

The Opposition

The Opposition, 1942

Lithograph

William Gropper (1897-1977)



A New Bill, 1940

Lithograph

William Gropper (1897-1977)



For other Political Images in the Gallery's collection, see

http://magart.rochester.edu/PRT893*1.htm.

What can you learn by carefully looking at these lithographs?

- What is going on in these prints?
- Describe the features of the room and of the men in the room.
- What features has the artist left out of these prints?
- Describe the effect on the viewer.
- How does the artist create a sense of intensity?

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.

William Gropper's social consciousness grew out of his impoverished childhood in New York City 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 the *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.

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*, which can be seen at the Memorial Art Gallery. (<http://magart.rochester.edu/Obj418.htm>)



Discussion/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*)

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>

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?

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 the 2004 political election.