William Gropper
American, 1897-1977
The Opposition, 1942
Oil on Canvas

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.”

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

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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.*

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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.  

  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](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/PRT899*1.htm
Lithograph
William Gropper (1897-1977)

*A New Bill*, 1940
http://magart.rochester.edu/PRT899*1.htm
Lithograph
William Gropper (1897-1977)
William Gropper
*The Opposition, 1942*

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