in the Graphic Arts Division, Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr. Princeton University Library](http://infoshare1.princeton.edu/rbsc2/ga/unseenhands/printers/bacon.html)


2 As stated in Interview with Peggy Bacon conducted by Paul Cummings at the artist's home in Cape Porpoise, Maine, May 8, 1973 located in the Archives of American Art and available for download on its website at http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/bacon73.htm
**Thomas Hart Benton**, American (1889-1975)

*Boomtown*, 1927-1928  
oil on canvas  
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery

Thomas Hart Benton was the son of a prominent Missouri congressman. He developed an interest in art and as a young man went to Europe, dabbled in modern art, and became actively interested in socialism. In 1924, as he returned to his hometown to be with his father, Benton had an epiphany:

> I cannot honestly say what happened to me while I watched my father die and listened to the voices of his friends, but I know that when, after his death, I went back East I was moved by a great Desire to know more of the America which I had glimpsed in the suggestive words of his old cronies…¹

From 1926 to 1935, Benton taught classes at the Art Students League but he was increasingly more interested in the Middle West than in the New York art world. He took sketching trips across country to see the real country, including such spectacles as the boomtown of Borger, Texas and in 1928 this became his first major Regionalist painting. He defined his paintings by their American subject matter (folk stories, popular songs, and his own distinct reading of American history and culture) and by their ability to be read by ordinary people.

By the early 1930’s, Benton had developed his own style, his own politics, his own voice for the marketing of his paintings and populist ideas, and the attention of the public and some major players in the New York art world. He was hired to do a series of prominent murals, *The Arts of Life in America*, for the library of the new Whitney Museum of Art, which were exhibited at the New School of Social Research in New York City.

When a museum director criticized Benton for his murals he shot back:
> “If it were left to me, I wouldn’t have any museums… Who looks at paintings in a museum? I’d rather sell mine to saloons, bawdy houses, Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs, Chambers of Commerce…People go to saloons, but never to museums.”²

Benton was asked to participate in the Federal Art Projects but never finished his assignment, leaving instead to Kansas City in 1935 to become director of painting at the Kansas City Art Institute and to paint a set of murals in the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City.

After his own popularity faded, Benton became known as the Jackson Pollock’s teacher. In recent years, art historians have revisited the writings by and about Thomas Hart Benton with a greater interest in what they reveal about the America of this time.³

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As a young art student in Chicago, in 1916, John Curry wrote to his father back home in Kansas, “Mighty glad to get your letter telling me about the farm. But I believe I would rather draw a picture of myself shoveling manure than do it…I’m mighty thankful to you for sending me. I don’t know when I can make art pay.”¹ Ten years later, Curry was still trying to be an artist, as he summarized his education:

- Came to New York to be an illustrator. Was not a brilliant success. Went to Paris and learned something from M. Schoukhaiff of the Russian Academy. Learned something, also, from the Louvre and have been trying since to carry out my ideas of how an American should paint. ²

In 1928, Curry painted *Baptism in Kansas*, a work which, while painted in the northeast, caught the attention of critics and was purchased by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney who was in the business of supporting artists she believed in. Whitney gave Curry a studio and a monthly stipend of $200. When the Whitney Museum of American Art was opened on November 18, 1931 the New York Times announcement showed Whitney standing next to *Baptism in Kansas* and the influential critic reminded readers that Curry’s work “is deeply and unmistakably American.”³

With Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton he was famous throughout the thirties as a Regionalist, or as America understood, Curry was the “Kansas farm boy turned great American painter.” While popular in New York and publicized in *Time* and *Life*, Curry’s work was not well-loved in Kansas.

Curry was the first artist-in-residence at an American university when he was hired by the University of Wisconsin, Madison, to bring art and the creative spirit to the largely agrarian college. His contract included housing and the princely sum of $4,000 a year and stated:

- Mr. Curry will teach no formal classes. He will, instead, mingle with the students, discuss art and its relation to society with them at round table meetings, and will drop in at regular classes for special comments. ⁴

In 1937, Curry was asked to paint a series of murals in the Kansas Statehouse. His imagery so angered Kansas politicians and citizens it was not installed. The commission was cancelled and Curry never signed the finished panels⁵.

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² Junker, p. 216.
⁵ More about the Kansas murals and their controversy is noted on this webpage from the Kansas Historical Society. http://www.kshs.org/cool2/curry.htm
**Stuart Davis** American (1894-1964)

*Landscape with Garage Lights*, 1931-1932

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery

Stuart Davis’ father was the art editor for the *Philadelphia Press* and his mother was a sculptor, so when at age 15 he started taking art classes from Robert Henri he wished to make the quick, honest drawings Henri, his father, and John Sloan espoused. Davis’ drawings were published by the radical leftist magazine, *The Masses*, and *Harper’s Weekly*. He started spending summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts along with a community of artists, developing his art, his writing, and finding his own distinctly modern voice. In the 1920’s, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney became a patron, providing him with a monthly stipend, and $900 to go to France.¹

As a painter, Davis refused to characterize his paintings as abstract, although everyone else did. He also carefully avoided overt references to his politics in his paintings, preferring instead to paint his American realism influenced by:

> “American wood and iron work of the past; Civil War and skyscraper architecture; the brilliant colors on gasoline stations, chain-store fronts, and taxicabs; the music of Bach; synthetic chemistry; the poetry of Rimbaud; fast travel by train, auto, and aeroplane which brought new and multiple perspectives; electric signs, the landscape and boats of Gloucester, Mass; 5 & 10 cent store kitchen utensils; movies and radio; Earl Hines hot piano and Negro jazz music in general…”²

During the depression and New Deal years, Davis became a radical activist for artists, helping to organize the American Artist’s Union, editing that union’s magazine, *Art Front*, and serving as secretary for the American Artists Congress which first met in 1936. Where a few years earlier, Davis was collecting checks from Ms. Whitney, now he led artists in the Union on protests at her new museum.

Among the most publicized skirmishes in the art press of the 1930s was a fight in the form of letters and essays between Davis and Thomas Hart Benton; both men loathed each other’s art and both were heavily invested in creating an American art.

After 1940, Davis broke with the radical left. He continued to paint, to listen to jazz, and to create his own authentic American art.

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¹ Stuart Davis was quoted, “I guess she was sorry for me because I was about the only one in the Whitney Studio Club who hadn’t been to France and she thought it would be good for me. I didn’t ask her for the money but I accepted it gratefully and was on the next boat over,” in Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers in association with the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1996. p. 80

Mabel Dwight, American (1875 – 1955)
*The Children's Clinic*, 1936.
lithograph on stone
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery

When Mabel Dwight was still Mabel Williamson, she had a revelation:

> When I was a very young woman and an art student in San Francisco, some fellow students introduced me to socialism. The encounter was similar to “getting religion.” My fervor shocked and alarmed my parents to such an extent that I was forced to go “underground” with my social ideas. This, of course, made the heat whiter. Art, too, I thought, must be an heroic comrade. This period of my life at least gave a definite bent to my later thought, and the reading done then directed my natural impulses. ¹

She moved to New York to be an artist, married a fellow socialist and artist, divorced him a few years later, and began developing her own art again. By 1925, she was working as a secretary at the Whitney Studio Club while also drawing in evening sketch sessions there with artists. In 1926, she went to Paris to learn the process of lithography and began producing prints based on her observations of daily life. On her return to New York, Dwight’s drawings and lithographs were critically praised for their skill, keen observation, and humor. Her work was published in *Vanity Fair*, and she showed (and sold work) with the Weyhe print gallery. Dwight’s prints used mild satire and depicted an interest in groups of people observed or observing (in zoos, looking into store windows, in movie theaters).

But prints (even good ones) stopped selling in the early years of the Depression and by 1933, according to her close friend Carl Zigrosser, she was, “in ill-health, financially down and out, discouraged in her art and life.” Zigrosser also noted that Dwight was more involved than ever in radical causes; she became a member of the Artist’s Union, was involved with the John Reed Clubs and actively concerned with national and international politics.

On December 31, 1933, she was hired for the temporary Public Works of Art Federal Art Project for a weekly salary of $34.² From September 1935 to August 1939, Dwight was employed by the Graphic Arts Division of New York City, Federal Art Project, and even though she suffering from health problems and had difficulty signing in every morning, Dwight printed editions of over 25 lithographs.

While making general interest prints for the federal projects and prints for The American Artists Group, Dwight also made politically charged prints which were reproduced in *The New Masses*. She was as ever committed to social justice as she was to her art.

² Robinson and Pirog, p. 29-31.
The Art:
Gropper wrote “…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

The Opposition appears at first glance to celebrate the vitality of democracy, a vigorous Senator passionately presenting his legislation, the significance of opposition in the democratic process. The senator dominates the space, his raised and gesturing right hand bisecting the dynamic diagonal curve of the gallery balcony. His torso, arm and chin thrust forward and he towers over the other members. Energy and vitality are also conveyed in the sweep of the balcony, the juxtaposition of the geometric shapes with the biomorphic forms, and the color contrast of blue suits against the burnt orange of the wood. Does Gropper mean to suggest Christian crosses or mullions in medieval style windows of the chamber; is this a holy place?

But closer examination reveals the orator’s audience is either asleep or inattentive. The exaggerated shapes of the bald head, the eyes obscured by sunglasses, the too shiny iridescent blue-purple of the suits, and the conspiratorial pose of the two huddling senators all suggest Gropper’s feeling (heartaches?) about the state of the American Senate.

Art historians are attempting to identify the individual senators portrayed in Gropper’s paintings. This painting is based on sketches he did from 1934-1942, as are two lithographs in the MAG collection (http://magart.rochester.edu/PRT899*1.htm).

The Artist:
William 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 feature artist at the New York Tribune and later for several radical magazines.

William Gropper's social consciousness grew out of his impoverished childhood and his work as a teenager in the garment district sweatshops. A 1927-28 visit to Soviet Russia with Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis reinforced his commitment to exposing social injustice and class inequality through his art. Gropper was active in leftist organizations but never joined the communist party. He believed art could induce political change in a democratic society and his

satiric caricatures of America's wealthy and powerful politicians and captains of industry were meant to educate the American people.

Gropper wrote "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" Socially conscious artists deliberately selected the medium of lithography because images could be produced cheaply enough that people could afford to buy them. His lithographs appeared in New Masses and Freiheit as well as the New York Herald-Tribune and the New Yorker. In 1953 he was called to testify before the Senate as part of Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist campaign.

For 30 years Gropper made a successful career producing cartoons, satirical drawings and illustrations. He had several one-man shows of his drawings as well as oil paintings.

**America:**
The Depression affected artists in fundamental ways, just as it challenged other institutions in America. The “art for art’s sake” attitude of the 1920s had seen focus on individual expression and developing 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 approved. 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, 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 Federal Arts Project in the 1930s; angered when the Senate eliminated relief programs for artists, he responded with his painting, *The Opposition.*

---

What can you learn by carefully looking at The Opposition?

- What is going on in the painting?
- Describe the features of the room and of the men in the room.
- Can you figure out when and where this scene is taking place?
- How does William Gropper create a sense of intensity?
- Is this a painting of a real event? Are these real – and identifiable – individuals?
  Why would Gropper paint them in such a distorted way?
  What features or qualities is Gropper emphasizing?
- What do you think is Groper’s message to the viewer?
  How effective is his technique of caricaturing the individuals in telling his story?
- Why do artists make art? What is the purpose of a painting?
- Why would someone buy this painting?

Ideas for Discussion and Activities:

Context:

- What is the role of "the opposition" in a democratic political system?
- What issues were before the Senate in 1940-1942?
- Who were the dominant Senators during that time?
- 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 and nullifying art reportage for the War Department. (Quoted in Grace Pagano, The Encyclopaedia Britannica Collection of Contemporary American Painting, Chicago, 1946)
  Research the history of federal funding, censorship and utilization of the arts in the United States.

Point of view:

- What meaning is Gropper giving to the concept of opposition in a democracy?
- What is caricature and what is its purpose?
- How successful is Gropper's portrayal of the Senate and Senators as caricature?
- What is Gropper's view of the Senate and what details tell you that?
- Compare The Opposition with other cartoons by William Gropper at http://www.a-r-t.com/gropper

Artist as social critic:

- Research other politically conscious artists such as Honoré Daumier, Ben Shahn or Diego Rivera.
- Research the history of caricature, a form of art, usually portraiture, in which the characteristics are distorted or exaggerated for comic effect. Compare caricature with cartoon, a humorous drawing or parody. Look up the work and careers of Thomas Nast and Gary Trudeau.
- How would it be possible for a caricature or political cartoon to be "un-American?"
- Collect and discuss political cartoons and caricatures from current and recent political elections.
Art as communication: role of the lithograph

- Who would commission and buy lithographs such as these?
- How did politicians and their critics convey their messages to the public in an age before TV?
- Compare the role of the muckraker or photographer with that of the caricaturist.
- Compare the two prints with the oil painting.
  - What changes has Gropper made?
  - What is the difference in effect of the two media?

These 2 lithographs from 1940 and 1942 are part of a series, "Sowers of the Senatorial Winds," begun in 1934 when William Gropper began "covering" the United States Senate for Vanity Fair. In the text accompanying his drawing, Gropper observed that the "windy" Senators produced "phrases rather than deeds." Images from these prints were incorporated into an oil painting, The *Opposition*, completed in 1942.

*The Opposition*, 1942
http://magart.rochester.edu/Obj1714
Lithograph
William Gropper (1897-1977)

*A New Bill*, 1940
http://magart.rochester.edu/Obj3943
Lithograph
William Gropper (1897-1977)
William Gropper, American (1897 – 1977)
The Opposition, 1942
oil on canvas
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery

As a child William Gropper lived in poverty in a New York Tenement house, while his mother worked as a seamstress and his over-educated father had trouble finding and keeping a job. At 15, the young artist left high school and began working in the factory, 6 days a week for 12 hours a day. Somehow Gropper managed to get art lessons at the Ferrer School with Robert Henri and George Bellows which fueled his passion to draw and reinforced his interest in the working people of the city as his subject matter. Gropper said “…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.”

He worked his way up to a public job in a clothing store frequented by a number of well known artists and illustration editors, including Frank Parsons, head of the School of Applied Art who, after seeing Gropper’s drawings, offered him a scholarship for part-time study at his school (allowing for Gropper to continue working). More training and more drawing led him to jobs in illustration including the one that changed his life.

The oft-told story of his conversion to the radical left came when he was an illustrator for the New York Tribune and was sent with a writer to cover the International Workers of the World, the Wobblies. Rather than satire the I.W.W, as his editors would hope, Gropper and his writer joined them.

Drawing was his escape out of the life of the worker but the fact that he’d been a worker was a special credential for his drawings. Gropper went to Russia in 1926 along with Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser as guests of the Soviet Union.

For years, Gropper contributed weekly drawings to The New Masses and Freiheit, as well as the New Freeman and the Liberator. His political cartoons for these publications were simplified and direct, showing oversized, heavily muscled workers and diminished weak bosses, or the growing international threat of fascism. He very much saw his work as propaganda and saw no fault in drawing with an aim to convert others to the cause as he had been converted. At the same time, his drawings for the mainstream press such as the drawings of Congress for Vanity Fair were more subtle and actually brought him a paycheck.

In 1936 he showed his paintings for the first time. The general and art public knew Gropper only for his black and white published and print work, his paintings were praised for their use of color, their dynamic effects and their passion.

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2 Ibid. p. 13.
3 The website www.gropper.com is a commercially created site for the sale of paintings by William Gropper but it is factually accurate and contains color images.
Reginald Marsh, American (1898–1954)

Ice Cream Cones, 1939
egg tempera on composition board
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery

The son of artists Reginald Marsh worked as an illustrator and as an artist. He studied art at Yale, and at the Art Students league in New York (where he took classes from John Sloan and Kenneth Hayes Miller). Marsh also worked as a scene painter in his youth.

He developed a style of drawing and painting reliant on his quick, keen observations of people in ordinary (walking the streets, riding the subway trains, eating ice cream cones on the boardwalk) and extraordinarily crowded situations (burlesque theaters, dance halls, and even breadlines). Marsh carried a sketchbook with him wherever he went and was a regular illustrator for a number of prominent New York magazines including the New Yorker. His images of the unemployed in the 1930s were made and seen less as political propaganda and more as first hand witness. A successful illustrator, Marsh was never really out of work, and he was always drawing what he saw.

Reginald Marsh
Bread Line -- No One Has Starved 1932,
etching, 6 3/8 x 12, signed; ed. 89/100 1969
UAM 1992.129
http://www.uam.ucsb.edu/Pages/trevey/representing-america/4x5/marsh-bread-4x5.html

In 1936, Marsh was asked by Olin Dows, administrator of The Section of Fine Arts division of the Treasury, a federal art project which hired artists without regard to their economic hardship, to paint 16 frescoes in the rotunda of the U.S. Customs House in New York. Marsh wrote, “I feel very proud that the honor to paint these walls has fallen to me…Here is a chance to paint contemporary shipping with a rich and real power neither like the storytelling or propagandist painting which everybody does. I have in the past painted dozens of watercolors around N.Y. harbor, and would like to get at it with some of this knowledge.”

### Teaching American History Through American Art
#### The Politically Aware Artist—Art Between the Wars
#### April 5, 2006

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The Politically Aware Artist  
Reinstating the Federal Art Projects  

Imagine: The Treasury Department with complete funding from the federal government has decided to re-instate the Federal Art Projects whose purpose was to employ out of work artists to record the American Scene and contribute to American culture with lasting creative projects. As part of this FAP project your group will be funded to either:

1. Create a public mural on a prominent wall in a public building that commemorates something of regional historical significance and contemporary relevance.

OR

2. Document some significant cultural, historical, or social thing in some interesting public way.

Spend a few minutes brainstorming, drawing, and writing up a rough first version of your idea. Consider:

What is the theme of your artwork?
What form will it take?
What will each participant’s role be in the production?
What considerations will you take to insure the community accepts your project?

Memorial Art Gallery  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

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Books:

*American Art: History and Culture*
Excellent survey written for older readers

*The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930’s*

*Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*

*For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars*
Excellent resource by a local scholar.

*The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*

*Metropolitan Lives: the Ashcan Artists and their New York*
Although focused on artists working earlier in the 20th century, Metropolitan Lives is an excellent resource for the art and culture, social and political activism of American artists.

*New Deal for Art: the Government Art Projects of the 1930’s with Examples from New York City & State*

*The New Deal for Artists*

*Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York*

*Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*

*Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-office Murals in the Great Depression*

*Using INTERNET Primary Sources to Teach Critical Thinking Skills in Visual Arts*

Videocassettes:

*Against the Odds: Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*

*Artists at Work: a Film on the New Deal Art Project*
Websites:

Life of the People: Realist Prints and Drawings from the Ben and Beatrice Goldstein Collection, 1912-1948
(http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/goldstein/)
The Library of Congress website features a web exhibition whose themes include Art of the People, The Radial Impulse (which explains and demonstrates the attraction of and strength of Socialist and leftist politics on a variety of artists working at this time), and Capital and Labor (which nicely surveys artists images of work). An excellent bibliography is also given.

Memorial Art Gallery
http://magart.rochester.edu/PRT893
These political drawings and prints were exhibited in the show, If Elected, I Will Serve, in the fall of 2004 at the Memorial Art Gallery.

The New Deal Network
(http://newdeal.feri.org/default.cfm)
This website is a project of the Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Institute (4079 Albany Post Road, Hyde Park, NY 12538). The site contains excellent resources for students and teachers to explore New Deal projects including but not limited to the WPA. Included on the site is a high school lesson plan, The Great Depression and the Arts. http://newdeal.feri.org/nchs/index.htm

Representing America: The Ken Trevey Collection of American Realist Prints
http://www.uam.ucsb.edu/Pages/trevey/index.html
This exhibition of American prints in the 1930s and 40s was organized by University Art Museum, at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Based on an exhibit in 1995, the web-based version includes work by Peggy Bacon, Reginald Marsh, Thomas Hart Benton and many others.

Smithsonian Archives of American Art
http://www.aaa.si.edu
This site includes 16 million letters, photographs, diaries, sketches, scrapbooks, business records, and other documentation that support the study of the history of the visual arts in America.

*Available in the Teacher Resource Center, Memorial Art Gallery

Memorial Art Gallery
Support for the Gallery’s 2005-06 school programs is provided by Bank of America, Dominion, and the Mary W. Clark Trust. Additional support is provided by the Fred and Floy Willmott Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Judson Jr., the estate of Estelle B. Goldman and an anonymous donor for the McPherson Director of Education.