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**THE ART AND ACTIVISM OF HUGO GELLERT:
EMBRACING THE SPECTER OF COMMUNISM**

by

James Wechsler

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of
New York**

2003

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

THE ART AND ACTIVISM OF HUGO GELLERT: EMBRACING THE SPECTER OF COMMUNISM

JAMES WECHSLER

City University of New York, 2003

Advisors: Dr. Katherine Manthorne, Dr. Marlene Park (retired)

Born Hugo Grünbaum in Budapest, Hungary, Hugo Gellert (1892-1985) became an extraordinarily influential figure in American art of the early twentieth century. Graphic artist, muralist, and painter, Gellert not only produced a vital, socially engaged body of work, but he also founded and occupied crucial positions in many of the important artists' organizations, which propelled American artists to a less isolated place in society during the Depression years. His most significant contribution to the development of art in America was his conviction that artists should organize and work together, not only for their ideals, but also for their own survival.

Gellert was perhaps the most active, outspoken and unapologetic American Communist artist of the twentieth century. His unrepentant, orthodox devotion to the Communist Party is one reason his reputation has suffered. Since Marxism is a product of modernist thought, the intersection of radical political theory and modern art should not be disjoined, but rather, examined as an important aspect of the twentieth century intellectual condition. Perhaps more than any other

American artist of his generation Gellert is suited for this analysis. He himself strongly disavowed any distinction between his art and his life declaring, "being an artist and being a Communist are but two cheeks of the same face, and I fail to see how I can be one without also being the other one."¹ This dissertation analyzes Gellert's artistic production in relationship to Communist Party policies.

"The Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert: Embracing the Specter of Communism," is the first monograph of this central, yet long neglected early twentieth century American artist. It traces the development of Gellert's artistic and political concerns from the 1910s through the 1940s. Because his life and art interfaced with so many significant developments in the social, political, and intellectual histories of this country, this study places Gellert in context of these related disciplines.

¹ Hugo Gellert, "The Role of the Communist Artist," draft of a speech, c. 1942-44. Gellert papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, box 3.

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Hugo Gellert, poster for Jores Ivers' *Peace Will Win*, 1951

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Hugo Gellert, *Louis Weinstock's Story*, pamphlet cover, c. 1951

5.11

Hugo Gellert, Stalin, *Masses and Mainstream* cover, April 1953

INTRODUCTION

Best known for his fiercely trenchant prints and drawings of the 1930s, Hungarian-American artist Hugo Gellert (1892-1985) was an extraordinarily influential figure in American art of the early twentieth century. Gellert was extremely prolific artistically, and notoriously active politically. Yet his importance did not involve stylistic innovations. Nor was it based on the introduction of a distinctive kind of subject matter. Gellert's most significant contribution to the development of art in America was his conviction that artists should organize and work together, not only for their ideals, but also for their own survival.

Gellert was a founding member of virtually all the important artists' organizations of the 1930s, including the John Reed Club, the Artists' Committee of Action, the Artists' Union, the American Artists' Congress, the Mural Artists' Guild, and the Artists' Coordination Committee. In addition he was a contributing artist to the radical journals *The Masses* and *The Liberator*, and a co-founder and editor of *New Masses* and *Art Front*. Consequently, Gellert served as an extremely important link between the relatively obscure politically radical artists' groups of the 1910s and 1920s, and the greater movement towards socially concerned art of the 1930s. But, even after social and political realism ceased to be a significant movement, the spirit of collectivity among artists, and the notion of the empowered artist that characterized the post-war American

avant-garde, can be traced to the artist organizations of the 1930s that Gellert helped establish. As a committed Communist who did not break with the Party, Gellert considered Abstract Expressionism to be at best purposeless, and at worst, the end result of a systematic campaign against political activism in the visual arts by an alliance of capitalist, governmental, and cultural institutions. He had hoped an organized, powerful union of artists would one day operate in a society free of a patron class, one which instead would be run by committees of honest working men and women.

Gellert made no secret of his politics. Without a doubt, he was one of the most active, outspoken, and unapologetic American Communist artists of the twentieth century. Moreover, he considered his art and his activism to be inseparable. As a result, his relationship to the American Communist Party (CPUSA) has overshadowed his art. This is not necessarily an inaccurate perception. For most of his career, Gellert's art was a reflection of Communist policies. However, in the late 1910s and 1920s, before the Party attempted to develop a more or less cohesive position on art, Gellert experimented with different forms of modernism. Though he criticized his early work as decorative and indulgent, it is not entirely apolitical. As early as 1916 Gellert addressed the theme he would continue to explore throughout his life, namely that the ruling classes profit through exploitation of the working class, and the working class can put an end to this system through organized action. By the same token, Gellert's later militant, overtly propagandistic work was not a repudiation of modernism. After all, Communism was an aspect of early twentieth century modern western thought as much as psychoanalysis, for example, or existentialism was. But, since Communism has been

taboo in American society for so long, it is often overlooked, or readily dismissed as an unimportant, or dangerous misstep in our culture's progress.

This is not the case in many other countries. Mexico, for instance, reveres its Party-affiliated artists of the early twentieth century. The government provides funds for conservation, extensive exhibitions, and publications domestically and abroad. Similarly, the Marx Memorial Library in London recently received a British National Heritage Lottery Fund grant to catalogue and reshelv its collection of Communist books and pamphlets. Yet, New York's Reference Center for Marxist Studies desperately needs funding for proper storage and conservation of similarly important archival material in danger of deterioration. Traditionally, major cultural institutions in the United States have accepted foreign artists who were committed to the Communist Party, such as John Heartfield (1891-1968), George Grosz (1893-1959), and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), who was a Party member from 1944 until his death in 1973. Yet, without a doubt, this was an aspect of their work that was not emphasized. Even more rare, are examinations of the work of American Party members. This practice presents a skewed, incomplete picture of a movement that was international. Communists did not work in isolation. American artists were in dialogue with Party-affiliated art organizations throughout the world.

Gellert's development as an artist was greatly affected by these exchanges. His work for the American, Hungarian language press put him in contact with the graphic art and literary experiments of the Hungarian avant-garde. In the early 1920s he was among the

first American artists to incorporate the formal and theoretical innovations of Russian constructivism. At the same time he absorbed the impact of Mexican muralism. He combined these sources with elements of cubism, precisionism, political broadside, and caricature to produce an oeuvre, which included five important murals in New York City (three and a half of which are lost),¹ over 150 original prints, and thousands of drawings in the radical and the mainstream press.

Since Gellert's life and art directly interfaced with so many significant developments of the social, political, intellectual, and art histories of the United States, an in-depth study of his artistic production and political activism from 1915-1945 (a period which saw the rise and demise of a movement towards socially engaged art in America) is a significant contribution to scholarship in a number of disciplines. The following study explores the historical moments in which Gellert participated, and locates his art within the social and political contexts of its time. Proceeding chronologically, I organized my research into four main sections. Within each of these I discuss the significant historical events that directly affected Gellert's development as an artist, and elaborate on Gellert's reaction to and participation in these events.

The first chapter, "From Budapest to Bohemia," explores the social conditions that

¹ These lost murals include the 1928 mural in Workers Cooperative Cafeteria, 30 Union Square, the 1932 mural in The Center Theater lobby, Rockefeller Center, 1236 6th Avenue of the Americas, the 1939 mural in the Communications Building, New York World's Fair, and two of the four panels of the 1946 *Four Freedoms* mural for the Hotel and Restaurant Union. The two panels that are lost are *Freedom of Worship* and *Freedom From Want*. The two that have been preserved, *Freedom of Speech* and *Freedom From Fear* are in the Tamiment Institute Library, New York University. Gellert's only New York mural that survives *in situ* is the 1959 cycle in the four lobbies of the Seward Park Houses at Grand Street and East Broadway in the Lower East Side.

impacted Gellert's childhood in turn-of-the-century Budapest, and the factors that led his father to move to New York in 1905, and send for the rest of the family in 1906. Gellert's traditional education at the conservative National Academy of Design is analyzed and contrasted with the graphic art inspired by the Viennese Secession and Hungarian modernism he began to produce during the late teens. This section includes with an extensive examination of Gellert's growing opposition to the World War, his subsequent involvement with the American leftist press including the socialist, Hungarian language weekly *Előre Képes Folyóirat* (Forward Weekly magazine), and especially the Greenwich Village cultural journals *The Masses* and *The Liberator*. Finally chapter one ends with the traumatic loss of his younger brother, Ernest, while in military confinement as a conscientious objector to the war, and Gellert's subsequent flight to Mexico.

Chapter two, "Communist Modernism," explores Gellert's association with socialist and anarchist groups and his subsequent commitment to the American Communist Party (CPUSA). He and the artists and writers of his circle were aware of Soviet cultural and political debates and they looked towards Soviet models to develop an American culture of revolution. "Communist Modernism" explores the internationalism of the Communist movement in the early 1920s and the American interpretation of Soviet ideas such as proletkult (proletarian culture) and constructivism in the visual arts and theater.

Geometric factory-scapes, Mayakovsky-like futurist poetry, and constructivist graphics appeared in the pages of the journal *New Masses*, which Gellert co-edited. At this time, Gellert himself experimented with typographical word pictures, photomontage, and abstract theater design. This period reached a high point for Gellert with his visit to

Moscow in 1927-28 for the tenth Anniversary of the Russian Revolution. There he formed important relationships with several Russian and Hungarian artists, poets, and critics. The chapter concludes with Gellert's subsequent completion of his groundbreaking, modernist mural in the Workers' Cooperative Cafeteria on Union Square in 1928.

With Josef Stalin's consolidation of power in 1928 following a four-year battle with his rival Leon Trotsky, the Soviet influence on American Communist artists assumed a different tone. The third chapter, "Militancy," explores this shift. Though American artists did not put into practice the Stalinist, nineteenth-century style, Socialist Realism that subsumed the more modernist approaches in the Soviet Union, as art editor of *New Masses* Gellert did help steer the journal to the Communist Party line. At the same time, he led one of the first anti-fascist groups in the United States, The Anti-Horthy League, which protested the Hungarian dictator's brutal suppression of dissent. Furthermore, in late 1929 Gellert and many of his *New Masses* comrades formed John Reed Clubs, associations committed to defining and enacting communist culture. In his criticism, his actions and his ambitious projects—such as the 1932 60-lithograph portfolio of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*—Gellert reiterated the militant Communist Party policies. "Militancy" explores in detail Gellert's second trip to the Soviet Union and Europe in 1932, and his position on propaganda in modern art.

The fourth chapter examines the Popular Front period. With the rise of fascism in Europe the official Communist attitude changed from the uncompromising militant

position to one that embraced other groups and individuals of the liberal left. In the United States, where Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs to combat the Depression were already being implemented, this policy of leftist cooperation generated an unprecedented period of cultural growth. Gellert's elaborate lithographic projects, mural proposals and commissions, published graphics, writings and editorial policies reveal ambivalence at first, then acceptance of the Popular Front strategy. Soon Gellert emerged as a significant figure in American art. He was a founder member of—and held key positions in—the artist organizations that defined the era, such as the Artists' Union, the American Artists' Congress, and Artists' Coordination Committee, which had an enormous effect on the art events of the 1939 New York World's Fair. Following the 1939 Soviet-Nazi Non Aggression Pact the Popular Front disintegrated and the left split once more into non-cooperating factions. At this time the New Deal projects lost its federal funding. These two events effectively brought an end to the vital Popular Front period.

My study concludes with the World War Two period and subsequent Cold War. After the Pearl Harbor attack, Gellert co-founded Artists for Victory, an umbrella organization that united diverse artist groups in support of the war effort. However, in the radically changing post-war art world Gellert and his comrades became increasingly isolated. With the persecution of the left following the War, Gellert helped form a cooperative gallery to show the work of blackballed artists. As McCarthyism gained momentum, Gellert and his wife, Livia, left the country for her native Australia. During this absence, a number of his murals were demolished. Upon his return Gellert devoted himself to the

Communist press and Communist activities. He endured decades of FBI investigations, which finally subsided in the mid 1970s.

The anti-Communism of the United States Government is one reason why Gellert's position in the art world eventually slipped from notoriety to obscurity. Another reason can be attributed to ideological clashes among the left. Gellert's uncritical support of the Communist Party, particularly during the Stalin period, taints his reputation among many liberal leftists. I do not share many of Gellert's beliefs, but I do not find them especially difficult to understand. He saw the Communist Party as the only viable means to empower the disenfranchised classes. Rather than expect immediate results, Gellert set his sights on the long-term goals. His confidence was not shaken during troubled times. I believe that Gellert did not consider Communist leaders infallible, but, since he saw the Party as the underdog surrounded by enemies, speaking out against the Party would have weakened its ability to function.

This study of Gellert's life is the culmination of many years of detective work. Because Gellert's contribution has been consigned to the fringes of the American canon, much of this material had to be excavated from many disparate locations. I conducted research in archives, libraries, and collections in Budapest, Mexico City, and London, as well as in numerous cities across the United States. Although throughout his career Gellert strove to communicate with an audience outside of the traditionally affluent, or intellectual classes, ironically he is known today primarily to a relatively small group of specialists, curators, academics, art dealers, and collectors. I hope that my work will

contribute to the process of broadening the interest in this controversial artist who, in many ways, expands our understanding of a complex and compelling period in American culture.

CHAPTER ONE FROM BUDAPEST TO BOHEMIA

Hugo Gellert was born Hugo Grünbaum¹ on May 3, 1892, the eldest child of tailor Adolf Grünbaum (1862-1939) and Katicza (Schwartz) Grünbaum (1868-1954) (figs. 1.1-1.2). The Grünbaums, a working class Jewish family, lived at Magyar utca (street) 25, in the Jewish, industrial neighborhood of Újpest, (New Pest, since 1950 the Fourth District) on the outskirts of Budapest, Hungary.² Both Adolf and Katicza came to the city from villages in the Hungarian countryside, Adolf from Zemplén County to the northeast (in present day Slovakia), and Katicza from Balatonfő-Kajan, in the lake Balaton region to the southwest. It appears that in the late 1890s Adolf and his young family joined Katicza's family and Adolf's brother Hermann (Ármin)³ in downtown Budapest on Kazinczy utca, in the Orthodox section of the New Pest Jewish Triangle (figs.1.3-1.4).

¹ The spelling of the name was Anglicized to Greenbaum in the United States before being changed to Gellert.

² The Grünbaum family consisted of Adolf and Katicza and their six children,

- Hugo, born May 3, 1892, Hungary, d. 1985
- Theodor, born June 8, 1893, Hungary d. 19??
- Ernest, born January 12, 1895, Hungary d. 1918
- Otto, born June 5, 1896, Hungary, d. 1989
- Louis (called Lawrence), born September 14, 1898, Hungary, d. 1979?
- Celia (called Billie, m. Niedich), born January 19, 1900, Hungary, d. 198?

Information taken from Adolf Greenbaum's Petition for Naturalization # 21915, July 17, 1912, State of New York Supreme Court Archives, NY, NY, from Gellert family gravestones, Mt. Hebron Cemetery, Flushing, NY, and from correspondence with descendants of Otto Gellert, and Celie (Billie) Niedich).

³ The Budapest City Directory for 1894 lists a Hermann Grünbaum, *paplanos* (quiltmaker) living at Kazinczy utca 12. On Hugo Gellert's birth certificate (Budapest National Archives, roll A3565, certificate number 995) his godfather Mór Schwarz, *uzabó* (tailor), is also listed at Kazinczy utca

In turn of the century Budapest, Jewish culture was characterized by three divergent trends. In addition to Orthodoxy, two modern movements developed. The first was Neology, progressive, urban, and internationalist. Neolog Jews strove for assimilation, considering themselves a part, albeit a minority, of the greater Hungarian community. The second was Zionism, advocating Jewish nationalism and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Since both Gellert's parents came from villages in the countryside and had Germanic surnames it is likely that their ancestry can be traced to the Galicia region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Galician Jews were generally the poorest, least educated, and most Orthodox. However, Adolf was not Orthodox. Gellert stated specifically that his father had no strong religious identity, though his mother may have had. During Gellert's youth, his parents were making the transition from

12. The precise relation of Mór Schwarz to Katizca Schwarz is unclear. My presumption is that Mór was Katizca's father, but he could have been a brother, uncle, or cousin. My belief that Hermann Grünbaum was Adolf's bother is based on Gellert's reminiscence of his (unnamed) paternal uncle's family, who lived with Gellert's family in Budapest while Gellert was a boy. The fact that Mór Schwarz and Hermann Grünbaum shared an address at Kazinczy utca 12 led me to surmise that these men were in fact close relatives of Gellert's family.

- The 1894 Budapest City Directory lists Hermann Grünbaum, *paplanos* (quiltmaker) at Kazinczy utca 12. No Adolf Grünbaum is listed.
- The 1896-97 Budapest City Directory lists Hermann Grünbaum, *paplanos* (quiltmaker) at Kazinczy utca 12. No Adolf Grünbaum is listed.
- The 1898 Budapest City Directory lists no Hermann, but it shows an Ármin Grünbaum at that address, Kazinczy utca 12. The same directory contains the first listing of Adolf Grünbaum, at Kazinczy utca 6b.
- The 1899 and 1900-1901 Budapest City Directories contain two listings for Adolf Grünbaum, Kazinczy utca 30 and Klauzál utca 4, which are within a few blocks of each other.
- The 1902-1903 Budapest City Directory lists Adolf Grünbaum only at Klauzál utca 4.
- The 1903-1904 Budapest City Directory contains no Adolf Grünbaum listing.
- The 1904-1905 Budapest City Directory lists Adolf Grünbaum in the same neighborhood, on Karoly karut 17.
- The 1905-1906 Budapest City Directory lists Adolf Grünbaum back at Klauzál utca 4.

traditional, rural Jews to modern, urban Jews, striving for assimilation. Hugo's birth was observed with the Jewish right of the *briss*,⁴ however the extent of his religious instruction, if indeed he had any, is unknown. He attended public school at the Lovag utca *gimnázium*, a few blocks from home. There he made his earliest connection between art and revolution, recalling,

Professor Kiel was my history teacher. He lectured with special enthusiasm about the Renaissance of the 15th Century and about the Hungarian Revolution of 1848-49 and its poet, Petöfi.⁵

Though Gellert may have been raised in a non-practicing Jewish household, as Jews, the Grünbaums were influenced nonetheless by social conditions of late 19th century Hungary. The experience of Hungarian Jews during the 19th century was greatly affected by Hungary's transition from a feudal to a modern society. Fueled in part by the desire for independence from the Habsburg monarchy, this 'Age of Reform' was accompanied by the growth of a romantic nationalist ideal. Economic development required the growth of a middle class, and cultural development entailed 'Magyarization,' the revival of Hungarian customs and, most importantly, the Hungarian language, which, under Austrian rule was supplanted by German. Both goals contributed to the encouragement of Jews to assimilate into the renewed culture, many Magyarizing their names. Hungary was a small nation attempting to preserve its culture despite the hegemony of a dominant nation. Perhaps Jews found it especially easy to identify with this Hungarian condition. Or maybe they foresaw peace, prosperity, and tolerance in

⁴ According to Gellert's birth certificate, Jakob Weinberger performed the customary rite of circumcision on May 10, 1892.

⁵ Hugo Gellert, "My Teachers," in *Hugo Gellert 1892-1985, People's Artist*, Hugo Gellert Memorial Committee, 12.

Hungary. But as the Hungarian nation began the task of forging a national identity, Jews swelled the ranks of Hungarian nationalists.

The progressive reforms and challenges to the Habsburg rule culminated with the Hungarian Revolution of 1848-49, led by activist journalist Lajos Kossuth (1802-1894). The majority of the Jewish population supported the Revolution, and many Jews actively participated. On July 28, 1849, towards the end of the brief period in which the Kossuth forces held power, Jewish emancipation was proclaimed and legal equality for Hungarian Jews was granted. However, the Hungarian Revolution was ultimately defeated in October of that year. The Habsburg monarchy remained in power, the independence movement was crushed, and Jewish emancipation was rescinded. Furthermore, because Jews were so active in the revolution, the victorious Austrian Baron Julius Haynau (1786-1853) imposed a penalty on the Jewish population of 2,300,000 guilders, which was eventually reduced to 1,000,000.⁶ For the next eighteen years liberal political thought was seriously weakened, as Hungary remained an undistinguished part of the Austrian Empire. However, during this period, memory of the 1848-49 Revolution grew in the Hungarian romantic nationalist character. To be a Hungarian patriot was to idealize the rebellion.

With the *Ausgleich* (Compromise) of 1867, Hungary achieved a certain degree of autonomy. Franz Josef (1830-1916) was crowned Apostolic King of Hungary in addition to his status as Emperor of Austria, but Hungary attained a separate

⁶ T.D. Kramer, *From Emancipation to Catastrophe: The Rise and Fall of Hungarian Jewry*, Lanham, MA: University Press of America, Inc, 2000, 5.

constitution and legislature, and Magyar became the official language of education and government.

Consequently, in December 1867 the Hungarian parliament virtually completed the process of institutional emancipation by approving a Bill sponsored by the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs, Baron Jozsef Eotvos (1813-71) that annulled almost all remaining anti-Jewish statutes. By this stroke individual Jews were elevated to a position of civil and political equality with individual Christians. Even though the Bill – maintaining the venerable Hungarian duality towards “Magyars of the Israelite Faith” – denied the Jewish faith recognition as one of the *Religiones Receptae* (Accepted Religions) and thus excluded the community from incorporation into the sanctum of the nation’s constitution.⁷

During the Dual Monarchy (1867-1918) the Hungarian economy was transformed from one based on agriculture to one based on industry. As economic growth led to urbanization, in 1873 the two cities of Obuda and Pest were incorporated with the city of Buda, seat of the independent Hungarian government, creating the new city of Budapest. Historian Vera Ranki observed,

the rise of Budapest as a metropolis was the result and the embodiment of interconnected historical processes and economic trends: the emergence of the modern state, which introduced freedom of movement for peasantry and for Jews; the ensuing large scale immigration from all parts of the Empire; the transformation of the traditional agrarian economy into a modern industrial one with the corollary requirement of labour; the inherently urbanizing trend allowing and demanding social mobility; and even technological changes which helped to overcome distance and promote migration, thereby speeding up the urbanization process.⁸

Because of Hungary’s long history of feudalism the new middle class was made up largely of relative newcomers who were ethnic minorities, mainly Jews and

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Vera Ranki, *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Jews and Nationalism in Hungary*, St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1999, 30-31.

Germans. The upper middle class of bankers and manufacturers were predominantly Jews. Thus with the spectacular growth of Budapest, assimilated, secular Jews were able to prosper, yet their political power remained nonexistent.

The improving socio-economic condition of urban “Magyars of the Israelite Faith” led to an influx of Jews into Budapest from other areas of the Empire. From 1825 to 1900 the Jewish population of Budapest rose from 8,000 to 166,000.⁹ Immigrants from some of the poorest regions such as Galicia to the Northeast, in addition to Jews from rural Hungarian villages, joined well-to-do assimilated Hungarian Jews in Budapest. The mobility and new social positions attained by Jews set off an anti-Semitic backlash from elements in Hungarian society threatened by the transformations that resulted,

from the advancement of liberalism and capitalism, both developments being viewed by the agitators as Jewish-induced, alien and hostile phenomena. Despite the diversity of their often conflicting ideologies, these established interest groups, particularly *déclassé* gentry, skilled artisans, Swabians (ethnic Germans) and sections of the Catholic Church, were united in their attempts to reignite financial (“Jewish economic dominance and exploitations”) and/or religious (“Christ-killers”) prejudices against the Jews. Consequently, to substantial numbers of those who accepted these fulminations, the threat posed by the highly assimilated Hungarian-Jewish plutocrat and the impoverished Orthodox peddler from Galicia merged to become the bi-polar elements of a united Jewish menace.¹⁰

⁹ Kinga Frojimovics, Géza Komorócsy, Viktória Pusztain, and Andrea Strbik, *Jewish Budapest: Monuments, Rites, History*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999, 263.

¹⁰ Kramer, *From Emancipation*, op. cit., 13.

Adolf Grünbaum was born in Zemplén County, a region bordered on the north by Galicia.¹¹ Zemplén was one of the first counties in Hungary to have a significant Jewish population, dating back to the seventeenth century. There is evidence Jews even owned property there before the emancipation law of 1867. Yet, despite these liberal tendencies, one of the most severe manifestations of anti-Semitic sentiment occurred in the spring of 1882 in the small village of Tiszaeszlar, on the Tisza River about 35 miles south of central Zemplén. After a fourteen-year-old domestic servant named Eszter Solmosi disappeared three days before Passover, rumors began to circulate that Jews murdered her to use her blood in the baking of matzo, the unleavened bread eaten during the Passover holiday. A Parliament member from Tiszaeszlar, Geza Onody, with support from the founder of Hungary's National Anti-Semitic Party, Gyozo Istoczy, and the local Catholic newspaper *Magyar Allam* (Magyar State) perpetuated this fabrication, and word spread throughout Hungary that Jews had committed ritual murder in Tiszaeszlar. After an investigation characterized by brutality and other serious miscarriages, a fourteen-year-old Jewish boy was coerced into confessing that he witnessed a group of Jews including his father kill the girl and drain her blood. Like the Dreyfuss Affair in France, the subsequent "Blood Libel of Tiszazeszlar" trial polarized the nation-state of Hungary. Although the defendants were eventually acquitted, the fallout triggered fresh waves of hostility towards Jews, especially in the countryside. It is not known precisely when Adolf Grünbaum left his village for Budapest, whether it was for his service

¹¹ Adolf Greenbaum's Petition for Naturalization # 21915, July 17, 1912, State of New York Supreme Court Archives, NY, NY. Most of the region is in present day Slovakia.

in the army, to seek his fortune in the growing city, or because life was becoming increasingly difficult for Jews in the region. It was most likely some combination of the three. He would have been one of the many thousands of rural Jews who migrated to Budapest in search of a better life in the late 19th century.

The family remained in the Pest Jewish Triangle neighborhood while Adolf Grünbaum made his way to the Netherlands in the autumn of 1905. From Rotterdam, on October 7, 1905 the forty-one year old tailor crossed the Atlantic on the Noordam to the United States, arriving in New York ten days later on the 17th. He declared his destination to be his uncle Edy Haas at what could be "No. 8 W. 115 St." on the Noordam's manifest, however the address is almost illegible.¹² He soon sent for the family, who arrived early in 1906. It is likely the growing reactionary movement in Hungary, accompanied by a fresh wave of anti-Semitism in the early years of the 20th century played a significant role in the decision to build a new life in America. Many Hungarians made the same decision around this time. In fact the Grünbaums came to America during height of Hungarian immigration, when between 1900-1910 some 311,682 Hungarians arrived in "the land of opportunity."¹³ The Grünbaums settled in Yorkville, a neighborhood on the Upper East Side of Manhattan that had a significant

¹² Adolf Gellert's Petition for Naturalization declared he arrived on October 16, 1905. The Noordam's manifest is dated October 17, 1905. American Family Immigration History Center (AFIHC), Ellis Island Passenger Record Archives, (www.ellisisland.org/search/index.asp?).

¹³ The Immigrant Labor Press in North America, 1840s-1970s: An Annotated Bibliography; Volume 2: Migrants From eastern and Southeastern Europe, Dirk Hoerder Editor, Wetport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987, 313.

Hungarian immigrant population.¹⁴ The family soon anglicized the name from Grünbaum to Greenbaum. However, rather than Americanize the name even further to Green, for instance, or Greentree, as did many Jewish immigrants, they Magyarized it. The name became the distinctly Hungarian Gellért, perhaps in reference to Gellért Hill in Budapest. Not only is the name specifically Hungarian, but it is Christian Hungarian. Gellért Hill was named after St. Gellért. It is the site where in the 8th century Bishop Gellért attempted to convert the pagan Magyars to Christianity. As a result, he was tied to an iron cart and rolled down the hill into the Danube. It appears that Hugo was the first to officially use the name Gellért (with an accent on the second “e”) over Greenbaum. In 1909 he registered as a student at the School of the National Academy of Design as Hugo Gellert. His father was still using Greenbaum in 1912, when he filed his Petition for Naturalization. In 1915 Adolf Greenbaum, tailor, is listed in the New York City Directory at 336 E. 82nd Street. By 1919/1920, however, the United States Census recorded Adolph (with a “ph”) Gellert as residing in the Bronx with his wife “Catherine” and their three children Otto, Louis, and Celia.

Gellert began his education at the National Academy by attending classes in drawing from antique casts. He was admitted to the program the following year and remained until the spring of 1914. During this period he won a noteworthy total of nine awards, four of which included cash prizes.¹⁵ Though he did not win

¹⁴ Hugo Gellert interview by Paul Buhle, April 4, 1984, transcript, Gellert papers, box 1; and Petition for Naturalization # 21915, July 17, 1912, State of New York Supreme Court Archives, NY, NY.

¹⁵ 1910 Suydam Silver Medal in Men’s Day Class

the prestigious seven-hundred-dollar Ella Mooney Travel Scholarship awarded to the most advanced pupils such as Maurice Sterne (1905) and Leon Kroll (1909), Gellert used the one-hundred-forty-five dollars in prize money as his own travel scholarship. Hoping to continue his academic training, Gellert intended to enroll in the Académie Julian in Paris when it opened after the summer in October. He recalled,

I thought I would go to visit my relatives in Hungary. Not having money I started out on foot. I got as far as Strasbourg at the German border. There I took a train to Munich, and from Munich to Vienna and from Vienna on a boat down the Danube to Budapest. Then as I arrived in Budapest, news came that war had broken out between the monarchy and Serbia.¹⁶

He had arrived in Hungary in August 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War. Gellert stayed with his aunt, uncle and cousins, as Budapest began the transformation from splendid, thriving capital city to home front. Gellert described how his uncle's hands shook upon receiving a telegram from the army. Expecting the worst, he was relieved when it turned out to be informing him that his son would be passing through Budapest on his way to the Eastern front. However, in the winter of 1915 after Gellert

1911 Suydam Bronze Medal in Life Class

Hallgarten School for Composition 2nd prize-\$40

1912 Hallgarten School for Painting prize-\$30

Baldwin Fund for Etching-\$25

Honorable Mention for Composition

1913 Suspended for not submitting drawings at examination-no prizes

Readmitted into night Life Drawing class

1914 Second Hallgarten Prize for Painting-\$50

Suydam Bronze Medal for Composition

Suydam Bronze Medal for Etching

Gellert file, National Academy of Design.

¹⁶ Hugo Gellert interview by Sofia Sequenzia, December 11, 1981, audio tape, Gellert papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (hereafter AAA).

returned to New York, he learned his cousin had died from frostbite while stationed in the Carpathian Mountains.

Though Gellert's European experience did not include a period of study at the Académie Julian, his brief stay in the French capital did have an effect on him as an artist. He visited the Louvre and even saw examples of cubism. But it was the posters in the street; particularly those advertising Michelin tires that impressed him most. After he arrived back in New York he devoted himself to graphic art, taking a job with the Rusling Wood commercial lithography house, designing posters for such products as Ferris Seeds and Royal Grape Juice. When the busy season ended, he was asked to stay on at a reduced wage. Rather than work for less, he quit.¹⁷

According to Gellert, he became involved with Socialism at this time through his younger brother Ernest and the Hungarian-American workers' movement. He participated in their cultural events, outings, and picnics. More importantly, he contributed drawings to *Elöre Képes Folyóirat* (Forward Illustrated Weekly Magazine) the Sunday cultural supplement of their socialist, Hungarian language newspaper *Elöre* (Forward) (published from 1905-1921). The publication changed its name to *Uj Elöre* (New Forward) (published from 1921-1937), to which Gellert contributed sporadically. The first six covers of *Elöre Képes Folyóirat* (vol. 1, no. 1 through vol. 1 no. 6) feature drawings by Gellert. Printed in black on color paper these covers reveal the twenty-four-year-old artist's stylistic

¹⁷ Sequenzia interview.

and social concerns. Gellert's debut *Előre Képes Folyóirat* cover from January 23, 1916, depicted a society lady with a little dog in her arms entering a building as a black doorman holds open the door (fig. 1.5). Observing this is a poor newsboy, whose thoughts are revealed in the caption below. "*De szeretnék kis kutya lenni!* (I wish I were a little dog)." Using the naïve remarks of poor children to reveal their dire conditions was a popular formula in cartoons for the radical journal *The Masses*. See, for instance, Alice Beach Winter's January 1913 *Masses* drawing of an impoverished girl walking past a wealthy mother, infant, and young, wavy haired, Lord Fauntleroy-type boy (fig. 1.6). The girl, misunderstanding the boy's clothing style, thinks "He ain't got no stockin's, he's poorer nor me." Another example is Art Young's October 1911 drawing of two indigent city kids looking at the night sky. The caption reads "Observation De Luxe. Young Poet: "Gee Annie, look at the stars! They're as thick as bedbugs."

Yet, if Gellert's message was modeled on the social reformist *Masses* illustrations, his fluid style and facile draftsmanship was not. His technique approximated the qualities of fine lithography, the application of ink wash, the subtle, textured tone like that of a grained stone. Compared with the rough aesthetic of Stuart Davis' (1894-1964) *Masses* work such as his deliberately unsophisticated June 1913 "*Gee, Mag, Think of us Bein' on a Magazine Cover!*," (fig. 1.7) or Maurice Becker's (1889-1975) ill-mannered, May 1916 *Harbinger of Spring* (fig. 1.8), Gellert's aesthetic is more polished and refined. Where Davis and Becker may have been striving to out "ashcan" their mentors John Sloan

(1871-1951) and Robert Henri (1865-1929), Gellert seems to have been looking their way, but also over their shoulders towards other influences. His light touch, attention to the interplay of positive and negative forms, and subtle hint of glamour suggest an awareness of Toulouse Lautrec's (1864-1901) theater lithographs and the woodcuts of the Nabi, Félix Vallotton (1865-1925).

While this first *Előre Képes Főlyoirat* cover depended on the caption dialogue to deliver its message, the subsequent anti-war covers from this same period relied less on textual narrative and more on graphic punch. In the January 30, 1916 cover, a soldier stands over his vanquished enemy and prepares to deliver the *coup de grace* with his bayonet (fig. 1.9). The prostrate one holds the end of the victor's rifle. "*Miért?*" (Why?), the question printed at the bottom of the page, could be read as a plea. Yet the standing soldier's body language indicates a moment of indecision as if he also asks it of himself. Ultimately, since there is no clear indication of which soldier represents right and which represents wrong, it is meant to prompt the viewer to question the war itself. Similarly, the February 6, 1916 cover also pointed to the futility of the war (fig. 1.10). Captioned *Háboru után* (After War), it is a domestic scene showing a young woman in traditional peasant dress spoon-feeding her invalid, armless husband, while their daughter stares blankly into space. The composition's large areas of open space, the way form is defined by decorative patterning, and stark contrasts of light versus dark is especially reminiscent of Vallotton's woodcuts of domestic interiors (fig. 1.11). Gellert could have seen the Swiss anarchist's dynamic, graphic compositions,

which expose the hypocrisy of social convention, during his stay in Paris, or in old copies of French illustrated journals such as Félix Fénéon's *La Revue blanche*. In the winter of 1915-1916, shortly before Gellert began illustrating the covers of *Előre Képes Folyóirat*, Vallotton published *C'est la guerre!* (This is War!) a volume of six woodcut prints. It appears that Gellert saw these prints. His February 20, 1916 cover, *Militarizmus: "Te kellesz nekem* (Militarism: "I Want You") could even be a response to Vallotton's *In the Shadows* (figs. 1.12-1.13). The composition as well as the subject matter is strikingly similar. Gellert's depicted a single helmeted figure emerging from the darkness in the upper left while Vallotton's includes two. Each image features a stark, frightened figure, with mouth agape, in the lower right. Vallotton's is a soldier witnessing hand-to-hand combat; Gellert's is a child shrinking from the specter of conscription. In both, a large expanse of black separates the cater-cornered forms.

After these *Előre Képes Folyóirat* covers, Gellert stopped contributing to the journal until late in 1920. The reason he stopped when he did is unclear. It may have been in part because in the spring of 1916 Gellert became involved with the radical journal, *The Masses*. In his own words,

I was doing some monkeying around the house, and I picked up two of my black-and-white drawings and took them down to *The Masses*, because they were against the war, as I was. When the next issue appeared, it had my drawings and I became a regular contributor (figs. 1.14-1.15).¹⁸

¹⁸ Hugo Gellert interview by Jeff Kisseloff, in Jeff Kisseloff, *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890s to World War II*, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989, 483.

Gellert's involvement occurred at a crucial period for *The Masses*. When he began contributing in June 1916 the magazine was still recovering from a major upheaval. Earlier that year John Sloan led a number of younger artists—his protégé Stuart Davis, in addition to Maurice Becker, Glen O. Coleman (1887-1932), and Henry Glintenkamp (1887-1946)—in a rebellion against the editor-in-chief Max Eastman (1883-1969). It began as a complaint against the editorial policy of adding witty captions to drawings in the belief that they would then be more accessible to the readership. Subsequently the Sloan group was labeled elitist “art-for-art-sakers.” They responded that Eastman’s vision had become too controlling, and threatened the policy of collective editorship. In their view, what was once a magazine that promoted no single theory of social reform, but expressed various revolutionary platforms, “a magazine with a sense of humor and no respect for the respectable,” which promised “to do as it pleases and conciliate nobody, not even its readers,”¹⁹ had substituted its healthy, questioning, mockery of bourgeois values for an unsmiling, overbearing political position. In other words, it had begun to take itself seriously. The insurrection was put down by a majority vote against the Sloan group. As a result, Sloan, Becker, Coleman, and Davis resigned from the magazine. Gellert’s arrival filled some of the vacuum left by resignations. Though he only contributed a total of nine drawings to *The Masses* from June 1916 until its final issue in November-December 1917, three of them were covers (figs. 1.16-1.17).²⁰ Gellert became

¹⁹ Inside cover of *The Masses* 8 (June 1916), in Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, xvi.

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1. Untitled (frolicking nudes), *The Masses*, vol. VIII, no. 8 (June 1916), 12.

friendly with Becker and Glintenkamp, but he evidently supported Eastman's position. He later said that he felt the rebel artists' position was based on self-importance, while Eastman's goal was to present a collaboration between artists and the writers. Although Eastman won the conflict, perhaps Sloan's point was subsequently given some consideration. No captions were assigned to Gellert's drawings, and only two were assigned titles. These related to the poems on the page they shared.

The Masses artists' strike was perhaps the earliest manifestation of the polemic between the 'proletarian' and 'bourgeois' impulse in the course of twentieth century American modernism. As it recurred throughout the following decades, Gellert became progressively more outspoken against 'pure' art, in favor of an art in service of the revolutionary class. Though the strike announced the beginning of this socio-cultural debate, in 1916-17 *The Masses* still epitomized Greenwich Village bohemian counter-culture. For Gellert, who was educated at the conservative, highly regimented National Academy of Design, *The Masses* attitude and the Village's free-spirited ethos of rebellion proved very stimulating. As John Reed (1887-1920) versified,

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2. Untitled (nude at pond), *The Masses*, vol. VIII, no. 8 (June 1916), 13.
 3. A Design by Hugo Gellert, *The Masses*, vol. VIII, no. 11 (September 1916), 17.
 4. Untitled (Girl in hat), *The Masses*, vol. IX, no. 1 (November 1916), cover.
 5. Untitled (Valentine), *The Masses*, vol. IX, no. 4 (February 1917), cover.
 6. Untitled (Satyr), *The Masses*, vol. IX, no. 8 (June 1917), cover.
 7. Fantasie, *The Masses*, vol. IX, no. 10 (August 1917), 20.
 8. Rainy Song, *The Masses*, vol. IX, no. 12 (October 1917), 4.
 9. Untitled (Pastoral), *The Masses*, vol. X, No. 1 and 2 (November and December 1917), 4.

Yet we are free who live in Washington Square,
We dare to think as Uptown wouldn't dare,
Blazing our nights with arguments uproarious;
What care we for dull old worlds censorious,
When each is sure he'll fashion something glorious?
Blessed art thou, Anarchic Liberty
Who asketh nought but joy of such as we!²¹

According to a 1918 guide to Greenwich Village, "New York's Bohemia," Gellert lived on Union Square at 11 East 14th Street, not Washington Square.²² Yet like the free thinkers in Reed's poem, Gellert did confront "old worlds censorious" through his art. His February 1917 *Masses* cover, for instance, featured a semi-nude woman. No academic study, it is a celebration of sexuality. She was depicted in the act of undressing, the seductively unbuttoned dress sliding off her naked shoulders to reveal her bare breasts (fig. 1.17). Most of Gellert's *Masses* graphics were similarly risqué. Faithful to *The Masses* oath to have "no respect for the respectable," his very first contributions to the magazine were erotically suggestive, and challenged prevailing, conservative American values.

Through *The Masses* Gellert was introduced to the younger artists and writers of his own generation such as journalist and founder of the Catholic Worker movement Dorothy Day (1897-1980), Maurice Becker, and Michael Gold (1894-1967), with whom he would establish important relationships. Day reminisced how she "spent many a night roaming the streets with Mike, Maurice, Hugo, and

²¹ John Reed, "A Ballad of MacDougal Alley," in Alex Baskin, *John Reed: The Early Years in Greenwich Village*, NY: Archives of Social History, 1990, 39. Originally in John Reed, *The Day in Bohemia or Life Among the Artists*, NY: Printed for the author by Hillacre Bookhouse, 1913.

²² Egmont Arens, *The Little Book of Greenwich Village: A Handbook of Information concerning New York's Bohemia, with which is incorporated a Map and Directory*, NY: Washington Square Book Shop, 1918, 17(?) (many pages are torn in the New York Public Library's copy so that the page numbers do not show).

others, ending up at the apartment for coffee and discussion. We used to pick up people in the parks and bring them home with us.”²³ The group of more established radicals such as Reed, Eastman, Floyd Dell (1887-1969), and Hippolyte Havel (c. 1871-1950) also welcomed him. He was invited to the spirited monthly meetings of the editors, when they discussed the material under consideration for the next issue. He recalled,

At my first meeting, Floyd Dell read a poem. It was voted on and accepted. Thereupon an irate voice shouted: “Phooey, bourgeois bunch, they vote on poetry!”

We were petrified. Floyd was the first to regain his presence of mind. “But Mr. Havel,” he said calmly, “you are an editor of *Mother Earth*. Don’t you ever make any decisions?”

“Yes, yes” was the answer. “We do make decisions, but we don’t abide by them...”²⁴

Strangely, in his *Masses* designs Gellert moved away from the overtly social themes of war and poverty. When compared to the *Előre Képes Folyóirat* covers and especially to the confrontational, political art for which he became known in the 1920s and 1930s, Gellert’s *Masses* drawings may seem incongruent. As Dorothy Day, noted, “when he was not drawing pictures of marching workers in overalls grasping their tools like weapons, he was making lovely pictures of goats and frolicking kids.”²⁵ While Day’s allegation that Gellert’s Art Nouveau, golden-age idylls are concurrent with his monumental signature style is not entirely

²³ Dorothy Day, *From Union Square to Rome*, New York: Arno Press, 1978 (first published in 1938), 80-81.

²⁴ Hugo Gellert, “John Reed and ‘The Masses’,” Zoltán Deák, ed., *This Noble Flame: Portrait of a Hungarian Newspaper in the USA, 1902-1982*. NY: Heritage Press, 1982, 76.

²⁵ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, New York: Harper, 1952, 71.

accurate, the point she makes regarding the apparent disparity between these aspects of his work was shared by others as well. Michael Gold remarked,

His drawings seemed out of another world. They were serene country idylls from some lost and forgotten golden age: beautiful little white goats with their kids resting gracefully under the trees; or lovely young girls in Greek robes who danced by a river to the piping of dark young shepherds while the sky shed happiness on all the world.²⁶

Later, towards the end of his life, Gellert explained,

I was a purist. I only made artistic...drawings at first. It took me some time before I made cartoons. I...made cartoons for the Hungarian paper because I thought that was suitable for a newspaper. But over there [at *The Masses*] that was an art magazine so my works were artistic. It was called a magazine of art and literature and I still believed that art was one thing and a cartoon was another.²⁷

He went on farther to disparage his early, less overtly political, "decorative" works.

As far as *The Masses* was concerned I made some allegorical drawings against the war. For instance, I had a man with an arrow and an animal he was aiming at. Someone came between him and the animal to protect it. That was my "decorative" way of expressing anti-war political cartoons (fig. 1.18).²⁸

Yet Gellert's early work is quite radical. It rebels against the strict tradition of his academic training. It is a type of modernism unique in the history of American art.

Unlike the canonical early American modernists, who broke from tradition by studying in Paris or Berlin; or through artistic epiphanies at the 1913 Armory

²⁶ Michael Gold, "Salute to Hugo Gellert," *Masses and Mainstream* (vol. 8, No. 1) January 1955, 27.

²⁷ Sequenzia interview.

²⁸ Buhle interview, 1.

show; or by frequenting the Arensberg salon or the Stieglitz galleries, Gellert's modernism came from another source. It came from Hungary.

Looking at Gellert's drawings from the 1910s and early 1920s it becomes clear just how much he was a product of *fin de siècle* Hungarian culture. By the 1890s Budapest's tremendous growth provided sufficient foundation for a thriving intellectual culture. The 1896 Millennial celebrations marking the 1000th anniversary of the Magyar tribe's settlement of the Carpathian basin provided a platform to reconcile Hungarian nationalism with the official Austrian neoclassical style. At the same time artists, architects and designers of the avant-garde began to theorize and produce work that rejected the dominant culture. Receptive to international modernism, the Hungarian avant-garde looked towards French Art Nouveau and the Viennese Secession as paradigms of anti-academicism. Yet, in their pursuit of an independent, specifically Hungarian identity, they imbued Art Nouveau and Secessionist designs with forms derived from Hungarian folk art.

In *Fantasie*, the "decorative" anti-war cartoon for *The Masses*, and in a number of other drawings from this early period, such as the December 26, 1920 *Előre Képes Főlyoirat* cover, and the October 13, 1920 *Előre Képes Főlyoirat* cover, Gellert used the theme of a deer hunt, which was important in pagan Hungarian mythology (figs. 1.19-1.20). It is not a benign, purely decorative use. When compared to his overtly political work it may not seem radical, but when Hungary was part of the Austrian empire, the modernist impulse to use the Hungarian

vernacular had political connotations. It was an anti imperial statement. The subject matter may not have been overtly revolutionary, but the sub-text was.

Variations on the deer hunt are some of the most ancient Hungarian legends that describe the origin of the Hungarian, or Magyar people. Before settling in the Carpathian Basin in the late 9th century, the Magyars were a nomadic tribe from beyond the Urals in Asia. The Hungarian tongue, in fact, belongs to the Finno-Ugric family. Unlike any Central European language, it is most closely related to Finnish. According to one origin myth, two noble brothers, Hunor and Mogor, became separated from their people while hunting. They followed a magic deer through unfamiliar lands until they arrived in Scythia. Roughly the area between the Black Sea and the Aral Sea, east, west, and north of the Caspian Sea, Scythia is the present day region of southeastern Russia and Kazakhstan where Europe and Asia come together. The brothers eventually separated, Hunor's descendants forming the Tartar-Vogul people, Mogor's forming the nomadic, horse-breeding Magyars.

As a motif, the deer hunt was prevalent in Budapest during the nationalistic *fin de siècle*. It was depicted as a code for Hungarian autonomy on monuments and public projects such as Alajos Stróbl's 1898-1904 *Fountain of King Matthais* in the inner courtyard of the Buda Castle, and Sandor Nagy's façade decorations of Isván Medgyaszay's 1908 Theater of Veszprém about fifty miles south of Budapest (figs. 1.21-1.22). Similarly, the influential, avant-garde architect Ödön

Lechner (1845-1914) revived vernacular forms from Transylvanian architecture. Remarking on the aesthetic similarities between these and the modernist, Art Nouveau designs, he incorporated them in a number of high profile projects in the 1890s such as the Museum of Applied Arts (1891-1896) and the Geological Institute (1897-1899). Lechner's pupil Béla Lajta (1893-1920) took these ideas to a new level. In his designs of the 1910s, Lajta referred to the repetitive, geometric, patterns of traditional Hungarian applied arts—such as chip carving, weaving, and embroidery—as decorative details on his buildings. When Gellert visited Budapest in the summer of 1914, Lajta's status was at its height. Gellert could have seen Lajta's Jewish Institute for the Blind (1908) on Mexikói Street, the Jewish Infirmary for Incurable Patients (1911) on Amerikai Street, and, in his old neighborhood, the István Széchnyi Secondary School (1912) on Vas Street, as well as the Center of the Orthodox Jewish Religious Community on Kazinczy Street, designed by Lajta followers, the brothers Béla and Sándor Löffler (figs. 1.23-1.24). All of these buildings feature façades illustrated with highly stylized, geometric reliefs that synthesize vernacular traditions and the modernist idiom. Gellert's similarly used decorative border devices to set off a modernized folk motif in his magazine cover illustrations from the late 1910s and early 1920s (figs. 1.25).

America's entry in the war in April 1917 altered the political climate in the United States, further polarizing the left from the American mainstream. The August

issue of *The Masses* was declared unmailable by New York postmaster Thomas Patton, under the recently passed Espionage Act, which stated:

Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any language intended to incite, provoke, or encourage resistance to the United States...shall be punished by a fine of \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both.²⁹

The editors applied for a mandatory injunction to require the postal service to accept and transport the magazine. Judge Learned Hand ruled in favor of *The Masses*. However, the post office appealed and, before Hand's ruling was upheld, the following three issues were successfully withheld from the mail.

Though *The Masses* editors ultimately won the battle, they lost the war. Patton exploited a technicality enabling him to revoke the magazine's second-class mailing status, reasoning that it was not a monthly magazine since it had missed successive months because of his own allegations of sedition.

In the wake of *The Masses*' demise, Gellert became more active in the radical press. He immediately joined *The Liberator* magazine as a contributing editor. Formed by Max Eastman, his sister Crystal Eastman, Floyd Dell, and John Reed, *The Liberator*'s inaugural issue—featuring Gellert's drawing of a Russian peasant sowing red, heart shaped seeds as the cover—appeared on newsstands in March 1918, merely two months after *The Masses* folded (fig. 1.26). The artists and writers of *The Liberator* were virtually identical to those of *The Masses*, but the editorial staff strove to protect their new journal from meeting the fate of its

²⁹ Section 3 of the Espionage Act, in *Espionage Act Cases with Certain Others on Related Points*, compiled and edited by Walter Nelles, NY: National Civil Liberties Bureau, 1918, 2.

predecessor. They had to be especially careful because Eastman, and a number of other *Masses* editors and staff members including Floyd Dell, Henry Glintenkamp, John Reed, and Art Young (1866-1943) were facing a second trial on charges of "conspiracy (1) to cause insubordination, etc., in the military forces, and (2) to obstruct the recruiting and enlistment service."³⁰ Indeed, Young, who was associated with both publications, remarked, "looking over a bound volume of *The Liberator* for 1918, it is easy to discern that the soft pedal was being used, in contrast to the outspokenness of *The Masses*."³¹ Almost no direct attacks on America's involvement in the war were included in *The Liberator*. For instance, the March 1918 issue contains a full-page illustration by Cornelia Barnes depicting a soldier saying goodbye to his mother. In the caption beneath she advises him "do try to make a personal friend of the Colonel" (fig. 1.27). While the mother's frivolous advice may have elicited chuckles from *The Liberator's* readers, it is worlds away from Henry Glintenkamp's audacious depiction of Death measuring a new recruit for a coffin, or M.A. Kempf's crude but effective, *Come on in America, the Blood's Fine!*, both of which appeared in *The Masses* (figs. 1.28-1.29).

Though Eastman and the others were acquitted, their understandable concern about the Espionage Act may have proved a factor in the shift in tone of *The*

³⁰ Ibid., 28.

³¹ Art Young, Joh Nichols Beffel ed., *Art Young: His Life and Times*, New York: Sheridan House, 1939, 330.

Liberator away from the discord and pessimism of *The Masses*, and towards a more unified, optimistic vision of Russia—the Bolshevik Revolution as liberator.³² Undeniably, events in Russia took center stage in *The Liberator*. In fact, one reason it was so hastily produced was so that there would be a vehicle for Reed's reports of the Russian Revolution.³³ As the socially and politically revolutionary movement grew to embrace events in Russia, Gellert's own dedication intensified. This commitment was enhanced tremendously by incidents involving his younger brother Ernest.

By numerous accounts Ernest Gellert was an idealistic, sweet-tempered and creative youth. He was a competent draftsman and a gifted violinist (fig. 1.30). In addition, as a socialist activist he was exceptionally committed, and exceptionally inflexible. For example, Gellert recalled one instance in which Ernest was arrested during an anti-conscription demonstration in New York. He adamantly refused to pay the fine on the grounds that it was a violation of constitutional rights. He would have gone to jail but other protestors arrested with him paid the fine rather than leave without him. Ernest was conscripted not long after the United States entered the war. Their father raised the Gellert children with a bias against the military. Adolf Grünbaum's experiences in the Austro-Hungarian army left an indelible anti-militarist impression on him. According to Gellert, his father was often imprisoned, and on at least one occasion, even physically abused, for

³² Most likely referring to William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist journal of the same name (*The Liberator*, 1831-1865), the 1918 *Liberator* viewed the Russian Revolution as a similar battle of good against evil.

³³ See Rebecca Zurier, *Art for the Masses: A Radical Journal and Its Graphics*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988, 25, 27.

conflicts with military authorities. Following in these anti-militarist footsteps Ernest declared himself a conscientious objector. He arrived at Camp Upton, New York on October 10th, 1917 “unconditionally opposed to any form of service, the aim and purpose of which is the destruction of human life.”³⁴

The Conscription Act, passed by President Wilson on May 18, 1917, had provisions for three different kinds of exemptions from service—absolute, non-combatant, and conditional. Clergymen qualified for absolute exemptions. Members of “any well-recognized religious sect or organization at present organized and existing and whose existing creed or principles forbid its members to participate in war in any form and whose religious convictions are against war and participation therein”³⁵ qualified for non-combatant service. Certain county or municipal officials, clerks, mail carriers, armory employees, persons “engaged in industries, including agriculture, found to be necessary to the maintenance of the Military Establishment or the effective operation of the military forces or the maintenance of the national interest during the emergency,”³⁶ and various others needed on the home front qualified for conditional, or partial military service. Because Ernest was a professional stenographer and was fluent in Hungarian, he qualified for administrative service. He rejected such service after it was offered to him. When asked if he would consider alternative non-combat service

³⁴ “Murder is Charged as U.S. Probes Objector’s Sudden Death at Camp,” *The Call*, (April 13, 1918), 3.

³⁵ “Provisions of the Conscription Act Relating to Exemptions,” in *Conscription and the Conscientious Objector*, NY and Washington: American Civil Liberties Bureau of the American Union Against Militarism, July, 1917, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

such as nursing the wounded he replied "inasmuch as the wounded being cured are sent back to the firing line, even hospital service, which on the surface seems innocent, would tend to prolong the war, and I could not accept that either."³⁷ He declined to cooperate with the induction process and had to be inoculated and fingerprinted by force. He utterly refused to participate in the war in any capacity. As he articulated his position, it became absolutely clear to all that his objections to the war were based on socialist principles.

The requested me to state my views...I replied that I was a conscientious objector—that I am opposed to war—that I regard all wars as futile as far as the settlement of any principle is concerned—that I considered the present war the logical result of the mad ambitions for commercial and territorial expansion on the part of the ruling classes of the European nations involved—that wars are possible only through the control of the political machineries, and all channels for forming public opinions, by those unscrupulous minorities—that wars will cease when the masses will take an intelligent, active interest in politics—that I deplore our entrance into the war—that if our aim is to benefit humanity, the only way we can realize it is by supporting Russia in trying to end the conflict on the basis of no annexation, and no indemnities.³⁸

Ernest obtained legal counsel from Walter Nelles, a New York attorney working with the American Civil Liberties Bureau. Precursor of the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Civil Liberties Bureau was formed during the First World War primarily to handle conscientious objector and Espionage Act cases. These had recently become Nelles's specialty. He moved his practice from lower Broadway to the headquarters of the American Civil Liberties Bureau at 70 Fifth

³⁷ Ernest Gellert, notes, Gellert papers, AAA, box 1.

³⁸ Ibid. Describing it as a diary entry of October 12, 1917, Hugo Gellert cited the same section of this text in his essay "My Brother Ernest," in Deák, ed. *This Noble Flame*, op. cit., 78.

Avenue, and limited his caseload to “persons whose legal troubles were due to their opinions (on the war).”³⁹

Within a week after his arrival at Camp Upton, Ernest was transferred to the Aviation Camp at Garden City, Long Island. There, he was subjected to humiliating punishments to weaken his will to disobey. Nelles advised Ernest to maintain a log of such actions. The resulting diary reveals numerous violations of his rights—ranging from petty torments and solitary confinement to out-and-out abuse—stemming from his refusal to follow any orders. On October 26th he wrote,

I was given an order to sweep out some quarters. At my refusal the sergeant of the guard said he was ordered to make me work and he told one of the guards to take a club and take charge of me. He then led me a few hundred feet from the guardhouse and marked out a six-foot circle, placing me in it and instructed the guard to strike me if I stepped outside the circle. After a couple of hours, I was taken back to the guardhouse.... I was again asked if I was willing to work. At my refusal I was taken to a somewhat smaller circle than the previous day— in the afternoon to a still smaller circle.”⁴⁰

According to Nelles, Ernest’s treatment was substantially worse.

To make him put on a uniform, his clothes were taken from him, and he was kept for several days on bread and water in a cold room. After this, once he had been forcibly dressed in a uniform, he wore it daily in preference to nothing. For a while he was kept in a six-foot circle for two hours each morning and afternoon, guarded by a soldier under orders to strike him with a club if he moved out of it. Throughout the morning of his court martial he was kept standing

³⁹ Walter Nelles, *A Liberal in Wartime: The Education of Albert DeSilver*, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1940, 147. Nelles would represent the *The Masses* editors as co-defense counsel—with Chicago lawyer Seymour Stedman and Charles Recht of New York—in the second *Masses* trial in 1918. See *Art Young: His Life and Times*, op. cit., 351.

⁴⁰ Ernest Gellert, notes, op. cit., Gellert papers, box. 1.

at attention out of doors, in an icy blizzard. In court in the afternoon, though his chilled body was shaky, he answered all questions with clearness, dignity and moderation.⁴¹

These tactics were not uncommon. Ernest's ordeal occurred in the early months of American participation in the war when there was no clear policy on the treatment of conscientious objectors. Throughout the war there remained no practicable standard for treatment of conscientious objectors. As one conscientious objector recognized,

the government policy on dealing with the C.O. problem is about as stupid as I can imagine. In Germany a C.O. is either shot, imprisoned, or discharged as "harmlessly insane." (A soldier, as the *Masses* once put it, I suppose being harmfully sane). In England he is either imprisoned or freed as being sincere, but in the U.S. they persist in trying to make a soldier of him, address him as private and keep him under the military, and because he will not cooperate with them in this course of action, even to the extent of cooking his own meals, they subject him to treatment or conditions as bad as if not worse than prison and still persist in telling him he is not a prisoner, but a soldier, which he would rather die than be.⁴²

No provisions excusing men for service were made for socialists. In fact, they were especially troublesome to the authorities. Socialists presented lucid, principled arguments. Their resistance clearly required more courage than conformity would have required. Furthermore, because many were willing to die for their principles they could not be effectively portrayed as cowards. The record of Ernest's court martial demonstrates.

Q. –You have no fear of death itself?

⁴¹ Walter Nelles, *A Liberal in Wartime: The Education of Albert DeSilver*, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1940, 125-126.

⁴² Harold Studley Gray, Kenneth Irving Brown ed., *Character "Bad:" The Story of a Conscientious Objector*, New York and London, Harper and Brothers, 1934, 149-150.

A. –I am as much afraid of death as any one else. To me death would mean the end of my existence. Perhaps I should be more afraid of death than ordinary people, but nevertheless, if death should be the alternative, I would submit to death.

Q. –It wasn't fear of death that prompted your feelings against war?

A. –No sir, the feelings upon which I act are the convictions, which I have stated.

Q. –And you place your personal opinions above life?

A. –My personal opinions and my life are synonymous. I would not consider (that) anybody has a right to take my life. Just for that reason I am taking this stand. If however, the close of my life results from it. It shall not be obtained without my full realization.⁴³

Despite his eloquence and sincerity, or because of it, the court martial found Ernest guilty. On December 14th he was sentenced to imprisonment for ten years. Conscientious objectors were routinely sent to the prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, but, oddly, Ernest was not sent to a military prison at all. Rather, he was transferred to Fort Hancock, New Jersey,

a small regular army post where there were no other prisoners. No further bodily hardships were imposed. He was allowed the freedom of the post. But daily for several months he was beset with captains and chaplains concerned of his conversion. Some of them liked him, and could not understand how so fine a person could be so craven as not to fight for his country. Others insulted him.⁴⁴

On April 8, 1918, after three months at Fort Hancock, twenty-three-year-old Ernest Gellert died. The authorities informed the Gellert family that Ernest committed suicide, explaining that he had acquired a rifle and, pulling the trigger by means of a stick, shot himself through the chest. Dorothy Day wrote:

Hugo and Mike Gold and I went to see Hugo's brother in the guardhouse and he seemed cheerful enough then, considering his tragic situation. We were all shocked to hear some weeks later that

⁴³ Transcript of Ernest Gellert's court martial, quoted in "Open Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Walter Nelles, Counsel for Ernest Gellert," April 16, 1918, Ernest Gellert folder, Michael Gold Papers, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁴⁴ Nelles, *A Liberal in Wartime*, op. cit., 126.

he was dead. The report was that he had taken his own life, but we could not believe it. He was a happy youth, friendly with the guards who smuggled his violin to him so that he could play to them. Hugo insisted he had been murdered.⁴⁵

The entire family believed Ernest's death was a homicide. Lawrence, the youngest Gellert brother, recalled, "when they brought his body home, we had a doctor examine him, and he said the bullet was fired from a distance of at least 15-20 feet."⁴⁶ They buried Ernest in Mount Hebron Cemetery in Queens, New York. Today his stone remains the tallest in the Gellert family plot. Beneath the name and dates, the stone bears an inscription taken from one of Ernest's prison letters; "the tribute I crave is a smile reflecting my own happiness, that ecstasy experienced by all who have pitted themselves as vanguards against oppression" (fig. 1.31).⁴⁷

Nelles did not passively accept the army's official conclusions. On April 11th he wrote to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker and attempted to generate publicity about the case by sending copies of the letter to the press. On April 12th *The New York Times* reproduced the entire Nelles letter verbatim, in which he outlined the Gellert family's protest.

No details of the firing of the shot that killed Ernest Gellert have been reported to the family. His relatives and friends believe that he was murdered. This belief rests on the knowledge of his character and temperament, upon the normality of his mood related in the latest communication received from him before his death....⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Day, *Lonliness*, op. cit., 71-72.

⁴⁶ Lawrence Gellert interviewed by Richard A. Ravis, Folklore Center, New York City, March 28, 1968, typescript, 24. I thank Steven Garabedian for providing this material.

⁴⁷ Inscription on Ernest Gellert's headstone, Mt. Hebron Cemetery, Queens, NY.

⁴⁸ "Objector's Family Think He Was Slain," *The New York Times*, (April 12, 1918), 8.

In that communication—eerily postmarked the day of his death—the Gellert family read no indication that Ernest was considering such an extreme act. In fact he was making plans for the future, urging those who write to him from then on to use a plain post card and to make no reference to his case. He concluded, “I am feeling fine. Love and regards to all. Ernest.”⁴⁹ Nelles demanded a public investigation be held, in which he would be allowed to examine witnesses, and that the minutes of any investigation conducted thus far be made public. A few days later he received a reply, as reported in *The World*.

Proof that Ernest Gellert, conscientious objector, committed suicide was the answer made at Governors Island yesterday to the open letter of Walter Nelles...At the office of the Adjunct General it was announced that a Special Board of Inquiry at Fort Hancock, N.J. had decided that young Gellert, who lived at No. 481 West 165th Street, killed himself with a rifle April 8. A note in Gellert's handwriting, telling his purpose, was found beside the body.⁵⁰

The note read,

I fear I have not succeeded in convincing the authorities of the sincerity of my scruples against participation in the war. I feel that only by my death will I be able to save others from the mental tortures I have gone through. If I succeed, I give my life willingly.⁵¹

After the note was revealed Nelles did not continue contesting suicide as the cause of Ernest's death. But he was convinced that the military's torment of Ernest drove him to that drastic act. As a result, the American Civil Liberties Bureau used details of Ernest's case to lobby the White House to reconsider the guidelines for evaluating the sincerity of conscientious objectors, and to develop regulations assuring their humane treatment. Nelles attributed to their efforts

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Slacker Gellert Suicide” *The World*, (April 13, 1918), 11.

⁵¹ Nelles, *A Liberal in Wartime*, op. cit., 126.

President Wilson's selection in July 1918 of a commission to investigate the sincerity of conscientious objectors. But their victory was at best incomplete, as Nelles recounted:

The Commissioners were men of humane and liberal minds, and they intended to be fair. But, seemingly conceiving "conscientious" as best represented by blind devotion to the precepts of some unreasoned mystic faith, they regarded the "political" objectors more skeptically than the religious. Most of the latter were induced to accept some form of noncombatant service. The "politicals," who would accept no war service, however safe, were thenceforth usually protected from bodily abuse. But most of them were kept at the training camps in small groups, surrounded by contumely, with nothing to do but talk and read.⁵²

In such environments of insult, conscientious objectors were routinely subjected to threats, harassment, and even violence. *The Masses* artist Adolf Dehn (1895-1968), a conscientious objector held at Camp Wadsworth, South Carolina in the summer of 1918, described his experience.

I was escorted to the Guard House. During the afternoon I enjoyed the threats of the guards—a brick wall and 20 years being most frequent—as they gleefully told me that the guard had stuck a bayonet up an objector's ass and another had been clubbed.⁵³

Ill-treatment was not reserved just for socialists and other "politicals." Ernest Meyer claimed that two Mennonite Christians confined with him at Camp Taylor, Kentucky had been tortured.

"You are lucky," said one boy. "See there," he added, lowering his head and exposing what appeared to be a big red contusion on his scalp.

⁵² Nelles, *A Liberal in Wartime*, op. cit., 128.

⁵³ Adolf Dehn letter to attorney Roger Baldwin of the National [sic.] Civil Liberties Bureau, n.d. (c. August, 1918), American Civil Liberties Union Papers, reel 2, vol. 13, Mudd Library, Princeton University.

"What is that?" I asked.

"They pulled out my hair. Yanked it out while a couple of soldiers held me. I don't remember what happened then. I fainted."

"They took off all my clothes except my underwear," said another, "and first they hit me with belts till I bled and then tied me on a chair and put me under a cold shower bath."⁵⁴

While Nelles eventually recognized Ernest's death as a suicide, Gellert never did. For the rest of his life he adamantly insisted Ernest had been murdered. Gellert's specific counter-theories regarding the details of Ernest's death were not recorded. He may have argued that the suicide note was a forgery, or part of a morbid, introspective journal entry or a letter that was taken out of context. After all, nowhere does the note actually say "I am going to shoot myself for the following reasons..." Rather, it presents the—perhaps theoretical—notion that his death may possibly protect others. Gellert could have seen the final line "if I succeed, I give my life willingly" not as a definitive statement, but more as an exploration of the concept. Since nothing follows, Gellert may have speculated that the document was not at all a suicide note, but in fact, a section that was physically cut out of a longer document. Perhaps there were following lines that read, "if I don't succeed, my death will be a waste. Therefore I must continue to live and work for the betterment of mankind despite my immediate hardship."

We can never know for sure what convinced Gellert that Ernest did not take his

⁵⁴ Ernest L. Meyer, *"Hey Yellowbacks!" The War Diary of a Conscientious Objector*, NY: The John Day Company, 1930, 59.

own life. In the end his opinion was most likely not based on a reasoned analysis of facts and evidence. Gellert claimed Ernest could not have killed himself because “he was confined, and he never had a rifle. And going to the mess hall and the lavatory –the two places he was allowed to go—he was always accompanied by a guard.”⁵⁵ However, according to Nelles’ account, Ernest lived under those conditions while awaiting court martial in the Aviation Camp at Garden City, but after he was moved to Fort Hancock he “was allowed freedom of the post.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, at the root of Gellert’s insistence that Ernest was the victim of foul play was simply his conviction that “the stuff he was made of was not for suicide.”⁵⁷ In other words, Ernest could not have killed himself because Ernest could not have killed himself. Because this circular logic is not a rational line of reasoning, it suggests an unwillingness to accept a difficult truth. It suggests a perception quite possibly affected by trauma. Certainly Gellert’s lifelong devotion to the Communist Party and his adamant defense of the Soviet Union had an ideological base. But on another level, his uncompromising zealotry, his inability—or refusal—to find fault with the Party or condemn it in any way, may have been motivated in part by compulsion stemming from the trauma of his brother’s suicide.

Since Gellert adopted such an extremist orientation it is worth pursuing this line of thought further. Though generally not as severe as the loss of a child or spouse, the loss of a younger sibling is an exceptionally difficult psychological

⁵⁵ Sequenzia interview.

⁵⁶ Nelles, *A Liberal in Wartime*, op. cit., 126.

⁵⁷ Hugo Gellert, “My Brother Ernest,” In Deák, ed., *Noble Flame*, op. cit., 79.

experience. Gellert would have suffered a terribly deep wound. If on an unconscious level Gellert believed Ernest did commit suicide, feelings of anger at—and betrayal by—Ernest would have been natural, as would have survivor guilt and a sense of responsibility for failing to protect his younger brother. Significantly, Gellert's nephew Don Gellert recalled that his grandmother (Hugo's and Ernest's mother) Katicza believed that it was in fact Hugo, not Ernest, who led the two brothers towards their uncompromising anti-war position.⁵⁸ Through devout allegiance to Communist ideology, Gellert may have acquired the ability to remain close to his brother, and to externalize, direct, and control of the pain, rage and other unresolved emotions.

For Gellert, it was easy to see Ernest's treatment and death in direct contrast to contemporary events in Russia. After all, Russian soldiers who, like Ernest, refused to obey orders to fight for the government were the driving force behind the revolution. The successful Bolshevik Revolution and Ernest's catastrophic battle with the American military system took place virtually simultaneously. There is evidence that the two events remained inextricably fused in Gellert's mind. He himself made the connection at the very end of his life when he recalled visiting his brother in the Aviation Camp at Garden City. "On one of the visits Ernest showed me a newspaper clipping. It showed Lenin's ten-point program, which began with, 'Peace, Bread and Land....' It was the first time we heard about Lenin."⁵⁹ Until then they were under the impression that Trotsky would be

⁵⁸ Telephone conversation with Don Gellert, October 15, 2002.

⁵⁹ Hugo Gellert, "My Brother Ernest," in Deák ed., *Noble Flame*, op. cit., 79.

the leader. Most likely this newspaper clipping was the front page of the November 9, 1917 socialist *New York Call*. Beneath the headline—which first proclaimed “Kerenski, Deposed by Bolsheviki, Flees as Radicals Rule,” then affirmed “Immediate Peace Aim of Counter Revolution”—a few paragraphs into the article, Gellert and his brother would have read, “summing up its aims in a proclamation to the troops at the front, the new regime says in its proclamation ‘Soldiers for peace, for bread, for land and for the power of the people.’” Not until the very bottom of the front-page column would they have learned,

N. Lenine [sic.] has reappeared and to the plank of the new government, ‘immediate democratic peace,’ he suggested two additions:
‘Offer of an armistice to the belligerents.’
‘Settlement of the economic crisis.’⁶⁰

To the Gellert brothers, who were facing what was certainly a dismal prognosis for Ernest’s case, this discovery that somewhere socialist theory was being put into practice would have offered hope. Lenin and Trotsky ended the war for Russia and proposed a way out of the stalemate for the remaining belligerents. If the Bolsheviks could do it in Russia, then it could be done elsewhere, even in the United States. Ernest suffered the fate he did because the United States of America was not ready in 1918. But, Gellert never abandoned faith that if a new American Revolution could topple the capitalist system, a period of peace and true democracy would emerge. In Gellert’s mind Ernest was an early casualty in this revolution, and every subsequent action or stance in service of it would justify his effort. Gellert declared as much in the dedication to his ambitious 1932

⁶⁰ “Kerenski, Deposed by Bolsheviki, Flees as Radicals Rule Russia,” *New York Call* (November 9, 1917), 1.

sixty-two-lithograph portfolio *Karl Marx Capital in Pictures*, which he produced to make the Marxist doctrine accessible to Americans. Quoting Marx's original dedication, "to the Memory of my dear friend Wilhelm Wolff, bold and faithful champion of the proletarian cause, born at Tarnau on June 21, 1809, died in exile at Manchester on May 9, 1864,"⁶¹ Gellert's dedication read, "to the memory of my very dear brother Ernest Gellert, brave and faithful soldier of the proletarian cause, born at Budapest on January 12, 1896, died in military confinement at Fort Hancock, N.J. on March 8 [sic.], 1918."⁶²

Others in Gellert's community also took an interest in Ernest for both personal and political reasons. John Reed returned from Russia shortly after Ernest's death. Gellert recalled meeting him by chance on a Greenwich Village street. "Jack didn't even stop to say hello. He just wanted to know all about my brother."⁶³ Though Reed never used Ernest's story in print, another of Gellert's *Masses* colleagues did. Maurice Becker—who served four months incarcerated in Ft. Leavenworth prison as a socialist conscientious objector—made a series of anti-war lithographs that focused on the persecution of Americans who refused to obey military authority. One of the prints is titled *Four Hours in the Snow—Ernest Gellert Before His Suicide* (fig. 1.32). A combination of episodes from Ernest's military diary, the image depicts a gaunt boy, coatless and shivering, as he

⁶¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, NY: International Publisher, 1929, translated from the 4th German edition by Eden & Cedar Paul.

⁶² Hugo Gellert, *Karl Marx Capital in Pictures*, Ray Long and Richard R. Smith, NY, 1934. Gellert apparently misremembered the month of Ernest's death. Ernest died on April 8th not March 8th.

⁶³ Kisseloff ed., *You Must Remember This*, op. cit., 450.

stands barefoot within a circle outlined in the snow. A heavysset uniformed soldier with a rifle guards him.

The Ernest tragedy had an impact on Gold as well. He ultimately attributed to it his decision to flee to Mexico rather than face conscription. "Finally I decided to get out of my country," he recounted,

It was the murder of Ernest Gellert—they called it a suicide—but was it not murder to have put him in a prison cell, a solitary prison cell for four months, or keeping [sic.] him out in the freezing weather standing in the prison yard in his underwear. They persecuted him and harassed him and had him up for long sneering questionnaires and the like.⁶⁴

According to Gellert, Ernest's death made him more determined than ever to oppose the war. Like Gold, rather than face conscription, he fled to Mexico. Gellert entered Mexico alone from California. According to one of his accounts, he remained in Mexicali— in Baja California just across the border with the United States—living with friendly Indian peasants and working in cotton fields on an irrigation project and as a picker. He apparently also traveled to other parts of Mexico and had some contact with fellow "slacker" Gold. In the 1960s Gold spoke about his Mexican experience. He crossed into Mexico from El Paso, Texas, with his friend Owen Cattell. They traveled to Mexico City, Guadalajara, and the oil fields of Tampico.⁶⁵ However, nowhere did he mention Gellert. Perhaps their contact was brief or uneventful. More likely, since Gold recorded this chronicle in the post-McCarthy, Vietnam era he purposefully did not mention

⁶⁴ Michael Gold interview by Michael Folsom, June 3, 1966, Michael Gold papers, Labadie Collection, Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

the names of his prominent living Communist friends. Yet Gellert and Gold did have some contact in Mexico. In one published source Gellert mentioned,

by Christmas, 1919, I was back in New York. I looked up Mike Gold, who was also back. He'd written a play about Mexico: "La Fiesta." Sampson Rafaelson, a young playwright, had a play on Broadway at that time. I showed Mike's play to him. He was excited about it and with an advance payment, took an option on it. I was tickled to be able to reciprocate for the help Mike gave me, when I was in need in Mexico.⁶⁶

The nature of this assistance remains unclear. In Mexico City Gold worked for socialist paper *Heraldo de Mexico*, which featured an English language page. He was friendly with a community of American draft evaders and expatriates, including the journalist Carleton Beales (1893-1979). From this position Gold would have been in a situation to help Gellert find work, a place to stay, or provide financial assistance.

Gellert returned to the United States at the very end of the 1910s. The decade had been a formative period for him. As it opened he was a young art student at the academy, yearning to continue his studies in France. The First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution replaced that desire with socialist notions of class struggle. These new ideals contributed to a new understanding of the role art could play in society. His involvement with radical leftist press, and especially, the loss of his brother, led him in the direction he would pursue for the rest of his life.

⁶⁶ Hugo Gellert, "Hugo Gellert as Teacher," Zoltán Deák, James Lustig, and Norma Rogers eds., *Hugo Gellert: Artist, Educator, Organizer*, NY: Hugo Gellert Testimonial Committee, 1981, 6.

CHAPTER TWO COMMUNIST MODERNISM

When Gellert returned to New York from Mexico at the end of 1919 he needed work and a place to live. He was not merely coming home from a long adventure in a foreign country. He was, technically, a fugitive. Though the war had ended a year earlier, the accompanying wave of anti-radicalism had not subsided. Rather, it had increased. The left's outspokenness during the war caught the attention of government officials, who, now that the war was over, could turn their full attention to ridding the land of subversives. A program of government-sponsored raids and anti-alien drives was carried out against well-known radical organizations and individuals. The Communist Party in the United States was formed at a meeting of the Socialist Party in Chicago on September 1st, 1919, which ended with a split into two rival parties, the Communist Party of America, and the Communist Labor Party of America, both of which operated in the open. Therefore, Communists were easy targets for governmental investigative committees. The first large-scale raid took place in New York on November 8, 1919—the same month Gellert returned—under the aegis of the Joint Legislative Committee Investigating Seditious Activities, chaired by New York State Senator Clayton R. Lusk. According to American Communist Party historian Theodore Draper, the operation involved over 700 police and special agents who swooped down on headquarters and meetings, carried away tons of papers and literature, and hauled off hundreds of people. About

seventy-five were prosecuted, including such well known Communists as Benjamin Gitlow and James J. Larkin (of the Communist Labor party) and Charles E. Ruthenberg, I.E. Ferguson, and Harry Winitsky (of the Communist Party). The first four were indicted for publishing the Left Wing Manifesto in the defunct *Revolutionary Age* four months earlier, before the Communist parties were formed. The New York Communists went underground immediately after these raids. The parties operated more or less openly in the rest of the country for about two months longer.¹

The Lusk raid ushered in what historian Frederick Lewis Allen described as an “era of lawless and disorderly defense of law and order, of unconstitutional defense of the Constitution, of suspicion and civil conflict—in a very literal sense, a reign of terror.”² On January 2nd 1920, and then again on January 5th, the infamous Palmer raids commenced in thirty-three cities. Over the next two years thousands of arrests were made and hundreds of aliens, particularly Russians, suspected of radical political activities were expelled. The most famous of these deportees were the outspoken anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman.

The United States of the post-war years was a society that did not tolerate revolutionaries. Therefore, when Gellert was approached with an opportunity that solved both his immediate problems, he readily accepted. Michael Gold, who had been an anarchist before learning about communism, told him about the predominantly anarchist community in rural Stelton, New Jersey. Gellert recalled. “I had just come back from California after slacking during the war in Mexico. Mike said, ‘I think you’d be good with kids, and they need an art teacher at

¹ Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, NY: Viking Press, 1957, 203.

² Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday*, NY: Harper, 1931, 39.

Stelton.”³ Gellert was not an anarchist. Though he did not officially join the Communist Party until 1934, he considered himself a Communist since the Bolshevik revolution, when he and Ernest first learned about Lenin. Eventually, Gellert would grow hostile to anarchist philosophy, however in the early 1920s anarchists, socialists, Communists all shared the common goal of a working class revolution against capitalism, and—to a greater or lesser degree—all were menaced by the government’s anti-sedition committees. As *The Masses* and *The Liberator* demonstrated, it was possible for radicals of differing philosophies to work together, despite the more than occasional ideological dispute. Located near New Brunswick, Stelton provided the ideal underground refuge for Gellert to live and work. He remained art instructor there from 1920 through 1922 until the post-war period of very aggressive governmental campaigns against radicals subsided (figs. 2.1-2.2).

The Stelton colony grew out of the Ferrer Center established in New York by the anarchists Emma Goldman (1869-1940), Alexander Berkman (1870-1936), Harry Kelly (1871-1953) and Leonard Abbott (1878-1953) in 1910. The Center was named in honor of the Catalanian libertarian educator Francisco Ferrer (1859-1909), whose *Escuela Moderna* (Modern School) operated as an independent pre-school in Barcelona from 1901 until Spanish authorities forced it to close in 1906. A follower of Russian anarchist Bakunin, Ferrer believed that state-run education programs were designed to, and succeeded in training children to

³ Hugo Gellert, interview by Paul Avrich, December 28, 1972, in Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996, 242.

submit to authoritarian systems. In order to combat this conditioning, Ferrer developed a preschool based on the theories of Froebel, Kropotkin, Pestolozzi, and Rousseau, which, in historian Paul Avrich's words,

aimed to do away with the formality and discipline of the conventional classroom, the restrictions and regulations that suppressed individual development and divided education from play. Anti-coercive and anti-authoritarian, it stressed the dignity and rights of the child, encouraging warmth, love, and affection in place of conformity and regimentation.⁴

In July 1909, Ferrer was arrested as the mastermind behind a series of uprisings in Barcelona. He was found guilty and executed by firing squad on October 13th of that year. It was a death that radicals, free thinkers, and liberals throughout the world understood as nothing less than state-sponsored murder. The name Ferrer became synonymous with the struggle to break from the self-perpetuating system that encouraged obedience over freedom, subjection over autonomy.

New York's Ferrer Center, located in upper Manhattan on East 107th Street, was a hotbed of social dissent and a hub of anarchist culture. The Center functioned as a meeting place for various revolutionary organizations such as the New York Mexican Revolutionary Committee, and the New York branch of the Syndicalist League, as well as a shelter for the children of striking workers.⁵ Furthermore, the Ferrer Center was a cultural center. It held free concerts, staged theatrical events, and provided a variety of free classes, such as courses in English, French, and Esperanto, open to students of all ages, and maintained a rich

⁴ Paul Avrich, *The Modern School Movement*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980, 7.

⁵ See Alan Antliff, "Carl Zigrosser and the Modern School: *Nietzsche, Art, and Anarchism*," *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 34, no. 4, (1994), 22 n. 10; and Harry Kelly, "Short History of the Ferrer Association," *Modern School I* (Autumn 1914), 9-10.

schedule of public lectures on art, literature, music, theater, politics, and other contemporary issues by renowned figures including Clarence Darrow, Emma Goldman, Sadakichi Hartmann, Hippolyte Havel, Jack London, Scott Nearing, and Upton Sinclair. The artists Robert Henri and George Bellows set up a life-drawing workshop there, which was known for its sharply anti-academic approach to figure drawing. One of their students, Man Ray—who attended the Ferrer Center from 1911-1915—recalled Henri “was against what most people were for and for what most people were against.”⁶ Rather than evaluating student’s work according to established standards, Henri would make “gentle, encouraging remarks, but never touched the drawings or criticized adversely.”⁷

Concurrent with the Ferrer Center’s role as a site for political and cultural activities such as these, it also housed a Ferrer Modern School for pre-school age children. Initially starting downtown (first on St. Marks Place and then on East 12th Street) the growing Modern School became incorporated into the 107th street complex in October 1912. In May 1915 increasing anti-leftist sentiment and the need for larger quarters caused the Modern School to relocate once again. They acquired one hundred and forty acres of farmland in Stelton, NJ and moved there. A group of urban, working class instructors, children and parents now became homesteaders. What was formerly one of Manhattan’s most important revolutionary support centers and counter-cultural clubs began the difficult

⁶ Man Ray, *Self-Portrait*, NY and London: Andre Deutsch, 1963, 23. Quoted in Francis M. Naumann, “Man Ray and the Ferrer Center: Art and Anarchy in the Pre-Dada Period,” in Rudolf Kuenzle ed., *New York Dada*, NY: Willis Locker & Owens, 1986, (11).

⁷ Man Ray, *Self-Portrait*, op. cit., 22-23; Naumann, “Man Ray and the Ferrer Center,” op. cit., 14.

transformation into an alternative, utopian community, unbound from the restrictions of American society and based on the liberating principles of anarchism. In the spring of 1921 Michael Gold described the community's growth and the hardships they endured.

There is a big school and about three hundred of the comrades scratching out a hardscrabble living there. Visitors come expecting a rosy millennium. The colony started in that spirit, but the visitors find weird tar paper shacks, fantastic in architecture as futuristic drawing, muddy roads, papers and tin cans littering the crossroads at the entrance to the colony; also intensely human scandals, rumors and jealousies as thick as mosquitoes and almost as plentiful as in any other closely knit community.⁸

At the heart of the community was the Modern School, under the directorship of Elizabeth ("Auntie") (1857-1944) and Alexis ("Uncle") (1870-1971) Ferrer. As Ferrer did in Barcelona, the Ferrers regarded the existing pre-school system in the United States as harmful to healthy development because it employed "the social tools of fear and shame" to engender conformity.⁹ These tactics bred either over-compensative, exploitative tendencies, or more commonly the inverse, mistrust, self-doubt, and submissiveness. At the Stelton Modern School the Ferrers enacted the proposals of late nineteenth century German educator Friedrich Froebel, who asserted that education

should be far more passive and following than categorical and prescriptive; for by the full application of the latter mode of education we should wholly lose the pure, the sure and steady progressive development of mankind...where self-evident, living, absolute truth rules...(the child) will maintain a passive following

⁸ Michael Gold, "A Little Bit of Millennium," *The Liberator* (March, 1921), 12.

⁹ Elizabeth Ferrer, "License in Education," in *The Spirit of Freedom in Education*, Stelton, NJ: The Modern School Press, 1919, 10.

character. For the living thought...demands and requires free self-activity and self-determination on the part of man.¹⁰

Froebel contended that independent, creative play was the path towards the development of healthy, independent minds. Therefore, arts and crafts, poetry, and drama were a very important part of the Modern School program. "We did not regard Art in terms of dancing, music or acting," wrote Elizabeth Ferm. "We recognized art as self expression, as a revelation of the spirit projected outwardly."¹¹

Indeed, Gellert's workshop seems to have observed this method. His instruction did not involve any kind of standardized art training. Rather, it consisted of passive guidance. Like Henri before him, Gellert "just encouraged them, praised their work, and they began to produce beautiful things."¹² He set out the supplies, organized the workspace, and "everyone painted what he fancied, the sky and beyond was the limit."¹³ Without regulation and discipline the situation did not degrade into chaos. In fact, as he lovingly described, the painting workshop was a paradigm of cooperation.

In the spring, we had a long table placed on the porch and the children, five to fifteen years old, sat at both sides of its length. Quart jars of tempera colors were lined up between the two rows of children. You would hear a five-year old, sitting near the end of the table: "Please pass the 'magenta,'" or some other color that might be at the other end. He or she knew all the colors by name, some

¹⁰ Friedrich Froebel, *The Education of Man*, New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1887, 10-11.

¹¹ Elizabeth Ferm, "Creative Work at the Modern School," undated, unpublished manuscript in The Modern School Collection, Special Collections Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

¹² Hugo Gellert, in Avrigh, *Modern School*, op. cit., 242.

¹³ Ibid.

before they'd learned to read. And with the children using them, the colors remained pure and clear to the very bottom of the jars.¹⁴

Michael Gold recalled an even less formal arrangement. Gellert would

come down in his bare feet, old cotton shirt and corduroy trousers, and sit down at a big table on the school porch and start to draw something. Ten or twelve kids would grab paper and crayons and follow his example. They would draw anything they wanted to. Some would draw the trees standing on the lawn; others would sketch Hugo, or their pals; some would sketch Fred, the horse, from memory, or Mike, the poor old hound who had attached himself to the school; or they would just draw imaginatively, from the emotions, innocently, with the primitive sweetness and truth we all have forgotten in this tangled age.¹⁵

This lack of formality was part of a well-considered, calculated method designed to encourage free thought. Gellert deliberately did not prescribe sets of rules in order to accustom children to making their own decisions, rather than learning to rely on an authority figure to dictate behavior.

Though the objective was not to create great artists, but to allow children to develop a healthy, well-defined, independent sense of self, the results of the art program impressed the Stelton adults. Subsequently, they organized the Ferrer School Art Exhibition, which took place at the Civic Club in Manhattan in November 1921. The show generated critical attention. The mainstream *New York Sunday World* reviewed it in a color, double page spread. Gellert maintained that Alfred Stieglitz, upon visiting the Civic Club asked him "what did you do to them? Every one of them is a genius!"¹⁶ Through his lavish praise it is

¹⁴ Hugo Gellert "Hugo Gellert as Teacher," in Hugo Gellert Testimonial Committee, *Hugo Gellert: Artist, Educator, Organizer*, op. cit., 6.

¹⁵ Gold, "Millennium," op. cit.

¹⁶ Gellert in Avrich, *Modern School*, op. cit., 242.

clear Stieglitz did not necessarily appreciate the context of anarchist education in which the works were created. The objective was not to create great artists, rather to encourage independent thought. However Floyd Dell—who was intimately familiar with the aims of the Stelton colony— did understand. In *The Liberator* he wrote,

Whether the children who are doing beautiful things in the Ferrer School art class are going to grow up to be artists, I have no idea. Some of them have so much artistic talent that I suppose they will become artists. The aspect of the exhibit interests me less than perhaps it should. I am less concerned with these pictures as the products of young artists than as the products of happy children.¹⁷

For Gellert, children's happiness and creativity were intertwined. In the *New York Sunday World* he described the experience of one of the older children, a sixteen-year-old named William Pogrebysky.

Now this boy studied at the National Academy of Design in New York. In a whole year he made six drawings. He was depressed there, felt the constraint of the 'teachers,' the insistence on 'formula,' on 'technique.' The supervision shielded him and made him sterile. Then he came out to us. We do not teach at the Modern School, in the way teaching is understood in other schools. We only give a boy or girl the utmost freedom of feeling, the greatest liberty of action within the community. In a week Pogrebysky had changed amazingly. He was at work, happy, without thinking of rules, schedules, so much to be turned out for inspection. And in six months he had done these wonderful things you see here.¹⁸

During his 1920-1922 residency at Stelton Gellert discovered that the children not only benefited from him, but also working with them—in the art class, and designing scenery for the Stelton Players—had an affect on his own practice. He attributed to their influence his introduction of playful, whimsical imagery into his

¹⁷ Floyd Dell, "Would You Like to be a Child?," *The Liberator* (November 1921), 22.

¹⁸ Hugo Gellert interviewed by Louis Bernheimer, in "Hands off the Child Artist," *New York Sunday World Magazine* (November 6, 1921), 4.

work. Children's art provided another means for him to further develop his anti-academic style. Like his young William Pogrebysky, at Stelton Gellert found an antidote to academicism. "I learned from the children," he acknowledged. "I was an academic product, and with them I loosened up completely."¹⁹ He assimilated the children's influence into his work. His cover for the December 1920 *Liberator*—which depicted a sword-wielding infant battling a dragon—was based on the theater curtain he and the children designed and executed for the Stelton Players (figs. 2.3). To the spindly-legged deer, and elegant goat families, familiar to *The Masses* and *The Liberator* readers, he now added colorful fish and birds; heroic figures, and mythological creatures, such as dragons, winged horses, naked angels, and putti-like toddlers who could stand erect and gracefully hold and manipulate objects, whether pieces of fruit or weapons, such as a sword or a bow and arrow (fig. 2.4). Gellert's draftsmanship became less refined; he experimented with color, using an unconventional, at times confectionary palette that included creamy purples, minty greens, bubble gum pinks and egg custard yellows.

Though this new subject matter may have employed tropes of the undisciplined, innocent eye, Gellert's intention was not to design nursery decoration. What he responded to in the children was their sense of discovery, of facing what is familiar and commonplace in the adult mind, as something fresh, new, and exciting, with endless possibilities. All children may have this potential. But the guiding principle observed at the Stelton Modern School was to enable children

¹⁹ Gellert in Avrich, *Modern School*, op. cit., 242.

to retain the ability to experience situations, ideas, and opinions with uncontaminated minds as they developed into adulthood. In the early 1920s this pure, uncorrupted quality appealed to both the modern artist and the political revolutionary in Gellert. From a political stance, the notion that a child considers its surroundings and experiences as fresh and limitless was an appropriate metaphor for the new world being created in the crucible of revolution.

On a technical level, Gellert saw a rawness in children's drawings, an inelegance, a way of further distancing himself from his academic training. As an institution, the academy represented the prevailing taste, which was dictated by the ruling class. To be a product of the academy was to uphold the *status quo*. The avant-garde was revolutionary. Therefore, Gellert's development as a modern artist required a further eradication of the academy's influence. He began rejecting academic aesthetics as soon as he left the National Academy of Design in 1914, via the Viennese Secession and Hungarian folk art. Young Gellert may have even begun his rebellion while still in attendance. He was evidently a gifted student and excelled in many ways, winning numerous prizes for instance, yet his record also indicates that he was temporarily suspended in 1913 for "not submitting drawings at examination."²⁰ Though the circumstances surrounding this failure to present final drawings are not known, because he demonstrated that he was more than capable of rising to the rigors of the program, it is an action that suggests a certain bohemian attitude of disrespect for authority. The Secessionist and folk art inspired *Masses* graphics demonstrate an initial move

²⁰ Gellert file, National Academy of Design archives.

away from outmoded standards. However, as significant as that gesture is, at the same time the designs do employ many traditional formal devices. For instance, though the two 1916 nudes first reproduced in *The Masses* are a step away from academic art, Gellert did rely on his schooling in life drawing, and composition (see chapter 1 figs. 1.14-1.15). Faithful to *The Masses* oath to have “no respect for the respectable,” they are a bit cheeky, and challenge prevailing, conservative American values. But they also are clearly the product of an academically trained artist. An air of refinement comes through despite Gellert’s effort to coarsen the expression through the medium of linocut. Through his attention to children’s art in the early 1920s, Gellert found a way of more thoroughly distancing himself from the academy.

The precedent of artists purging themselves of conventional aesthetics by emulating the pure, authentic, uncontaminated visual expressions of children was set by the European modernists; The Blaue Reiter group, Picasso, and of course Matisse. Gellert certainly knew these artists’ work. He would have also found those in his immediate circle, who were concerned with a similar approach to modernism. In January 1919 *Liberator* writer Louise Bryant (1885-1936) wrote,

in Russia even children’s art is taken seriously. In Petrograd was published a monthly magazine called *Our Magazine*. All the stories, poems and illustrations were done by children under twelve years of age. And they were done beautifully!²¹

Chief among the American artists important to Gellert’s development, whose ideas were shaped by the modernist view of children’s art were the husband and

²¹ Louise Bryant, “Art For American Children,” *Playboy*, vol.1, no. 1 (January 1919), 11.

wife William (1897-1966) and Marguerite (1887-1968) Zorach. The Zorachs were part of a larger group including Ada Gilmore Chaffee (1883-1955), Charles Demuth (1883-1935), Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), Edna Boies Hopkins (1872-1937), Blanche Lazzell (1878-1956), Ethel Mars (1876-1956), B.J.O. (Bror Julius Olsson) Nordfeldt (1878-1955), Maud Hunt Squire (1873-1954) who converged on the artists' colony of Provincetown, Massachusetts in the spring and summer of 1915. A number of these artists lived and worked in Paris before the First World War. There, Marguerite painted a portrait of Leo Stein. She and William met Picasso at Gertrude Stein's salon, and just before the opening of the *Salon des Indépendants*, watched "Matisse putting the final touches to his big painting *The Red Interior*." ²² Mars and Squire enjoyed a particularly close friendship with Stein, whose word portrait *Miss Furr and Miss Skeene* is based on them. ²³ Through Stein, they too were acquainted with Picasso and Matisse. When these Americans were forced home by the war, they brought with them a working knowledge of many of the advances of the Parisian avant-garde, particularly those of Matisse and the Fauves.

Some of these Provincetown artists were involved with the experimental theater group the Provincetown Players. Formed in the summer of 1915 by New York playwrights George Cram ("Jig") Cook (1873-1924), Susan Glaspell (1876-1948), Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), – and aspiring playwrights Floyd Dell, Max

²² William Zorach, *Art is My Life: The Autobiography of William Zorach*, Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1967, 24.

²³ See Catherine Ryan, *Trés Complémentaires: The Art and Lives of Ethel Mars and Maud Hunt Squire*, Mary Ryan Gallery and Susan Sheehan Gallery, 2000.

Eastman, John Reed, Louise Bryant, and Mary Heaton Vorse (1873-1966), the Provincetown Players came into being partly because existing theater companies were too conservative to perform Cook's plays, and partly as a bit of experimental, anarchistic-bohemian summer fun. Nordfeldt and William Zorach acted in the Players' first productions during the summer of 1915. William and Marguerite collaborated on set designs.²⁴ When the group returned to New York after the following summer of 1916, The Provincetown Players transformed themselves into a more organized company. Their performance space, the Playwrights Theatre, was hardly a proper theater. The troupe

converted the parlor floor of a Greenwich Village brownstone on MacDougal Street into a theater. The apartment was divided into two sections, the rear used for a stage, while visitors sat in the front where brown wooden benches, accommodating about 150 customers, were laid out in tiers. Admittance to The Playwrights' Theatre, legally a private club, was by subscription only in order to avoid the city's housing and fire regulations for commercial theaters.²⁵

It is not known if Gellert actually visited Provincetown during the late 1910s. But he traveled with the Provincetown Players crowd in Greenwich Village. His circle not only included his close friend Mike Gold—two of whose plays were staged in

²⁴ In addition to these artists Charles Demuth and a surprising variety of lesser-known artists, including Gellert, were associated with the Provincetown Players. For instance, Harry Gottlieb, who, like Gellert, became a co-founder of the John Reed Club in the late 1920s, and was known for his agitational activities and Social Realist paintings and prints during the 1930s, designed a set for the Spring 1921 performance of Cloyd Head's *Grotesque* and appeared in bit parts in at least two Provincetown Players productions; the January 1921 performance of *The Spring* by George Cram Cook, and the March 1922 performance of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. (See *The Quill: A Magazine of Greenwich Village*, vol.9, no. 5 (May 1921), 19, and Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau, *The Provincetown: A Story of the Theatre*, NY: Russell and Russell, 1972, 245-255).

²⁵ Arthur Frank Wertheim, *The New York Little Renaissance: Iconoclasm, Modernism, and Nationalism in American Culture, 1908-1917*, NY: New York University Press, 1976, 157.

New York by the Provincetown Players in 1917, and one in Provincetown in the summer of 1920—but also the older *Masses/Liberator* writers Dell, Eastman, Bryant, Reed, and Vorse. Gellert would have certainly known the artists involved with the Provincetown Players who lived in the Village, such as Nordfeldt and the Zorachs. Marguerite Zorach's linoleum cut, *Provincetown Players*, was used for a poster advertising the company's 1916 season, and her related backdrop for Bryant's morality play *The Game*, which featured a "decorative and abstract pattern of the sea, trees, the moon, and the moon path," adorned the front of the MacDougal Street theater for many years (fig. 2.5).²⁶ William Zorach's graphics were highly visible as well. His linocut *Sailing in Provincetown* was featured on the June 1918 cover of the literary journal *The Quill: A Magazine of Greenwich Village* (fig. 2.6). His work appeared sporadically in subsequent issues throughout the 1920s. William and Marguerite Zorach's designs were also often reproduced in *Playboy*, the art and literature quarterly published irregularly from 1919 through 1924 by Washington Square Book Shop owner Egmont Arens (1888-1966).

A well-known Village literary figure, Arens published the works of a variety of poets including Josephine Bell (1897-19??), Alfred Kreymborg (1883-1966), Minna Loy (1882-1966), and even the painter Marsden Hartley (1877-1943) in *Playboy*. Arens not only promoted the better-known American modernist artists such as the Zorachs, Gaston Lachaise (1882-1935), Abraham Walkowitz (1880-1965), and Max Weber (1881-1961), he also reproduced paintings by Gauguin,

²⁶ Zorach, *Art is My Life*, op. cit., 46.

British Vorticist C.R.W. Nevinson (1889-1946), examples of Russian Futurist embroidery, articles on children's art, an etching by Matisse, and Rembrandt's drawings. Moreover, Arens championed Gellert and other young less-established artists such as Gellert's fellow Hungarians, Ilonka Karasz (1896-1981) and Zoltan Hecht (1890-1968), as well as Rockwell Kent (1882-1971), William Gropper, and Winold Reiss (1886-1953). He showed their prints, drawings, and designs on the pages of *Playboy*, and even held exhibitions in his renowned bookshop at 27 West 8th Street.

As a Greenwich Village artist Gellert was certainly acquainted with the modernist Greenwich Village/Provincetown artists during the late 1910s. But he was not receptive to their influence until the early 1920s. Through the Secession, Hungarian folk designs, and children's art Gellert succeeded in liberating himself from the restrictions of reactionary, academic approaches to art. In the early 1920s Gellert himself became involved with the Provincetown Players. He may have been involved as early as 1920 when, according to Arthur Moss, publisher of *The Quill* "every Tuesday night at the Provincetown Theatre, the Hungarian Players under the sponsorship of Ilonka Karasz and Ilona Fulop, two charming Magyarettes, present one act plays in their native tongue."²⁷ It is worth speculating that Gellert was involved with these productions. He was very interested in Hungarian-language theater at this time. Not only did he begin illustrating the *Színházi Ujság* (*Hungarian Theatrical Journal*) in 1921 (fig. 2.7)

²⁷ Arthur Moss, "Mister Moss Gets By Without Paying," *The Quill*, vol. 7, no. 7 (December 1920), 26.

but also Gellert designed and painted scenery for plays performed by the Elöre Group of Players (also called the Elöre Amateur Club). Under the direction of Hungarian playwrights Andor Garvay—who became stranded in New York by the outbreak of the First World War—and his colleague Lajos Egri (1888-1967), one-act plays were staged in New York, then in industrial New Jersey towns with large Hungarian communities. Gellert traveled with the scenery by truck, and served as a member of the production crew, helping transform the stage between acts while master of ceremonies Garvay amused the audience.²⁸

There is a much clearer connection between Gellert and the Provincetown Players a few years later in the decade. Gellert designed a poster for Eugene O'Neill's 1924 *All God's Chillun' Got Wings*, and produced portraits of O'Neill, Paul Robeson, George Cram "Jig" Cook, and later in the 1920s, of his friend Gold, for Provincetown Players productions (figs. 2.8-2.12).²⁹ It makes sense then that he began to pursue a modernism similar to other artists associated with the Provincetown Players, such as the Zorachs. There is no record of a particular friendship between Gellert and the Zorachs at this time, though correspondence in the 1930s indicates a warm familiarity. Even if they were not friends in the early 1920s, Gellert clearly felt an affinity to William Zorach's graphics in

²⁸ See Hugo Gellert, "The Elöre," in Deák et. al., *Noble Flame*, op. cit. 77-78.

²⁹ The portrait of George Cram Cook was used for the October 31, 1923 pamphlet announcing the Provincetown Players ninth season (Deutsch and Hanau, *The Provincetown*, op. cit. 91-92). The portraits of O'Neill and Robeson portrait were used as publicity material for the October 1924 performance of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. The portrait of Gold was used for the September 1929 performance of Gold's *Fiesta* (Provincetown Players Scrapbooks 1924-1929, New York Public Library, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor Lenox, and Tildon Foundations).

particular. Like Gellert, Zorach worked with children as an art instructor in progressive schools. And like Gellert, Zorach responded to the children's art. As he wrote,

I was eager to work with children and was fascinated by their lack of inhibitions, by the freshness of their imagination and the freedom and spontaneity in their handling of form and color. I learned as much from them as they ever learned from me.... a modern artist's whole idea was to free himself from the academic point of view, to see the world with a view as primitive and unsophisticated as a child and then go on from there to build his own art forms and see color with a new vision. That's what Matisse was doing and what the modern artists were all doing. They were beginning a new world.³⁰

Gellert would have seen such works as William's *Design for a Tapestry* from the January 1919 *Playboy* (vol. 1, no. 1), and Marguerite's large infant painting in the March-April issue (vol. 1, no. 2). Echoes of images such as these seem to reverberate in works of his own, such as the winged horse in the 1923 woodcut cover of *Playboy* (vol. 2, no. 1), and the infant's pose in the c. 1923 painting *Man, Woman, Child* (figs. 2.13-2.16). As in William Zorach's design, Gellert was concerned with the brittle interplay of positive and negative forms, which delineate figures as well as passages of ornate, decorative detail. As in Marguerite's painting, Gellert's kneeling baby dominates the foreground, gesturing symbolically with its arms.

In addition to the liberal art and poetry magazines, which provided space to develop his graphic style, in 1920 Gellert began regularly contributing once again to the more politically engaged journals *The Liberator*, and *Elöre Kepes*

³⁰ William Zorach, *Art is My Life*, op. cit., 73-74.

Folyóirat.³¹ Until its final publication in December 1921 Gellert was *Előre Kepes Folyóirat*'s main artist. During 1921, he often illustrated whole issues, from the covers to the small drawings used to enhance page design. Moreover, an entire page of each issue—usually page nine—was devoted entirely to reproducing one of his works. This gave Gellert a weekly forum to exhibit his graphic art. It was for the most part non-political, figurative modernism, such as the subtly erotic, linear standing nude pencil drawing of December 19, 1920, which owes an obvious debt to Matisse (fig. 2.17).

Through his association with *Előre Képes Folyóirat*, *Előre*, *Uj Előre*, and even *The Masses*, and *The Liberator*, Gellert would have been exposed to the radical artists of the Hungarian avant-garde, the Activists (*Aktivisták*), who advocated political, as well as aesthetic revolution. Formed during the First World War by the poet and Constructivist typographic artist Lajos Kassák (1887-1967), the Activists included other artists of Gellert's generation such as Mihály Bíró (1886-1948), Sándor Bortnyik (1893-1976), Gyula Derkovitz (1894-1934), János Tábor (1890-1956), and Béla Uitz (1887-1972). United in their opposition to the war, the Activist agenda was to create a new art in service of international socialism. At war's end they supported the short-lived Hungarian Communist revolution of 1919 led by Béla Kun. The Activists sought to reach the working class, as well as intellectuals advocating the media of mass production, particularly the poster and the little magazine. Kassák declared painters should learn from the poster artist.

³¹ Gellert's drawings began appearing in *the Liberator* again with his cover of the February 1920 issue, and in *Előre Kepes Folyóirat* on September 19, 1920

We desire with all our hearts that just as the poster is a magnificent compliment to the modern town, the picture too should fill our room with a life outside us, one that subdues all industrial objects; and as posters jostle for position on the colorful hoardings with their stubborn, world-shattering zest, so let pictures vie with each other in today's musty and soporific exhibitions! ³²

Gellert followed social and political developments in Hungary and he knew about the Activists, and Kassák's journal *Ma* (Today), published from November 1916 to June 1925. ³³ Yet, Gellert was most likely first introduced to Kassák's writings before *MA* was published. In March 1916 *Előre Képes Folyóirat* published Kassák's modernist narrative of childhood *A rossz emlékek közül* (Several of the Bad Memories), which told the story of a free spirited woman who rented a room in the home of his narrator's family. *Előre Képes Folyóirat* and its successor *Uj Előre* continued to feature Kassák's poetry throughout the late 1910s and early 1920s. ³⁴ Significantly, these journals also published Hungarian translations of

³² Lajos Kassák, "The Poster and the New Painting," *MA*, vol. I, no. I (November 1916). In Haywood Gallery, *The Hungarian Avant Garde THE EIGHT AND THE ACTIVISTS*, London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1980, 112-113.

³³ Buhle interview, op. cit., 4.

PB: What about those revolutionary artists who were sympathetic with the Béla Kun government, were you related to them in any way?

HG: In a way I was interested. They were modern. There was even a paper called *Today*.

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- "A rossz emlékek közül" (Several of the Bad Memories), *Előre Képes Folyóirat*, vol. I, no. 10, (March 26, 1916), 11-12.
- "Szegény kis gyermek dala" (Poor Little Child's Tune), *Előre Képes Folyóirat*, vol. III, no. 20 (May 12, 1918), 6.
- "A világirodalom fele" (Towards World Literature), *Előre Képes Folyóirat*, vol. VI, no. 11 (March 13, 1921), 6-7.
- "Aktivista művészet és forradalom" (Activist Art and Revolution), *Uj Előre*, (June 2, 1922).
- "Az idő szomorúságában" (In the Sorrow of Time), *Uj Előre*, (June 18, 1922), Magazine Section, 6.
- "Fiatal Munkás" (Young Worker), *Uj Előre*, (July 8, 1922), Section 3, 3.

articles and drawings by Gellert's *Liberator* comrades such as "*A kultura szerepe a munkás társadalomban*" (The Role of Culture in Working Class Society) by Mike Gold (*Előre Képes Folyóirat*, vol. V, no. 6, February 8, 1920), and Maurice Becker's ironic cartoon "*A porosz militarizmus a szabadság földjén*" (Prussian Militarism Means Freedom) (*Előre Képes Folyóirat*, vol. VI, no. 10, March 6, 1921).

Furthermore, through these journals Gellert would have been able to see reproductions of Hungarian Activist art. The December 28, 1919 *Előre Képes Folyóirat* reproduced Uitz's agitational poster *Vörös Katonák Előre* (Red Soldiers Forward) (fig. 2.18). However, examples of Hungarian Activist art and literature were not limited to the Hungarian language press. In the summer of 1919 Crystal Eastman (1881-1928) was invited to Hungary to report on Béla Kun's Communist republic, which followed the Russian Bolshevik example and in March 1919 seized power from the post war liberal pacifist Károlyi government. As the third Communist revolution following the Russian revolution and the failed German Spartakist revolt, Hungary was seen as a domino that could launch a revolutionary chain reaction in Europe. Appearing in August, 1919 Eastman's "In Communist Hungary" explained the inner workings of Kun's revolutionary government and described in detail Activist posters *in situ* in the Budapest streets.

The revolutionary placards are all red, almost wholly one color.
They are everywhere, on every street—enormous sheets many of

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- "Boldog köszöntés" (Happy Greeting), *Uj Előre*, (December 3, 1922), 3.
 - Untitled, 4 stanzas, *Uj Előre*, (February 11, 1923), 6.

them, some good drawings some bad; very daring and simple; all emphatically modern. One is a great bold red figure running with a flag—"To Arms!" There is a soldier charging with a bayonet—"He who is not with us is against us!" "Save the Proletariat," "Defend the Revolution," "Join the Red Guard!"—these are the phrases repeated again and again—but never a word about Hungary, never a note of nationalist appeal (fig. 2.19).³⁵

Non-Hungarian-speaking Americans would have had an opportunity to see an Activist poster before Eastman's vivid description in the *Liberator*. The cover of the July 1916 *Masses* featured Mihály Bíró's red, sledgehammer-wielding figure, which he used repeatedly in a number of graphic projects (fig. 2.20). Gellert's early 1920s gouache study for a *Liberator* cover (never used) depicting a nude red man with a sledgehammer, seems to be a response to this image or Bíró's numerous variations on this theme (fig. 2.21). Bíró's posters from the revolutionary period of 1918/1919 of colossal laborers destroying the old order clearly had an affect on Gellert. Like Bíró's broom wielding giant in *Keleti Ujság* (fig. 2.22), Gellert's May 1921 *Liberator* cover features a peasant sweeping the face of the globe (fig. 2.23). Gellert's cartoon *Just a Look In* (*Liberator*, Vol. 6, No. 8, 1923, p. 6) is compositionally and conceptually similar to Bíró's 1919 poster for the radical political newspaper *Politika* (Politics) (figs. 2.24-2.25). Both picture a tremendous workingman looming over the diminutive domes of government buildings that house the heads of state. In Bíró's case the revolutionary behemoth easily lifts the distinctive neo-gothic roof of the turn of the century Hungarian Parliament building. He literally overpowers the obstruction—symbolized by the architecture of an empire at the height of its pre-

³⁵ Eastman, "In Communist Hungary," *The Liberator* (August 1919), 9.

war power—in order to shed light into the formerly inaccessible space. In Gellert's drawing the enormous proletarian expresses his wish to look inside the United States Capitol. But, because his class does not yet control the machinery of government, the Capitol dome remains a barrier. Throughout his career Gellert continued to find inspiration in Bíró's posters. He used the Activist artist's 1912 anti-war poster *A háború borzalmai ellen...* (Against the Horrors of War) as the source for a lithograph in his 1933 portfolio *Karl Marx Capital in Pictures* (figs. 2.26-2.27). In each image a uniformed skeleton heaves a shovel full of tiny figures, who he has just scooped up from the crowd at his feet, into the back of a cannon. Militarism literally transforms the masses into ammunition.

Through the *Előre Képes Folyóirat* and especially *The Liberator*, Gellert once again became connected with the organized group of politically radical artists and writers attempting to establish a culture of the American revolutionary left. *The Liberator* made an effort to maintain the same irreverent tone of *The Masses*. For instance an advertisement for the 1921 Liberator Costume Ball assured readers that in addition to John Sloan and Maurice Becker, none other than the notoriously conservative sculptor Gutzon Borglum, who in 1915— twelve years before beginning the Mt. Rushmore monument—began a 1,200 foot long relief of Confederate soldiers on a Georgia mountain commissioned by the Ku Klux Klan, would be on hand to judge the contest for best costume. However, where *The Masses* encouraged social and political revolution from a variety of radical perspectives without espousing any one organized ideology, *The Liberator's*

vision became increasingly unified around the Communist Party. *The Liberator's* editors provided their readers with access to ideas, theories, and declarations generated in revolutionary Russia. In January 1919 *The Liberator* printed Lenin's *Message to American Workers*, which called for the revolutionaries to be prepared for the difficult struggle against capitalism, filled with sacrifices and dangers. With Soviet political theory came an increased attention to Soviet revolutionary culture.³⁶

One of the most significant issues for American artists and writers on the left was the debate brought about by the cultural implications of the Bolshevik revolution. The complex and divisive notion of Proletkult (proletarian culture), or the manifestation of a new culture originating from a working class consciousness, which would be distinct from the standards of pre-revolutionary imperial culture. Marxist intellectuals Alexander Bogdonov (1873-1928), Aleksei Gastev (1882-1941), and A. V. Lunacharsky (1875-1933) conceived Proletkult as a way of defining and engineering this new cultural ideal. It was also a means of securing a useful place for intellectuals as instructors in the new revolutionary society. After the revolution, a state subsidy was provided under Proletkult's auspices for theater workshops, art studios, literary circles, and adult education. Lenin opposed the movement. He considered the need for such cultural growth to be a secondary concern in the face of the immediate priorities during the post-revolutionary civil war—or war Communism—period, which were ensuring the

³⁶ See Antoniette Galotola, "From Bohemianism to Radicalism: The Art and Political Context of the 'Liberator.'" Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 2000.

stability of the government and cultivating practical skills. Officially, state-sponsored Proletkult was short-lived. Following the workers revolt in Kronstadt and subsequent sympathy strikes, which challenged the Bolshevik's rule in the spring of 1921, Proletkult lost most of its state support, and was subsumed by the Commissariat of Enlightenment. However, the issues Proletkult embodied lived on through the 1920s, coloring the rhetoric of the Soviet cultural debate, and paving the way for Socialist Realism. After Lenin's death in January 1924, the hard line, Stalinist faction used the Proletkult premise—that true Communist culture must come from the working class—to discredit the intellectual opposition. The hard liners cast suspicion on intellectuals—especially on Leon Trotsky, Stalin's rival as successor to Lenin—declaring their views tainted by the bourgeois precepts.

Trotsky discouraged the attempts to engineer new culture, declaring the Bolshevik Party should only provide the masses with the machinery of government.

The dictatorship of the proletariat is not an organization for the production of the culture of a new society, but a military system struggling for it.... The main task of the proletarian intelligentsia in the immediate future is not the abstract formation of a new culture regardless of the absence of a basis for it, but definite culture bearing, that is, a systematic, planful and, of course, critical imparting to the backwards masses of the essential elements of culture which already exists.³⁷

³⁷ Leon Trotsky, "Literature and Art," 1925. In Lang and Williams eds., *Marxism and Art: Writings in Aesthetics and Criticism*, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 65, 66.

Hard line opposition within the party branded Trotsky a counterrevolutionary for embracing a culture contaminated by bourgeois aesthetics. They pointed to phrases like "backwards masses," in order to show that Trotsky could not sympathize with the populace. Rather, Trotsky's opponents proclaimed he was a privileged product of the bourgeoisie, and as such considered himself superior to the proletariat. During the mid 1920s in the midst of these cultural/political maneuvers American Communists did not necessarily take an active stand against Trotsky. Gold in fact praised him in a number of essays in 1925 and 1926. However, by 1928 when Trotsky was expelled from the Party and sent into exile, American Party members and sympathizers including writers and artists such as Gold, Freeman, and Gellert followed the Stalinized Party line.

In the early part of the decade the bourgeois culture vs. proletarian culture polemic informed *The Liberator's* view on the function of art in what they considered proto-revolutionary America. *The Liberator* became a forum for an American interpretation of, and reaction to the ideas of the Russian Communist Party. In the February 1921 issue of *The Liberator* Michael Gold articulated the distinction between artists of the bourgeoisie and artists of the people. Naturally, Gold pointed to Soviet Russia as the example to follow, using the Proletarian Culture campaign as a paradigm for revolutionary writers and artists in the United States.

The elder artists have all been sick. They have no roots in the people. The art ideals of the Capitalist world isolated each artist as in a solitary cell, there to brood and suffer and silently go mad. We artists of the people will not face life and eternity alone.... Proletcult

(sic.) is Russia's organized attempt to remove the economic barriers and social degradation that repressed that proletarian instinct during the centuries.³⁸

Gellert too had been searching for an approach to art fitting for an "artist of the people." He had been illustrating for the socialist press since 1916, yet despite exceptions—such as the first *Előre Képes Főlyoirat* covers, and the first *Liberator* cover—he did not directly address social and political problems in his early work. Through Gold and the *Liberator* community Gellert was influenced deeply by the concept of Proletkult. Thus, it was not difficult for Gellert to apply his attention to folk-art and the art of children, to the Proletkult ideal of art by untrained workers. Gellert championed this "proletarian instinct" in his lyrical drawing *Proletarian Poet* (*Liberator*, July 1922) (fig. 2.28), which depicts a young working man sitting serenely with clasped hands and closed eyes. As the title suggests, he is a worker, an untrained poet, yet he composes poetry nonetheless. For Gold, Gellert and Proletkultists, in the ideal, new Communist society workers were to control the means of artistic, as well as industrial and agricultural production.

Gellert was from the working class, but as an academically trained artist and professional designer, he himself was not a proletarian artist. Though Gellert traded academicism for modernism, his style of eye-pleasing draughtsmanship did not fit comfortably with the Proletkult grimy paradigm of authenticity. Gellert began to search for the visual counterpart to Gold's literary manifesto. He turned to the Communist political cartoonist—and fellow *Liberator* editor—Robert Minor

³⁸ Michael Gold (Irwin Granich), "Towards Proletarian Art," *The Liberator*, (February, 1921), in Michael Folsom ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, NY: International Publishers, 1972, 66.

(1884-1952) for inspiration. Minor believed that most art produced in bourgeois cultures was *de facto* capitalist propaganda. Therefore the left had to counter it with proletarian propaganda. Working exclusively for the radical press, Minor produced drawings for what he designated "The Poor Man's Art Gallery." Minor taught Gellert, "(the) cartoon, which can reach and move thousands, millions, can be art," he explained. "I learned that art need not be expressed in oils and in paintings alone: it can live in the pages of newspapers..."³⁹ For Gellert, Minor was a heroic figure, whose gritty drawings resulted from physical effort akin to those of a laborer in heavy industry. He exemplified this ideal of the politically enlightened art worker as opposed to the stereotyped effete artist in his ivory tower studio, disengaged from working people. Gellert described,

armed with a jumbo-sized black marking crayon, Bob would grunt and groan as he put all his might into a drawing. When he finished he looked like a gladiator emerging from combat. His drawing, reduced to the barest essentials, verily flashed its message.⁴⁰

Gellert cultivated a technique that was deliberately unsophisticated and started producing dark, dense, heavily crayoned political cartoons. In his political cartoons he adopted Minor's physical, unrefined approach. Gellert's *Angel of the Lords* for example owes a great deal to Minor, whose cartoons such as *Knight of the Round Belly* were regularly featured in *Liberator* centerfolds (figs. 2.39-2.30). However, where Minor rendered form through vigorous chiaroscuro, Gellert used the flat side of a rectangular lithographic crayon bar to achieve the modernist hard edge, implied planes, and simplified geometric structures.

³⁹ Joseph North, "Hugo Gellert: Artist 'in the Liberation War of Humanity'" *The Worker* (April 26, 1953), 11.

⁴⁰ Hugo Gellert, "Poor Man's Art Gallery," *American Dialog* (Spring 1967), 17.

Gellert produced a group of easel paintings during this period that were exhibited in his first one-man show at the Kervorkian Galleries at 40 West 57th Street from May 1st to 31st 1923. Though the whereabouts of most of these paintings is unknown, a number have been placed in collections and some were reproduced in the press. An examination of the exhibition reveals Gellert showed labor themes side by side with more conventional, non-socially conscious modernism such as portraits, and even pure abstraction. This juxtaposition prompted the critic Henry McBride to describe Gellert as "something of a cubist," who "appears to have been touched with Socialism."⁴¹ Gellert equated Communism, modernism, modernization, and mechanization. Traditional, conservative art was not a viable expression of the new world. Modern art was revolutionary because it challenged old world values and celebrated the industrial age. Therefore, to Gellert and many others in the *Liberator* crowd in the early 1920s, modernism was not necessarily in conflict with the Communist notion of Proletkult. Gellert articulated this idea in an interview with the critic Sidney Garfield just before the Kervorkian exhibition.

Those who sigh for the "beauty" of the work of the old masters, when viewing modern art, had they lived at the time of Botticelli, would have yearned for the work of a still earlier master. The work of their creative contemporaries is too real for them. It reveals the time in which they live and sometimes the revelation is ugly—the very thing they try so hard to get away from. They are afraid of life. They seek refuge in the past. They cherish the past with romantic longing. They dare not think of a new adventure or try a new

⁴¹ Henry McBride, "Hugo Gellert's Work Simplifies Things," *New York Herald*, (May 6, 1923), magazine section, 7.

experiment. A flight in an aeroplane might be exciting but an ox-cart is safer.⁴²

Similarly, the *Liberator* critic Don Brown declared in a review,

every creative artist is a rebel, a revolutionist. Whether he is in conscious alliance with a revolutionary group or not, he is still a rebel, a creator of new forms, a foe of stale convention, an exponent of Conception as opposed to Representation. He knows that a work of art does not have to be about anything, that it is something.⁴³

Gellert's self-portrait from this period endeavored to reconcile the seemingly conflicting approaches, "conception" or "representation" (fig. 2.31). In the painting the artist is literally situated among them. That which is recognizable is on the left. A pattern of abstract color dominates the right. In the realistic section a cow, the epitome of domesticated nature, stands placidly in a grassy pasture. In the upper left corner is an abstracted biplane; its phallic body aimed lustily towards the female nude, who floats in space directly above the artist's head. Along the entire right side is a rainbow-colored ripple pattern, like a spectral analysis of light waves. A flat, translucent, cubist rectangle emanates from the middle of the artist's forehead, linking the bi-plane, nude woman, and wave pattern. The marriage of modernist formalist devices and realistic, descriptive rendering suggests an attempt to resolve the discrepancy between the bohemian/intellectual/modernist culture and the working class/populist/matter-of-fact culture born out by the discussions of Proletkult.

⁴² Sidney Garfield, "Hugo Gellert—A Modern," *The New Pearson's*, vol.49, no. 3, (March 1923), 47- 48.

⁴³ Don Brown, "Hugo Gellert—Happy Rebel," *Liberator*, vol.6, no. 6, (June 1923), 8.

A number of paintings in the exhibition reveal that Gellert pursued other, more direct solutions to the problems facing those aiming to articulate a new working class idiom. He developed a primitivism inspired by children's art. According to Arens, Gellert's technique was "purposefully unsophisticated" because he felt "very deeply that the furthest reaching truth finds expression in the simplest forms."⁴⁴ Through his untraining Gellert not only participated in the canonical modernist notion that the innocent, or the uncivilized—in his case children—possess a sincerity that is lost through indoctrination into bourgeois society. But, he was also operating within the Proletkult discourse of an authentic, "pock marked but our own," expression arising from the new class of revolutionary, working-class, non-art professionals.

In *The Presser* and *The Sewing Machine Operator* strong, thick-wristed garment industry workers concentrate on their tasks (figs. 2.32-2.33). The *Miner* is depicted in a stoop, holding his pickaxe in both hands (fig. 2.34). The curving, simplified outline of the muscular neck and shoulders, and the rounded profile of the presser echo the billowing steam forms that emerge from his heavy iron to enshroud him. Similarly, the way the egg-shaped back of the sewing machine operator's head connects to his solid stalk-like neck mirrors the hemisphere and cylinder of the sewing machine. The curving business end of the miner's pickaxe reiterates the rounded arc of his arms and hunched shoulders. This formal commentary suggests that Gellert considered the individual worker to be

⁴⁴ Egmont Arens, Foreword for checklist to Gellert's exhibition at Kervorkian Galleries, 40 West 57th Street, New York, May 1st—31st, 1923, Gellert papers, Mary Ryan Gallery, New York.

inseparable from the labor he performs. Or in Marxist terms, the worker's value is measured according to his ability to produce. Gellert continued to make Minoresque political cartoons throughout his career. However, as the labor paintings in the Kervorkian exhibition revealed, in the early 1920s Gellert sought to incorporate social content and modern technique.

Gellert's style developed further with his introduction to the Russian avant-garde. His friend and *Liberator* colleague, the Russian-American painter and graphic artist Louis Lozowick (1892-1973), spent the early 1920s in Europe. Lozowick visited Moscow in 1922 and established professional relationships and friendships with many of the Russian Constructivists, including Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956), El Lissitzky (1890-1941), and David Shterenberg (1891-1948), the theorist Osip Brick (1888-1945), the cubo-futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), and the theatrical director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940). Lozowick wrote,

I let it be known that I was (eager) to learn as much as possible about art and artists since 1917; and before long, I was flooded with books, pamphlets, announcements, posters, magazines, collections of poetry, prose, art criticism, and anthologies, printed mostly on bad newsprint. During those first years of the Revolution, the itch to appear in print was irresistible—pamphlets in every size, of every description, on every conceivable subject [sic.].... Going through this material gave me a fuller view of the early period than any formal history could have done.⁴⁵

Lozowick became the leading American authority on the Russian avant-garde. His essay, "A Note on Modern Russian Art," which appeared in the February

⁴⁵ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt ed., *Survivor From a Dead Age: The Memoirs of Louis Lozowick*, Washington and London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, 229.

1923 issue of *Broom* is the earliest account of the Russian avant-garde in the United States. Upon his return to New York in the winter of 1923/24, Lozowick wrote and lectured on the subject of modern Russian art. He was the only American included by Katherine Dreier (1877-1952) in the *Russian Suprematism and Constructivism* exhibition at the Société Anonyme. In conjunction with this show, on February 19, 1924 Lozowick presented the lecture *The Suprematists of Russia*. His precisionist, machine-age style, which incorporated principles of constructivism and urban realism, had a strong effect on Gellert.

Around the time of Lozowick's return from Russia, Gellert became interested in constructivist theater design. He experimented with it through collaborations with the Hungarian-American playwrights Lajos Egri (1888-1967) and Francis Faragoh (1898-1966). Gellert's illustrations for a published version of Faragoh's one-act play, *The Plug in the Hole* (*Playboy*, no. 9, July 1924), are reminiscent of Lozowick's Lissitzky-inspired black and white mechanical abstraction drawings. Gellert similarly used black geometric shapes based on mechanical forms such as gears tools in one drawing (figs. 2.35-2.36).

Gellert pursued a more complex project with his set designs for Egri's eight-act play *Hakuba and Hekuba* (c. 1923, translated into English by Faragoh). The title referred to the twin countries Hakuba and Hekuba, whose inhabitants live for only twenty-four hours and, though their customs, religion, and language are identical,

their fierce nationalism destines them to go to war.⁴⁶ Imre Szabo, a stranger to both lands arrives in Hakuba and lives among the populace. Because he sees no difference between them and the Hekubanians, Imre tries to convince them all to live in harmony. For this he is ostracized, jailed, and sentenced to death as a traitor in a decree that proclaimed he

attempted to incite to revolt against the Government, law, order and the constitution; furthermore, that he had demanded equal right for all; furthermore, that he had sought to hinder our just war against the dastardly oppressors of our country; furthermore, that he had thus given aid to the enemy by calling upon the people to refuse payment of special taxes; furthermore that he had been adjudged corrupt and criminal in his activities of the past; furthermore, that as such he is a menace to society and to the commonwealth; furthermore, that he had done all this [sic.] things with a sane mind, with malice aforethought...⁴⁷

The play is clearly an allegory of conscientious objectors and the First World War.

Though influenced by Constructivism, *Hakuba and Hekuba* does not present machinery as the liberator of the working class. Rather, like the German Expressionist dramas that made up a significant portion of the Soviet repertoire in the early 1920s, the ruling class was shown controlling the means of production, and machinery was presented as a source of oppression for the

⁴⁶ Lajos Egri, *Hakuba and Hekuba*, unpublished manuscript, c. 1923, The Library of Congress rare books and manuscripts department, Washington, DC. The c. 1923 date from the Library of Congress catalog cannot be corroborated. Gellert's set designs could be from 1923, but they relate more closely to his work from 1924, such as the drawings for Faragoh's *Plug in the Hole* (*Playboy* no. 9, July 1924). If Gellert's constructivist style evolved through his association with Lozowick, the 1924 date makes more sense since Lozowick did not return to New York until the very end of 1923 or early in 1924.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

working class. According to Egri's script each citizen wears "small clockworks in the region of the abdomen. These clocks indicate the amount of air consumed and the number of steps taken by the individual."⁴⁸ Inspectors stop each citizen after every fifteen steps to collect walking and breathing tax. When Imre strikes his accuser, knocking him off his feet, "sounds of springs snapping and wheels breaking appear to come from within him."⁴⁹

It is unclear if the play was ever performed or if Gellert's sets were constructed, but gouache studies exist indicating his ideas for the *Hakuba and Hekuba* sets (figs. 2.37). According to Egri's instructions the curtain rises on Scene I revealing an old, white-haired bespectacled Caligari-esque scientist busily working over a female figure on an operating table, inserting a cogwheel into her chest. "About him there are other wheels, too, of various sizes and shapes, and there are minute springs and intricate bits of delicate machinery..."⁵⁰ Gellert's solution was a large standing pressure gage in the foreground in front of an array of cogwheels and steel beams, or crane arms, all within a triangular outline indicating the sloped walls of an attic garret. Though Gellert's design is two-dimensional in format and it is unclear if he intended the designs to exist as stationary backdrops or as three-dimensional environments with moving parts, the cogs and beams bring to mind Liubov Popova's 1922 sets for Meyerhold's production of Fernand Crommelynck's *The Magnanimous Cuckhold* (fig. 2.38).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1

After his introduction to constructivist theater Gellert applied the formal innovations of constructivism to his industrial subjects. The result was a unique form of precisionism that incorporated the Marxist notion of class struggle, and Bolshevik agit-prop. Gellert can be included in discussions of precisionism, although his precisionism differs significantly from that of Lozowick and the best-known American artists such as Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), Charles Demuth (1883-1935), George Ault (1891-1948), Elsie Driggs (1898-1992). Where these artists concentrated primarily on pristine mechanical and architectural forms, rarely including figures, Gellert primarily focused on the human element of labor (figs. 2.39, 2.42). In this sense his work is related more closely to the Russian artists of the OSt (Society of Easel Painters) group such as Aleksandr Deineka (1899-1969), Iuri Pimenov (1903-1977), whose pristine, figurative style celebrated the machine as the liberator of the working class (figs. 2.40-2.41).

By the autumn of 1922, with the fiscal situation of the magazine in alarming condition *The Liberator's* editors were forced to assess their options. Joseph Freeman outlined the several options they saw open to them. The first was to end the publication completely and "thus destroy the only left-wing -publication of arts and letters in America." The second was making it more appealing to a middle class readership "by converting it to a pinkish art journal, divorced from politics, like the dozens of little reviews springing up all over the country and among American exiles in Europe for the solace of the tired radicals. Finally," Freeman reasoned,

we could turn over the magazine to the Communist Party in whose principles we believed and which needed a monthly publication. At a staff meeting, which included Bob Minor, Floyd Dell, Bill Gropper, Hugo Gellert and myself, we voted to present the magazine to the Party.⁵¹

The Liberator grew from a journal "with one foot in bohemia, the other in the revolutionary movement," to a representative of the Communist Party in 1922. Nevertheless, two years later after its October 1924 issue, *The Liberator* ran out of money for publication. Subsequently, it was amalgamated with *The Labor Herald* and the *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, two financially unstable Communist publications, to form *The Workers Monthly*.⁵² Gellert seems not to have been involved with this publication, which featured cartoonists, affiliated more closely with the Party, such as Fred Ellis (1885-1965), Maurice Becker, Lydia Gibson, and Robert Minor. It is unclear if he was excluded from contributing or if he chose not to participate. Though Gellert had demonstrated his devotion to the Communist cause, and had made his share of pro-Bolshevik and anti-capitalist cartoons for the radical press, perhaps in 1924 Party officials considered him still too much the bohemian Greenwich Village avant-gardist, without the "diamond-

⁵¹ Joseph Freeman, *An American Testament: A narrative of Rebels and Romantics*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1938, 273.

⁵² Edited by Workers Party leader Earl Browder, *The Workers Monthly* assured its readers that,

—It retains the old fighting spirit and careful leadership of the trade union struggle developed by THE LABOR HERALD.

—It continues the traditions of revolutionary art and politics established by THE LIBERATOR.

—It carries on the pictorial and textual story of Soviet Russia and the international class struggle, which made famous THE SOVIET RUSSIAN PICTORIAL.*

* *The Workers Monthly*, vol.1, no. 1, (November 1924), inside cover.

hard mind of the revolutionist,"⁵³ to be involved with serious political work. *The Worker's Monthly* was even more of a Party voice than the post-1922 *Liberator*. In 1925 the Party meant something different than it did earlier in the decade. Since Stalin's appointment as General Secretary of the Russian Communist Party in April 1922, the anti-intellectual position within it had strengthened significantly. The voice of *The Worker's Monthly* was the voice of the coalescing Stalinist hard line. Like *The Liberator*, *The Worker's Monthly* published Lenin's "Message to American Workers." It also included speeches by Stalin. Significantly, it did not print anything by Trotsky. Moreover, *The Worker's Monthly* featured a serialization of Grigorii Zinoviev's (1883-1936) 1923 series of lectures, *The History of the Bolshevik Party*.⁵⁴ Through conspicuous exclusions and misrepresentations, these lectures "represent perhaps the first attempt to 'rewrite' the Party's history to meet the needs of immediate factional struggles, in

⁵³ Michael Gold, "A Little Bit of Millennium," *The Liberator*, (March 1921), 12.

⁵⁴ Like *The Liberator's* treatment of John Reed's reports of the Bolshevik revolution, *The Workers Monthly* successively printed five of the six Zinoviev lectures.

—Lecture One*, "Bourgeois Revolutionaries and the Russian Working Class Before 1880," appeared in the November 1924, December 1924, and January 1925 issues.

—Lecture Two, "Marxism vs. Populism and Economism 1880-1900," appeared in the February 1925, March 1925, and April 1925 issues.

—Lecture Three, "'Iskra' and the Fight for Bolshevism 1900-1903," appeared in the May 1925, June 1925, August 1925, and September 1925 issues (no part of the lecture was included in the July issue. The September issue also contains the beginning of the fourth lecture.

—Lecture Four, "The War with Japan and the Years of Reaction 1904-1905," appeared in the September 1925, October 1925, November 1925, and December 1925 issues.

—Lecture Five, "Lessons of the Revolution and the Years of Reaction 1906-1909," appeared in the January 1926, February 1926, March 1926, and May 1926 issues (no part of the lecture was included in the April 1926 issue).

* Titles for these lectures do not appear in *The Workers Monthly*. Titles used for this list are as they appear in Grigorii Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party From the Beginnings to February 1917: A Popular Outline*, R. Chappell trans., London: New Park Publications, 1973. First Published as *Istoriya Rossiiskoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii (Bolshevikov): Pupulyarny Ocherk*, Moscow: State Publishing House, 1923.

particular the struggle against Trotsky and his supporters.⁵⁵ Zinoviev's history painted Trotsky as a bourgeois intellectual removed from the proletariat.

Though the Stalinized Party's opposition to the loosely defined intellectual "Trotskyite" embrace of high modernism would lead to Socialist Realism in the 1930s, this transformation was a gradual process. In the mid-1920s the leading Russian modernists who were committed to the working class revolution introduced figuration into their work in the name of the proletariat. *The Worker's Monthly* featured examples of Russian art that reflected this mid-1920s period of Communist modernism. Though Gellert was not directly involved with *The Worker's Monthly* as a reader he would have had the opportunity to see the colorful, geometric graphics of Alexander Lebedev (1891-1967), and Adolf Strakhov's poster *1870-1924 V. Ul'ianov (Lenin)* (figs. 2.43.44).

Though he did not contribute to the *Workers Monthly*, Gellert was not inactive in the radical press. After the *Liberator* folded, he, John Sloan, and Maurice Becker immediately began to form a new magazine. Unlike the serious political orientation of the *Workers Monthly*, this new publication attempted to revive the bohemian spirit of *The Masses*. In January 1925 the three artists wrote the following letter.

⁵⁵ R. Chappell, Foreword to *History of the Bolshevik Party*, op. cit., X.

Dear Fellow-Artist or –Author:

There is a good chance of getting hold of a big subsidy toward the starting of a new “Masses” for the new time. Are you still feeling young and expressionistic? If so, come to a meeting of the old Masses-Liberator crowd at Maurice Becker’s house. No. 15 St Lukes Place, on Thursday evening at 8:30 o’clock, Feb. 5th.

We are planning a non-partisan, non-propaganda revolutionary journal of art, literature, and satire that will have a mass circulation. If you are out of town and can’t make come to the meeting, send us a note saying whether you will join in this new artists’ assault on things-as-they-are.

Send in suggestions for a name, draw up a program, suggest an editor and a business manager, if you can. Our first step is to organize, and then we can go after the subsidy.

Yours fraternally,

John Sloan
Hugo Gellert
Maurice Becker

P.S. Be sure to come if you can. Everyone wants to see you after all these years.⁵⁶

Other artists and writers responded with enthusiasm. Soon, as Joseph Freeman explained, “this plan for a ‘broad united front’ of liberal and radical writers around a new magazine was approved by Scott Nearing, Roger Baldwin, Michael Gold, William Gropper, Hugo Gellert and others who considered the matter.”⁵⁷ They received a subsidy from the American Fund for Public Service, a foundation endowed by Charles Garland, “a philosophical anarchist,” who “tuned over his million-dollar inheritance.”⁵⁸ In December 1925, a year after the Sloan, Gellert, Becker letter, *The New York Times* announced:

⁵⁶ Sloan, Gellert and Becker to Fellow Artists January 30, 1925. Helen Farr Sloan Library, Delaware Art Museum.

⁵⁷ Freeman, *American Testament*, op. cit., 305.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 304.

The magazine will be called *The New Masses*. According to the publishers, the cost of publication for the first three years has been underwritten by the American Fund for Public Service. At the expiration of that period the magazine is expected to be able to pay its own way.⁵⁹

Finally, in May 1926, the first issue *New Masses* arrived. As with the first issue of *The Liberator*, *New Masses* (vol.1, no. 1) featured a cover by Gellert (fig. 2.45).

While both covers depict a single figure of a workingman, by 1926 Gellert incorporated his hard-edge, streamlined style with the rough, proletkult aesthetic. The May Day worker was quickly drawn with thick strokes of the flat-edged crayon against a geometric, planar space. Furthermore, as Lozowick scholar Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt noted, Gellert's cover was "printed in black, white and red, colors that were commonly used by Russian avant-garde artists in the twenties."⁶⁰

Russian modernism infiltrated into the United States throughout the decade from a number of sources close to Gellert. In late 1924 or in early 1925, Michael Gold went to Europe. In London he

met a curious Dickens character named Huntly Carter. He was a lean, deaf, eccentric man of 50, in a greenish frock coat, and had just written the first English book on Soviet drama [*The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia*]. He gave me a copy, and to my own amazement, some latent passion for the theatre cropped out in me, and I left my friend to his gin and gingerbeer, and took a freight boat to Leningrad.⁶¹

⁵⁹ "Radical Magazine Backed by \$1,500,000," *New York Times*, (December 8, 1925), 13.

⁶⁰ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "Art on the Left in the United States, 1918-1937" in Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, ed., *Art and Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997, 224.

⁶¹ Michael Gold, "My Life," c. 1928 unpublished manuscript, Michael Gold clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

Gold's passion for the theater was really not all that latent. After all, he was a member of the Provincetown Players, who staged two of his plays in 1917, *Ivan's Homecoming*, and *Down the Airshaft*.

In Russia, Gold met Brick, and Mayakovsky, whose aggressively modernist poetry exerted an immediate and powerful influence on him. When he returned to New York in the spring of 1925, Gold was brimming with passion for Mayakovsky, Russian Futurism, and Soviet writers' organizations. But he was especially enthusiastic about Meyerhold's constructivist theater. Gold disseminated his zeal to the radical artists and writers in New York.

When I got back to New York after three months of seeing these plays, these Meyerhold plays and their creators and followers full of enthusiasm in their home in Leningrad, I felt as if something had left my life and must be replaced by something as close to the original as possible.⁶²

When Mayakovsky visited New York that summer, the group of radical writers and artists associated with Gold welcomed him as a visiting hero. Mayakovsky arrived in New York on July 30, 1925 after a brief stay with the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera in Mexico City. On his Declaration of a Non-Immigrant Alien Arriving in USA, Mayakovsky stated his occupation as an "artist-painter," the reason of his visit being to exhibit his advertising material. His address was 152 West 46th Street, the studio of Hungarian book illustrator and muralist Willy Pogany. With his shaved head, booming voice, "broad shoulders, thin torso, and

⁶² Mike Gold interview by Michael Folsom October 19, 1966, op. cit.

long legs of a Dempsey,"⁶³ Mayakovsky made a commanding impression on the circle of radical writers and artists who welcomed him. What impressed Mayakovsky most about New York was the degree to which it was industrially advanced, and the degree to which Americans took this for granted. He was awed by

The lights of street lamps, the jumping lights of advertisements, the glow of shop windows and the windows of never closing shops, the lights illuminating huge posters, lights from the opening doors of cinemas and theaters, the rushing lights of subway trains glittering under one's feet through the glass pavements, the lights of inscriptions in the sky.

Brightness, brightness, brightness.⁶⁴

Yet Mayakovsky criticized the metropolis as unorganized, maintaining, "intellectually, New Yorkers are still provincials. Their minds have not accepted the full implications of the industrial age."⁶⁵ Gellert and Mayakovsky spent some time together that summer, developing a friendship while discussing these "implications." Gellert was assigned by the *New York Sunday World* to draw a portrait of Mayakovsky for Gold's interview (fig. 2.46). Mayakovsky even drew a very competent likeness of Gellert, which Gellert inscribed "By golly, not only are you a great poet, but also an artist" (fig. 2.47). In Gellert's drawing, a small abstracted industrial scene emerges behind the poet's head. At the center of this vignette, a rushing figure literally becomes a cog in a greater machine,

⁶³ Freeman, *American Testament*, op. cit., 336.

⁶⁴ Vladimir Mayakovsky, "My Discovery of America," in Wiktor Woroszyński, *The Life of Mayakovsky*, New York: Orion Press, 1970, 372.

⁶⁵ Vladimir Mayakovsky interview by Michael Gold, "Russia's Dynamic Poet Finds New York Tame: We're Old-Fashioned, Unorganized, to Mayakovsky" *New York Sunday World*, (August 9, 1925), 3E

symbolically illustrating Mayakovsky's Communist ideal of "real industrial civilization"⁶⁶ in which the populace works in tandem with technology.

In the wake of Mayakovsky's visit, Gellert's contributions to *New Masses* suggest an awareness of Soviet experiments with photomechanical processes. For instance, in September 1926, on the occasion of George Bernard Shaw's 70th birthday, *New Masses* published a Gellert portrait of the radical Irish playwright. With the stylized, art deco likeness, the artist included curving lines of black and red text, its modern, utilitarian design reiterating the streamlined facets of Shaw's features (fig. 2.48). While not as sophisticated as the typographical experiments of Lissitzky, such as *Dlia Golosa* (For the Voice), his 1923 collaboration with Mayakovsky, Gellert's effort nonetheless reveals that in the mid 1920s, he sought inspiration in such Russian models.

Mayakovsky's visit inspired many members of the radical *Liberator*/*New Masses* circle. Gellert, along with Paul Peters, Arturo Giovannitti (1884-1959), William Gropper, Louis Lozowick, Florence Rau, and Bertram Wolfe (1896-1977), joined the Workers' Dramatic League, the revolutionary modernist theater group Gold organized in 1925. Its first production, the mass pageant *The Paris Commune*, took place on March 15, 1925 at Madison Square Garden. The first actual play that ran for more than one performance was Gold's *Money*, which opened at

⁶⁶ Vladimir Mayakovsky interview by Michael Gold, "Russia's Dynamic Poet Finds New York Tame...", op. cit.

Tammany Hall on January 8, 1926.⁶⁷ Though Gellert is mentioned as a member of the League, it appears his contributions were primarily those of behind-the-scenes support. He had experience in the theater, which would have proved valuable to an emerging theater group. By the time Gold returned from Russia, Gellert had designed posters and illustrated programs for numerous Broadway shows through the New York theater publicists Schubert and Pemberton. In addition to his involvement with productions in the Hungarian community, by 1923 he was well known for his "posters, his magazine covers, his stage designs."⁶⁸ He had also built a reputation as a theatrical illustrator contributing regularly to the theater page of the *New York Times*.

⁶⁷ See Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "Centre Stage: Radical Theatre in America, 1925-1934," *RACAR (Revue d'art canadienne—Canadian Art Review)*, vol. XIX, no. 1-2, (1992), 112-122. The drama historian, Malcolm Goldstein wrote that Gold, Ernest Lawson, John Dos Passos, Alexander Arkatov (a Russian visitor), Nathan Fine, Lozowick, and Gellert formed this worker's theater organization in the spring of 1926, and that its first production was Gold's play *Strike!* (Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression*, NY: Oxford University Press, 1974, 13.) Goldstein most likely derived this date from a notice in the June, 1926 *New Masses*, which announced,

The Workers' Dramatic League is a new organization, which has been founded for the purpose of giving a series of experimental plays in the fall. Those who are interested are invited to come to the studio, 64 Washington Square South any Wednesday evening. Alexander Arkatov, an extremely able modernist will direct the acting and play producing. Writers and artists of the *New Masses*, have helped to organize the Workers' Dramatic League and it is hoped that working men and women who wish to see a workers theatre in America will show their interest by coming to the meetings.

(*New Masses*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 1926, 26.) However, a notice in *The Daily Worker* (Saturday, December 26, 1925, 3) advertising the performance of Gold's *Money* a full six months before the *New Masses* announcement appeared. As Marquardt noted *The Paris Commune* took place over a year earlier on March 15, 1925 ("Centre Stage," op. cit.).

⁶⁸ Egmont Arens, checklist for Gellert exhibition, Kervorkian Gallery, op. cit.

The Workers' Dramatic League staged at least three productions in 1926.⁶⁹ However, by all accounts its effect fell far short of creating a revolution in the theater. But it did succeed in capturing the attention of millionaire Wall Street financier and philanthropist Otto Kahn (1867-1934). In the fall of 1926, Gold, Em Jo Basshe (1899-1939), John Dos Passos (1896-1970), Francis Faragoh, and John Howard Lawson (1894-1977), through a series of grants from Kahn, reorganized the Workers' Dramatic League into The New Playwrights Theatre, a not-for-profit company, which was incorporated in March of 1927.⁷⁰ Gold admitted he had doubts about the arrangement at first. But, within minutes of their initial conversation, he found that Kahn had the

strangest, most inexplicable instinct for all that is new, experimental and revolutionary. He has what is as amazing, little respect for the bourgeois art authorities, but a youthful and warm and unforced sympathy for the young fledgling self-doubting art worker.⁷¹

Kahn was known for his financial support of established cultural institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera, as well as for individual struggling artists. Kahn even lent Gellert money to purchase a house in White Plains, a town in Westchester County just north of New York City.⁷² According to Gold, Kahn was an extraordinarily enthusiastic patron.

⁶⁹ Along with the two Mike Gold productions already mentioned, a production of Karl Wittfogel's *The Biggest Boob in the World* has also been documented (Goldstein, *Political Stage*, op. cit. 424.)

⁷⁰ New Playwrights Theatre certificate of incorporation, March 16, 1927, Otto Kahn Papers, Princeton University Library Department of Rare Books and Special Collections.

⁷¹ Gold, "My Life" Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

⁷² Copies of receipts from Kahn indicate Gellert made a number of interest payments to Kahn from February through April 1929. Gellert papers, AAA, box 3.

What Mr. Kahn suggested at our first interview was that he likes [sic.] my play, but thought that New York needed a new theatre to produce such plays. I agreed with him. So he said, "why don't you organize such a thing? I'll help you." So I said, "all right, thanks, I will," and staggered out into the street.⁷³

Kahn clearly took pleasure in his role as benefactor, and eagerly pledged considerable sums, on one occasion before even fully knowing the results of his initial investment. A May 1927 ship to shore "Marconigram" from Kahn to The New Playwrights Theatre reads,

Thanks interesting letter. While had intended make further support dependent on impression this season am willing provide twenty-five thousand dollars next season.⁷⁴

In total Kahn supplied \$53,600 to the New Playwrights Theatre over a two-year period.

Kahn may have enjoyed his relationship with the revolutionary players, yet, as a multimillionaire banker, he recognized the potential awkwardness of this affiliation. As he regretfully wrote declining an invitation to the 1928 *New Masses* Ball,

It would have been a matter of interest and, I feel sure, of enjoyment to me to come to the ball on December 7th, but even though you mention that you mean to make it a special point not to give publicity to the fact of my presence, the chances are, ten to one, that it would become known, and receive a sensational twist in some of the organs of the press. I feel, therefore, that I shall have to deny myself the pleasure of availing myself of your kind

⁷³ Gold, "My Life," op. cit.

⁷⁴ Otto Kahn papers, Princeton University Library Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. After Kahn's funding ceased The New Playwrights Theatre could not survive and soon dissolved in May 1929.

invitation. That is one of the penalties of the unfreedom which, alas, goes with my job.⁷⁵

While Kahn's support of, and relationship with, the New Playwrights group set him apart from most wealthy capitalists, he was not a leftist himself. Gellert insisted that in 1927 when Kahn came to his second one-man exhibition at J.B. Neumann's New Art Circle at 35 West 57th Street, he tried to convince Gellert that Mussolini was not as bad as Gellert depicted him in a caustic portrait (fig. 2.49).⁷⁶

The name New Playwrights Theatre was a direct reference to the original Playwrights' Theater, the Provincetown Players 1916-1918 Greenwich Village performance space. This name association was no coincidence. Michael Gold, of course, was involved with the Provincetown Players in 1917 before he went to Mexico. Furthermore, Kahn was also a former patron of the Provincetown Players. It was he who provided funds for the original Playwrights Theater on MacDougal Street.⁷⁷ Though the Provincetown Players were still staging productions when the New Playwrights Theatre was formed, the new group evidently hoped to be perceived as the legitimate heir of their namesake, and perhaps even benefit from the cache of critical attention that Provincetown Players generated.

⁷⁵ Otto Kahn to Natalie Gomez, Business Manager, *New Masses*, December 18, 1928. Otto Kahn papers, Princeton University Libraries Department of Rare Books and Special Collections.

⁷⁶ Sequenzia interview.

⁷⁷ According to Provincetown Players historians Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau "Otto Kahn paid for the second floor 'rallying place' above Christine's restaurant on MacDougal."

However, reaction to the New Playwrights proved disappointing. As John Dos
Passos recalled in 1931,

One attempt to buck the tide and put on plays dealing with
industrial life around us in a novel experimental manner, The New
Playwrights Theatre, found no support in the kind of interest and
enthusiasm that kept the Provincetown Players going in the early
days, and failed after two seasons. Still, I think it may eventually be
remembered as a crude forerunner of a new type of theatre.⁷⁸

The mainstream press seldom reviewed New Playwrights performances. When
they did they were inevitably unkind. Punning on Em Jo Basshe's New
Playwrights manifesto "The Revolt in Fifty-Second Street," published in *The New
York Times* one reviewer acidly dismissed the group as "revolting playwrights." In
a review of a performance of Paul Stifton's *The Belt*, *The New York Times*
theater critic J. Brooks Atkinson quipped that the play was "more racket than
drama." However, his review of John Howard Lawson's *The Loud Speaker*, while
no less harsh regarding the story, dialogue, and acting, Atkinson was impressed
to a degree with the stage sets, which were "constructivist to the last daub of red
paint."⁷⁹

Although Gellert and Lozowick were not on the board of directors, they
sympathized with the New Playwrights "revolutionary departure from formerly

⁷⁸ John Dos Passos, "The American Theatre: 1930-31," *New Republic*, (April 1, 1931), 171, in
Goldstein, *Political Stage*, op. cit., 11.

⁷⁹ "Revolting playwrights" line cited by Atkinson and credited to "a contemporary newspaper."
(*New York Times*, March 3, 1927, section 2, 27). Review of *The Belt* (*New York Times*, October
20, 1927, 33). Review of *The Loud Speaker* (*New York Times*, March 3, 1927, section 2, 27).

fashionable conceptions of dramatic art.”⁸⁰ Lozowick lectured on Soviet avant-garde theater and they both contributed their skills as graphic designers for letterhead and production programs. Lozowick’s constructivist machine ornament adorned the program for the 1927-28 production of John Howard Lawson’s *The International* (fig. 2.50). Gellert’s letterhead design depicted a male worker-figure with a sledgehammer, fully integrated with the mechanical environment around him (fig. 2.51). The New Playwrights attempted to incorporate the visual arts into their theater in other ways. They sponsored exhibitions in the lobby of their West 14th Street theater. Gellert’s work was shown in one instance, and, according to the program of the 1929 performance of Gold’s *Fiesta*, young Thomas Hart Benton’s (1889-1975) *History of the United States* paintings were on view.⁸¹ The art exhibits may have also been an attempt to generate income for the theater as Kahn’s subsidy dwindled.

The EN-PI-TI shops may have been another such endeavor. In late 1928, Gellert, Lozowick, George Granich (Gold’s brother), playwright and illustrator Yosel Cutler (1896-1935), puppeteer Remo Bufano, William Gropper, Morris Pass, Arthur Segal, Henry Glintenkamp (1887-1946), and Art Young, organized the EN-PI-TI shops, a cooperative “design and construct” business, out of the New Playwrights Theatre at 133 West 14th Street. A phoneticization of “NPT” for New Playwrights Theatre, the EN-PI-TI shops advertised “skyscraper

⁸⁰ New Playwrights Theater program, Otto Kahn Papers, Princeton University Library Department of Rare Books and Special Collections.

⁸¹ Playbill for New Playwrights Theatre production of Mike Gold’s *Fiesta*, 1929, New Playwrights Theatre file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

bookshelves – machine age furniture – bookends – bookplates – modernistic window displays – signs – posters – screens – letterheads in any material from your own or our designs.”⁸² Despite the fact that it existed within a capitalist society, the EN-PI-TI Shops was a self-conscious emulation of Soviet productivist ideas that artists should design functional products suitable for the new, post-revolutionary society.

Gellert had the opportunity to participate directly in a Soviet productivist project the previous year when he made his first trip to Soviet Russia to attend the Tenth Anniversary Celebration of the October Revolution.⁸³ Many other foreign artists were in Moscow at the time, including Gellert's *New Masses* comrades William Gropper and the writer Robert Wolf, the father of American literary realism Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), and Diego Rivera. In Moscow Gellert met a number of important exiled Hungarian Communist artists and political figures such as the Activist artist Béla Uitz, the critic Alfred Kemény (1895-1945), known under the pseudonym Durus, the art historian János Mácza (1893-1974), and even Béla Kun himself. Uitz had recently been appointed a professor at the Soviet VKhUTeln (High State Art-Technical Institute) and was well connected with many of the state agencies and artist organizations that comprised the Moscow art world. It may have been through Uitz that Gellert received a commission from the State Publishing House to design book jackets for Russian

⁸² *Theatre 1929: A Magazine Published by the New Playwrights Theatre* (January 1929), 2, New Playwrights Theater file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

⁸³ Gellert's route to Moscow was circuitous. He left New York in the summer of 1927 and spent some time in Europe before continuing to Moscow. He returned to New York in early 1928.

translations of Dreiser's novels and stories.⁸⁴ Gellert's illustration for *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser's novel about a working girl's struggle and eventual rise to success on the New York stage, depicts different strata of the American urban landscape (fig. 2.52). In the foreground are references to the working class; an elevated train, factories, and tenements with drying laundry. In the background, visible through the cloud-like smoke, are the skyscrapers of the well-to-do, symbols of capitalist power.

Gellert was in Moscow at a crucial, transitional period in Soviet politics and culture. Politically, in late 1927 Trotsky's Left Opposition made one final attempt to bolster their stance against Stalin. Yet after a series of key turnarounds from former supporters, the Trotsky bloc disintegrated. On November 14th Trotsky was expelled from the Party. Exiled to central Asia at the beginning of 1928, the former Commissar of War was deported the following year. The Russian avant-garde was in transition as well, affected by the culture wars of the earlier part of the decade. The AKhRR (Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia) group, which advocated the hard-line Proletkult argument against "abstract concoctions"

⁸⁴ The Russian publication of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, for which Gellert designed the jacket, is dated 1930. It is most likely Gellert made this drawing while in Moscow in 1927 and that it was not published until 1930. According to Gellert's testimony at the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA) of the United States House of Representatives on November 13, 1953 he "stated that while in the Soviet Union, 'they were getting out a series of books on THEODORE DREISER and I made the jackets for them.'" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, File Number 100-19719, Section Number 2, Reference Number 100-19719-110, 5). Similarly, David Shapiro wrote that during Gellert's 1927 trip to Moscow he "created a series of book jackets for numerous translations of Dreiser's work." (See David Shapiro, "Hugo Gellert: Political Activist, Political Artist," in Zoltán Deák et. al, *Hugo Gellert 1892-1985: People's Artist*, op. cit., 10). However, Ruth Apperson Kennel, Dreiser's personal secretary during the writer's visits to Russia, only specifically mentioned that in 1927 Gellert designed the jacket for *Chains*, Dreiser's volume of short stories. (See Ruth Apperson Kennel, *Theodore Dreiser and the Soviet Union 1927-1945: A First hand Chronicle*, New York: International Publishers, 1969, 20).

and in favor of “heroic realism,”⁸⁵ had gained influence, in proportion to the Stalin’s consolidation of power. Even among the avant-garde, decipherability—legible figuration as opposed to abstraction—was becoming an essential feature of Constructivism. By the late 1920s a new Constructivist realism had subsumed utopian abstraction in the spatial arts. Members of the OSt (Society of Easel Painters) group such as David Shterenberg, and his former students at VkhuteMas (High State Art-Technical Studies), especially Deineka and Pimenov advocated a flat, linear, clear realism based on industrial forms. In 1928 the OSt group and artists who earlier in the decade were leaders in the most radical factions of the Russian avant-garde, such as Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956), Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958) formed the October (Association of Artistic Labor) group. October strove to subordinate all art “to the task of serving the concrete needs of the proletariat, the leaders of the peasantry, and the backward national groups.” Yet, they sought to incorporate the high modernist contributions, the “achievements of the last decades, when the methods of the rational and constructive approaches to artistic creation, which had been lost by the artists of the petty bourgeoisie, were restored and developed considerably.”⁸⁶ As strongly opposed to the nationalist rhetoric of the AKhRR group as they were to its promotion of conservative academic techniques, the October group retained the internationalist principles that characterized the period following the revolution. Members of October included

⁸⁵ AKhRR, “Declaration,” in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell publishers Ltd., 1992, 384, 385.

⁸⁶ October (Association of Artistic Labor), “Declaration,” in Harrison and Wood eds., *Art in Theory*, op. cit., 465, 466.

foreign artists visiting Russia such as Rivera, as well as those who had settled there more permanently, such as the German former director of the Bauhaus Hannes Meyer (1889-1954), and co-founder of the group, the Hungarian Béla Uitz, an extremely influential figure for Gellert during his stay in Moscow.

Though Gellert himself was not a member of October, his own approach to art was in sympathy with the group's position, which sought to balance the advanced modernist techniques with the original proletkult notion that "all means of expression and design must be utilized in order to organize the consciousness, will, and emotions of the proletariat and the working masses with maximum force."⁸⁷ After his return to the New York in 1928 Gellert, commenced with monumental mural for the Proletcos (Proletarian Cooperative Stores, Inc.) Cafeteria. According to one-time party member Benjamin Gitlow,

on the ground floor of 30 Union Square a cooperative cafeteria was established, with murals on its walls by the talented Hugo Gellert, a comrade. This was not only the center for Communist "bull sessions" lasting far, far into the night, but also a gold mine for the management of the *Daily Worker*, the New York District organization and the National Office.⁸⁸

The cafeteria was such a gold mine because the Workers (Communist) Party headquarters and the *Daily Worker* offices were located in the same building (fig. 2.53). In many ways Gellert's mural fulfilled every aspect of the October program. Situated in a proletarian social space, it was conceived, executed and entirely devoted to "serving the concrete needs of the proletariat." Furthermore, Gellert's

⁸⁷ Ibid., 466-467.

⁸⁸ Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth About American Communism*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 309.

modernist technique did reject “passively contemplative, static, naturalistic realism with its fruitless copying of reality,” in favor of a “proletarian realism that expresses the will of the active revolutionary class.”⁸⁹

Though the mural was destroyed when the building was demolished was demolished (c. 1947-51), it was recorded in at least three photographs, and in descriptions in the press, interviews of Gellert, and Gellert’s own writings. Eight feet high, the mural covered one eighty-foot wall, and a facing wall that was broken by two doors with roughly thirty feet of usable space. The long wall was devoted to heavy labor, factory workers to one side, miners to the other (figs. 2.54-2.56). The factory section included a frieze of thirteen monumental standing figures in front of abstracted machine forms. Male and female, various races, Gellert showed them standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Great wheels anchored each end of the composition. The wheel at the left appears to have been part of a truck. The wheel at the right had a piston attached, indicating it is part of an engine. In front of each wheel, was a pair of woman, each with a placard. One of them echoed the slogan of the Communist International (Comintern) “WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE,” Another, in American vernacular warned “DON’T SCAB.”

Next to the women on the left, a construction worker in profile walked toward the center of the composition. At the center two women read *The Daily Worker*. To the right of them were two male figures facing forward. One represented industry,

⁸⁹ October “Declaration,” op. cit.

the other agriculture. Each of these two allegorical figures holds attributes of his profession. Industry with the hammer also holds a light bulb signifying the drive to unify Soviet Russia through electrification. Agriculture with the sickle also holds a shaft of wheat to signify the victory over the famine of early 1920s, civil war period. Agriculture's sickle strategically overlapped with industry's hammer to form the emblem of the Bolshevik state.

While Orozco's 1930 mural for the New School for Social Research, and Rivera's infamous unfinished 1933 *Man at the Crossroads* (destroyed 1934) for Rockefeller Center are well known for their depictions of Lenin, Gellert's cafeteria mural was the first in New York to feature a portrait of the Bolshevik leader. On the twenty-foot wall, opposite the central panel was a life-size depiction of Lenin, as muscular as a workingman, but dressed in a three-piece suit of a world leader (fig. 2.56). Lenin was joined by portraits of other prominent radicals, including Gellert's friend and idol, the journalist John Reed; and the first General Secretary of the American Communist Party Charles Ruthenberg (1882-1927). The recently electrocuted anarchists Nicola Sacco (1891-1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1888-1927) occupied the six-foot square space between two doorways. Though photographs of these portraits have not yet been located, they may have been based on Gellert's portraits of the two published in the April 24, 1927 *Sunday World*, and again in the September 1928 *New Masses* as Gellert was working on the mural (fig. 2.57). As one would expect *New Masses* hailed the mural as

"probably the finest example of modern art in America."⁹⁰ However, even the mainstream press praised Gellert's work. A review in *The New Yorker* raved that

The Gellert murals are the only ones on this continent except those of Riera [sic.] in Mexico City that are really contemporary. We have been shameful in our failure to use artists in our buildings, and the Proletcos cafeteria may start something... The labor party is fortunate in having a spokesman as articulate as this artist.⁹¹

The New Yorker critic's use of the euphemistic term "labor party" notwithstanding, by this time Gellert was quit literally a spokesman for the Communist Party. Earlier in 1928, the three-year Garland Fund subsidy for *New Masses* ran out. Subsequently, like its predecessor, *The Liberator*, *New Masses* was presented to the Party. No issue appeared in May. Publication resumed with the June 1928 issue, which announced that the editorial staff had been reorganized. Instead of the fifteen-member Executive Board, there was now a single editor, Mike Gold, and a single art editor, Hugo Gellert. With this transformation, the *New Masses* no longer claimed to be the "non-partisan, non-propaganda, revolutionary journal of art, literature, and satire,"⁹² of the 1925 Sloan, Becker, Gellert letter. Gold and Gellert maneuvered the journal towards the Communist Party line, thus providing the Party with a cultural voice.

⁹⁰ *New Masses*, vol. 4, no. 8, (January 1929), 4.

⁹¹ *The New Yorker*, (November 10, 1928), 105.

⁹² Sloan, Becker, Gellert to Fellow Artists and Writers, January 30, 1925, op. cit.

CHAPTER THREE MILITANCY

In his writing of the late 1920s Gellert started to articulate the Communist Party position on art. He began in January 1927 with an attack on Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), condemning the Romanian sculptor for remaining "vague and noncommittal" during the world war, striving for an expression that was "pure [and] above the battle."

What is it that Brancusi worked on in 1916 during the war in Paris?
What had he to say? He cut a huge phallus into marble that is what
he had to say! Men are slaughtered, men are crazed...the artist,
the divine, toys with the phallus!¹

Gellert's polemic instigated a debate with the poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972). In a letter to *New Masses* defending Brancusi, Pound protested, "Why the HELL should Brancusi, a Roumanian [sic.] peasant by birth, take sides in a war between [the] German Empire and two capitalist arms firms?"² Gellert replied, "I did take it for granted that Roumanian [sic.] peasants were human beings and that it would disturb them to have other humans murdered."³ Gellert's argument epitomized the militant position, which was that those not directly involved with the social struggle, by default, were aligning themselves with the *status quo*. Through his exchange with Pound, Gellert threw down the gauntlet against modernist formalism that had no clear social message. He found many artists

¹ Hugo Gellert, "O + .1.," *New Masses*, vol. 2, no. 3 (January 1927), 25.

² Hugo Gellert and Ezra Pound, "Pound vs. Gellert," *New Masses*, vol. 2, no. 4 (March 1927), 25

³ Ibid.

who agreed. Tina Modotti (1896-1942), the Communist expatriate photographer in Mexico, sided with Gellert. Modotti commented in a letter to the photographer Edward Weston that in the March 1927 *New Masses* there was “an interesting controversy between Ezra Pound and Hugo Gellert—I daresay the latter got the better of it.”⁴

Later that year, en route to Moscow, Gellert sent a dispatch to *New Masses* from Paris advancing his position. In it he contradicted the notion that Communism repressed artistic freedom while capitalist democracies guarantee it. He reasoned that when artists must rely on patrons and dealers they are rewarded with success only by conforming to market forces. Gellert wrote that while he and an unnamed “individualist” artist sat in a Montparnasse café, discussing the issue of artistic freedom in Russia, the “Individualist” suddenly ran out into the street. When he returned the “Individualist” explained to Gellert that an art dealer had passed by. “And you,” he acidly remarked, “the individualist, ran after him. If a fat art patron would show you the color of a thousand-franc note you would drop on your knees. If someone offered you a large sum of money would you refuse to paint the kind of picture he would demand of you?” The “Individualist” admitted that he would “probably give him the picture he wanted.”⁵ The “Individualist,” for Gellert was the opposite of the Communist. He equated individualism with self-interest and Communism with community consciousness. This point of view was

⁴ Tina Modotti, letter to Edward Weston, March 22, 1927, in “The Letters of Tina Modotti to Edward Weston,” *The Archive* (Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona), no. 22 (January 1986), 49-50. I thank Lic. Antonio Saborit of the Instituto Nacional de Arte y Historia, Mexico City, for bringing this letter to my attention.

⁵ Hugo Gellert, “I Meet and Individualist,” *New Masses*, vol. 3, no. 5 (September 1927), 25.

not uniquely Gellert's. His "Individualist" parable was essentially an illustration of the Leninist position. Long before the October Revolution Lenin had written,

The freedom of the bourgeois writer, artist or actress, is simply masked (or hypocritically masked) dependence on the money-bag, on corruption, on prostitution.

And we Socialists expose this hypocrisy and rip off the false labels, not in order to arrive at a non-class literature and art (that will be possible only in a Socialist extra-class society), but to contrast this hypocritically free literature, which is in reality linked to the bourgeoisie, with a really free one that will be *openly* linked to the proletariat.⁶

Events in Hungary led Gellert to take a more direct political stance. On August 1, 1919 after a mere 133 days in power Béla Kun's Hungarian Soviet Republic fell. It had been severely weakened by internal opposition and external aggression. Within Hungary the peasant class, as well as the bourgeoisie, initially enthused by the liberal post-Hapsburg reforms, resisted the anti-religious propaganda, appropriation of family savings, and the nationalization of all businesses and rural estates, large and small. As a result, according to historian Isván Deák,

industrial production and productivity declined rapidly; farmers refused to accept new currency; and food no longer reached the cities. These developments led to forced requisitioning, which in turn fomented widespread peasant resistance. The repressive countermeasures of the government only increased popular hostility. The Soviet army was unable to break through to the Hungarians; nor was the Communist dream of world revolution realized. By July 1919, without having suffered any military reversals, the Kun regime had lost nearly all its power, and at the

⁶ V.I. Lenin, "Party Organization and Party Literature," in Harrison and Wood eds., *Art and Theory*, op. cit., 139.

end of the month the attacking Romanian army met with no resistance.⁷

In the wake of the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and the Romanian occupation, the leaders of the two dominant counter-revolutionary factions, former Austro-Hungarian admiral Miklós Horthy and the petit royal Count István Bethlen, filled the void. In March 1920, through military backing, Horthy emerged from a questionable "election" as regent of the new reactionary Hungarian government. In June Hungary was forced to sign the Versailles peace treaty in which the nation lost two thirds of its pre-war territory and 60 percent of its pre-war population to Romania and the new republic of Czechoslovakia. By September a new wave of anti-Semitic laws were enacted, such as those limiting the number of Jews in institutions of higher learning. As Count Michael Károlyi, former President of the pre-Kun Hungarian Republic put it,

The Jews were blamed for Bolshevism. The Horthy anti-Semites have an adage, which they apply indiscriminately and bitterly—"Every Bolshevik is a Jew and every Jew is a Bolshevik." And because the country was terrified by the "Red Menace," because they feared Béla Kun, who was also a Jew and a Communist, the Jew became and is the scapegoat of their hatred.⁸

The following year, in April 1921, Horthy appointed Bethlen prime minister, completing the return of Hungarian government to the pre-war conservative nationalist complexion.

⁷ István Deák, "Hungary: A Brief Political and Cultural History," in S.A. Mansbach, *Standing in the Tempest: Painters of the Hungarian Avant-Garde, 1908-1930*, Santa Barbara: The Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1991, 27.

⁸ "Count Karolyi Decries Hungarian 'Pogroms,'" *The Jewish Journal*, (May 7, 1930), 3.

This transformation from a Bolshevik style revolutionary government to proto-fascist, ultra-conservatism deeply troubled the American left, especially Hungarian-American leftists like Gellert, who had expressed opposition to Horthy since the Admiral rose to power. Gellert's full-page cartoon *Magyarország 1920-ban* (Hungary 1920) depicting Horthy as a vulture perched over a bound and wounded young man representing Hungary appeared in *Előre Képes Folyóirat* in December 1920 (fig. 3.1).⁹ *New Masses* labeled Horthy "Hungary's Bloody Mary," and published editorials condemning the admiral's "reign of terror" which "managed to kill off, or imprison, or exile, or shut up, intimidate, and castrate every decent contemporary exponent of the arts and sciences" in Hungary.¹⁰ A call to action came in the spring of 1927, when Hungary began treaty negotiations with Mussolini's Fascist Italy. As *New Masses* reported,

When Premier Count Belthlen de Bethlen of Hungary returned from two weeks visiting Signor Mussolini at Rome he said, "my government will undertake in the immediate future a thorough study of the fascist system, especially its social aspects...we shall adopt those fascist reforms which have been tested and found practicable."¹¹

With a number of other Hungarian immigrants, including the novelist Emery Bálint, Rabbi Dr. Samuel Buchler, President of the Federation of Hungarian Jews, and the artist Wanda Gág (1893-1946), Gellert organized the Anti-Horthy League.¹² As the Hungarian American Communist paper *Amerikai Magyar Szó* recounted in 1954,

⁹ *Előre Képes Folyóirat*, (December 26, 1920), 5.

¹⁰ "Hungary's Bloody Mary," *New Masses*, vol. 2, no. 3 (February 1927), 25.

¹¹ "In Hungary," *New Masses*, vol. 2, no. 7 (June 1927), 21

¹² Hugo Gellert, "The Anti-Horthy League," in Deák ed., *This Noble Flame*, 84. In November 1927 the *New York Times* named Buchler as the President of the Federation of Hungarian Jews in

this League was organized on March 15, 1927, with 136 delegates from 36 Hungarian American socialists present. The work of organizing was carried out by ELORE (Forward), one of our paper's ancestors, in that movement which carried on a ceaseless struggle against Horthy type gangsters and to open their base deeds to American opinion. And also to hinder the building of political and economic support among Hungarian Americans by Horthy's agents.¹³

Gellert confirmed that the league was not a Communist, or even a specifically political organization *per se*. Rather, as he described,

the overwhelming majority in the Anti-Horthy League [was] made up of sick and benevolent societies, cultural societies, athletic clubs, singing societies and even semi religious organizations. They [were] non-political in character and the common bond, which [united] them all under the banner of the Anti-Horthy league [was] their hatred for the Horthy regime and their hatred of Fascism as an international menace.¹⁴

This organized hatred of fascism coalesced around a specific event in the fall of 1927. The Horthy government presented the city of New York with a gift of friendship, a monument to Lajos Kossuth, leader of the 1848 Hungarian revolution against the Austrian monarchy (fig. 3.2). On November 5th, workmen broke ground on the site in Riverside Park at 113th street amid ceremonies that included a procession from Yorkville to Riverside Drive of one thousand traditionally costumed Hungarians, gypsy music, and speeches by Senator Royal

America and Gellert as the President of the Anti Horthy League ("Police Rout 'Reds' in Kossuth Meeting," *New York Times*, November 6, 1927, 27), On March 15, 1928 the *New York Times* named Buchler as the Anti-Horthy League's leader and Gellert as an official of the league ("Hundreds of Police Guard Hungarians," *New York Times*, Thursday, March 15, 1928, 12, section 1).

¹³ Dr. Bela Pogany, "Hugo Gellert on the Front Line of Social Values: An Appreciation of the Art and labor Movement Role of Hugo Gellert," *Amerikai Magyar Szó* (Hungarian American Word), October 28, 1954, 1. Translation from the original Hungarian in FBI Hugo Gellert file, File Number 100-19719, Section 1.

¹⁴ Hugo Gellert, "The Mystery of a Cablegram—Or a Study in Yellow," *New Masses*, vol. 5, no. 10 (March 1930), 23.

Copeland, Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia and Hungarian dignitaries. The Anti-Horthy League attempted to distribute pamphlets and incite antagonism toward the Hungarian Regent. As a result,

several blows were struck by policemen when the anti-Horthites offered resistance in being driven from the meeting. The handbills, which they sought to distribute, called attention to a protest meeting at the Yorkville Casino, 210 East Eighty-sixth Street.¹⁵

At that meeting Gellert "charged that the Hungarian Government is supporting persecutions and granted no liberties."¹⁶ Buchler, after proclaiming that he was not a Bolshevik, articulated the league's specific opposition to Hungary's gift.

"My objections to the erection of the statue are the same as many other Hungarians who believe the monument being erected by the persons in charge of the work is a farce. What reason," he asked, "have we to go to Riverside Drive and erect a monument to a man who in 1848 proclaimed Hungary to be free? I do not decry Kossuth. He was undoubtedly a great man and worked for reforms which many of us still cherish, but the idea of a monarchical Government, which is still persecuting Jews and which in no way embodies the principles of Kossuth, taking a part in the erection of the statue, is a joke."¹⁷

An editorial in *New Masses* offered an explanation.

The gesture is calculated to produce two results: one is that the poor Hungarian workingmen of this country, blinded by the glorious name, will fork up the shekels; the other, that the American bankers will so much more readily cock their eyes in the direction of Hungary.¹⁸

The following spring, when a group of three to five hundred Hungarian delegate "pilgrims" arrived in New York to dedicate the monument, the Anti-Horthy League

¹⁵ *New York Times*, "Police Rout 'Reds,'" op. cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *New Masses*, "Hungary's Bloody Mary," op. cit.

was more prepared to confront them with a show of defiance intended to draw attention to Horthy's repressive rule. As the ship carrying the delegation from Hungary reached the pier, the Anti-Horthy League confronted it with an organized protest that delayed the disembarkation for hours. The demonstration continued peacefully until "a flashbulb exploded in the hands of an American photographer and the police believed a bomb exploded, the waiting crowd [believed] that the police threw something into the crowd. A riot broke out, the police began to fight."¹⁹ Eventually the Horthy delegates "came down the freight elevator, jumped into taxis and buses and went to their hotel where other Hungarians picketed, bearing Gellert's placards, protesting the Hejjas lads and other sins of the Horthy regime."²⁰

The following day, again, as the delegation attended events in the city they were met by Anti-Horthy League protests. According to the *New York Times*, "the city sent forth such an army of its blue clad soldiers of peace that any possibly contemplated disturbance developed no further than the silent circulation of Anti-Horthy handbills."²¹ But the following day at the dedication of the statue in Riverside Park, an elaborate disturbance did develop. Gellert and novelist Charles Yale Harrison "made arrangements with an ace pilot of the war to fly (them) over the unveiling ceremony." Gellert recalled they "arrived in New Jersey with a bundle of leaflets to meet the pilot. A few of the leaflets had nothing but

¹⁹ Pogany, "Hugo Gellert on the Front Line," op.cit.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Hundreds of Police Guard Hungarians," *New York Times*, op. cit.

'Greetings to the Mayor' printed on them. We showed one of them to the pilot." ²²

What they did not show the pilot were the majority of leaflets printed with Gellert's drawing "showing how Horthy had transformed the gallows into a statue of Kossuth (fig. 3.3)." From the air they showered the ceremony with Gellert's anti-fascist propaganda. *The New York Times* downplayed the incident.

The only trace of discord at the unveiling ceremonies was the hum of an airplane circling above the Hudson River to scatter anti-Horthy leaflets. Most of these floated on the breeze to some other section of the city. A few, however, fell into the crowd and found their way to the speaker's stand, just north of the monument. They were copies of the same leaflet distributed at the City hall exercises on Wednesday when more than five hundred "Kossuth Pilgrims" were welcomed by Mayor Walker.²³

That night, the Anti-Horthy League held a meeting at the Central Opera House on Third Avenue and Sixty-seventh Street. Gellert was among the numerous speakers—including his New Playwrights Theatre comrades John Dos Passos and Francis Faragoh—who protested the scheduled reception of the Horthy representatives in Washington by President Coolidge. Making good on their threat to picket the White House should Coolidge receive the visiting Hungarians, a small group including Gellert,

²² Hugo Gellert, "The Anti-Horthy League," In Deák et al., *Noble Flame*, op. cit.

²³ Anonymous, "Two Nations Unveil Statue of Kossuth," *The New York Times* (March 16, 1928), 3, section 1. Five sub-headlines appear after the lead. In progressively diminishing typeface the first three praise the event. The final two announce

MARCHERS ARE HECKLED

**Plane Drops Leaflets
Attacking Horthy on Riverside Drive—
Police Set Heavy Guard**

his wife, the musician Livia Cinquegrana, and two other Anti-Horthy League activists made the trip to the capital.

According to the *Washington Post*, "one of the strongest police guards ever called upon to protect a visiting foreign delegation" surrounded the Hungarian Kossuth Commission as they made their way to the White House. There, an additional "50 metropolitan police, 12 additional White House guards and a special detail of Park police" met them. However, "shortly after the delegation arrived a party of Hungarian pickets bearing placards criticizing the Horthy government began to march down West Executive Avenue."²⁴ Immediately the four protesters were arrested, "taken into custody by park police and charged at the Third Precinct with carrying banners and signs without a police permit. They gave their names as Hugo Gilbert [sic.], Emory Balint, Camilla L. Cinquegrana [Gellert's wife] and Paul Delco, all of New York City (fig. 3.4)."²⁵ The placards they carried were not shown in the photograph of the four with the arresting officers that accompanied the story. However the text of each message was reported in detail.

The placards carried by the picketers who said they were members of the anti-Horthy League of America, read "Hejjas a mass murderer." "They Dishonor Kossuth." "Perenyi a Hapsburg lacky." "They jailed Hatvany." "Tomscauy (sic.) reinstated the whipping post." The charges referred to members of the Hungarian delegation, it was explained.²⁶

²⁴ *Washington Post*, (March 20, 1928), 24.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Though only four members of the Anti-Horthy League were involved with the action, through the *Washington Post* report their message was carried to thousands in the general population. Of course the Communist press paid even more attention to the Washington incident. From March 17th through March 21st *The Daily Worker* featured the story in blazing headlines and photographs, heroizing the four.²⁷

The Anti-Horthy League remained active for the remainder of the decade, organizing demonstrations to draw attention to oppressive conditions in Hungary (fig. 3.5). As president of the Anti-Horthy League Gellert acted as escort to Count Károlyi in the spring of 1930, during the former Hungarian leader's lecture tour of the United States. Beginning in New York, the two traveled through the heavily Hungarian regions of industrial New Jersey and Pennsylvania, to California, where in Los Angeles Károlyi was fêted by Hollywood celebrities including Charlie Chaplin. In San Francisco on May 1st Károlyi and Gellert went to San Quentin Prison to visit Tom Mooney (1882-1942), the anarchist activist who, with Warren Billings (1893-1972), was wrongly convicted of murder for bombing a

²⁷ *The Daily Worker*, vol. V, no. 66 (March 19, 1928), 1

**WORKERS RESUME HORTHY PROTEST
Picket Line is Planned for White House**

The Daily Worker, vol. V, no. 67 (March 20, 1928), 1

5 ANTI-HORTHY PICKETS JAILED IN WASHINGTON

The Daily Worker, vol. V, no. 67 (March 21, 1928), 1

**HORTHY EXPOSED AT WHITE HOUSE
Coolidge Greets Hejjas, "Mass Murderer"**

1916 Preparedness parade that advocated U.S. intervention in World War I. On the 3rd Gellert's jailhouse portrait of Mooney appeared in the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin* (fig. 3.6). Significantly, Gellert did not depict Mooney as a noble victim. He is "all smiles" and "bathed in sunshine" as "he and Károlyi were absorbed in animated talk" on that May Day.²⁸ In the early 1930s the tasks of the Anti-Horthy League were taken over by the John Reed Club [JRC]. As *New Masses* reported in June 1931, after the Hungarian writer Sandor Gergely and editor Arpad Molnar were imprisoned in Hungary for sedition, it was not the Anti-Horthy League but the JRC of New York who "cabled protests against this latest action of the fascist Horthy government of Hungary."²⁹

The Anti-Horthy League may not have been a Communist organization, but the JRC was. Formed as the stock market reached bottom in October/November 1929 by the militant group of artists and writers of the *New Masses*, the JRC literally began as an informal club. Historian of the American literary left, Alan H. Wald's research revealed that writer Norman MacLeod (1906-1985)

claimed as well that formation of the John Reed Clubs was not initiated by Party leadership; it had been organized after [*New Masses* managing editor Walt] Carmon [1894-1968] kicked a bunch of young writers out of the *New Masses* office. They had been hanging around too much, and to get them out of his hair he told them to "go out and form a club." Rose Carmon confirmed the story and recalled that Carmon added, "I've even got a name for you—call it the John Reed Club."³⁰

²⁸ Hugo Gellert, "Touring the Country with Count Karolyi." In Deák, et al., *Noble Flame*, op. cit. 89.

²⁹ "Hungarian Writers Imprisoned," *New Masses* (June 1931), 22.

³⁰ Alan H. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 105, 362 (n. 9, 10). MacLeod quote (n. 9) is from Norman MacLeod interview by William Ruben, March 28, 1969,

Whoever suggested it, Reed's name was invoked because as journalist, poet, playwright, activist, and co-founder of Workers Party—the splinter group that would evolve in 1923 into the Workers (Communist) Party, and in 1930, into the CPUSA—Reed personified the ideal of the artist-revolutionary. According to art historian Helen A. Harrison, the artist Anton Refregier (1905-1979) corroborated the MacLeod-Carmon account. His description of the Club's formation is strikingly similar to it, except that Refregier remedied the omission of the artist faction.

The [*New Masses*] editor said, for Chrissake, I can't stand you guys, get the hell out. It was the only one center where artists, writers, poets, used to gravitate. Finally we got ourselves a loft on 14th Street and opened up our own headquarters.³¹

Refregier recalled that the founding artists were Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, Fred Ellis, Louis Lozowick, Joseph Pass, and himself.³²

The JRC headquarters at 10 East 14th Street was a place where Communist artists and writers could meet, discuss the issues that concerned them, and formulate policy on their role as culture-workers. Foremost among these was how to involve the working class in cultural production, one of the main objectives

Labadie Collection, University of Michigan. Carmon quote (n. 10) is from Rose Carmon interview by William Ruben, April 25, 1969, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan. Carmon was managing editor of *New Masses* from 1929 to 1932, when he moved to Moscow. There he worked as editor of the English language edition of *International Literature*, the International Bureau of Revolutionary Writers publication. See Wald, *Exiles*, op. cit., 103, 361 (n. 1).

³¹ Anton Refregier interview by Helen A. Harrison, January 2, 1975, in Helen A. Harrison, "John Reed Club Artists and the New Deal: Radical Responses to Roosevelt's 'Peaceful Revolution,'" *Prospects* 5 (1980), 242.

³² *Ibid.*, 267 (n. 2).

of Proletkult. Through traveling exhibitions, art classes, and lectures, which targeted disenfranchised communities, the JRC strove to traverse the class boundaries traditionally associated with the fine arts. After the group established an affiliation with the other Comintern (Communist International) artists and writers groups at the November 1930 Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkov Ukraine, (the Kharkov conference), the JRC became the official cultural voice of the CPUSA.

Before establishing the international affiliations at the Kharkov Conference the JRC filled a variety of needs. One of its earliest official events—if not its very first—was reminiscent of the bohemian *Masses* days. In November 1929 Em Jo Basshe, Hugo Gellert, Michael Gold, William Gropper, Harold Hickerson, Isidore Klein, and Carlo Tresca arranged a rent party in the JRC's name for a friend in Greenwich Village. Such events were common in the Depression. Guests would pay less than they would in a commercial amusement venue, and the proceeds would help the hosts pay their landlords. This particular evening, according to the JRC invitation, "promise[d] to be somewhat out of the ordinary -- movies, dancing, beer and beauty."³³

³³ The invitation, dated November 20, 1929, is typed on *New Masses* stationery. It begins "The John Reed Club – newly formed club of radical artists and writers – has arranged a Rent Party for Saturday, November 23, at the home of Clara Michelson, 22 Bank Street." (Louis Lozowick papers, AAA).

The Party in general valued literature as a cultural form over the visual arts. The Club's writers came dominate its policy and direction. However, as Carmon observed,

from the very beginning of the New York John Reed Club of American revolutionary writers and artists in 1929, the artists group was the most active. The most talented artists made timely drawings for the *New Masses*, *Daily Worker* and other revolutionary publications. They conducted meetings, held exhibitions of their own, showed their work in leading American galleries. It was not a large group then, but among them were such well known artists as William Gropper, Louis Lozowick, Hugo Gellert, Jacob Burck, Fred Ellis and others. One of their first public meetings was in answer to the "religious war" then being conducted against the Soviet Union.³⁴

This meeting took place under the auspices of the Friends of the Soviet Union at the Bronx Coliseum on April 19, 1930. In conjunction with the event the JRC released a statement endorsed by 81 club members denouncing the anti-Russian "holy crusade' of Pope Pius XI, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Bishop Manning, Rabbi Wise and other ecclesiasts," which club member Theodore Dreiser described as,

a drive on the part of our entrenched Western monopolistic interests to bring about either a holy war against Russia or to becloud the Western mind in regard to some of the ills with which unrestrained capitalism is now threatening us—the people at large.³⁵

³⁴ Walt Carmon, "Phil Bard: American Artist," *International Literature*, no. 5 (1934), 80

³⁵ "Group Here Scores Anti-Soviet Drive," *New York Times* (April 19, 1930), 7. The *Times* included the following list of 81 artists, writers, educators and scientists that were included in the JRC's membership. Though Anton Refregier was a founding member, his name was not included.

Em-Jo Basshe	Ernestine Evans	John Herman	Louis Lozowick	A. Schachner
Helen Black	Clifton P. Fadiman	Eitaro Ishigaki	Norman MacLeod	Edith Segal
Franz Boas	Kenneth Fearing	Joseph Kalar	A.B. Magil	William Segal
Jacob Burck	Sara Bard Field	Joseph Kaplan	Jan Matulka	Otto Soglow
David Burtiuk	Joseph Freeman	Paul Keller	Scott Nearing	Herman Spector
Walter Bynner	Sender Garlin	J. Kittine	Joseph North	Genevieve Taggard
Walt Carmon	Hugo Gellert	I. Klein	Harvey O'Connor	Carlo Tresca

As an organization for social change the JRC soon began claiming greater numbers of radical and liberal academics, and cultural figures into its ranks. Two months later, on May 19, 1930, the JRC, now at 102 West 14th Street, issued another statement to the press. This time it was endorsed by 135 writers, and educators who saw an urgent need to confront the “‘Red Scare’ [that] was sweeping the country and threatening the complete destruction of civil liberties.”³⁶

Malcom Cowley	Lydia Gibson	Gan Kolski	M. J. Olgin	Jim Tully
Harry W.L. Dana	Michael Gold	Alfred Kreymborg	Harry A. Overstreet	Mary H. Vorse
Franz E. Daniel	Paul Green	Joseph W. Krutch	Joseph Pass	Keene Wallis
Adolf Dehn	Horace Gregory	Joshua Kunitz	Morris Pass	Jim Waters
Floyd Dell	William Gropper	Susanne La Follette	Harry A. Potamkin	William C. Williams
John Dos Passos	Minna Harkavy	Margaret Larkin	Louis Ribak	Edmund Wilson Jr.,
Theodore Dreiser	Charles Yale Harrison	William E. Leonard	Boardman Robinson	Adolf Wolff
Prof. Knight Dunlap	Josephine Herbst	Melvin P. Levy	Dr. W. J. Robinson	Charles E. S. Wood
Robert W. Dunn	Robert Herrick	H. H. Lewis	Martin Russak	Art Young
Fred Ellis				

³⁶ “‘Red Scare’ Protest Issued by Liberals,” *New York Times* (May 19, 1930).

L. Adohmyan	Max Eastman	Josephine Herbst	Harvey O'Connor	William Siegel
Sherwood Anderson	Charles Ellis	John Herman	M. J. Olgin	Upton Sinclair
Erno Basshe	Fred Ellis	Harold Hickerson	Joseph Pass	John Sloan
Helen Black	Ernestine Evans	Grace Hutchins	Morris Pass	Otto Soglow
Prof. Franz Boas	Kenneth Fearing	Eitaro Ishigaki	Nemo Piccoli	A. Solataroff
Alter Brody	Sara Bard Field	Joseph Kaplan	Harry A. Potamkin	Walter Snow
Samuel Brody	Wald Frank	Ellen A. Kennen	John Cowper Powys	Raphael Soyer
Fritz Brosius	Harry Freeman	Rev. C. D. Ketcham	Juanita Preval	Herman Spector
Jacob Burck	Al Freuh	Rev. Frank Kingdon	Walter Quirt	Prof. J. M. Stainaker
David Burluk	Hugo Gellert	I. Kittine	Burton Roscoe	Genevieve Taggard
Rev. R. B. Callahan	Michael Gold	I. Klein	Anton Refregier	Eunice Tietjens
Walt Carmon	Floyd S. Gove	Alfred Kreymborg	Philip Reisman	Carlo Tresca
Ralph Cheyney	C. Hartley Grattan	Joshua Kunitz	Louis Ribak	Jim Tully
N. Cikovsky	Horace Gregory	Melvin P. Levy	Boardman Robinson	Louis Untermeyer
Lydia Cinquegrana	William Gropper	Louis Lozowick	Anna Rochester	Joseph Vogel
Sarah N. Cleghorn	Rose Greuning	Grace Lumpkin	Anna Rosenberg	Keene Wallis
Ann Coles	Carl Haessler	Norman Macleod	Julius Rosenthal	Frank Waits
Malcolm Cowley	E. Haldeman-Julius	A. B. Magil	Martin Russak	Prof. R. E. Waxwell
Franz E. Daniel	M. Haldeman-Julius	Jan Matulka	Samuel Russak	Rev. C. C. Webber
Miriam A DeFord	Ruth Hale	H. L. Mencken	David Saposs	G. F. Willison
Adolf Dehn	Jack Hardy	Norma Millay	E. A. Schachner	Edmund Wilson Jr.

In addition to these high-profile rallies and protests in support of Soviet Russia, the JRC's primary objective was to involve the disenfranchised, working class in cultural programs. Louis Lozowick explained, the Club's

activity flows along several lines. They organize meetings and discussions to expose the class character of bourgeois art, to fight the influence of that art on the masses and to agitate for the consolidation of proletarian forces. They offer their services to the working class in his political and economic battles by preparing posters for demonstrations, staging pageants, decorating workers plays, illustrating shop papers, etc.³⁷

They began offering their services to the working class by mounting exhibitions that were intended to be relevant to their lives. The first such exhibition opened within months of the Club's formation, on December 15th 1929 at the United Workers Cooperative Apartments, 2700 Bronx Park West, and included the work of Art Young, Hugo Gellert, Louis Lozowick, Wm. Gropper, Gan Kolski, Jacob Burck, Fred Ellis, and Morris Pass, among others.³⁸ Reportedly

over 300 workers came to the opening. There was a furious discussion, led by Lozowick, Basshe, Gropper, Klein and others. The workers razzed the still-lifes, nudes and several other pieces of stale academicism hung by several of the painters. The workers liked the strong modern stuff.³⁹

Floyd Dell	Mina Harkavy	Harriet Monroe	Theodore Scheel	Adolf Wolff
L.A. De Santes	Prof. S. R. Harlow	Prof. Frank McLean	Isidor Schneider	Charles E. S. Wood
Babette Deutsch	Charles Yale Hamison	Scott Nearing	Evelyn Scott	Art Young
Carl Van Doren	Aline D. Hays	Alfred H. Neumann	Edwin Seaver	Stark Young
John Dos Passos	Arthur G. Hays	Eugene Nigob	Edith Segal	Avram Yamolinsky
Robert E. Dunn	Lowell B. Hazzard	Joseph North	Esther Shemitz	William Zorach

³⁷ Louis Lozowick, "Art in the Service of the Proletariat," *Literature of the World Revolution*, no. 4 (1931), 126.

³⁸ "Worker's Art," *New Masses*, vol. 5, no. 7, (December 1929), 21.

³⁹ "A New Program for Writers," *New Masses*, vol. 5, no. 8 (January 1930), 21.

After this same exhibition opened at a subsequent venue in the Brownsville (Brooklyn) Youth Center in April, *New Masses* similarly reported, “about 150 workers came to the symposium of the John Reed Club in connection with the art exhibit.” These young workers who “came to view an exhibition of revolutionary pictures and discuss these pictures with the artists,” were no aesthetes, but they wanted to learn about cubism. They accepted Lozowick’s precisionist lithographs of oil tanks, which looked “clean, sturdy and beautiful,” because “that is how they will look after the revolution (fig. 3.7).”⁴⁰ Whether the 300 workers in the Bronx actually preferred the modern works to the academic ones, or whether the 150 in Brooklyn actually were interested in cubism or viewed Lozowick’s oil tanks as a post-revolutionary ideal, cannot be independently confirmed. However, the fact that, in 1930 the Club emphasized these reactions is significant. It reveals that in the early years of the JRC, artists sought to legitimize modernism in the name of the proletariat. Gellert recalled, “it was a Communist Club, but we were liberal, and progressive artists could join.”⁴¹ The artist Philip Reisman (1904-1992) similarly portrayed the group as diverse.

There were some people in the club who were abstract artists, and there were other people who were semi-abstract, there was a sculptor who did animals. It didn’t matter. A person got up, and he projected a certain point of view, and other people got up and disagreed with him.⁴²

⁴⁰ Joseph Pass, “At a Workers Art Exhibit,” *New Masses*, vol. 5, no. 12 (May 1930), 21. In his pioneering *Masters Thesis, Proletarian Art, and the John Reed Club Artists, 1929-35* (Hunter College, 1970), Arthur Hughes originally attributed this as a reference to Lozowick’s work.

⁴¹ Sequenzia interview.

⁴² Philip Reisman interview by Francine Tyler (December 21, 1987). In Francine Tyler, “Artists Respond to the Great Depression and the Threat of Fascism: The New York Artists’ Union and its Magazine *Art Front* (1934-1937),” Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1991, 42.

The JRC artists did not want the workers to be passive observers. By April of 1930 space was found at the United Cooperative Workers Apartments in the Bronx for the first John Reed Club Art School, under the directorship of Gellert, and John Reed Club Music School, at which his wife Livia was an instructor.⁴³ William Gropper, Morris Pass, and the Sculptor Minna Harkavy ran another JRC art school in lower Manhattan.⁴⁴ The schools were organized by and functioned under the direction of Workers International Relief (WIR), a fundraising organization with Party affiliations. Gellert made at least one poster for the WIR (fig. 3.8), however, it is unclear if the JRC received funding from the WIR or in what capacity it assisted in raising funds for WIR causes.⁴⁵ Over the next six years these proletarian art school experiments would be established in different formats and areas, but as Reisman explained to art historian Arthur Hughes, the schools ultimately

failed at the educational and every other level. Workers most often failed to attend classes in political cartooning and other useful subjects, and if they did, quickly lost interest after working on demonstration and leaflet material. The proletkult theoreticians were forced to come to terms with the fact that the training involved prevented the worker from being both industrial worker and an artist at the same time.⁴⁶

⁴³ "Workers Art," *New Masses*, vol. 5, no. 10 (March 1930), 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Historian of American Communism, Theodore Draper asserted that the WIR grew out of the Friends of Soviet Russia (FSR), a front for the Communist Party, which was organized in 1921 to send money and supplies to famine-plagued Russia. It changed its name in 1924 to Workers' International Relief, then in 1926 to International Workers' Aid, then in 1927 back to Workers' International Relief with Communist Party member Fred Biedenkapp as secretary and former Episcopal Bishop William Montgomery Brown as chairman. See Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, NY: Viking Press, 1960, 176-177.

⁴⁶ Arthur Hughes, "Proletarian Art," op. cit., 43-44.

Because of its Party affiliation the WIR was truly an international organization. Through the WIR, the JRC had access to foreign cultural productions, such as films that mainstream venues did not screen. In conjunction with the first exhibition the Club—along with the WIR, the New York Local Benefit Strike Fund, and the USSR Tractor Fund—sponsored a Red Art Night featuring the “first showing of a special Russian Film,” in addition to presentations by Gellert, M.J. Olgin, William Gropper, Art Young, H. Hickerson, and Louis Lozowick.⁴⁷

The Kharkov conference was called primarily to standardize the Party’s literary policy. After all, it was the Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers. Writers from some twenty-three countries were represented. Visual artists were also present. Fred Ellis and William Gropper attended with the delegation from the John Reed Club. But the emphasis of the five-day conference was on literature. As a result, the resolutions on visual art were relatively open. The International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists (IBRA) was formed during the conference under the supervision of the former Hungarian Activist Béla Uitz, whom Gellert met during his trip to Russia in 1927. Though IBRA was an official Party organization, it stood in the shadow of its more powerful literary sibling, the International Bureau of Revolutionary Writers (IBRW)⁴⁸ IBRA functioned as an umbrella organization, which united the various international Communist artist organizations such as the JRC, the French *Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Revolutionnaires* (l’AEAR), the German *Association Revolutionärer Bildender*

⁴⁷ “Red Art Night,” *New Masses*, vol. 5, no. 8 (January 1930), 13.

⁴⁸ Also known as the International Union of Revolutionary Artists (IURA)

Künstler Deutschlands (ARBKD), and the Mexican *Unión Internacional de Escritores y Artistas Revolutionarios (UIEAR)*. The IBRA declaration proclaimed,

We revolutionary artists, using the accumulated artistic experience and achievements of past centuries in the domain of our work, the domain of pictorial art, must struggle:

For revolutionary content and new forms in art, intelligible to the broad working masses and based on the class struggle;

For the synthesis of class content and new form in revolutionary art.⁴⁹

Though IBRA set the system in place for tighter party control over art policy, at its inception the program was quite open-ended and not especially different from the program of October (Association of Artistic Labor), which Uitz also helped formulate. With no overt hostility towards the avant-garde, like October's call the IBRA manifesto appealed to artists to use new forms to express revolutionary content. The IBRA recommendation to mine "the accumulated artists experience and achievements of past centuries" is simply a more encompassing version of October's appeal for artists to build on the "achievements of the last decades."⁵⁰ In other words, the directives from the Kharkov left the door open for visual artists to employ modern forms and techniques. As historian of Russian art John E. Bowlt observed, in late 1930,

Kharkov was perhaps the stronghold of the avant-garde in the Soviet bloc: that was where the Ukrainian modernists such as Vasily Ermilov and Mariia Siniakova were still active, where Malevich was publishing his last articles in the journal *generatsiia* [New Generation], and where design competition for the

⁴⁹ The Committee for the Organization of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists (IBRA), "To All Revolutionary Artists of the World," *Literature of the World Revolution*, Special Number, Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers (1931), 11.

⁵⁰ "October (Association of Artistic Labor)," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1992, 465, 466. See Chapter 2.

construction of the city theater had drawn entries from all over the world, including one from Marcel Breuer.⁵¹

No distinct IBRA journal was produced as a result of Kharkov. But, the visual arts received mention in the IBRW Moscow-based journal *Literature of the World Revolution*, published following the conference early in 1931, and edited by Béla Illes and Antal Hidas, two other Hungarian expatriates Gellert knew from his 1927 Moscow trip. Significantly, Gellert was the only American visual artist included in its inaugural issue. Two of his drawings were reproduced, each filling an entire page. The first dates from 1927, the second is more contemporary with the publication. Though the political message is unmistakable in each, a comparison of the two reveals changes in the artist's technique. The first drawing depicts an Asian rickshaw operator who has let go of his vehicle, causing the obese imperialist passenger to tumble backwards out of the carriage into a ditch (fig. 3.9). The insubordinate driver, all muscles and clenched fists, looks with contempt at the pudgy, helpless former overlord. Gellert's late 1920s geometric, abstracting language allowed him to take liberties with form, perspective, and space. The second drawing is representative of the direction Gellert was moving. It shows a line of unemployed stretching to the horizon (fig. 3.10). In the 1930s Gellert's graphic style became more naturalistic. There are exaggerations, but fewer passages dissolve into abstract, planar shapes. Though no one clear resolution on style or technique in the visual arts was adopted at Kharkov,

⁵¹ John E. Bowlit, "Hungarian Activism and the Russian Avant-Garde," in Mansbach, ed., *Standing in the Tempest*, op. cit., 160.

Gellert began to move towards a more literal realism. His depictions of workers became portraits with distinct features rather than generalized types.

As the Soviet government grew into the Stalinist bureaucracy, similarly after Kharkov the cultural organizations became more compartmentalized.

Internationally, specialized organizations and committees arose to attend to different aspects of party cultural work. Often these were media specific. For instance, the Workers' Film and Photo League (FPL)—founded in December 1930 as a sub-group of the JRC and the WIR to screen “revolutionary films” to “instruct this [worker] film audience in the detection of treacherous reaction of bourgeois film”⁵²—took over the function of film distribution. In addition to screening foreign films the FPL even produced documentary newsreels of its own. An announcement in the December 1931 *New Masses* claimed that seven such films had already been completed under FPL auspices. Along with JRC members Whittaker Chambers, Robert W. Dunn, Joseph North, Robert Evans (Joseph Freeman) and H.A. Potamkin, Gellert served on the advisory board for *Winter 1931*, the eighth such production.⁵³ The fate of *Winter 1931*, and other FPL productions is uncertain. However, the League did provide a substantial number of Russian “revolutionary films to workers’ organizations throughout the country,” including Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*, *October (Ten Days That Shook The World)*, and Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* for screening, in

⁵² Alan Potamkin, “The Eyes of the Movie,” *International Pamphlets*, no. 39, (1934).

⁵³ See “Workers Film and Photos,” *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 7 (December 1931), 27. It is unclear if *Winter 1931* was ever completed or what Gellert and the other advisory board members’ precise roles were. According to the above notice the advisory board completed “the scenario.”

"social, literary and music groups, A. F. of L. locals, Y. branches, liberal clubs, and fraternal organizations."⁵⁴

Along with these well-known films, the FPL also showed many lesser-known works such as *Cannons or Tractors*, which have not survived into our time. Though this film is lost, its general theme is preserved in Gellert's poster (fig. 3.11). In a band along the top are red army soldiers with stacks of books, and a young Russian family standing before a factory in full production (fig. 3.12). The mother presents the infant to her husband, who clasps engineering tools in one hand and a hammer and sickle in the other (fig. 3.13). The child in the foreground partly covers the smoke from the chimneys in the background, forming a visual analogy between industrial production and the birth of a new post-revolutionary generation. This optimistic scene is contrasted with two images of the United States in the lower corners. On the left a shovel jawed policeman clubs a protester in front of the U.S. Capitol building, while his comrade attempts to ward off another blow (fig. 3.14). On the right a multi-racial group of workers stands defiantly beneath a noose hanging from a tree branch (fig. 3.15).

After Kharkov, Gellert and the JRC artists intensified their program to identify themselves with the working class rather than the intellectual class. A January 1931 *New Masses* biographical sketch of Gellert portrayed the artist in proletarian terms as a worker who "started working at 14 in a machine shop. Dug ditches, skinned mules, picked cotton and taught school," in addition to working

⁵⁴ Ibid.

in steel mills.⁵⁵ Though he was not an actual party member until November 1934, Gellert aligned himself with the militant Communist position, and even before Kharkov denounced his former non-Communist affiliations. His March 1930 commentary, "Teachers Who Flunked" described the deficiencies of utopian anarchist colonies such as Stelton. Recalling his experience teaching there ten years earlier, Gellert asserted he and the other "teachers were full of illusions about 'libertarian ideas,' 'concepts of freedom,' 'individuality,' etc." Consequently, the children grew up to be unprepared to fight for social change. Gellert saw them now as spoiled, irresponsible "tolerant lukewarm sophists...cautious, safe and sane mediocrities...sure to get more than they give." He lamented,

we should have told them the value and importance embodied in our class within the structure of the present society. We should have told them of its important role in the formation of a new society. We should have written our own textbooks, should have told them stories of our own heroes, about our own hopes and desires.⁵⁶

To serve that very purpose, in 1931 with Party support after Kharkov, Gellert, Gropper and other JRC artists helped launch *New Pioneer*. A monthly journal for children, *New Pioneer* featured such stories of radical heroes as "We Have Not Died in Vain," the story of Sacco and Vanzetti illustrated by William Gropper (fig. 3.16).⁵⁷ Moreover, to encourage working-class children to develop skills as proletkult artists, *New Pioneer* offered prizes for portraits of Communist leaders like Lenin and Stalin, and for cartoons such as the January 1932 winner depicting "Bill Worker" standing over a policeman that he had just clubbed unconscious,

⁵⁵ *New Masses*, vol. 6, no. 8 (January 1931), 23.

⁵⁶ Hugo Gellert, "Teachers Who Flunked," *New Masses*, (March 1930), 12.

⁵⁷ *New Pioneer*, vol. 1, vol. 5 (September 1931), 10-11.

while “Mr. Fullbelly” runs for his life (figs. 3.17-3.18). In addition to this blatant method of political indoctrination, *New Pioneer* also delivered anti-racist messages depicting racial prejudice as a by-product of capitalism, and racial harmony as a feature of Communism. Gellert’s *New Pioneer* cover for the November 1932 15th Anniversary of the Soviet Union shows a multi-racial group of young pioneers under a Communist banner (fig. 3.19).

Apart from his committee work with the JRC and responsibilities as a contributing editor to *New Masses*, the project that preoccupied Gellert at the beginning of the 1930s was his graphic interpretation of Karl Marx’ *Das Kapital*, *Karl Marx’ Capital in Pictures* (1933). This ambitious portfolio featured sixty-two lithographs, each of which illustrated an accompanying page of Marx’ text. These lithographs were printed from metal plates, which were not only more economical than the traditional use of grained stone, but the resulting impressions were rougher, without the subtle gradations of traditional “fine” prints. These were prints for factory workers not art collectors. Gellert’s prime concern with *Capital* was to make Communist dogma accessible to the average workingman, who was more comfortable reading illustrated newspapers than thick volumes of dense, economic theory. Printmaking was an important means to realize these ends. Where illustrations in magazines and posters displayed in the street are ephemeral, and murals can only be experienced *in situ*, editioned prints, through their sheer numbers and archival qualities, are ubiquitous and indelible. In 1934 Gellert’s *Capital* was published in book format, making it affordable and

accessible in libraries. Between the portfolio of lithographs and the book, the work could be easily disseminated, exhibited simultaneously in multiple locations, and preserved in libraries, museums, and JRC affiliated institutions. In addition, printmaking allowed him to create a portable, organized, permanent record of many of the images he explored in other media over the years, such as the breadline that appeared in *Literature of the World Revolution*, and the defiant standing worker that appeared in the November 1929 *New Masses* (figs. 3.20-3.22).

Gellert began work on this ambitious undertaking in the late 1920s, probably around the time he helped establish the JRC. He eventually finished proofing the sixty-two lithographic plates in the summer of 1932. On April 23rd of that year the Russian government dissolved all Russian art organizations except the writers union (IBRW) and artists union (IBRA). Subsequently *Literature of the World Revolution* changed its name to *International Literature*. On the inside cover of the first issue appeared a transcription of this Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations, the decision adopted by the central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which states among its purposes,

To unite all writers who support the platform of the Soviet Government and who strive to take part in socialist construction, into a single union of Soviet writers, which shall contain a Communist fraction.

To make a similar change in other forms of art.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, "Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations," *International Literature*, no. 1, (1932), 2.

In support of this new order, of which the JRC was part, the Club issued its Draft Manifesto. Published in *New Masses* in June 1932 the JRC called upon "all honest intellectuals, all honest writers and artists, to abandon the treacherous illusion that art can exist for art's sake, or the artist can remain remote from the historic conflicts in which all men must take sides."⁵⁹ In other words, JRC demanded that artists place their art in the service of the revolution against capitalism. There was to be no neutral art. Art that did not directly serve this purpose reinforced the problem.

Though the JRC supported the Party's position unconditionally, and the *New Masses* editorial staff consisted of JRC founders Carmon, Gellert, and Gold, the IBRW gave the journal low marks. They found

insufficient political work reflected not only in its literary features, but also in the production of the magazine's artists. Very often, in the drawings published in the magazine, we find revolutionary content sacrificed for esthetic innovations and experiments in form together with a fetishistic approach to capitalist technique and its underestimation of the consciousness of militancy of the revolutionary movement with corresponding overestimation of the might of American capitalism. Witness the fact that the artists are not yet strong enough to rise to direct militant conclusions and show the only possible revolutionary escape from capitalism's crisis.⁶⁰

Similarly, Russian critic A. Elistratova described insufficient revolutionary content in *New Masses*. She singled out Gellert, Gropper, and Bard, three artists who voiced their unqualified support of the Kharkov resolutions.

⁵⁹ "Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Club," in Harrison and Wood eds., *Art and Theory*, op. cit.

⁶⁰ "Resolution on the work of *New Masses* for 1931 as formulated by the Secretariat of the IURW relating to the fulfillment of the decisions of the Kharkov Conference," *New Masses*, vol. 8, no. 3 (September 1932), 21. In Arthur Hughes, "Proletarian Art," op. cit., 37.

The traditions of petty bourgeois passiveness, of pacifist humanism, are still strong in the creative work of a certain section of contributors like William Gropper, Hugo Gellert, Phil Bard, and others.... This passive registration of facts of class "oppression," amounts to complete repudiation of the revolutionary class struggle, to an advocacy of passiveness and nonresistance. Such, for instance, is the deceptive illustration by Gellert to Marx' *Capital* (October issue of *New Masses*) which depicts a submissive victim falling under an axe intended to symbolize the brute force of the fascist dictatorship.⁶¹

Rather than uniting the "writers who support the platform of the Soviet government and who strive to take part in socialist construction,"⁶² both the IBRW resolution on the work of *New Masses* and Elistratova's critique are inflected with the authoritarian language typical of the ultra-nationalistic "socialism in one country" period of the USSR. In 1931 outsiders were viewed with suspicion. It is difficult to address Elistratova's criticism of Gellert because it is based on that one image of "a victim falling under an axe" (fig. 3.23). It is likely that she did not see any other prints in the series, although *New Masses* clearly indicated that the image she criticized was part of a larger body of work. Had she seen Gellert's *Capital*, she may have learned just how fully it fulfilled the IBRA and IBRW objectives. It was not merely an artistic interpretation of Marx' treatise. Gellert strove to radicalize those who viewed it, through the technique of dialectical materialism.

As socialist realism scholar Matthew Cullerne Bown explained it, dialectical materialism in art was "built on the illustration of conflicts—of the old and the

⁶¹ A. Elistratova, "New Masses," *International Literature*, no. 1 (1932), 110, 111.

⁶² "Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations," *International Literature*, op. cit.

new, the bourgeois and proletarian—accompanied, perhaps by an indication of the resolution of such conflicts in a way consistent with Soviet ideology.”⁶³

Through the portfolio and book formats, Gellert was able to work with text in series to demonstrate these conflicts and resolutions. As one critic for *Art Digest* noted “lithographs seem to bear out the idea that graphic depictions are more vivid, more emotionally stirring and more far reaching as propaganda than all the most vituperative propaganda.”⁶⁴ Individually each print makes a direct statement. As a group, the prints can be read in relation to the text and to each other. For instance, Gellert first presents conditions under capitalism. Henry Ford can lock out his workers should they demand more pay or fewer work hours. But if the labor force organizes through a strong union, they can achieve the ultimate goal, control of the means of production (fig. 3.24-3.26). Similarly he draws a cause-effect relationship between excess and poverty. First Gellert shows capitalism as a destructive, giant J.P. Morgan walking through the city, crushing building tops with a bag of money (fig. 3.27). Later in the series he shows the same cityscape, only the Morgan figure is replaced by a starving child (fig. 3.28). The viewer, or reader, automatically associates these two images and draws a conclusion, one has power *because* the other does not. Similarly, in a single image he compared the hands of a wealthy man, which possess leisure items, a cigar and a martini glass, with the heavy, empty hands of a laborer (fig. 3.29).

⁶³ Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Social Realist Painting*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998, 122.

⁶⁴ “Gellert’s ‘Capital,’” *The Art Digest*, vol. VIII, no. 14, (April 15, 1934), 22.

Gellert further encouraged his viewer to arrive at revolutionary conclusions by locating Marx' 19th century text in a 1930s United States of America. In 1932, when the portfolio was finished, the Great Depression was at its peak. The image of the bread line would have touched a chord with contemporary viewers. Gellert also included portraits of recognizable figures. In addition to Morgan, he showed John D. Rockefeller, Sr. being strangled by tickertape, and Andrew Mellon literally riding on the back of a worker, who not only supports the thin man's meager weight, but also the weight his massive wealth, as well as that of a non-union "scab" worker (figs. 3.30 -3.31).

In order to illustrate Marx' concept of surplus value, Gellert developed an extraordinarily legible language of symbols. Consisting of clock face, arrows, fists and various commodities this picture writing interprets the text so efficiently that even one who could not read very well would understand it. For instance, in *The Production of Surplus Value* 30 an arrow wraps around the clock face to indicate 6 hours have elapsed. The clenched fist is a sign for labor. The plate of food is what that amount of labor can provide (fig. 3.32). Therefore, a worker need only put in a six-hour shift to provide for his family. Anything over six hours is surplus, which endows the boss with capital (fig. 3.33). Once Gellert introduced these pictographs, he used them in different combinations. Fists on a jacket, a fist on a can, he accustoms the viewer to value commodities as the products of labor (figs. 3.34). As a contemporary Hungarian critic observed, "how many hands hold the means of production in their grip, and for how long, determines the value of

the product. Gellert's drawings make this lesson clear, compelling, unforgettable."⁶⁵

It is possible that Elistratova's critique of Gellert's position in relation to Party policy may have stemmed from his non-party member status. Other, non-Russian Communist critics saw *Capital* as an innovative, uniquely Communist expression. Robert Minor, who himself gave up art in 1926 for more direct Party work—or as he described it, “put down the crayon” to “go out where the events, which [he] was attempting to depict on cardboard were taking place”⁶⁶—countered the notion that Gellert was anything other than a committed revolutionary artist. He distinguished Gellert from fellow travelers with fluctuating convictions.

In his use of an aesthetic means to bring the great work of Marx to the masses, Gellert has done something not done before. It is a step that must be followed by the inevitable logic of these revolutionary days. Gellert knows this and with a spirit in keeping with his art and with his collective philosophy, he opens an invitation to all the artists of the world to feast their talents on: “...the works of our great working-class leaders—Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin—a wealth of material for their best creative artists.”⁶⁷

It is difficult to imagine an artist undertaking such an epic project at the height of the Depression, without any outside funding. But if Gellert conceived it in the late 1920s, when he was making good money from his portraits for *The New Yorker* and *The Nation*, or at the time of his Proletcos mural when he was thinking in

⁶⁵ Lajos Bebrits, “How Hugo Gellert Illustrated *Capital*,” 1933, in Deák et. al. eds., *Hugo Gellert, 1892-1985: People's Artist*, op. cit., 14.

⁶⁶ “A Great Artist is Honored,” *International Literature*, no. 5 (1934), 152.

⁶⁷ Robert Minor, “Karl Marx on the Lithographer's Stone,” *Daily Worker*, (March 24, 1934), 9.

monumental terms, it begins to make sense. Yet, in the summer of 1932, when the sixty-two lithographic plates were ready for printing, Gellert faced a huge, debilitating expense. Had his 1932 application for a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation grant to create "a portfolio of lithographs of the industrialization of the Soviet Union" been accepted it would have offset the expenses significantly.⁶⁸ Undaunted, Gellert decided to have the edition printed in Paris, where printing costs were more reasonable. On November 1, 1932 he was issued a passport. He arranged his passage with the Party-affiliated World Tourists, Inc., to sail on the Aquitania on November 4th for Cherbourg, France.⁶⁹ On board he met his Hungarian colleague Lajos Bebrits, who was being deported.⁷⁰ According to Gellert, Bebrits suggested he try to have the *Capital* portfolio published in the Soviet Union, rather than in Paris. Gellert agreed and went directly to Moscow.

⁶⁸ Gellert application for John Simon Guggenheim grant, 1932, John Simon Guggenheim Foundation archives. Gellert applied for Guggenheim grants four times, 1932, 1936, 1938 and 1949. None of his applications resulted in a grant. I thank G. Thomas Tanselle, of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for this information.

⁶⁹ On November 13, 1956 The House Committee on Un-American Activities asked Gellert about this trip. His testimony was paraphrased in an FBI memo to J. Edgar Hoover.

During the course of this hearing in which the subject testified that he had visited the Soviet Union in 1927 and in 1932, he was asked with respect to his latter trip, "Were you the guest of any group or organization in Moscow?" Gellert answered, "No." He was then asked, "Or in Leningrad?" to which the subject replied, "I was not the guest of any group. I paid my way."

(Hugo Gellert File, FBI, unnumbered Memorandum from William F. Tompkins, Assistant Attorney General, Internal Security Division, to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation [J. Edgar Hoover], November 29, 1957). According to another FBI document in Gellert's file, Gellert was identified as one of a group who "sailed on the 'S. S. Aquitania' From New York, New York on November 4, 1932 bound for Cherbourg, France." (File Number 100-19719, Section Number 1, c. 1954, 29-page dossier of Gellert's Affiliations, Organizations and Other Activities compiled by New York Field Office, Section L, 22).

⁷⁰ Bebrits remained in the USSR from 1932 until the Communists returned to power in Hungary following the Second World War. He then returned to Hungary where he became Minister of Transportation.

There the poet Sarlota Lanyi took him to see her husband, Erno Czobel, who was an official at the Marx Engels Institute. They showed the prints to Béla Kun, who was the liaison between the Marx Engels Institute and the Comintern. With Kun as translator, Gellert visited the different graphics workshops, but, as Gellert recalled, the workshops only had low-quality paper that could not be used to print archival-quality editions. However, through Kun, the Marx-Engels Institute approached Gellert about making a series of 25 drawings for the *Communist Manifesto*, which they intended to print as a small book if the paper was available. He described why the project was not realized.

They would pay 40 rubles per drawing. I mentioned this to Béla Uitz. He brought it up at a meeting of the Artists' Union. There they debated and the resolution was that 40 rubles is not enough for a drawing. I returned to the Marx Engels Institute to inform the relevant parties of this resolution. They explained that they had already exhausted their annual budget, and since they had not previously planned this publication, they wanted to pay the sum out of pocket. They dared not offer more, fearing they would not be able to come up with enough money. Thus the drawings did not make it into the Communist manifesto. The most prestigious Soviet institutions hold artists' decisions in high esteem. Behold, proof that the Soviet artist is indeed master of his destiny, contrary to the foreign anti-Soviet perception.⁷¹

Gellert's account of this encounter cannot be confirmed. However, there is evidence that two other Soviet Government commissions resulted from this trip. On December 16, 1932 Gellert signed an agreement committing him to execute a painting of 8 square meters on the theme "Class against Class" for the Revolutionary Military Council of the USSR. This contract, countersigned by V.I. Mutnyh, required that the "painting must be finished and given to the jury for

⁷¹ Hugo Gellert, autobiographical sketch in Hungarian, Gellert papers, AAA, box. 1.

consideration no later than February 1st, 1933.”⁷² If the jury accepted his design, then Gellert would receive 400 rubles. The artwork would subsequently become the property of the Revolutionary Military Council of the USSR; the artist, however, would retain the right of reproduction, except for the production of a postcard. Apparently this project was realized because a subsequent contract reveals that a poster was made from the mural. It appears that Gellert also sold work to Moscow’s Museum of Western Art while he was in that city. An article about the museum in the April 1933 *New Masses* noted,

Boris Ternovetz, a distinguished Russian critic and authority on modern art is the curator of the Museum of Western Art in Moscow, which houses one of the finest collections of modern art to be found anywhere in the world.... The museum was very actively building up a special section of post war art with particular attention to revolutionary art. For the latter section, the museum has recently purchased works by Gropper, Burk, Bard, Pass, Gellert, Lozowick, Wolfe and others.⁷³

Since Gellert spoke no Russian he spent most of his time with the Hungarians and Americans in Moscow. He made a portrait of the writer Antal Hidas, and visited Béla Uitz, who described the hardships under which Soviet artists worked. Subsequently, with money from Bill Weinstone, representative of the American Workers’ (Communist) Party, Gellert traveled to Berlin to buy painting material for Uitz and to carry out a personal errand for Kun. In the German capital Gellert met the Hungarian critic Alfréd Kemény (a.k.a. Durus) who arranged for him to make an illustration for *Rote Fahne* (Red Flag), the publication of the German *Association Revolutionärer Bildender Künstler Deutschlands* (ARBKD). Gellert’s

⁷² Contract between Gellert and the Revolutionary Council of the USSR, Gellert papers, AAA, box 3.

⁷³ “John Reed Club Art in Moscow,” *New Masses*, vol. 8, no. 8, (April 1933), 25.

crayon drawing depicted three monumental workers operating machinery inside a Berlin gas works (fig. 3.35). Significantly, the industrial environment does not dwarf the men. On the contrary, they dominate the muralistic composition, connecting top to bottom like three human pillars. Gellert's illustration is about the laborers. The factory paraphernalia is literally relegated to the shadowy background. After a brief stay in Berlin, Gellert returned to Moscow with the art supplies for an appreciative Uitz. It is not known precisely how long Gellert remained there. But, by March 9, 1933, Gellert was back in Paris, where he had the *Capital* lithographs editioned at the well-known Eugene Desjorbet lithography workshop. As in Moscow and Berlin, Gellert established contact with the local arm of the IBRA, the French *Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Revolutionnaires* (l'AEAR), which exhibited some of the *Capital* prints later that month. Gellert remained in contact with a number of the IBRA artists and IBRW writers he met in Moscow. A few years later he was to be included in a "series of monographs on Progressive Revolutionary Artists of Europe and America to be published by the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists." At first the artist Jacob Kainen was selected to write the text, but Gellert chose "proletarian" author, Henry Hart for the task instead. It seems, however, that the project was never realized, though others in the series, such as one on William Gropper by Louis Lozowick may have been.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Lozowick did write a monograph on Gropper, which was published by A.C.A. Gallery in conjunction with a March 1937 Gropper exhibition. But it is uncertain if this text is related to the IBRA series. As IBRA was planning the series, Alfred Durus sent Gellert the following list of the first monographs that were to be published (Alfred Durus to Hugo Gellert, October 3, 1935, Gellert papers, AAA, box 1). Durus acknowledged Gellert's preference of Hart over Kainen the

Through his Party connections Gellert found an international community of artists who shared the same uncompromising, zealous Communist militancy. As his numerous writings, designed to dispel "myths" of artistic repression in the Soviet Union, indicate, Gellert portrayed Communist artists as free to discuss different points of view about aesthetics, for example, or compensation. But one area in which there was no room for dispute among Party members was loyalty to the Party. Stalin's victory over Trotsky in 1928 caused a tremendous rift among Communist artists. Those who expressed dissent from the Stalin-led Party were,

following month (Alfred Durus to Hugo Gellert, November 23, 1935, Gellert papers, AAA, box 1).

<u>ARTIST</u>	<u>COUNTRY</u>	<u>AUTHOR</u>
Fred Ellis	America	Alfred Durus
John Heartfield	Germany	S. Tretiakev
Art Young	America	?
Franz Masereel	France	O. Beskin
Robert Miner	America	Michael Gold
Jacob Burck	America	B. Ternovetz
Clemente Orozco	Mexico	Lewis Mumford
Alex Keil	Germany	Alfred Durus
Hugo Gellert	America	Jack Kainen
William Gropper	America	Louis Lozowick
Ernest Neuschul	Germany	Alfred Durus
Lascle Meszares	Hungary	Alfred Durus
Louis Lozowick	America	Samuel Putnam
David A. Siquieros	Mexico	Charmion Von Wiegand
Quintanilla	Spain	?
Chuso Tomatzu	Jap. America	Stephen Alexander

at the very least, excommunicated. The best example of this was the case of Diego Rivera.

In 1930 when Rivera arrived in San Francisco to paint a mural for the stairwell of the Pacific Stock Exchange Social Club, the *San Francisco Chronicle* printed an illustration epitomizing what many feared would result if the foreign Communist muralist was allowed to realize the project. *The Chronicle's* illustration—captioned “Will Art be Touched in Pink?”—showed a photograph of the stock exchange stairwell, doctored to include a superimposed image of Rivera’s 1926 fresco *Wall Street Banquet*, as if this were the image destined for the space (figs. 3.36-3.37). One of Rivera’s most notorious works, *Wall Street Banquet* featured caricatures of the famous American capitalists John D. Rockefeller Sr., J.P. Morgan, and Henry Ford.⁷⁵ The accompanying article observed,

And so the controversy rages! The artistic world as well as the leading financiers of San Francisco, are all waiting with great interest—and some with a bit of apprehension—to see what Rivera will produce when a Communist is called upon to decorate the walls of a temple of capitalism.⁷⁶

When Rivera’s mural was completed these fears were allayed. It contained no disrespectful portraits of prominent capitalists. As a result, the JRC artists were outraged. Gellert deemed it disgraceful that Rivera, who professed to be

⁷⁵ From 1923 through 1928, Rivera decorated the walls on three levels of the Ministry of Education with scenes from the Mexican Revolution and scenes depicting current sociopolitical concerns. Located on the third floor of the colonnaded Court of the Fiestas, *Wall Street Banquet* appears with a series of other images depicting the overindulgence of capitalists. These panels were contrasted with images of poverty and Communist revolution.

⁷⁶ “Will Art be Touched in Pink?” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, (September 25, 1930), 5.

revolutionary, included no references in his San Francisco mural to Tom Mooney and Warren Billings. To Gellert, an artist of Rivera's stature became complicit in the "Mooney-Billings frame up" by not declaring its injustice in the city where it occurred.⁷⁷

The following year, Rivera was given a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The extremely well-attended exhibition featured seven portable fresco panels, four of which were quotations from his Mexican murals, and three of which were New York scenes. Significantly, with the Rockefeller family so closely associated with the museum, the murals Rivera chose to reproduce contained no personal attacks on Anglo-American financiers. Although a number of works in the exhibition did refer to class struggle, such as *The Uprising*, and *Frozen Assets*, the JRC journalist Joseph Freeman attacked Rivera in *New Masses*. Because many of the denunciations were based on fabrications, and patently stemmed from Rivera's opposition to the official Communist Party line, Freeman's credibility is problematic. However, Freeman's observation that Rivera's tremendous success in the United States involved "accepting commissions from the wealthy bourgeoisie he once so savagely caricatured" was accurate.⁷⁸ Indeed, by the time Rivera's Museum of Modern Art exhibition closed in early 1932, of the three American capitalists he insulted in *Wall Street Banquet*—Rockefeller, Morgan, and Ford—he had completed a mural for former

⁷⁷ See Raquel Tibol, *Diego Rivera, Arte y Política*, Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, S.A., 1979, 436. I thank Lic. Tibol for bringing this to my attention.

⁷⁸ Robert Evans (a.k.a. Joseph Freeman), "Painting and Politics, The Case of Diego Rivera," *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 8 (February 1932), 25.

Morgan partner, American Ambassador to Mexico Dwight Morrow, and had accepted offers from Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller, Sr. To make his point, Freeman alluded to *Wall Street Banquet*, arguing that Rivera may have been a great artist in 1926, but his work suffered since he began displaying the counter revolutionary, Trotskyite tendencies that led to his expulsion from the Communist Party in 1929.

When Gellert was invited to participate in the May 1932 exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*—the very next exhibition to follow the Rivera retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art—he engaged the very same issues he faulted Rivera for ignoring. Moreover, he used the opportunity to further address anti-Communist accusations that Russian artists did not enjoy the same creative freedom as their counterparts in the United States. Where in 1927 Gellert wrote about it in his “individualist” letter to *New Masses*, in 1932 he used the Museum of Modern Art exhibition to demonstrate his point that there existed in the United States boundaries that artists could not transgress. Gellert submitted a work intended to offend some of the most powerful men in the country. His piece, *Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together (Last Defences of Capitalism)*, generated controversy when it was rejected from the exhibition because of its insulting depictions of John D. Rockefeller Sr., J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, and President Herbert Hoover (1874-1964) guarding bags of money (fig. 3.38). Also rejected were William Gropper’s *The Writing on the Wall*, and Ben Shahn’s (1898-1969) *Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (figs. 3.39-3.40). Gropper’s work

depicted Andrew Mellon and J.P. Morgan feasting in the company of pigs and attack dogs while National Guardsmen staved off activists protesting hunger and poverty. Shahn's painting showed the executed Italian-American anarchists lying in state in front of the Dedham, Massachusetts courthouse. Behind them were some of those responsible for their unjust convictions including a portrait of Judge Webster Thayer, Massachusetts governor Alvan F. Fuller, who refused a stay of execution, and Harvard President Abbot Lawrence Lowell, who chaired the commission that upheld the conviction, even while finding that Judge Thayer's derogatory references to the defendants constituted a "grave breach of decorum."⁷⁹ Gellert's proposal was so audacious, it seems to have been deliberately designed to test the limitations of freedom of expression. *Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together (Last Defences of Capitalism)* linked the most powerful figures of industry and government to the gangster Al Capone (1899-1947), who sits at their side. Beneath the capitalist/politician/criminal alliance, a Wild West lawman, soldiers, and uniformed police throw tear gas bombs while standing over a jailed Tom Mooney. Its implications were clear: corrupt money bought the power to suppress dissent. Unlike the smiling 1930 May Day jailhouse portrait, this Mooney is a stoic victim. However, Gellert's mural proposal was not a pessimistic statement. As the sub-title reveals, it is the last defenses of

⁷⁹ *The Sacco-Vanzetti Case: Transcript of the Record of the Trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in the Courts of Massachusetts and Subsequent Proceedings, 1920-27*, 6 vols., V, 53781. In Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991, 4. For a detailed analysis see Alejandro Anreus, et. al., *Ben Shahn and The passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, Jersey City, N.J.: Jersey City Museum, distributed by Rutgers University Press, 2001.

capitalism. The implication is clear. Soon the revolution would come, bringing with it justice for the oppressed.

This version of Gellert's mural is actually a reworking of his first submission that was rejected outright, ostensibly because its horizontal format did not conform to the rules of the exhibition, which specified that each entry be seven feet high by four feet wide. The first version depicted only the Rockefeller, Morgan, Ford, Hoover, and Capone figures (fig. 3.41). In the first version nothing distracts from the insulting portraits. Immediately after the first version of *Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together* was rejected, a representative of the museum contacted Gellert and suggested that he not only change the format, but also change the subject matter. According to Gellert the unnamed envoy wondered "if it would not be a good idea in a way to do the panel of Lenin instead of the one you did," further suggesting that a Lenin portrait "would really be a definite and different aspect of the symbolism of the whole social struggle."⁸⁰ Gellert never mentioned the representative by name, but it may have been director of the museum Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who intervened between the troublemaking artists and the board of directors as the situation escalated. Discussing the incident, Barr's biographer Alice Goldfarb Marquis referred to a letter to Gellert, which Barr never sent, maintaining that the museum's policy forbade

"any representation of a living person which has any malicious intent." Barr wanted to assure Gellert that the museum did not object to depictions of "class struggle as such," but it did object "on

⁸⁰ Hugo Gellert, "We Capture the Walls," *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 12 (June 1932), 29. It is unclear if "the panel of Lenin" was a reference to Gellert's Proletcos cafeteria mural, or whether was another portrait of Lenin altogether.

the basis of the personalities that are lampooned, who may be indirectly responsible for the future of the museum."⁸¹

By willfully disregarding this suggestion and deliberately reworking the same theme into a different format, Gellert set out to make the kind of trouble that the Communists accused Rivera of avoiding.

The derisive passage in the upper register of Gellert's second version, capitalists with the spoils of their corrupt and exploitative system, is a variation on the theme Rivera painted in his infamous *Wall Street Banquet*. Helen Appleton Read, the critic for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noticed the similarity. She quipped

Rivera's and Orozco's invectives against capitalism painted on the walls of the Secretariat and the High School in Mexico City in which Morgan, Ford, and Rockefeller appear as symbols of the system, were probably regarded as artistic precedent for these inexcusable inclusions.⁸²

But the relationship to Rivera actually went deeper. In fact, the entire concept for the Museum of Modern Art's *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* exhibit developed from an incident centered on Rivera. *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* opened in May 1932. It was the first show in the Museum's new location at 11 West 53rd Street, following Rivera's enormously successful retrospective at the former space. During Rivera's exhibition rumors began to circulate throughout the New York art world that he, along with British painter Frank Brangwyn (1867-1945), and Spanish painter José Maria Sert

⁸¹ Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.: Missionary for the Modern*, Chicago and New York: Contemporary Books, 1989, 94. Marquis attributed this quote to Barr, but did not cite the source.

⁸² Helen Appleton Read, "Mural Projects Shown at Modern Museum Fail to Reveal Potential Talent," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Sunday, (May 8, 1932), E6.

(1876-1956) had been commissioned to create murals for the lobby of the RCA building in the newly completed Rockefeller Center complex. *Art Digest* reported,

The rumor that the murals for Radio City [sic.], the Rockefeller project in the heart of New York, were to be commissioned to Rivera, Sert and other foreign artists has stirred [up] a tempest. Advocates of the "American Movement" broke into print with bitter attacks of alleged discrimination...others argued for open competition.⁸³

Gellert was by no means an advocate of the "American Movement," but he did argue for open commission. His June 1932 *New Masses* article explained,

Rockefeller Center with its huge wall spaces loomed big as a mural decoration possibility for many an artist. They awaited the completion of the building with impatient expectancy. Then came the news: these walls had been assigned without any competition. Feeling ran high, the art pages of the bourgeois press were filled with indignation and protest. Something had to be done. The architects of the Rockefeller Center issued a statement denying that the contracts were assigned. Upon the heels of this upheaval, the Museum of Modern Art, of which Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. is treasurer, invited artists to participate in an exhibition of mural decorations.⁸⁴

Indeed the exhibition does seem to have materialized as an afterthought to redress the negative publicity. It was organized at the last minute, allowing artists only six weeks to prepare their mural entries. The critic Henry McBride remarked in the *New York Sun* "the wall painting experiment seems to have found artists unprepared."⁸⁵ In this context, the offensive nature of works by Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn can be seen as returning the slap in the face, which Rockefeller Center/Museum of Modern Art officials dealt to these less-established artists.

⁸³ "The Mural Tempest," *Art Digest* (February 15, 1932), 5.

⁸⁴ Hugo Gellert, "We Capture the Walls," op. cit.

⁸⁵ Henry McBride, "Bliss Collection Looks Well in The New Building, However," *New York Sun*, (May 7, 1932), 9

There is evidence that this slap was keenly felt by the museum's administration. A. Conger Goodyear, president of the board of trustees, threatened to resign if these mural studies were included in the show. A few days before the exhibition was scheduled to open, the museum's board met in Goodyear's absence. Their decision, to include the offending paintings rather than face a scandal in the press, prompted the Barr to send Goodyear a telegram on April 28th explaining,

We have had ten days of hell over these pictures...the decision of [Samuel] Lewinson, [Stephen] Clark, and Nelson [Rockefeller] was made after the most careful consideration and after Mrs. Rock [Abby Aldrich Rockefeller], before she left, agreed to leave them in...I implore you not to make a hasty decision but to talk with Mrs. Rock as well as Clark and Lewinson. Please keep this telegram confidential.⁸⁶

Goodyear, no doubt, did keep the telegram confidential, but the day before the exhibition opened the story leaked to the press. Gellert had already had some experience exploiting the media with the Kossuth statue dedication leaflet drop and the demonstration in Washington. As a *New York World* insider, having worked as a freelance illustrator for the paper during the mid 1920s, it is quite possible he fed them the story. On May 2nd a *New York World* headline announced,

**Insurgent Art Stirs Up Storm Among Society
Murals for Modern Museum Rejected as Offensive, Then Accepted
Linked Hoover to Al Capone**

The article reported,

The advisory committee of the museum, headed by Nelson Rockefeller, son of Mr. And Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr., took the part of the three artists whose work was at the center of the storm,

⁸⁶ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., telegram to A. Conger Goodyear, April 28, 1932, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

while the majority of the more venerable trustees opposed hanging the murals.⁸⁷

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller was “understood to have maintained an attitude of neutrality.” Gellert and Gropper both were quoted confirming “the existence of a controversy about their work.”

The tide was finally turned in their favor, they said, by a revolt among other artists invited to contribute murals. Soon after receiving the notices of rejection, they said, they told others of their fate, and eight or ten declared that they also would withdraw, if the murals by Gellert, Gropper and a third by Shahn, dealing with the Sacco-Vanzetti case, were not hung.⁸⁸

The “disagreeable” works by Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn were included in the exhibition; however, they were not reproduced in the catalog. In a decade known for politically-based artist groups, this incident set a precedent for American artists organizing against censorship. Moreover, because Nelson and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller did not actively oppose the inclusion of such militantly Communist artworks in the museum that they sponsored, the incident demonstrated that the Rockefellers would tolerate, and even support in their institutions, works of art that made damaging statements about capitalism, a system the Rockefeller family epitomized. Rivera certainly would have known about the controversy, if not from the accounts in the press, then from Ben Shahn, whose Sacco-Vanzetti paintings Rivera championed, and who was one of Rivera’s assistants on his *Man at the Crossroads* fresco for Rockefeller Center. The fact that the Rockefeller family sided with Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn must

⁸⁷ “Insurgent Art Stirs up Storm Among Society,” *New York World Telegram*, (May 2, 1932), 16.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

have had some bearing on Rivera's decision to include the Lenin portrait in *Man at the Crossroads* (fig. 3.42)

Murals by American Painters and Photographers was understood to be a forum for raising the profile of American muralists. One would assume that through the offensive nature of Gellert's submission, and through the scandal it caused, he would have essentially disqualified himself as a competitor for mural commissions. As Helen Appleton Read observed, "it suffices to say that the panels sent in by Gellert, Shahn ... and Gropper had no place in an exhibition purporting to discover material with which to 'enrich the walls of modern buildings.'"⁸⁹ Not everyone agreed. Shortly after the 1932 exhibition closed, Eugene Schoen (1880-1957), an interior designer hired by the Rockefeller Center Corporation, contacted Gellert. Schoen informed the artist that Wallace Harrison (1895-1981), one of the Center's architects, had seen Gellert's Proletcos Cafeteria mural and wanted him to paint a mural for the lounge of Schoen's Center Theater, a cinema located in the 1236 Sixth Avenue (between 48th and 49th Streets) building of the Rockefeller Center complex.

The choice of Gellert seems surprising in light of the events at the Museum of Modern Art, and nobody was more astonished than Gellert himself. The Rockefeller Center officials were quite clear about the purpose of the commissioned art works. The art for the Center had a specific political function. "Rockefeller City: Thematic Synopsis," a document produced by the Rockefeller

⁸⁹ Read, "Mural Projects," op. cit.

Center Corporation as the decoration was being planned, declared "if a whole population, such as Rockefeller City will possess, can be lifted into a finer life in their working hours, then the economic democracy of America will have begun its answer to the Bolshevist challenge."⁹⁰ However, another contemporaneous document revealed a certain level of anxiety. "Wisely chosen, and effectively executed, such a program would have a valuable influence in informing the public and improving its appreciation." But at the same time it warned,

some ideas involve controversy. (Capital and Labor, International Peace, etc.) It would be unfortunate to attempt representations which might be open to doubt or even ridicule. It seems sound policy to adhere to objective depictions rather than to attempt idealistic symbolism.⁹¹

However, because of his cafeteria mural, Gellert was recognized as a leading modern muralist at the time, despite his politics and the Museum of Modern Art controversy. According to one art critic for *The New York Times*, of all contemporary American muralists of 1932, only Gellert had "an important mural commission, already executed, to speak for him. The walls of the Workers' Cafeteria in Union Square were decorated some four years ago with designs in Gellert's simple, dynamic style."⁹² Furthermore, Schoen's original concept for the Center Theater project involved numerous portraits of leading movie stars. Gellert was well known for his graphic, geometric, faceted portraits that appeared

⁹⁰ "Rockefeller City: Thematic Synopsis," c. 1931-32, 4. Rockefeller Archive Center, Collection: Family, Record Group: 2 OMR, Series: Business Interests, Box: 93, Folder 704, Rockefeller Center Inc.—Themes and Decorations, 1931-1933.

⁹¹ "A Decorative Scheme for Rockefeller Center," March 1932. Rockefeller Archive Center, Collection: Family, Record Group: 2 OMR, Series: Business Interests, Box: 93, Folder 704, Rockefeller Center Inc.—Themes and Decorations, 1931-1933.

⁹² "Mural Projects on View," *New York Times* (March 13, 1932), 4N.

regularly in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The World*, *Pearsons*, and other journals of the 1920s.

Gellert's modernist Deco style lent itself to Schoen's interior. According to the official guide to Rockefeller Center—produced and published by Rockefeller Center, Inc. shortly after the building complex was completed—"the Center Theater is the smaller of the two theaters in Rockefeller Center. The charm and beauty of its interior design and furnishings are unsurpassed even by the Radio City Music Hall."⁹³ To be sure, the Center Theater was an Art Moderne jewel. The street level foyer featured five large opaque windows of translucent, sandblasted glass. Walking across the crimson, scarlet and plum colored carpet specially designed to provide pattern in three directions past the rose-purple Bubinga (African Rosewood) walls, warm, red-toned furniture, drapery, and vermilion columns and auditorium doors, one eventually came to a wide, curving staircase (fig. 3.43). Downstairs was the ladies lounge—featuring a glass mural designed by Maurice Heaton commemorating of the transatlantic flight by Amelia Earhart—and gentlemen's lounge, featuring a photo-mural by Edward Steichen, "depicting army, navy, and civil aviation" (figs. 3.44-3.45).⁹⁴ Upstairs there were three mezzanines. While the first mezzanine was decorated in the same Bubinga tones as the foyer, the second mezzanine featured cool blues, natural tans and "a black and silver painting by Hugo Gellert which depict[ed] the struggle of Light

⁹³ "Guide to Rockefeller Center," *Rockefeller Center Weekly*, vol. 2, no. 21 (May 23, 1935), 11.

⁹⁴ "Radio-Keith-Orpheum Theatre," *American Architect*, issue 2614 (December 1932), 52.

over Darkness" (figs. 4.46-4.47).⁹⁵ Pointedly, no description, other than the vague title of the work was offered. A likely explanation is that the subject of Gellert's mural, albeit thinly veiled, was one of the controversial themes about which Nelson Rockefeller was warned.

The movie star concept was eventually abandoned, permitting Gellert the freedom to conceive and design the mural without restrictions. Yet he retained the cinematic motif of a celluloid filmstrip, complete with sprocketed edges. The four-foot-wide strip emerged from the floor, continued across the ceiling, and down the opposite wall, ending at the top of a doorway. However, instead of other references to the movie industry, Gellert used the space to exalt the working class. He recalled, "on the floor I painted a manhole. From the manhole emerged a great big black man with a monkey wrench. Behind him stood a white worker with a sledgehammer. Behind the white worker was a woman with a child."⁹⁶ But, rather than a mere glorification of labor, as the Rockefeller Center Corporation desired, Gellert produced a statement about political struggle. In addition to the empowered, multiracial proletarian figures, Gellert also demonized the capitalist system. Linking the lopsided distribution of wealth to social ills, such as prostitution, which plague the poor, Gellert painted "figures bound and strangled by ticker tape and a young girl hid[ing] her face in shame as a worker brandishes his fist at those who destroyed her."⁹⁷ A suggestion as to how the

⁹⁵ Ibid, 53.

⁹⁶ Sequenzia interview.

⁹⁷ Joseph North, "Hugo Gellert: Artist in the Liberation War of Humanity," *The Worker* (April 26, 1953), 11.

class conflict could be resolved took the form of “a working-class mother who holds her baby toward the sun which Hugo painted on the ceiling. Sparks of the sun are shooting off and Hugo drew them as red stars.”⁹⁸ The symbolism of an infant reaching for red stars could not be ignored. Gellert insisted that “the architect who supervised all the interior decorations looked at the murals as they were being completed and suggested nervously, ‘Wouldn’t it be better to give those red stars another color?’”⁹⁹ Yet when Gellert refused, “the architect” did not insist and the red stars remained.

The Communist content did not trouble cultural critic Lewis Mumford, who had lectured at the JRC. Rather, he regretted that Gellert’s work was not given a more prominent wall. In his *New Yorker* column Mumford lamented,

Hugo Gellert’s interpretation of the proletariat of the world rising out of a manhole and ascending to the Soviet heaven is excellent as a literary conception; but it lacks space for execution and is little more than a sketch for the mural that might have been painted.¹⁰⁰

Mumford mused whether “it elevate[d] public taste to show potential patrons of this theater ascending from a manhole—and to a red star,”¹⁰¹ and suggested that the mural ought to be examined by Sam “Roxy” Rothafel, the movie palace impresario and owner of the Roxy theaters—including the Center Theater and Radio City Music Hall.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 11-12.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 12. It is unclear if this “architect” was Schoen. Schoen did supervise the interior of the Center Theater, but not “all the interior decorations” of Rockefeller Center.

¹⁰⁰ Lewis Mumford, “The Rockefeller Collection,” *The New Yorker*, (January 7, 1933). In Robert Wojtowicz, ed., *Sidewalk Critic, Lewis Mumford’s Writings on New York*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998, 92.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Mumford's mention of Rothafel would have been understood by anyone following art world news. It was an indelicate allusion to the first instance of the censorship of a Rockefeller Center commission, which was perpetrated by Rothafel, and had made the papers the previous weeks. Upset over sculptures of nude women by Robert Laurent, Gwen Lux, and William Zorach, Rothafel had the "improper and suggestive"¹⁰² statues removed from the Music Hall. The artists were outraged. Stating their case first in an angry letter to the Rockefeller Center Corporation, they had optimistically believed that through the ambitious use of contemporary art throughout the complex, "the future of American art would be bettered, that a new era would arise when the general public would not be considered as a public of morons but would be given an opportunity to see the finest developments in this field of culture." However, the artists wrote,

Our belief in that good intention has been shattered. Our work was removed from the Music Hall surreptitiously without any notice to us. We, like the general public, first learned of it through the columns of the newspapers. This is a breach not only of courtesy, but even of public decorum.¹⁰³

After alerting Mr. Rothafel to the potential dangers of Gellert's mural, Mumford compared the "hidden" subversive element in it to "the Aztec idols the Indian workman used to hide under the altars of the Christian churches in Mexico"¹⁰⁴

Through this statement Mumford referred to American expatriate Anita Brenner's 1929 *Idols Behind Altars*, a book that demonstrated how native Mexicans

¹⁰² "3 Artists to Exhibit Nudes Banned by Roxy" *New York Times*, (December 15, 1932), 22.

¹⁰³ Robert Laurent and William Zorach to Rockefeller Centre, Inc., (December 15, 1932), Rockefeller Family Archives, Record Group 2 OMR, Business Interests, RCL, Box 93, Folder 93.

¹⁰⁴ Mumford, "The Rockefeller Collection," *The New Yorker*, (January 7, 1933), in Robert Wojtowicz ed., *Sidewalk Critic*, op. cit.

succeeded in resisting the total imposition of the Spanish invader's culture during the colonial period. Brenner then related this concept to early 20th century Mexican illustrators such as José Guadalupe Posada and Manuel Manilla, who used populist imagery to make political statements. Finally, she traced this lineage to the Mexican muralists.

This strategy of deception in Gellert's mural to which Mumford pointed resonated among muralists of the radical left who were attempting to deliver their message to a mass audience within a capitalist society. Both Gellert and Rivera had to be just deceptive enough so they could place their ideological idols behind their patron's altars. The red stars, silver dollar, and ticker-tape-bound capitalists in Gellert's second mezzanine mural at 1236 Sixth Avenue were accepted.¹⁰⁵ However, Rivera's portrait of Lenin in the RCA Building lobby at One Rockefeller Center was not. The resulting obliteration of the fresco in February 1934 brought into the mainstream the issues of patronage, censorship, and freedom of expression that, before then, had been discussed primarily by the left.

¹⁰⁵ Gellert's mural survived less than twenty-two years. It remained *in situ* until 1954, when the Center Theater, which could not compete with Radio City, was demolished and replaced with more office space.

CHAPTER FOUR THE POPULAR FRONT

During the 1930s art in America underwent a tremendous transformation. What had been a move to the left by a minority of radical leftist artists earlier in the century became the dominant trend. In the 1920s the impulse for artists to organize was concentrated in circles of radicals with a specific Marxist agenda. These groups laid the groundwork for the activities of the following decade. Gellert played a principal role in this transition. During the Depression formerly liberal, apolitical artists became increasingly class conscious. In the post-war boom economy of the 1920s alternatives to the capitalist economic system would not have seemed important to the non-radical artist. But because the Depression instigated constant, unavoidable confrontations with unemployment, poverty, and hopelessness, even politically mainstream artists could not avoid questioning an economic system, which could collapse in such a devastating way.

Though there was general disillusionment with American culture and politics, there was no single event to galvanize artists around the need to band together until the 1933-34 Rivera battle of Rockefeller Center. It instigated responses from artists across the nation. Drawing on his organizational experience with the Anti-Horthy League, the *New Masses*, and the John Reed Club, Gellert emerged as a leader of the scores of artists outraged by such a blatant act of destruction. Though he was once counted among the most outspoken of Rivera' detractors,

Gellert's voice now became one of the loudest in the protest against Rockefeller's brutal censorship. With Saul Berman, Stuart Davis, and Zoltan Hecht, Gellert organized the Artists' Committee of Action in February 1934 as an agency to protest the act a mere matter of days after the fresco was destroyed. Though the Committee was born out of that specific incident, its overriding objective was to create an alternative to the patronage system, one in which artists were free to create and develop without fear of repercussions from challenging the political, social or aesthetic positions of their benefactors.

A number of Gellert's previous writings and actions were designed to elicit this very kind of change. His 1927 *New Masses* anecdote about the "individualist" in Paris, for instance, and certainly the 1932 Museum of Modern Art incident had this effect. These efforts may have caused a stir, but they had no immediate discernable effect on the art world. Through his involvement with the John Reed Club, Gellert contributed to the attempt to nurture a proletarian culture, which he hoped would grow strong enough to challenge the entrenched bourgeois systems. Though this idealistic experiment died on the vine, the destruction of the Rivera fresco in February 1934 was of such a great magnitude that Gellert, through the Artists' Committee of Action, was able bring together a significant contingent of outraged artists seeking to change the system. By May of 1934 the Artists' Committee of Action claimed the support of 1000 New York artists.¹

¹ Artists' Committee of Action letter to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, reproduced in *Art Front*, vol. 1, no. 2, (January 1935), 4.

Many of this number were most likely also members of the Artists' Union, an organization that grew from a group of John Reed Club members, who, in the summer of 1933, formed the Artists' Group of the Emergency Work Bureau to apply pressure for government sponsored art projects.² As this group grew that autumn its members changed its name to the Unemployed Artists' Group, aligning themselves with the Communist-sponsored Unemployment Councils. Though he must have sympathized with their platform, Gellert does not seem to have been involved with this group. Perhaps this is because at this time he simply was not an unemployed artist. He was by no means well off, but despite the Depression, Gellert found work as an artist. He had just completed his Center Theater mural the previous fall. Then the Soviet Government contracted him. He was able to self-publish the *Capital* portfolio through a commission to design a twenty-four section color billboard for California's highways by an organization lobbying for Tom Mooney's release from prison.³ In 1933 he illustrated *The Mirrors of Wall Street*, an anonymously written series of biographical exposés of thirteen of the richest Wall Street tycoons published by the mainstream G. P.

² The founding artists were Max Spivak, Louis Ribak, Michael Loew, and Bernarda Bryson. See Gerald M. Monroe, "The Artists' Union of New York," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Education, New York University, 1971, 33-56.

³ According to an unpublished Hungarian document in Gellert's papers, on his way from Moscow back to Paris in the Spring of 1933 he,

ran into a woman whom [he] had previously met through Upton Sinclair, when [he] had been in California [with Karolyi in the Spring of 1930]. This woman was lobbying for the liberation of Tom Mooney, the innocent workers' leader who had been condemned to a life sentence in a California prison. She asked (him) to design a 24-section color billboard, hundreds of which would be posted along California's main roads to draw attention to Tom Mooney's innocence. [They] completed the plan and they paid (him) so well for it that the printing of [his] portfolio hardly seemed to cost anything.

Hugo Gellert, Hungarian language autobiographic sketch, Gellert papers, AAA, box 1.

Putnam's Sons.⁴ The following year the publishing house Ray Long and Richard R. Smith issued *Capital* in book form.⁵ In late 1934 Eugene Schoen, the interior architect of the Center Theater, commissioned Gellert for a "lithographic painting," which was exhibited in Schoen's room at the Thirteenth Contemporary American Industrial Art exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁶ Furthermore, from 1925 through 1937 Gellert received regular work as an illustrator for the *New Yorker*, contributing portraits to the profiles column. In addition, though his salary must have been meager, Gellert was a full-time art editor of *New Masses*.

The Unemployed Artists' Group pushed the administrators of the emergency New Deal relief agencies to extend funds for art projects. By the end of the year, largely due to efforts by Edward Bruce, and President Roosevelt's boarding-school friend George Biddle—artists not associated with the group—money was made available to the Treasury Department to establish the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). Because this pilot, yearlong project employed many of the formerly unemployed artists, the members of the Unemployed Artists' Group changed its name to the Artists' Union in February 1934, roughly at the same time that the Artists' Committee of Action was formed.

⁴ Anonymous, with drawings by Hugo Gellert, *The Mirrors of Wall Street*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, NY: 1933.

⁵ Hugo Gellert, *Karl Marx' Capital in Lithographs*, Ray Long and Richard R. Smith, NY, 1934.

⁶ 5 November 1934–6 January 1935.

The Artists' Union grew to fulfill a much broader role than the John Reed Club and the Artists' Committee for Action. It strove to carve a place for the artist, which had not existed before in American society. Echoing Gold's "Towards Proletarian Art," Gellert's anecdotes on individualism and the illusion of autonomy under the bourgeois patronage system, and even Lenin's writings on the nature of artistic production under capitalism versus socialism, Stuart Davis articulated the plight of artists before the union was organized.

The artist of the immediate past was an individualist, progressive or reactionary in his painting theory, working within the framework of middle class culture and marketing his product through channels set up by the middle class. His economic condition in general was poor and he was badly exploited by art dealer and patron alike.⁷

The Artists' Union provided a way of fighting against this exploitation, fighting "for increase in projects, against layoffs, against time and wage cuts, for social and unemployment insurance, for trade union unity, against the degrading pauper's oath on the projects and for free expression in art as a civil right."⁸

Throughout 1934 the Artist's Committee of Action was the *de facto* watchdog group against different forms of art censorship in New York. The suppression of the Rivera fresco, of course, was the case with the highest profile. Another arose at the Westchester Institute of Fine Arts in Tarrytown, New York, on August 31, 1934, when a twenty-six-year-old Latvian immigrant house painter named John Smiuske threw paint remover on, and struck a match to *The Nightmare of 1934*,

⁷ Stuart Davis, "The Artist Today: The Standpoint of the Artists' Union," in Shapiro, *Art as a Weapon*, op. cit., originally in *American Magazine of Art* (August 1935).

⁸ Ibid., 115.

an anonymous artist's large, mural study, which included caricatures of President Franklin Roosevelt, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Smuiske confessed,

when paint remover and fire had destroyed part of the painting in which Mrs. Roosevelt's picture was displayed, I turned the painting over on the floor so that the painting was facing the floor. The fire went out immediately. I then turned the painting so as the back of the painting was to the floor. I saw then that the part of the painting I wanted destroyed was destroyed.⁹

Smuiske's work was then interrupted by a museum official who was attracted by the screams of the women visitors. By then the painting had been burned beyond repair. As Smiuske explained to a *New York Times* reporter that he thought the painting

was all right, except for including Mrs. Roosevelt. I thought it was a disgrace to bring a woman into a political thing of this kind. Anyway it wasn't good art. It wasn't worth 5 cents. I'm not the only one who dislikes it. It should have been destroyed a long time ago. The person who ruins it will be doing other people a service. I'm glad I did what I could.¹⁰

Compared with Gellert's *Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together*, and Gropper's *The Writing on the Wall*, *The Nightmare of 1934* seemed benign enough. Eight feet by four feet, it

depicted President Roosevelt speaking into a series of microphones, a characteristic smile on his face and a small crown on his head. With his right hand he held the stand for the microphones and with his left a fishing line, from which dangled a large fish.

Mrs. Roosevelt, in evening gown and wearing a paper crown stood to the President's left. A mass of papers was dropping from her left hand. On the table before the president were scattered playing cards all of them deuces, symbolizing the New Deal.

⁹ "Complete Confession of Vandal," *The Daily News* (Tarrytown), (August 31, 1934), 1.

¹⁰ "Roosevelt Mural Burned By Zealot," *New York Times*, (September 1, 1934), 15.

Clad in a clown suit, Secretary Morgenthau sat in the foreground, juggling money high in the air. Below him, hands reached out beggingly from a pool of water.¹¹

The artist who painted *The Nightmare of 1934* used the pseudonym Jere Miah II (as in the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah), and to this day has not been identified.

Though his painting was destroyed, Jere Miah II nonetheless pleaded for leniency for Smiuske explaining with surprising compassion, "I understand how an inarticulate person would use fire instead of a brush to express his feelings."¹²

Although Smiuske was sentenced to six months in the Westchester County Penitentiary, he was released after only serving four weeks because Jonas Lie, President of the National Academy of Design, member of the New York City Art Commission, and trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, personally furnished the \$500 bail. Lie explained he "was outraged by the caricature, and admired the youth for his courage and for having been aroused by so cowardly a portrayal," adding "the sentence was too severe for so justifiable an act."¹³ The destruction of a painting because of its political content was bad enough. But Lie's endorsement of the act, though he insisted he did so not in any official capacity but only as a private citizen, effectively implied the complicity of the institutions he represented.

As Chairman of the Artists' Committee of Action, a Communist, and an academically-trained artist who rejected the academy, Gellert saw Lie as the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Jonas Lie Aids Man Who Ruined Mural," *New York Times*, (October 5, 1934), 25, quoted in *Art Front*, vol. 1, no. 1 (November 1934), 3.

embodiment of all he opposed. Lie was an academic painter and a social conservative who believed that politics was of no concern to art. For Gellert Lie was the archetypical melodrama villain with "his stove-pipe hat cocked at a rakish angle," jeering at the artists who were picketing the Rockefeller Center Municipal Art Exhibition the previous February.¹⁴ Gellert later described a personal confrontation with Lie at this event as a clash between the old dying order and the new breed of pugnacious activist artists.

The President of the National Academy came and he said, 'there isn't an artist amongst you.' I walk up to him, I stuck my nose into his face, [and] I said 'I am a Goddamn sight better artist than you'll ever be.' 'Hooray!' went up from the picket line and the man, the President, had to slink away.¹⁵

In 1934, the destruction of a work of art by an agency or an individual who did not like the artist, the message, or the technique could not help but draw comparisons with similar actions in Nazi Germany. Just over a year earlier, on the 10th of May 1933, the first of Hitler's book burnings had taken place. Intended to purge Germany of "Jewish intellectualism," volumes of Sigmund Freud, Heinrich Mann, Karl Marx, and many others were consigned to the bonfires in front of Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm University. In an open letter to Lie, Gellert pulled no punches. He accused Academy President of being "in thorough accord with the aims and methods of Adolph Hitler." He explained,

the civilized world stood aghast as Hitler coupled the killing of men with the burning of books. The executioner's axe and the flames of the pyre are fitting symbols of the backwards march of confused

¹⁴ Hugo Gellert, "Jonas Lie and Property Rights" *Art Front*, vol. 1, no. 1, (November 1934), 3. Though unsigned, this editorial was most likely written by Gellert. His voice is audible throughout, especially in the final paragraph in which he reiterates the issues in Marxist terms.

¹⁵ Sequenzia interview.

humans to the caveman. This marching back to the beast is by no means confined to present-day Germany alone.¹⁶

Lie's response did not contradict Gellert's comparison to Nazi policy.

Astonishingly, it reinforced it. Lie first asserted that he was "opposed to the destruction of the work of a living artist without his being consulted." In this respect he considered Smiuske guilty. However, he allowed that burning a work of art is justifiable if it is done in the name of a high ideal.

On the other hand, this overt act was committed by a high ideal. Therefore I sympathize with him in his act and consider that his punishment of more than four weeks in jail has been sufficient, and I put up bail of \$500 pending the appeal of his case.¹⁷

His position was supported by a *New York Times* editorial the following day, which reiterated Lie's rationalization that "it is wicked to destroy an artist's work without his permission, but in the present instance the offender acted in passion and under the sway of a high ideal." Furthermore, the *Times* justified Lie's approval of the burning as an acceptable reaction to a disruptive work of art.

Citizens who believe that a flash of honest indignation now and then is a becoming thing, would have been rather glad to learn that the man who furnished bail was Jonas Lie, the president of the National Academy as well as the private individual, and that the sense of civic outrage was reinforced by the feeling that it was a pretty bad picture.¹⁸

Finally, Gellert connected the *Times* editorial justifying Lie's position that burning a painting can be an acceptable act under certain conditions, with the biased way in which the news was delivered in the "bourgeois press."

¹⁶ "An Open Letter to Jonas Lie, President of the National Academy of Design," *Art Front*, vol. 1, no. 1, (November 1934), n.p.

¹⁷ "Artists Assail Lie for Aiding Vandal," *New York Times*, (October 10, 1934), 25.

¹⁸ *New York Times*, (October 11, 1934).

The *Times* does not choose to uphold the rights of property when it concerns only art and artists. But when it concerns coal barons, shipping magnates, steel corporations and automobile industrialists... Human blood is spilled... Bayonets glisten, teargas, machine guns and screaming editorials rush to the aid of the most sacred of the sacred...PROPERTY RIGHTS.¹⁹

In order to remove the obstacles to free expression inherent under private patronage, the Artists' Committee of Action proposed a non-profit Municipal Art Gallery and Center in which "(1) Only artists can hold executive offices. (2) All executives are duly elected by the artists themselves."²⁰ In Marxist terms, the artists were to control the means of their production. The institution's objectives were extraordinarily forward looking. It was to fulfill much greater needs than merely providing an exhibition venue. It was to establish a fund from sales and income from activities that would be used to benefit all its members. It was to include,

- A fraternal meeting place for the artists enabling them to come in contact with their contemporaries.
- A live forum for the discussion and exchange of ideas in art.
- A center for traveling exhibitions from which art works would be sent to all sections of the country; also where art from other parts of the United States could be studied.
- A department for the popularization of art and art appreciation.
- Studies and laboratories where advanced experiments will be conducted in all mediums.
- A circulating library of art works to be rented and loaned to private individuals and public places.
- An art committee to establish friendly relationships with art centers throughout the world.²¹

¹⁹ "Jonas Lie and Property Rights" *Art Front*, op. cit.

²⁰ "Artists' Committee of Action to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia," *Art Front*, op. cit.

²¹ "Outline for A Municipal Art Gallery and Center as proposed to the Mayor by The Artists' Committee of Action for The Municipal Art Gallery and Center," (March 11, 1934), Gellert papers, AAA, box 2.

Originally, part of the Rockefeller Center plan was to include some form of public art space. However, in no way did it approach the scope of the Artists' Committee of Action's conception.

The artists did not oppose the Rockefeller Center gallery for this reason alone. Because the gallery was located at Rockefeller Center, its credibility was tainted. It could not escape associations with the destruction of the Rivera fresco. The Artists' Committee of Action's inaugural activity was to draw attention to the hypocrisy of opening an art center in the social space where a public work of art had been demolished over the objections of the artist and the art community. The artists set up a picket line in front of the Sixth Avenue entrance to the Center to protest this art center's first exhibition. Organized by soon-to-be-Federal Art Project director Holger Cahill, this show was billed as the first municipal art exhibition. Harry Gottlieb declared that artists were outraged "that this 'harmony show,' purporting to show [a] community of interest among all New York artists was actually serving to whitewash Rockefeller vandalism."²²

Gellert himself pointed to this duplicity in his portfolio of lithographs and text, *Comrade Gulliver: an Illustrated Account of Travel into That Strange Country, the United States of America*, a satirical diary written by Gellert in the voice of a Russian ball-bearing factory worker who visits a liberal, leisure-class, friend, Mr.

²² Harry Gottlieb, "Municipal Art Center," in Baigell and Williams, eds., *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 160.

Keen, in New York. The two travel through the city, and then drive through the mining and industrial areas of Pennsylvania and Ohio to the Deep South, encountering civil unrest, unemployment, and racism. Each passage from Gulliver's chronicle is complemented by an image. In *Patronage*, a tuxedoed society painter is represented with brush, palette, and ring through his nose, from which a leash trails to an unseen hand (fig. 4.1). The accompanying text describes Comrade Gulliver's visit to Rockefeller Center with a young American woman he met on the bus.

We entered the tallest [building] at the center of the group. A large white wall faced us. On either side of it long corridors were decorated with pictures. "How strange," I remarked, "they put pictures where you can't see them and this big space, in the light remains blank."

"That too had a picture—a fresco. Didn't you hear about it?" The girl said. I shook my head. "Yes a picture of a countryman of yours—Lenin."

"A picture of Lenin, what happened to it?" I asked in amazement.

"It was destroyed"

"Why, wasn't it any good?"

"It must have been good, they paid twenty thousand dollars for it."

"Why was it destroyed then?"

"Oh, Mr. Rockefeller didn't like it."

"Who is Mr. Rockefeller?"

"He is an art patron"²³

For Gellert the issue extended beyond a wall with a picture on it. An alternate version of this text, not written from Gulliver's point of view, reveals that Gellert considered the Rockefellers guilty of far greater crimes against humanity, of which their treatment of the Rivera mural was merely symptomatic. He explained that great philanthropic gestures such as the construction of Rockefeller Center served as a form of cultural bribery, which allowed much more serious robber-

²³ Hugo Gellert, "Patronage," in *Comrade Gulliver: An Illustrated Account of Travel Through That Strange Country The United States of America*, NY: Putnam's Son's, 1935, 13.

baron transgressions to go unpunished. He listed precedents in the tactics of John D. Rockefeller, Sr. whose civic generosity was proportionately negated by the heinousness of his misdeeds.

He built great churches to the greater glory of God, and plundered his own flesh and blood brother of his worldly goods. He endowed institutions to scientific research for the prolongation of life. But he did not hesitate to shoot down his workers in cold blood.

Like father like son. John D. Rockefeller Jr. dedicated his great palace of art by the destruction of a work of art as part of the opening ceremonies.

This great art patron, the richest man in the world, was not pleased with a work of art, therefore he destroyed it. He paid for it. It was his. He had a right to destroy it. He can buy a thousand works of art and destroy them all! And why not, for is art more precious than human life? Why should not the destroyers of life also destroy art?²⁴

The artists opposed to the Rockefeller Center Municipal Art Exhibition met on February 26th at Irving Plaza, on East 15th Street near Union Square. At that meeting Gellert argued for an artists' strike, the same tactic that he and the other artists used in the 1932 face-off against the MoMA administration. As Monroe related, "evidently as a result of his aggressive stance, Hugo Gellert was elected chairman of the new organization."²⁵ Gellert too recounted that it took some effort to persuade concerned artists to take action, but he soon convinced them to mobilize.

I said "look, now you're artists and all you want to do is talk, you don't want to do anything." I took my hat and coat and one of the men grabbed me, [Alexander] Stavenitz, he later became the director of the teaching project on (the) WPA. He said "Hugo you're

²⁴ Hugo Gellert. "Patronage," alternate draft for text of *Comrade Gulliver*, Gellert Papers, AAA.

²⁵ Monroe, "Artist's Union," op. cit. 57

the only guy who talks sense. You're going to leave us?" So I stayed and before long the majority voted for a picket line.²⁶

Following the lead of organized labor, demonstrations, picket lines, and sit-ins became the standard method for artists to voice their demands. On May 9th 1934, The Artists' Committee of Action organized a demonstration with the Artists' Union to bring their case for a Municipal Art Center controlled by artists directly to Mayor LaGuardia's doorstep. Three hundred artists marched from the headquarters at 11 West 18th Street shared by the Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union to City Hall. According to *The New York Times*, "handbills were distributed along the route urging support of the plan for a municipal art center. The handbills were prepared by the Artists Committee of Action, which arranged the parade. Hugo Gellert is chairman of this committee."²⁷ Monroe noted that The Artists' Committee of Action was "more or less a 'paper' organization controlled by Gellert who was able to attract large numbers of artists to demonstrations and to solicit the support of distinguished public figures."²⁸ Among these prominent individuals were journalist Heywood Broun, cultural theorist John Dewey, urban critic Lewis Mumford, co-founder of the National Civil Liberties Union Amos Pinchot, investigative journalist and social reformer Lincoln Steffens, and photographer and gallery director Alfred Stieglitz. Although they endorsed the need for a Municipal Art Gallery, there is evidence that not all of them approved of Gellert's tactics. In a photograph of the demonstration that

²⁶ Sequenzia interview.

²⁷ "300 Artists Demand Municipal Centre; Deutsch Pledges Aid to Group at City Hall," *New York Times*, (May 10, 1934).

²⁸ Gerald Monroe, "Art Front," *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 13, no. 3, (1973), 13.

appeared in *Art Front*, a somewhat bewildered looking Alfred Stieglitz regards Gellert as he addresses a “crowd of 2000” on the steps of City Hall (fig. 4.2). In November 1934 Stieglitz wrote Gellert that he no longer wanted his name associated with the organization.²⁹

Mayor LaGuardia responded to the Artists' Committee of Action's demands by appointing a Municipal Art Committee of One Hundred established art world figures in September 1934 to oversee the city's vision of a Municipal Art Gallery. This committee included Museum of Modern Art director Alfred Barr, Gellert's nemesis, Jonas Lie, as well as the artists John Sloan, Leon Kroll, Louis Lozowick, and Michael Loew. “The latter two,” as Francine Tyler observed, “both John Reed Club members, and founders of the Artists' Union, kept the ACA (Artists' Committee of Action) apprised that the Committee of 100 was nothing more than a showcase of important names, and not a real working body.”³⁰ On October 26th, in response to LaGuardia's proposal, The Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union held a meeting at the New School for Social Research. Chaired by Gellert, the meeting concluded with the two groups agreeing on a refined platform of demands. In addition to their vision of a Municipal Art Center, these included an extension of work-relief for artists, and for the Mayor to endorse their call for permanent, federally funded art projects. Despite being denied a permit by the police, Gellert announced that they would

²⁹ Hugo Gellert to Alfred Stieglitz, November 10, 1934, Gellert papers, AAA, box 2.

³⁰ Francine Tyler, “Artists Respond to the Great Depression and the Threat of World Fascism: The New York Artists' Union and its Magazine, *Art Front* (1934-1937),” Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1991, 153.

once again march to City Hall to present their demands to Mayor LaGuardia. Yet regardless of these efforts, the LaGuardia Committee of One Hundred's plan for a Municipal Art Center fell far short of the artists' goals.

In January 1935 a temporary Municipal Art Gallery was opened at 62 West 53rd Street. However, artists submitting work discovered two stipulations on the application form. One denied the right of all non-citizens to exhibit in the space, so that prominent artists such as Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889-1953), who had lived and worked in New York for thirty years, were prevented from exhibiting. The other empowered the Committee of One Hundred's Municipal Art Center to exclude any work of art that would "abuse the hospitality of the administration of New York."³¹ In other words, city officials could ban a work of art that did not conform to the municipal government's political views. Once again, The Artists' Committee of Action responded with protests. Their threat to boycott and picket the exhibition caused the Committee of One Hundred to replace the citizenship clause with a residency clause and to withdraw the "hospitality clause."

Though the Artists' Committee of Action's version of a municipal art center was never fully realized, echoes of its ideal resonated in the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project's (WPA/FAP) Community Art Center program, which operated from late 1935 until mid-1943. Significantly, Holger Cahill, folk art scholar and curator who organized the controversial Rockefeller Center

³¹ "Our Municipal Art Gallery and Center," *Art Front*, (February 1936), 4, in Tyler, "Artists Respond," op. cit., 158.

Municipal Art Exhibition, designed this facet of the FAP. In 1921 Cahill became assistant to director of the Newark Museum, Charles Cotton Dana. "From Dana," *Time* magazine observed, Cahill "caught the conviction that an art museum or gallery should mean a lot more than a place to get bored in on Sunday afternoon."³² Coming from this museum background, Cahill recognized that no reliable institutional system of support for contemporary American artists existed. Rather, a pattern had developed since the mid-19th century where wealthy collectors built their collections around highlights of European art history. In turn, the great American museums, which received the base of their permanent collections, as well as much of their funding, from these individuals, tended to collect from this point of view as well. These great concentrations of art naturally accumulated in large cities that grew around commerce. Therefore, by not being actively encouraged to make art, contemporary artists, particularly those cut off from large cities, were passively discouraged. As Thomas C. Parker, Cahill's appointee as Director of the Community Art Center's program articulated, Art Centers were in no way to be thought of as museums, rather as a foil against the "white marble corridors...of endowed institutions."³³ Where the museum's aim was to preserve the past, the Community Art Center's emphasis was on the present.

Like most of the objects it exhibits, the average museum is a fragment of the past, displaying legacies willed from rich men's

³² "WPA Director Holger Cahill, His Project: To Build a Plateau," *Time*, vol. XXXII, no. 10 (5 September 1938), 35.

³³ Transcription of a Speech by Thomas C. Parker before the Art Reference Round Table group of the American Library Association, in Kansas City Missouri, at the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art (June 1938). Federal Art Project press release, AAA, microfilm roll 1107, frame 243.

homes, and thus constituting an entity that does not have the social significance, which it could and should have. The museum, as a public institution, has accomplished little in breaking the fallacy that art speaks to a very limited number and that the ability to appreciate beauty and to share in the experience of art is the exclusive birthright of the few... Chief among the economic factors responsible for this decline has been the development through rapid industrial changes, of an unhealthy environment for the arts, undermining the contribution of the artist as a valuable member of society.³⁴

In this respect, Cahill and Parker sympathized with the Artists' Committee of Action's desire to establish an alternative to private patronage. They believed that thriving art communities were an essential and inseparable function of a healthy society. What Cahill proposed was a threefold solution to compensate for the exclusionary orientation of the collector/museum system.

1. Financial assistance to all working artists.
2. An actively functioning exhibition program, which would target communities that had no endowed art museums, and provide alternatives to communities that did.
3. An art education program, which would offer free studio classes for children and adults, as well as lectures on contemporary art and art history.

Fundamental to these goals was the instigation of active community participation in the arts. A complex network of Community Art Centers, Extension Galleries and Federal Art Galleries was built across the country. Although these institutions operated in cooperation with each other, each fulfilled unique functions. Federal Art Galleries operated with government funds and served as a showcase for work created on the FAP, and as a non-profit gallery from which tax-supported and partially tax-supported institutions were encouraged to request allocations.

³⁴ Ibid.

Extension galleries were branches of Community Art Centers set up in different sections of the same state. As outposts of the Community Art Center, they expanded the Center's reach. Community Art Centers and their Extension Galleries were only partially supported by government funds. A board of directors was chosen from the community. They, in turn, were required to obtain financial backing of local cooperating sponsors. The Centers' functions were much broader than merely exhibiting art made on the project. They acted as a combination of Federal Art Gallery, art school, exhibition gallery, historical society, and theater. By 1940, 48 art centers were operating with 33 extension galleries in 21 different states, including a Children's Art Gallery in Washington, DC.³⁵

The Community Art Center experiment may have been one of the most idealistic and least recognized aspects of the FAP. Though the platform of the Artists' Committee of Action may have served in part as a model, the Community Art Center program differed on many key issues. Because the FAP operated with federal funds, it had to work within existing norms. It had to be moderate on the issues, whereas the Artists' Committee of Action advocated revolutionary social change. Therefore, one of the unfortunate results was that Art Centers legitimized the *status quo*. For instance, while black artists were not excluded from the program, in the Deep South the Art Center administrators did not challenge segregation laws. They reinforced them by incorporating them into the program. In Florida, the Jacksonville Negro Art Gallery operated separately from

³⁵ AAA, microfilm roll DC-54

the Jacksonville Art Center. Pensacola, St. Petersburg, Tampa, all made similar racist arrangements.

As the Artists' Committee of Action advocated, artists did run most of the Art Centers. However, since the centers were not supported entirely with federal funds—the eventual goal of the program being to wean them off federal funding completely—they had to work with boards of directors chosen from the community and were required to obtain financial backing from local “cooperating sponsors.” Therefore, the Centers' directors were constrained by many of the same problems of veiled patron control that the program was supposed to eliminate. Center directors often had to be conciliatory to prevailing, conservative board members. Some were unable to break from their influence. Others found ways to compromise. For example, Philip Curtis, gallery director of the Phoenix Community Art Center sought to appease difficult benefactors by showing academic painting from local collections along with modern painting from the FAP. He wrote,

there is a group, the very conservative and ill advised ... Fine Arts Ass., which will have to be delicately handled. They have been buying a painting a year for some time—I thought it might be wise to select a few of these and show them at the same time. This would please them and at the same time give a swell note of contrast—because I imagine that these paintings represent everything that the painters of today aren't doing and shouldn't do.³⁶

³⁶ Philip Curtis to Thomas C. Parker, n.d., AAA, microfilm roll DC 63, frame 320.

It has been argued that government art programs such as Community Art Centers helped create a public that was receptive to art in the post-war period. In 1946 Cahill wrote,

It is my belief that the thing that created this great popular interest in art, the thing being cashed in on by the magazines, by the dealers, and by the advertisers, is the direct result of the government and the artists working together. They went out into this great new public and brought it into the orbit of the art world.³⁷

Because Gellert's vision for the Municipal Art Center was rooted in Marxism, it did not include the eventual transition from public to private funding. His entire point was that private funding impeded the artist's freedom because it gave patrons the opportunity to restrict subsidies for a work that, for whatever reason, they did not want to be seen. For Gellert, the post-war art boom signaled nothing less than a return to censorship by patronage, as endowed institutions and collectors marginalized art expressing, or intending to inspire, a politically revolutionary orientation in favor of Abstract Expressionism, which did not. Gellert adamantly wanted to keep his version of a Municipal Art Center financed through federal funds to avoid the "cashing in" by opportunistic publishers, dealers, and advertisers that Cahill somewhat bitterly described.

Although the Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union were separate organizations, at first they worked together for many of the same goals. They were closely linked in 1934 and early 1935. They shared the 11 W. 18th Street headquarters, where the Artists' Union's weekly meetings took place on

³⁷ Holger Cahill, "Can Art Survive with its Present Patronage?" *ALA News: Official Publication of the Artists' League of America*, no. 1 (1946), n. p.

Wednesday evenings, and the Artists' Committee of Action met on Monday evenings. The two groups co-produced the first issues of *Art Front*. Gellert was responsible for inviting Herman Baron, director of the American Contemporary Artists (ACA) gallery, to join the executive board of the Artists' Committee of Action.³⁸ As Monroe noted,

Baron, a former writer and editor of trade magazines, published an art bulletin under the aegis of his gallery. He offered Gellert the use of the bulletin; Gellert suggested to the executive board of the Artists' Union that an official journal would be useful to both organizations. The board agreed and scheduled a meeting to plan the magazine.³⁹

The first issue of *Art Front* was published in November 1934, with Gellert as editor-in-chief.⁴⁰ Whether by coincidence or with intention, that very same month and year Gellert officially joined the Communist Party. Perhaps these two events are related. Because *Art Front* was first produced under the joint editorship of the Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union, it is possible Gellert wanted to distinguish himself, and by extension the group he chaired, as the Communist faction, compared to the Artist Union's more general, unaffiliated left. Even before the Kharkov conference, literature was the art form with which the Communist Party was most concerned. At Kharkov this preference acquired the structure of policy. Subsequently, *New Masses* grew to reflect this position. With the formation of *Art Front* Gellert may have been maneuvering to construct a

³⁸ Though Baron was associated with each, the ACA (American Contemporary Artists) and the ACA (Artists' Committee of Action) were separate organizations. To avoid confusion, when referring to Gellert's committee I spell out Artists' Committee of Action rather than use the ACA abbreviation.

³⁹ Gerald M. Monroe, "The Artists' Union," op. cit., 156.

⁴⁰ Stuart Davis succeeded Gellert for the second issue through the seventh.

space specifically for visual art, in the hopes that the Party would recognize its potential.

In addition to his responsibilities of chairman, Gellert's involvement with the Artists' Committee of Action also drew on his skills as an artist. He painted banners for demonstrations and designed the Committee's graphic, anthropomorphic emblem, which appeared on pickets, leaflets, and the cover of the first issue of *Art Front* (fig. 4.3). In it Gellert used the typographical A, C, A forms to delineate two figures. One holds a brush indicating painting, the other a hammer indicating sculpture. The legs of this painter and sculptor form the legs of the two capital 'A's in ACA and the C overlaps their torsos. It is similar to earlier works depicting unity between different segments of the proletariat such as the industry and agriculture figures in his Proletcos Cafeteria mural and the pair in his November 1926 *New Masses* cover in front of whom Lenin beams like a proud father (fig. 4.4). In the mural the figures are clearly of different races. Not only are their skins different shades, their features clearly indicate, without resorting to caricature, that one is of European descent, the other of African descent. However, the figures in the emblem are reduced to simple geometric shapes. Their features are identical. The only indication of racial difference is that one's skin is lighter than the other. This was not strictly a design decision, revealing nothing more than an aesthetic choice or a desire to make the logo as simple and legible as possible. The resulting implication that in the organization is literally composed of artists of all races effectively illustrates their program's

stipulation that “no discrimination whatsoever against any school of aesthetic belief, no political discrimination, nor shall race, creed or color constitute a barrier to membership.”⁴¹ Similarly, in the drawing adorning the masthead of *Art Front*’s inaugural issue, Gellert depicted men and women of different race, united through their demands for jobs, relief, and a municipal art center managed by artists (fig. 4.5). The January 1935 *Art Front* cover was designed entirely by Gellert (fig. 4.6). As with many of his *Capital* prints, he used graphic iconography to make social and political concepts legible. Building on the forms of his Artists’ Committee of Action logo, Gellert added text and algebraic symbols to create a simple illustrated equation for the organization’s fundamental objective. The two figures, truncated to include only their upper bodies, arms and heads appear above the phrase “JOBS FOR THE ARTISTS.” Beneath that a plus sign precedes a simplified, geometric rendering of a long, neoclassical building, with portico and columns. Under the structure, the words “MUNICIPAL ART CENTER” reveal its function. The solution to this arithmetical problem is indicated next to an equal sign below; a frieze of ten heads, rendered in the same blocky style as the logo representing “ART FOR THE PEOPLE.”

Depicting “the people” as multiracial was more than a sensitive or astute artistic observation. The Communist Party recognized the immense potential force of a racially united working class. To that end, they worked towards an empowered African American community. The segregation laws were not their only

⁴¹ “Outline for A Municipal Art Gallery and Center as proposed to the Mayor by The Artists’ Committee of Action for The Municipal Art Gallery and Center,” *Art Front*, op. cit.

obstacles. Well into the 1930s lynching was a very real danger for African American men accused of a crime in the south. Furthermore, the Communists regarded the death penalty, which is disproportionately enforced against blacks, as "legal lynching." Those hostile to the American Communist Party may be justified in many of their criticisms. However, thirty years before the civil rights movement of the 1960s, more than any other group, the Communists were actively drawing attention to racist policies, practices, and resultant crimes against humanity.

One of the most important examples of this activism was the Party's involvement with the infamous "Scottsboro Boys" case. In 1931 nine African American teenagers accused of raping two white women on a freight train outside Scottsboro, Alabama were convicted of the crime despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, which included nothing less than a confession from one of the "victims," who admitted "those police men made me tell a lie."⁴² The case was tried and retried over the course of the next six years. During this time, through the International Labor Defense (ILD), an arm of the Party established in 1925 to offer legal counsel and advocate "class war prisoners," as well as other Party, and non-Party organizations, chiefly the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Scottsboro case gained worldwide attention.

⁴² Facsimile of the Ruby Bates letter recanting her charge of rape included in original bound volume of *Scottsboro Alabama: A Story in Linoleum Cuts*. In Andrew Lee, ed., *Scottsboro Alabama: A Story in Linoleum Cuts* by Lin Shi Khahn and Tony Perez, NY: New York University Press, 2002, 143.

Though these groups each genuinely sought to win justice for the wrongly imprisoned youths, they strongly disagreed on tactics, and debilitating squabbles marked their relationships. There was particular tension between the Party and NAACP, the former believing the latter's less militant orientation and association with middle-class liberals tantamount to complicity. An especially aggressive cartoon by Gellert expressing this Party grievance appeared in the February 1932 *New Masses*. It showed a terrified, cherubic black youth having a noose affixed around his neck by a brutish, badge-wearing white man masquerading as black (fig. 4.7). The caption beneath reads "THE SCOTTSBORO LEGAL LYNCHING—the face of the NAACP, with the arms of the bosses."⁴³ In late 1934/early 1935 the NAACP organized the exhibition "An Art Commentary on Lynching," which they hoped would draw attention to these crimes. Walter White, executive Secretary of the NAACP and the exhibition's curator, wrote to Gellert on January 2nd that he and the NAACP "very much hope that you will be moved to do one or more drawings"⁴⁴ for the exhibition. Not only did Gellert refuse, he and the John Reed Club boycotted the NAACP exhibition. White confronted this boycott in another letter to Gellert.

We sincerely trust that there will be no such opposition for we know that the John Reed Club would not want to put itself in the position of obstructing an effort into which a great deal of time has been put to stimulate thought and action on the subject of lynching in circles which have not yet been reached by the John Reed Club, the

⁴³ See also Hemingway, *Artist's on the Left*, op. cit., 65.

⁴⁴ Walter White to Hugo Gellert, January 2, 1935, Gellert papers, box 1.

International Labor Defense, the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, or the N.A.A.C.P.⁴⁵

Unfazed by White's plea, the John Reed Club organized its own exhibition. Endorsed by both the Artists' Union and the Artists' Committee of Action, "The Struggle for Negro Rights" opened March 2nd at the ACA Galleries downtown on 8th Street, the very day the NAACP show closed. This unambiguous connection between the John Reed Club, the Artists' Union, the Artists' Committee of Action, and the Party, in the context of this highly polarized event is revealing. It suggests that in the first months of 1935 the Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union both sided with the position of the Party to the exclusion of other standpoints.

The sculptor Theodore Roszak singled out one of Gellert's main contributions as introducing the social and political pamphlet into the vernacular of American modern art, remarking that in the 30s "the ideological shifts were tremendous and they fell in different directions and for a while the pamphleteer was very important."⁴⁶ Gellert made a number of posters in support of Party causes and institutions, such as *See the Soviet Union in the Making*, his advertisement for the Party-affiliated World Tourists travel agency, and the *Vote Communist* campaign poster for the Foster-Gitlow ticket in the 1928 presidential race (figs. 4.8-4.9). As early as 1927 Gellert designed a poster advertising the *American Student Delegation to Russia*—showing black, white, male and female American

⁴⁵ Walter White to Hugo Gellert, January 16, 1935, NAACP papers, in Marlene Park, "Lynching and Antilynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s," *Prospects* 18, (1993), 328.

⁴⁶ Theodore Roszak, interview by Harlan Philips, 1963, AAA, microfilm roll 3199.

youths on their visit to Moscow—for the front organization the Student Council of New York (fig. 4.10). Gellert does not seem to have illustrated many actual Party pamphlets in the 1930s, yet, in early 1935, Gellert was working on his second major cycle of lithographs, *Comrade Gulliver*. Published in the later part of the year and, like *Capital*, issued as a hard-cover book as well, the prints and text were produced on the cusp between the militant Third Period and the Popular Front.⁴⁷ In many ways *Comrade Gulliver* functions as a guide to ideology expressed in Party pamphlets during this transition.

Many of the segments illustrate the Party's position on race, yet surprisingly none specifically mentions the Scottsboro case. The text of *A Stake in the Commonwealth* gruesomely describes the torture and murder of a black labor organizer, while the image shows a pair of dark-skinned legs suspended above a pile of firewood (fig. 4.11). In *Free Labor* the legs attached to a ball and chain are not racially marked, however the text explained how black men were routinely falsely arrested to serve on chain gangs for municipal building projects (fig. 4.12). In *Black and White*, Gulliver meets "a Negro poet, a comrade...(who) had traveled through the Soviet Union." The two eat at a diner where, to Gulliver's surprise, the black man is charged extra. After the meal the counterwoman breaks the poet's glass explaining "the two bits extra was for this...we don't use them

⁴⁷ Though this body of work is dated merely as 1935, it is possible to refine this date. The print *Every Man a King* refers to one of Louisiana Senator Huey Long's populist slogans. The text with this image includes a note that since completion of the project Long was assassinated "by forces more dangerous than he was." Long was killed September 8, 1935. *Comrade Gulliver*, therefore, was published after the Popular Front was officially declared in August 1935. However, most if not all the lithographs were drawn and printed, and the text was written before this event.

after niggers." Gulliver then draws parallels between the persecution of Jews in Czarist Russia and the treatment of blacks in the United States, adding that racism in his land "disappeared with the Czars and all our one hundred and seventy-four nationalities now live in the greatest harmony." Later, at the railroad station Gulliver and his host, Mr. Keen, encounter a porter whose Phi Beta Kappa pin reveals that he has a degree in mathematics. After hearing the man's rhetorical "What else is there open for a Negro?" Gulliver concludes, "America is a strange place indeed. They can spare great scientists for the most menial tasks. They can afford to utilize mathematicians as carriers of luggage!" Devoid of distortions or the exaggeration of features that characterize many images of African Americans by white artists at the time, the sensitive portrait of the young black man reading is a study in dignity (fig. 4.13). This portrait was produced at the same time as a caustic *Art Front* article by Stuart Davis, which demanded, "are the gross caricatures of Negroes by [Thomas Hart] Benton to be passed off [sic.] as 'direct representations?' The only thing they represent, is a third rate vaudeville character-cliché with the humor omitted."⁴⁸

Despite the initial cooperation between the Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union, conflict soon developed. In the early issues of the *Art Front*, Gellert's faction had a significant effect on editorial policy. However, after the January 1935 issue a rift developed along political lines between the two groups over the direction *Art Front* should take. Monroe described the friction as a result of the Artists' Committee of Action's "primarily professional goals," or its focus on

⁴⁸ Stuart Davis, "The New York American Scene," *Art Front*, vol. 1, no. 3 (February 1935), 4.

the Municipal Art Center, and the Artists' Union's "primarily economic goals," namely relief for unemployed artists.⁴⁹ But, it is likely that this debate for was more complex, and extended beyond these two issues, which ultimately were not so far apart. In his study of the John Reed Club artists, Arthur Hughes noted,

the last two years of the John Reed Club in New York (1934-5) were characterized by a sudden increase of artist activity taking place outside the narrow limits of the club itself. This activity centered around the State and Federal art projects and the rapid rise of the Artists' Union, all of which implied rapid changes in the economic and political lives of a large number of artists. The Reed Club artists were presented with a situation, which they were forced to relate to despite the left-over ultra-leftism of the party. The unionization and radicalization of artists simply would have taken place without them, hardly something that revolutionary artists would have liked to see.⁵⁰

Thus, regardless of certain displays of inflexibility exemplified by the White-Gellert exchange and the resulting opposing exhibitions, the John Reed Club began to interact more openly with the non-Party left. Though Gellert ostensibly chaired a "committee," the voice of the Artists' Committee of Action was essentially his and the party's. As one of the those hard-line John Reed Club artists who did not want to see "the unionization and radicalization of artists simply [taking] place without them," Gellert, through his committee's co-editorship of *Art Front*, was in a position to exert a disproportionate influence on editorial policy. His concentration on censorship and patronage was incorporated in *Art Front* with the Artists' Union's argument for government funding for artists. Gellert supported this objective, but for him this was at best only a temporary solution to the problem of employment and free expression. He believed that ultimately the

⁴⁹ Monroe, "Artists' Union," op. cit., 158

⁵⁰ Hughes, "Proletarian Art and the John Reed Club Artists," op. cit., 51.

capitalist system would have to be overthrown in order to achieve these goals. According to his own account, his experience in the Soviet Union during the spring of 1933 was "proof that the Soviet artist is indeed master of his destiny, contrary to the foreign anti-Soviet perception."⁵¹ Inseparable from Gellert's platform on censorship was the notion that free expression cannot exist under capitalism. While the Artists' Union lobbied for art programs to emerge, more or less within the existing system, behind Gellert's argument was a call for revolution. The split between Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union may have also involved the degree to which *Art Front* would bite the hand that the Union hoped would feed artists by means of the federal art programs.

At the time when these first tentative art programs were implemented the Communists remained hostile to Roosevelt and the New Deal. Such antagonistic statements were expressed in pamphlets by Party leaders such as Earl Browder. In 1933 he insisted,

it has become very fashionable nowadays to describe the New Deal as American Fascism. One of Mussolini's newspapers has declared that Roosevelt is following the path first marked out by Italian Fascism.... A group of honest revolutionary workers in Brooklyn recently declared that Roosevelt and Hitler are the same thing.⁵²

Little had changed in this attitude by the beginning of 1935. In fact, an unattributed editorial (possibly by Gellert) in the February *Art Front* called the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps' (CCC) relief camps "nothing more than

⁵¹ Hugo Gellert, autobiographical sketch in Hungarian, Gellert papers, AAA. See Chapter 3, footnote 72.

⁵² Earl Browder, *What is the New Deal?*, NY: Workers Library Publisher, August 1933, 15.

military training camps in disguised form.”⁵³ The *Comrade Gulliver* print *By-Products* depicts a regiment of soldiers, identically dehumanized by their doughboy helmets, tube and goggled gasmasks, greatcoats, and shouldered, bayonet fixed rifles (fig. 4.14). In revealingly similar language to that *Art Front* editorial, the accompanying text equated the CCC camps with fascist adolescent organizations like the Hitler Youth and the Italian *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB).

Thus America is perfecting a plan for the time when the workers shall no longer be willing to starve, when they shall rebel against hunger. The American government plans to marshal these homeless and disinherited children against their own flesh and blood for the murder of their brothers and parents.⁵⁴

In a 1934 pamphlet illustration William Gropper portrays the President as a huckster selling bogus cure-alls to those gullible enough to listen (fig. 4.15). Gellert’s *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is an even more fiercely anti-Roosevelt image (fig. 4.16). Loosely based on Dürer’s famous woodcut, Gellert’s lithograph depicts the President with ultra-conservative anti-Semitic radio preacher Father Coughlin, flamboyant demagogue Louisiana Senator Huey P. Long, publishing magnate and outspoken critic of the left William Randolph Hearst as the biblical deliverers of conquest, bloodshed, famine, and death. As James Casey wrote in a contemporaneous Party pamphlet,

Among the more known leaders of these fascist movements are Father Coughlin, [and] Senator Huey P. Long... But Hearst, publisher of the most powerful chain of newspapers in America and an industrialist himself, is the chief spokesman of all fascist forces in this country.⁵⁵

⁵³ “Great Expectations,” *Art Front*, vol. 1, no. 3 (February 1935), 3.

⁵⁴ Gellert, *Comrade Gulliver*, op. cit., 6.

⁵⁵ James Casey, *Hearst—Labor’s Enemy No. 1*, NY: Workers Library, 1935, 2.

Gellert implied these villains would bring terror and misery, but as the Book of Revelations foretold, a new age of harmony and brotherly love would follow. Like a number of other Jewish-American radicals, such as anarchist Alexander Berkman who wrote of "the new hope, the revolutionary Messiah,"⁵⁶ and Mike Gold, who described the workers revolution as "the true Messiah,"⁵⁷ Gellert used the biblical reference as an accessible, recognizable analogy. Where Berkman and Gold replaced their traditional Talmudic concept of salvation with the Marxist concept of proletarian revolution, Gellert used Christian iconography, representing the coming of Armageddon before the New Testament rebirth of the world. But in Gellert's version this final Book of Revelations "healing of the nations" would not come about through divine intervention.⁵⁸ It would be a very human endeavor, involving the culmination of class struggle. Just as *The Bible* claimed that the return the Messiah was inevitable, Marx predicted that Communism was a certainty. The Depression was seen by Marxists as a crack in the capitalist armor, and they strove to exploit it. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels described such economic crises—when "society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation [has] cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed"⁵⁹—as the natural, periodic consequences of capitalism. If the crisis was severe enough and the

⁵⁶ Alexander Berkman, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, Pittsburgh: Frontier Press, 1970, 238.

⁵⁷ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money*, NY: International Publishers, 1965, 224.

⁵⁸ Revelations 22:2

⁵⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848, in Samuel H. Beer, ed., *Marx and Engels The Communist Manifesto*, NY: Meredith Corporation, 1955, 15.

proletariat was sufficiently radicalized, the conditions could be right for the inevitable Communist revolution.

Though there were a significant number of Communists among the leadership of the Artists' Union, it was expressly not a political organization. In order for it to remain most effective in recruiting union members, the Party's involvement had to remain relatively aloof. Subsequently, the Party's cultural commissar V. J. Jerome intervened to arbitrate between the Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union. As a result, it was agreed that the concerns of the Artists' Committee of Action were not as urgent as was securing jobs for artists through the government art programs as advocated by the Artists' Union. The Artists' Committee of Action moved its meeting place from the loft at 11 West 18th Street to a new space at 919 8th Avenue. Shortly thereafter, at a regular Wednesday night meeting of the Artists' Union, Gellert announced that the Artists' Committee of Action would disband, explaining that it was "in the interest of harmony among the artists."⁶⁰

The settlement of this conflict took place at an important moment in Party history. Just a few months earlier, in September 1934, Party leadership agreed to alter the structure and the purpose of Party-affiliated art groups. With the characteristic favor shown to the writers' group, the John Reed Club's literary faction was immediately reshaped into the American Writers' Congress and the

⁶⁰ Monroe, "Artists' Union," op. cit., 61. Monroe paraphrased an interview he conducted with Gellert on October 9, 1969.

League of American Writers. The first conference of the American Writers' Congress Against War and Fascism was held in New York from April 26-28, 1935. The friction between Gellert's committee and the Artists' union occurred during this period, before there was a comparable redirection of the John Reed Club art group. Jerome's verdict may suggest that this struggle between Gellert's group and the Artists' Union over *Art Front* was in part a collision between those who held the hard line of the militant Third Period (Gellert), and the new, tentative, United Front strategy to establish alliances between intellectuals and the Party (The Artists' Union). This direction pointed to the Popular Front Against Fascism, which was announced a few months later in August 1935 at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow. In order to amass support for the Soviet Union under the growing Nazi threat, the Party no longer denounced liberals, intellectuals, and socialists. More than mere toleration, Party members now actively courted relations with these former enemies and even "progressive" elements within the middle class.

Gellert's failure to gain Party support for the Artists' Committee of Action in the first months of 1935 may be an indication that as an artist he was unapprised of the pre-Popular Front speculative shift in policy from militancy to United Front. Since he was so closely involved with John Reed Club writers, however, it is possible that he was informed, but there was no clear course of action for artists to implement this new policy. Therefore, Gellert's dissolution of the Artists' Committee of Action in March 1935 may not have been so much a failure of the

group, but an early manifestation of the Party's reorganization of its visual art policy. That very same month the party magazine, *Communist*, declared,

the Party's general line in this period is to mobilize the masses against capitalist reaction and fascization, against war preparations, and for the defense of the Soviet Union, on the basis of the united front policy, seeking to lead the masses up to the revolutionary way out, to the struggle for a Soviet America.⁶¹

Beginning with the April 1935 issue, *Art Front* appeared as "the official publication of the Artists' Union," rather than of both groups (though The Artists' Committee of Action's logo remained on the masthead along with the Artists' Union's until December 1936). While Gellert was no longer the leader of a discreet agency, he did remain involved with *Art Front* for a while. His presence on the editorial board was felt throughout 1935, while Stuart Davis was editor-in-chief. Though Davis was himself an abstract painter, and wrote favorable reviews of non-political modernist exhibitions, throughout the course of his tenure as editor of *Art Front* the journal's tone was at its most militant. Francine Tyler wrote of two stages through which *Art Front* passed in its three years of publication.

The first phase, from November 1934 through November 1935, comprised seven issues, each consisting of eight pages, as a combative and austere voice spoke of concerns around organizing artists. Cartoons as vehicles of attack bolstered radical John Reed Club proletarian issues.⁶²

⁶¹ Alex Bettleman, "Report to the National Agitation and Propaganda Conference, January 18, 1935," *Communist* 14, (March 1935), 240. In Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986, 8.

⁶² Tyler, "Artists Respond," op. cit., 172.

Monroe's research revealed that at least one *Art Front* editor claimed that for a while Davis was a member of the Party.⁶³ During this time, as editor-in-chief "Davis was able to maintain a close personal relationship with Hugo Gellert and the social realists on the board, while encouraging a more open attitude toward art content in the magazine."⁶⁴

Throughout the first phase of *Art Front* the John Reed Club operated simultaneously with Artists' Union, and there were numerous overlaps within the two groups. For example the February 1935 issue of *Art Front* announced the John Reed Club School of Art exhibition and listed courses offered and instructors. By November 1935 the John Reed Club's call for a proletarian art was supplanted by the Artists' Union's Popular Front policy that welcomed all artists who opposed fascism and war. As Hughes remarked, "symbolically, the Artists' Union moved into 430 Sixth Avenue in November 1935, just as the John Reed Club School of Art was moving out. The School lasted for less than two months at its new Fourteenth Street location."⁶⁵ From this moment, the open attitude that encouraged non-militant points of view gradually grew stronger.

Davis himself contributed to this more open attitude. The February 1935 *Art Front* contained his favorable review of the Salvador Dalí exhibition at Julien Levy Gallery. Yet, the same issue also included an anti-Dalí piece by the critic Jerome

⁶³ Monroe interview with Max Spivak, March 11, 1970. In Monroe, "Artists' Union," op. cit., 144.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 160-161.

⁶⁵ Hughes, "Proletarian Art," op. cit., 53.

Klein, expressing the hard line, John Reed Club position. Klein rejected the notion that the Surrealist "discrediting of reality is revolutionary" in that it "advanced the cause of the liberation of the proletariat, which will come into its own when it has seen through the illusions of capitalist culture." Rather, he wrote,

in actuality the Surrealists, far from playing a critical, destructive role, have created a new set of illusions in their flight from external reality into fantasy.... These manifestations have neither touched the proletariat, which is no great loss, nor furthered the cause bound up with the political fate of the proletariat.⁶⁶

Gellert agreed with his comrade's assessment. In a review of the 1932 Sixteenth Annual Society of American Artists exhibition, he faulted David Burliuk for becoming "involved with surrealist mysticism," explaining that while the Surrealists "accept the theory of class-struggle on the basis of Marxian dialectics," they reject "Marxism as a basis of their art, as art is an expression of the emotions and as such cannot have scientific principles as its basis."⁶⁷ In *Comrade Gulliver* Gellert suggested that if Dalí's illusionism expressed anything it was decay, which only the decadent bourgeoisie could appreciate. From Gulliver's proletarian point of view, Surrealism is indecipherable. Under the heading *Art News*, Gulliver's chronicle merely quoted a "most perplexing and astonishing report in a New York newspaper" describing the scandalous *Bal Onéirique* (Dream Ball) thrown by Salvador Dalí and his wife Gala on February 17, 1935, to mark their departure from New York. Gulliver's "New York newspaper" did not repeat the damaging claims that Gala's costume—the hat of

⁶⁶ Jerome Klein, "Dada for Propaganda," *Art Front*, vol. 1, no. 3 (February 1935), 7.

⁶⁷ Hugo Gellert, "The Independents Show," *New Masses*, (May 1932), 29. In Hughes, "Proletarian Art," op. cit., 55-56.

which featured a baby doll with ants emerging from a bloody, lobster claw induced head wound—was a reference to the recently kidnapped and murdered Lindbergh baby.⁶⁸ However, it disparaged the debauched event, which featured barmen wearing human hair neckties, a cross-dressed guest “in a tail coat, with little else than a pair of women’s stockings held up by woman’s garters,” and Dalí himself sporting “a glass case on his chest [which contained] a woman’s brassière.”⁶⁹ The lithograph that complemented this account also comments on surrealism. It shows a painter as a skeleton, with palette in one hand, brush in the other, standing in front of an easel, smoking a cigarette (fig. 4.17). The handless alarm clock that sits on the windowsill may be an allusion to Dalí’s famous melting watches. Because Gellert’s handicapped timepiece cannot function, it may suggest that the Spanish Surrealist’s imagery, though full of references to time, fails to engage important events existing during the actual historic moment in the world outside the studio. Similarly, what this fleshless artist lacks in corporeal substance, his paintings also lack in content. As his body is decayed, so is his social conscience.

As *Art Front* entered its second phase in late 1935, a contingent of editors led by the painter Joseph Solmon, muralist Max Spivak, and nascent critic/theorist Harold Rosenberg, who favored stronger attention to artistic innovation over social content, began challenging the journal’s predominantly proletarian aesthetic. Again a conflict developed around the political role of *Art Front*. At one

⁶⁸ See Meredith Etherington-Smith, *Dalí: A Biography*, London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992, 223.

⁶⁹ Gellert, *Comrade Gulliver*, “Art News,” op. cit., 12.

heated Wednesday night meeting in early 1936 Rosenberg argued for more control over the journal, reportedly declaring that his group “put out the magazine, [the majority of the editors] are a bunch of dummies.”⁷⁰ Despite the fact that the majority of the union membership considered the Rosenberg bloc elitist and would have voted the “clique” off the board had a vote been called, the dispute was settled by Party intervention.⁷¹ The result reflected the new Popular Front attitude of cooperation with liberal, intellectual fellow travelers. While Spivak was asked to resign from the board in January 1936, Rosenberg remained, and Solmon was promoted to managing editor. He, in turn, appointed Balcomb Greene, the leftist, non-objective painter to the editorial board. Gellert also resigned at this point, as did Davis, Baron, and Henry Glintenkamp.⁷² *Art Front* remained a Marxist art journal. Leadership of the Artists’ Union remained predominantly Party members. But the Party’s cultural policy had changed.

The most significant result of this change in policy was the formation of The American Artists Congress, an artist group closer to the Party and distinct from the Artists’ Union and *Art Front*. It is no coincidence that the Gellert, Davis, Baron, Glintenkamp resignations occurred the month before the first public meeting of the American Artists Congress in February 1936. Those who left made a choice, the Congress over *Art Front*. Monroe suggested that this was in

⁷⁰ Monroe, “Art Front,” op. cit. 17

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Monroe, “Art Front,” op. cit. 17. Gellert’s name, which appeared on the masthead as a member of the journal’s editorial board from December 1935 through February 1936 was absent from the March 1936 issue.

part because the Congress was more prestigious.⁷³ This is certainly so, but in Gellert's case, it was not so much an issue of status. He was most likely motivated just as strongly, if not more so, by his allegiance to the Party.

Because the Artists' Union was not a Communist organization it could not effectively fulfill the cultural platform of the Party through *Art Front*. The union was quite democratic and the requirements for membership were far from stringent. One union member recalled "anyone who could draw a straight line ... or a crooked line" was readily admitted.⁷⁴ While many Communists occupied positions of leadership, it was ultimately this rank and file who decided policy by voting during the Wednesday night meetings. The union publication *Art Front* reflected this policy. The Congress on the other hand was not a democratic organization. Not every artist was accepted. Baron, Davis, Gellert and the Congress leadership considered only artists "of recognized standing in their profession."⁷⁵ With Party arbitrator Jerome's decision that the Artists' Union limit its scope to employment issues, the need to fulfill all other concerns of the Party was met by the American Artists' Congress.

It is possible that V. J. Jerome's settlement between the Artists' Committee of Action and the Artists' Union over *Art Front* was based on his knowledge that this

⁷³ Monroe, "Artists' Union," op. cit. 174, and conversation with James Wechsler, December 30, 2002.

⁷⁴ Blanche Grambs, interview by James Wechsler, April 24, 1995, In James Wechsler, "The Great Depression and the Prints of Blanche Grambs," *Print Quarterly*, vol. XIII, no. 4, (1996), 376-396.

⁷⁵ Attributed by Baigell and Williams to Stuart Davis, Aaron Douglas, Hugo Gellert, Ben Shahn, William Siegel, and Saul Schary, "Call for the American Artists' Congress," in Baigell and Williams, *Artists Against War and Fascism*, attribution 9, citation, 47.

new organization, better suited to handle such matters, would soon be formed. As a matter of fact, the idea for a new, Party-affiliated organization of visual artists had been under consideration since the previous fall. The founder of International Publishers and CPUSA Central Committee representative Alexander Trachtenberg had proposed it in September 1934, at the second national conference of the John Reed Clubs in Chicago. However, serious, practical discussions regarding the formation of such a group did not begin until May 1935, when Trachtenberg brought up the need for a specialized art organization independent of the Artists' Union at a meeting of the John Reed Club. Though Davis "secured the assurances of Trachtenberg that the Congress would be free of any interference by the party,"⁷⁶ Trachtenberg was in a position to guarantee only that the Congress would be free of non-artist party officials. The Party may not have controlled the Congress, but because Gellert was such a devoted Party-member, the Party's position was certainly represented among the Congress's planners. Gellert was the ideal choice to fulfill this role. He was a Party artist who had one foot in the militant John Reed Club proletarian culture milieu, and—through his Bohemian Greenwich Village lineage, his public murals, and his illustrations for the "bourgeois press"—one foot in the non-party, New York art community.

Because Gellert gave up his committee and limited his stake in *Art Front* when he did in March, he was able to devote himself more completely to formulating

⁷⁶ Gerald M. Monroe, "The American Artists' Congress and the Invasion of Finland," *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 15, no. 5, (1975), 14.

the Congress, on which he worked tirelessly. Indeed, in one of Gropper's caricatures of the Congress participants, Gellert was portrayed riding a scooter, the significance of which must have been to emphasize his activity, forming committees, attending meetings, producing lithographs, writing text, editing and contributing drawings to *New Masses*, giving speeches, painting murals, organizing schools, protests, and the Congress itself (fig. 4.18). Gellert became one of the core group, along with Davis and Baron, who met regularly throughout the spring and summer of 1935 to discuss the idea of the congress with other interested artists and critics including George Ault, Maurice Becker, Arnold Blanch, Henry Billings, Peter Blume, Nicoli Cikovsky, Aaron Douglas, Adolph Dehn, Harry Gottlieb, Henry Glintenkamp, William Gropper, Mina Harkavy, Eitaro Ishigaki, Jerome Klein, Louis Lozowick, Jan Matulka, Saul Schary, Ben Shahn, William Siegel, Niles Spencer, Harry Sternberg, Moses Soyer, and Lynd Ward. With Davis, Douglas and Shahn, Gellert wrote the final version of the "Call for an American Artists' Congress," published in the October 1935 *New Masses* endorsed with 107 signatures, and the December 1935 *Art Front* with 111. This call was directed at "all artists of recognized standing in their profession, who are aware of the critical conditions existing in world culture in general, and in the field of the arts in particular ... who realize that the cultural crisis is a reflection of a world economic crisis and not an isolated phenomenon."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Attributed by Baigell and Williams to Stuart Davis, Aaron Douglas, Hugo Gellert, Ben Shahn, William Siegel, and Saul Schary, "Call for the American Artists' Congress," in Baigell and Williams, *Artists Against War and Fascism*, attribution 9, citation, 47.

Significantly, though now a casualty of the Popular Front, the Artists' Committee of Action was recognized in the Congress. Its position around patronage and censorship that Gellert wanted to promote through *Art Front* was written into the Call.

In addition to his economic plight, the artist must face a constant attack against his freedom of expression.

Rockefeller Center, the Museum of Modern Art, the Old Court House in St. Louis, the Coit memorial Tower in San Francisco, the Abraham Lincoln High School, Riker's Island Penitentiary—in these and other important public and semi-public institutions, suppression, censorship or actual destruction of art works has occurred.⁷⁸

The role of the Committee was brought up in a number of papers presented at the Public Session of the Congress. In his opening address, which answered the question "Why an American Artists' Congress," Stuart Davis recalled.

Nearly two years ago prominent New York artists started a campaign through the Artists' Committee of Action for a Municipal Art Gallery to provide a badly needed outlet for the artists of this city.

When the city administration finally took up the idea, without recognition of the Artists' Committee of Action, it opened a gallery in a remodeled private house early in 1936, on a basis of discrimination against non-citizens and censorship of art disapproved by the administration. Such reactionary ideas could never have been introduced under a truly democratic management of the Municipal Gallery by the artists themselves, which the Artists' Committee of Action had repeatedly called for.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ "Call for the American Artists' Congress," in Baigell and Williams, *Artists Against War and Fascism*, op. cit., 47.

⁷⁹ Stuart Davis, "Why an American Artists' Congress?" presented at the American Artists' Congress, Public Session, Town Hall, 14 February 1936. In Baigell and Williams, *Artists' Against War and Fascism*, 65.

Similarly, in his paper "Repression of Art in America" Joe Jones listed numerous examples of censorship by public and private patrons, including the Rockefeller Center Corporation's solution to Rivera's transgression, and the Museum of Modern Art's, "where the Rockefellers are also active...attempted censorship of work by Ben Shahn, William Gropper, and Hugo Gellert in its mural show." He ended with a plea for further vigilance.

These cases need no further elaboration. They indicate plainly how the widespread growth of reaction in the United States is affecting liberty of artistic expression. Powerful protest actions have already done much to prevent stifling of our liberties. It is up to the American Artists' Congress to give impetus to the movement for the defense of our rights as artists and Americans.⁸⁰

The difficulties facing artists working under the American capitalist system were contrasted with the freedoms enjoyed by artists in Soviet Russia. Margaret Bourke-White spoke of her experience as an industrial photographer in Soviet Russia. Like Gellert's assessment of artists' conditions in his 1932-33 visit, Bourke-White proclaimed that

in Soviet Russia the artist is needed. He assumes a place of importance in Soviet life. He is paid while he is learning, paid while he is experimenting, paid for his finished work. If his work is reviewed, he is even paid for the use of his picture in that magazine or paper where the review appears. He is paid so well that artists, together with writers, form the highest salaried class in the country.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Joe Jones, "Repression of Art in America," presented at the American Artists' Congress, Public Session, Town Hall, February 14, 1936. In Baigell and Williams, *Artists' Against War and Fascism*, op. cit. 75.

⁸¹ Margaret Bourke-White, "An Artist's Experience in the Soviet Union," presented at the American Artists' Congress, Public Session, Town Hall, February 14, 1936. In Baigell and Williams, *Artists' Against War and Fascism*, op. cit., 86.

Similarly, at the Problems of the American Artist panel during the Second Closed Session at the New School for Social Research, Lozowick's paper "The Status of the Artist in the U.S.S.R." described how the problems of patronage were solved in the Soviet Union.

It was inevitable that a revolution, which abolished the private magnate in industry should also have abolished his blood relative the private dealer in art. Speculative manipulation of market values in art has eliminated together with the institution so popular among the well-fed—the starving artist. Private patronage, while not illegal, had almost entirely disappeared and had been superceded by social and public patronage, constantly growing in proportion with the economic progress of the country and the cultural growth of the masses. Workers' clubs, cooperatives, collective farms, museums, educational institutions and government departments constitute both the new audience and the new patron.⁸²

As Andrew Hemingway observed, of the signers of the *New Masses* call, "the overwhelming majority had already had some connection with the John Reed Club or acted as fellow travelers in the course of the decade."⁸³ Hemingway doubts the legitimacy of the Congress' claim to be a genuine alliance between the Party and liberal intellectuals. Notwithstanding non-Party participation such as Lewis Mumford's opening address, painter and WPA art project administrator George Biddle's chairmanship of one session, Hemingway noted,

the real complexion of the organization was revealed in effusive statements on the position of the artist in the USSR from Margaret Bourke-White and Lozowick, and addresses appealing to artists to join ranks with organized labor from Heywood Broun of the

⁸² Louis Lozowick, "Status of the Artist in the U.S.S.R.," Presented at the American Artists' Congress, Problems of the American Artist panel, Second Closed Session, New School for Social Research, February 15th or 16th. In Baigell and Williams, *Artists' Against War and Fascism*, op. cit., 163.

⁸³ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2002, 123.

American Newspaper Guild and Francis J. Gorman of the United Textiles Workers, both of whom were fellow travelers.⁸⁴

Hemingway's assessment reveals the paradoxical nature of Popular Front organizations and the Popular Front itself. The Communist position was presented, but that position involved an acceptance of viewpoints that, though not specifically anti-Communist, at least suggested solutions to the problems of the day that differed from the Communist position. This paradox was precisely the appeal for many leftists who rejected the dourness, discipline and inflexibility that typified the militant Third Period. Not only did the Party recognize alternative (leftist) points of view, it softened its own rhetoric. The aggressive cry for proletarian revolution was supplanted by the call to defend freedom from fascism. The purpose of this policy was to decrease the isolated position of the Party. Ultimately, they still wanted to achieve the same goals as during the pre-Popular front period. For the militants, like the NEP period in Soviet Russia after the post-revolutionary Civil War, when bourgeois specialists were invited to help build a technological infrastructure, the Popular Front could be justified as a necessary detour on the way to world socialism.

Gellert's Congress paper, "Fascism, War and the Artist," expressed the Popular Front point of view with some reservations. Like most of the other speakers, Gellert described fascism as a world problem affecting everyone, fascism as the foe of culture, which strangles honest expression. He insisted, "The threat of

⁸⁴ Ibid., 123-124.

Fascism exists in the U.S.A. It is all the more insidious because it is disguised. Its advocates do not, as yet, come out openly in favor of it."⁸⁵

Aesop Said So, Gellert's third and final body of lithographs, also released in hard cover, is a quintessential product of the American Artists' Congress mission, which sought to expose "the daily reminders of fascist growth in the United States."⁸⁶ As an advertisement for the book in *Art Front* described it, "the fables are unaltered from the original: The accompanying illustrations, however, apply the wisdom of the Greek slave to the modern social scene with scathing brilliance."⁸⁷ As a form fables are instructive, moralistic, designed to improve conduct, Yet, a successful fable enlists the reader's sympathies in behalf of what is good, honorable, and praiseworthy, and arouses indignation at what is low, dishonorable, or dangerous. The reader is meant to draw the intended conclusions without perceiving the presence of the advisor. Gellert used these well-known allegories to encourage the reader/viewer to support the Popular Front in the United States, where, in Gellert's words "it is necessary for fascism to masquerade as a champion of democracy and liberty."⁸⁸ For instance, the lithograph *Fascism, War and the Gullible (The Bird Catcher and the Lark)* portrays a group of convicts with hands bound behind their backs marching in an ellipse across a map of The United States (fig. 4.19). The fable appearing on the opposite page describes how a credulous lark became entrapped because it

⁸⁵ Hugo Gellert, "Fascism, War and the Artist," in Baigell and Williams, op. cit., 172-173.

⁸⁶ "Call for the American Artists' Congress," Baigell and Williams, op. cit., 47.

⁸⁷ *Art Front*, Vol. 3, Nos. 3-4 (May 1937), 31.

⁸⁸ Hugo Gellert, *Fascism, War, and the Artist*, in Baigell and Williams, op. cit.

believed the huntsman's propaganda portraying his snare as the foundations of a new city. Realizing its mistake too late, the Lark does not blame his captor "it serves me right; I should have had more sense than to trust you."⁸⁹

In *Aesop*, Gellert illustrated the new, Popular Front Communist position that "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism." This catchphrase entered the American vernacular when Communist Party candidate Earl Browder used it in his 1936 Presidential campaign. But it was not merely an appealing campaign slogan. It was written into the Constitution of the CPUSA, which presented the Party as

a working class political party carrying forward today the traditions of Jefferson, Paine, Jackson, and Lincoln, and of the Declaration of Independence; it upholds the achievements of democracy, the right of "life, liberty, and the pursuits of happiness," and defends the United States Constitution against reactionary enemies who would destroy democracy and all popular liberties.⁹⁰

The Party sought to establish "common ownership of the national economy, through a government of the people, by the people, and for the people; the abolition of all exploitation of man by man, nation by nation, and race by race, and there by the abolition of class divisions in society" by the establishment of socialism "according to the scientific principles enunciated by the greatest teachers of mankind, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin."⁹¹

⁸⁹ Hugo Gellert, *Aesop Said So*, portfolio of 20 lithographs, edition of 50 (only 33 printed). Published in book form NY: Covici Friede Publishers, 1936. n.p.

⁹⁰ Preamble, Constitution of the Communist Party of the U.S.A., adopted by the Tenth National Convention, May 27-31, 1938, NY: Workers Library Publisher, n.d. 3

⁹¹ Ibid.

In support of this policy, Gellert's illustration *The Farmer-Labor Party (The Bundle of Sticks)* incorporates a hammer and sickle and Jefferson's "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" line from the *Declaration of Independence* (fig. 4.20). The Communist affiliated Farmer-Labor Party sought an alternative to the two party system, "with the workers and the farmers, who constitute the majority of our population, becoming the backbone of the party." Though they advocated "public ownership of the railroads, public utilities, and the trusts and monopolies," the Farmer-Labor Party did not propose total, Soviet style collectivization. Rather, it stood for "greatly increased taxes on large incomes, inheritances, on dividends, and corporation profits," while opposing "all burdensome taxes upon small incomes, and the people, such as sales taxes etc."⁹² The extent to which the Popular Front position differed from the ideology of the Third Period becomes clear when *The Farmer-Labor Party* is compared to two prints in *Comrade Gulliver*, which as a pair also used Jefferson's famous line. Where the Aesop print links the American Revolutionary war to the Russian Revolution (and all future workers revolutions), The Gulliver print *Life, Liberty...* depicts a stealthy cat about to strike an unaware, completely exposed mouse, and ...*And the Pursuit of Happiness*, shows the dead body of a suicide victim, who, the accompanying text reveals, jumped to her death because she learned her successful search for employment put a needier breadwinner out of that job (figs. 4.21-4.22). Though cooperation with moderate leftists was a principle of the Party's new outlook, Gellert remained at the militant end of the spectrum. He

⁹² Ben Gitlow, "America For the People! Why We Need a Farmer Labor Party," NY: Labor Party Association, 1933, 13.

used the *Moon and the Stars* fable to illustrate his distrust of liberals. "The Moon asked the Stars to make her a cloak that would fit her well. 'How,' they replied, 'can we make a cloak to fit you, who are now a New Moon, and then a Full Moon, and then again neither one nor the other?'"⁹³ Notwithstanding this admonition *Aesop* does not encourage armed uprising.

In February, Gellert said publicly that, "the Roosevelt administration has offered no resistance against reaction. It is in constant retreat before it. By getting concession after concession, reaction is strengthened and emboldened."⁹⁴ Indeed the position of the Party in the first months of 1936 remained decidedly anti-New Deal. However, by the spring of that election year, though Earl Browder was himself running for president on the Communist ticket, the Party decided to back Roosevelt as the lesser of two evils against the Republican Alfred Landon. As a result, Gellert no longer equates Roosevelt with Coughlin, Long and Hearst. Rather than signaling Armageddon, the president appears in *Aesop* as merely conflicted, perhaps hypocritical. *Roosevelt and His Two Wives* (*The Man with Two Wives*) pits his dignified, young and fit, worker wife in overalls against his arrogant, old, out of shape, aristocratic wife (fig. 4.23). To make him appear young the worker wife plucks out his white hair. The older one plucks out his black hair so he will seem more like her. After they are through he has pleased neither and is completely bald. The similarity to Earl Browder's May 20, 1936 speech at Madison Square Garden, which faulted Roosevelt for maintaining "a

⁹³ Hugo Gellert, *Aesop Said So*, op. cit., n.p.

⁹⁴ Hugo Gellert, "Fascism, War, and the Artist," in Baigell and Williams, op. cit., 174.

center position between the demands of the masses and the pressure of those reactionary forces” can’t be ignored.⁹⁵

Though Roosevelt was no longer an out-and-out enemy, and Long was killed in September 1935, Hearst and Coughlin were still considered part of the fascist menace. In *Hearst and Columbia (The Garbage Man and the Laundress)* the publishing magnate wears a Swastika tiepin and sullies the American flag with his filthy-handed Nazi “Heil Hitler” salute (fig. 4.24). In his cover illustration for the 1936 Party pamphlet *Hearst: Counterfeit American*, William Siegel similarly showed the distinctively homely, self proclaimed “great American” using the American flag to hide his uniform of the Nazi brownshirts (fig. 4.25). Like a bullfighter, he uses the flag as a distraction, while fascism looms behind him in the dark. The pamphlet’s text described Hearst as a Nazi sympathizer who “must pretend to be a pillar of Jeffersonian democracy. He must hide the club that strikes against progress under the cloak of Jefferson.” In Hearst’s papers

there were columns and columns about great American traditions, which Hearst interpreted to mean deportation, government by and for the rich, submission and war. He proclaimed that these were the teachings of the founding fathers, the great Americans, the Constitution, The Declaration of Independence, and the Bible.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Earl Browder, in Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade*, NY: Basic Books Inc., 1984, 190.

⁹⁶ Ann Weedon, “Hearst; Counterfeit American,” NY: American League Against War and Fascism, 1936, 3.

Hearst was the epitome of the creeping fascism Gellert warned of at the American Artists' Congress, "Fascism masquerading as champion of democracy and liberty."⁹⁷

Besides meeting for well-publicized symposia, the American Artists' Congress sponsored over twenty-two exhibitions between 1936 and 1941, including *Against War and Fascism: An International Exhibition of Cartoons, Drawings and Prints*, April 15-May 6, 1936; *In Defense of World Democracy: Dedicated to the Peoples of Spain and China*, December 15-30, 1937, and four annual membership exhibitions.⁹⁸ Perhaps the most ambitious was *America Today*, an exhibition of one hundred prints, which opened simultaneously in thirty American cities in December 1936. Gellert was part of the thirteen-member jury—with Arnold Blanch, Stuart Davis, Ernest Fiene, George Picken, Harry Sternberg, Lynd Ward, and Max Weber—that functioned as the curatorial team. In addition to his role as juror, Gellert's contribution to *America Today* was the lithograph to *Pieces of Silver*, which showed Father Coughlin speaking into a crucifix-adorned microphone, his mouth open in mid-sermon, a pontificating hand gesture emphasizing the point he is making (fig. 4.26). The light reflecting off his spectacles completely obscures his eyes, thus imbuing him with a sense of untrustworthiness. Literally his vision is empty. The priestly robe from which his gesturing hand emerges only covers that side of his body. The other side of him is dressed in a suit. That hand, the business hand, rests on a moneybag. This

⁹⁷ Gellert, "Fascism, War and the Artist," in Baigell and Williams, op. cit., 173.

⁹⁸ See Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, op. cit., 125-130.

lithograph, originally included in Aesop as *Father Coughlin and his Flock* illustrates the fable (*The Blind Man and the Wolf's Cub*), suggesting the Radio Priest represented nothing more than the familiar evils of greed and intolerance camouflaged as a crusader for morality.

Though Gellert's print is one of most trenchant, the vast majority of the prints in the show were socially conscious, reflecting the Congress's over-arching political concerns. Yet the goal of the exhibition was not merely to advance the position of the Congress. It also was a concerted attempt to create a new, symbiotic relationship between artist and public, which would completely alter the art market. In the catalogue of *America Today*, which reproduced all one hundred prints, Alexander Stavenitz explained,

in arranging for the simultaneous showing of these thirty duplicate exhibitions, the American Artists' Congress is attempting to help the artist reach a public comparable in size to that of the book and motion picture, and to bring the artist and public closer together by making the print relevant to the life of the people, and financially accessible to the person of small means.⁹⁹

Ralph M. Pearson's more overtly Marxist approach asserted,

direct contact between the layman who uses or might use works of art and the individual who produces them, together with the recognition of the artist's authority to choose and manage his own exhibits, is a healthy and fruitful condition. By direct contact with his audience the artist avoids the censorship proceeding from both the profit motive and lay officialdom.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Alexander Stavenitz, "The Origin of These Prints," *Graphic Works of the American Thirties*, NY: Da Capo, 1977, 6. Originally published as *America Today: A Book of 100 Prints*, NY: American Artists' Congress, 1936.

¹⁰⁰ Ralph M. Pearson, *ibid*, 7.

As Gellert warmed to the Popular Front, he gradually accepted certain programs of the New Deal, in particular the art programs. In December 1936, after William Zorach informed him that a building was to be decorated with labor murals, he sent examples of his murals and graphic art to Edward Bruce, assuring the Section of Fine Art (Section) director, "I would be delighted to have an opportunity to paint such labor murals; it is the kind of work that I would desire above anything else."¹⁰¹ Because Gellert received steady work as an illustrator and editor, he did not qualify for the FAP, which selected artists based on their need for employment in addition to their professional ability. However, the Section, which hired muralists and sculptors to adorn newly constructed Federal buildings, had no such restrictions. Yet, despite Bruce's response assuring Gellert, "as our project develops I shall communicate further with you," the collaboration did not materialize.¹⁰² In fact, Gellert was never commissioned to paint a mural for the WPA. Rather, he claimed to have actually surrendered a well-paying mural job to Project artists. During his 1956 United States House Un-American Activities Committee hearing on Communist Political Subversion, Gellert was asked if he "ever received any compensation from any Government agency, State, Federal, or otherwise?" He testified:

During the existence of the WPA, I was to get a commission from a very important corporation in America to paint a mural for \$5000

¹⁰¹ Hugo Gellert to Edward Bruce, n.d., c. 1936, Gellert papers, AAA. Although this letter is undated Bruce's reply indicating receipt of the books and photograph and an assurance that is dated December 24, 1936. See note below.

¹⁰² Bruce to Gellert, December 24, 1936, National Archives, Washington, DC, Correspondence of Edward Bruce 1934-35, general correspondence 'G,' record group 121, box 3, Entry 124.

and the WPA requested that I let them have it and I did so, in order to raise the prestige of their projects.¹⁰³

Long after the conclusion of these investigations, Gellert revealed more details about this incident. In 1938 he was friendly with the daughter and son-in-law of Dr. Louis I. Dublin, Vice President and Statistician of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Gellert learned from his physician, who was associated with the insurance company, that the young couple insisted to Dublin that Metropolitan Life contract Gellert to paint the murals for their pavilion at the upcoming World's Fair. Dublin ostensibly heeded their advice, and he and Gellert agreed on a fee of \$5000, a tremendous sum during the Depression. A few weeks later, Holger Cahill, National Director of the Federal Art Project contacted Gellert. Cahill explained that because the WPA was under increasing fire from conservative members of Congress, a high profile job such as the Metropolitan Life Pavilion would demonstrate that the Project did not waste tax payers money on failures, but that powerful business world figures also patronized artists who survived the Depression with Project assistance. Gellert agreed, and bowed out of the venture. So far, his account has not been confirmed, although one of the two Metropolitan Life Pavilion murals, was painted by Emanuel Romano, a Project muralist, whose 1937 *Circus* was installed in the Klondike Building at the City Home on Welfare Island (Roosevelt Island, New York City). As compensation, Gellert was employed briefly on the Project as a teacher, instructing students at the Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx in mural painting techniques. He recalled that it took a day to prepare for the class and a

¹⁰³ Transcript of Gellert's testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, November 13, 1956, 6331. Hugo Gellert File, FBI, number 100-NY-9645, vol. 5, serial 291-371.

day to teach it. For this he received \$26 a week in compensation. After about ten weeks, the New York FAP Director Audrey McMahon approached him with a problem. He was receiving a week's salary for two days of work. She said, "Mr. Gellert I found out it is illegal what we are doing, because you are only putting in two days. Maybe if we can arrange [for you] to paint a mural in the school as well then you'll be able to square it." Gellert considered the proposal but had to decline, reasoning, "I paid \$75 a month for my studio and the project paid \$26 [per week]. That would [have] meant that I had to forgo working for the periodicals where I earned my living so I couldn't afford it."¹⁰⁴

The second meeting of the American Artists' Congress, which took place in December 1937, is not nearly so well documented as the first. Unlike the papers of the first conference these were not published, and subsequently, only titles exist. Since he was involved with a number of World's Fair related projects, it is not surprising that his paper was titled "The World's Fair." In his first Congress paper in 1936 Gellert reminded his listeners "the artists cannot fight alone. We must have allies in other groups that fight against Fascism. But above all, we must ally ourselves with that most irreconcilable foe of Fascism, militant organized labor, against whom Fascism directs its hardest blows." His desire to form an alliance between artists and "militant organized labor" suggests he was in agreement with the report from the Mexican Delegation to the Congress, read by José Clemente Orozco in the session following Gellert's, which declared "the artists' means of struggle against imperialism, Fascism, and war consist

¹⁰⁴ Sequenzia interview.

fundamentally of Trade Union organizations, an essential point of which is the defense of all rights won by the working class." The Mexican delegates proposed "a system of inter-trade union cooperation" with artists via the "establishment of a Cultural Section within trade unions and other syndicate organizations."¹⁰⁵ It is likely that Gellert's 1937 Artists Congress paper on the World's Fair had something to do with organizing Fair muralists. For some time he had been working towards establishing a union for artists that was associated more closely with organized labor than the Artists' Union. With Davis and muralist Frederic Knight, Gellert formed a separate agency in January 1936. Functioning with the conviction that "not only is it necessary for artists to get together in societies, but it is also necessary for the societies to join hands in order to attain maximum effectiveness," this Artists' Coordination Committee became the umbrella organization that united many different artists' groups, each of which were represented by two delegates.¹⁰⁶ As chairman of the Artists' Coordination Committee, Gellert did not control any of the individual groups, but in effect he

¹⁰⁵ Mexican Delegation to the American Artists' Congress, read by José Clemente Orozco, Reports and Resolutions of Delegates and Permanent Organization, Fourth Closed Session, new School for Social Research, February 16, 1936. In Baigell and Williams, 205.

¹⁰⁶ ARTISTS' COORDINATION COMMITTEE, Report to Member Societies, Hugo Gellert papers, AAA, microfilm roll 2812, frame 452-458. As of June 1939 Member Societies included:

1. The American Artists' Congress
2. An American Group
3. American Society of Painters, Sculptors, and Gravers
4. Artists' Union
5. Harlem Artists' Guild
6. Mural Artist's Guild of the United Scenic Artists
7. National Association of Women Painters & Sculptors
8. National Society of Mural Painters
9. New York Society of Women Artists
10. Sculptors Guild, Inc.
11. United American Artists

ARTISTS COORDINATION COMMITTEE letterhead, Hugo Gellert papers, AAA, microfilm roll 2812, frame 460.

led a super union of artists. Their first actions included the transfer of artists laid off from the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) to positions on the WPA Federal Art Project WPA/FAP. They were successful in rescinding a monthly wage cut from \$115 to \$103 for WPA muralists. They interceded on behalf of the Model's Union during their strike against the Art Students League. They established a dialogue with Mayor LaGuardia advocating representation on the Municipal Art Commission, and even petitioned President Roosevelt to push for "a deficiency appropriation provided for the perpetuation and the expansion of the Federal Art Project."¹⁰⁷ However, as preparations for the World's Fair commenced in 1937, the Artists' Coordination Committee concentrated most of its efforts at collective bargaining on the Fair management.

Gellert was not only an administrator. He participated as an artist in a number of projects that developed from the cooperation of these formerly distinct constituents, such as the special joint council of the Architectural League and the National Society of Mural Painters formed in relation to upcoming Fair.¹⁰⁸ The first and only project was a plan for a Community Center, "conceived and projected specifically for educational and recreational activities at the New York

¹⁰⁷ Hugo Gellert, Chairman, Artists' Coordination Committee to President Franklin P. (sic.) Roosevelt, December 26, 1938, Gellert papers, AAA, microfilm roll 2812, frame 462.

¹⁰⁸ Hand written note by Davis, nominating Gellert, sculptor Paul Manship, and painter George Biddle to the Collaborative Council of the Architectural League, n.d., Gellert papers, AAA. Of the three only Gellert actually participated in the Collaborative. In all there were twenty three members of Architects, painters and Sculptors Collaborative, the architect Oscar Stonorov; six sculptors, William Zorach, José Ruiz Ribera, Aaron Goodelman, Concetta Scaravaglione, Minna Harkavy, Isamu Noguchi; and sixteen muralists, Jacob Burck, Louis Ferstadt, Hugo Gellert, Grace Greenwood, Marion Greenwood, Howard Lee Irwin, Leo Katz, Howard Lehman, Michael Lensen, Monty Lewis, Ryah Ludins, Anatole Shulkin, Maxwell B. Starr, Clara Fargo Thomas, and Stuyvesant Van Veen. "23 Artists Join in Unique Work," *New York Sun*, May 1, 1937.

World's Fair of 1939.”¹⁰⁹ Although their proposal was not realized at the Fair, the Architects, Painters and Sculptors' Collaborative did exhibit their ideas in April, 1937 at the Fifty-First Annual Exhibition of the Architectural League of New York, which presented “a comprehensive exhibit of sketches, studies, models, and perspectives” for the Fair.¹¹⁰ Designed to fulfill the recreational needs of a population of 100,000 on eight acres of land for the cost of \$600,000 (excluding equipment), architect Oscar Stonorov's model included an auditorium for theatrical, orchestral, and cinematic events with a seating capacity of 2000, a library, art galleries, work shops, a gymnasium, an indoor pool, locker rooms, a cafeteria, scientific laboratories and a nursery. These facilities occupied three buildings, the flat roofs of which functioned as sun decks. They surrounded a circular pool that became a skating rink in winter, and were interconnected through a system of ramps and promenades. As one contemporary account enthused, “the entire project is ultra-modernistic. Even the landing and diving floats, instead of being flat floats, are sculptured abstractions of the female form afloat. Huge murals of modern art will decorate the buildings both inside and out.”¹¹¹ Gellert's mural study, *Labor*, was one of the ten designated for the 365-degree colonnade encircling the pool.¹¹² Thematically, *Labor*, (fig. 4.27) is similar

¹⁰⁹ “Project of a Community Center by the Architects, Painters and Sculptors Collaborative,” brochure, NY: Architects, Painters, and Sculptor's Collaborative, 1937.

¹¹⁰ *The Architectural League of New York Fifty-First Exhibition*, NY: The Architectural League of New York, 1937, 2

¹¹¹ “23 Artists Join in Unique Work,” op. cit.

¹¹² The murals within the colonnade were,

1. *Water and Soil* by Marion Greenwood
2. *Industry* by Stuyvesant Van Veen
3. *Power* by Grace Greenwood
4. *Labor* by Hugo Gellert

to Gellert's previous murals. It features groups of multiracial figures representing agricultural workers and industrial workers. However, unlike the realized murals in the Workers' Cooperative Cafeteria and the Center Theatre, with this small-scale study, Gellert explored more of the plastic possibilities of large wall painting. The figures occupy a space composed of geometric, architectural forms ranging from simple, flat, poured-concrete column or wall shapes to a smaller, more complex passage in the upper right of capped verticals, and discs suggesting, perhaps railroad signals. These relate to and are contrasted with the massive, diagrammatic cogs and the shirtless workingman in the upper left, whose universal, bicep-flexing gesture for power extends almost to the center of the composition. Gellert achieved a vigorous tension through abrupt changes in scale, asymmetry, and dynamic contrast between curves and hard angles.

-
5. *Creating the New* by Maxwell B. Starr
 6. *Sports* by Jacob Burck
 7. *Cinema* by Howard Lee Irwin
 8. *Nightlife* by Louis Ferstadt
 9. *Bread and Water* by Ryah Ludins
 10. *Cosmetics* by Michael Lensen

The outside murals were,

1. *Sports* by Monty Lewis (Sports Building)
2. *Athletics* by Leo Katz (Sports Building)
3. *Electro* by Louis Ferstadt (Science Building)
4. *Food* by Anatole Shulkin (Science Building)
5. *Athletics* by Harold Lehman (Sports Building)

The sculpture was,

1. *Fountain of Horses* by William Zorach
2. *Swimming Pool Islands* by José Ruiz de Ribera
3. *Basketball Player* by Aaron Goodelman
4. *Dawn* by Concetta Scravaglione
5. *Garden Statue* by Minna Harkavy
6. *Noon* by Isamu Noguchi

"Project of a Community Center by the Architects, Painters and Sculptors Collaborative," op. cit.

Amidst this late 1930s spirit of collectivization, Gellert resolved to unionize the National Society of Mural Painters, an organization of which he had been a member for some time. He explained,

I saw how the older, better established artists would hire a younger assistant and while [the established artist] was getting maybe thousands of dollars for a mural the assistant was paid \$25 a week. I couldn't see that. So I proposed the National Society of Mural Painters become a trade union of mural painters and join the American Federation of Labor.¹¹³

According to the report Gellert made to the National Society of Mural Painters, the object of this union was "to promote fraternal feeling among its members, regulate working hours, obtain just compensation for all services, rendered and to cope with such other problems of mutual interest to its members as may arise from time to time."¹¹⁴ But, rather than promote fraternal feeling, the unionization issue caused discord within the Society. President J. Scott Williams proclaimed that because of Gellert's actions the Society's "good name has been put in jeopardy and all (its) associations with other responsible Societies have been profoundly disturbed."¹¹⁵ Apparently, Gellert's move towards unionization of the

¹¹³ Sequenzia Interview. In this interview Gellert is unclear about dates. At one point he said he became involved with the National Society of Mural Painters in 1927. However, at this time he had not yet painted a mural. He may have joined at the time he painted his Workers Cafeteria mural in late 1928, or when he painted the Center Theater mural in the late summer of 1932. He was definitely a member by March 9, 1936 when he was nominated for the office of 2nd Vice-President of the Society (National Society of Mural Painters News Letter, March 16, 1936, 4. Gellert papers, box 2). According to Rebecca Zurier, Gellert and the "National Society of Mural Painters formed the Mural Artists' Guild of the United Scenic Painters of the AFL-CIO in 1934." (Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 179). Zurier most likely got this date from her 1984 interview with the artist cited as one of her sources (the other source, Deák, et al. *This Noble Flame* contains no mention of this organization). Gellert appears to have been imprecise about this event in the Zurier interview as well.

¹¹⁴ Hugo Gellert, "Report on the Unionization of Mural Painters," read at membership meeting of the national Society of Mural Painters on September 27, 1937. Gellert papers, AAA, box 2.

¹¹⁵ J. Scott Williams to Hugo Gellert, October 14, 1937. Gellert papers, AAA, box 2.

mural painters was related to the Artists' Coordination Committee's negotiations with the World's Fair. Williams wrote to him,

it is my opinion that you should refrain from any activity either as representative on (National Society of Mural Painters) Committees or in any manner whatever on behalf of the National Society of Mural Painters until I can make a thorough investigation of the Coordination Committee and its proper relations to the Society.¹¹⁶

Eventually, Williams solved the crises by removing Gellert from his position as Chairman of the Current Work Committee, declaring, "the simplest solution to your particular difficulties is this—Constitutionally you are not a member of the National Society of Mural painters because of non-payment of dues."¹¹⁷

However, Gellert was successful in finding a group of other members who were interested in becoming involved with a bona-fide labor union. They approached Louis Weinstock, secretary treasurer of District Council No. 9 of the Painters, Decorators and Allied Groups Union. Weinstock suggested they contact the United Scenic Artists, who after all, were painters. By November 15, 1937, following a series of discussions with representatives of these organizations and the American Federation of Labor, Gellert's group of muralists were accepted as the Mural Artists Guild local 829 of the United Scenic Artists Union.¹¹⁸ One of Gellert's first responsibilities with local 829 was to participate in negotiations

¹¹⁶ J. Scott Williams to Hugo Gellert, October 2, 1937. Gellert papers, AAA, box 2.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Among its membership local 829 boasted George Biddle, Rockwell Kent, William Gropper, Harry Sternberg, Anton Refregier, Winold Reiss, Eric Mose, Louis Fernstadt, Alfred Crimi, Daniel MacMorris, Hilaire Hiler, Marion Greenwood, Hugo Gellert, Leo Katz, Anatol Shulkin, Michael Lowe, Stuyvesant Van Veen, Kyra Markham, and Arshile Gorky (Fred Marshall, Business Representative, United Scenic Artists of America to Editor, Herald Tribune, n.d., post-July, 1938, Gellert Papers, box 2).

between the union and Grover Whalen, President of the Fair.¹¹⁹ Once they received Whalen's initial pledge that the construction and operation of the Fair be one hundred percent union, they outlined their further demands in a written statement "respectfully submitted" to him on December 17, 1937. The document first established that the unionized Scenic Artists were to retain the "power to make laws and wage scales with respect to their craft and each of the various classifications of said craft and its members." Then it listed six conditions designed to assure that the union retained control of production. They were to have "permission to make an immediate check of all persons employed directly or indirectly by the World's Fair Corporation" so they could "determine whether any of said persons are performing or executing any of the work coming under [union] jurisdiction." If they found non-union labor performing work under the union's jurisdiction, the offenders would "be required to join the union or be replaced with members of the union in whose jurisdiction said person may be working." They were to be provided with lists of all "individuals or firms who have already been given contracts" for any work coming under union jurisdiction, and in cases where "special contracts" have been awarded, "the individual or firm be required to join the union or unionize their shops within 30 days or said contracts be cancelled or withdrawn. They were to be "kept informed of all future contracts," and, finally, that a Union list of all acceptable employers be distributed to those who were to work at the Fair.¹²⁰ This agreement was tested a number of

¹¹⁹ Draft statement from local 829 to World's Fair Corporation, n.d., c. January 1938, Gellert papers, AAA, box 2.

¹²⁰ Business Representative, United Scenic Artists L.U. 829 of the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America to Grover Whalen, President New York Worlds Fair

times during the course of 1938. A twenty-one day strike organized by United Scenic Artists took place between May 31 and June 21, 1938 because Pierre Bourdelle who was working on murals for the Food Building and the DuPont Building was a non-union artist. The strike was settled after discussions revealed that Bourdelle worked at his studio, not on site. The Union then agreed that only murals executed directly at the site of the Fair needed to be made by Union muralists. Another strike in August was settled after nine days when non-Union muralist Domenico Mortellito agreed to join local 829.¹²¹ This outcome represented a significant victory for the union, and a personal victory for Gellert, as Mortellito was the most active and vocal opponent of the move to unionize.

Gellert himself executed a mural at the Fair for the interior of Public Address Headquarters of the Communications Building.¹²² Like Stuart Davis's mural for the same building, Gellert's mural was not preserved and exists only in studies (figs. 4.28-4.29). Related to his Community Center Study, the Communications mural also featured a large, powerful male profile at the left. This figure was not a laborer. The drafting pencil clutched in his hand denotes him as an inventor. A diminutive child standing on his shoulder and speaking into his ear symbolized both the theme of communication and the idea of the new; the progress-through-

1939, Inc., December 17, 1937, Gellert papers, Mary Ryan Gallery, New York, Mural Artists Guild folder.

¹²¹ "Strike Delays," New York World's Fair 1939-1940 papers, New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Box 570, "Strike Delays" Folder.

¹²² "List of Murals at World's Fair, Murals in Exhibit Area" 5, National Society of Mural Painters papers, AAA, Roll D249, frame 910, and "Minutes – 157th Meeting, Board of Design of New York World's Fair 1939 Incorporated, Box 390, New York World's Fair 1939-1940 papers, New York Public Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Box 390.

science "world of tomorrow." At the right, workers of different races join hands, the world's proletariat united through modern communication. At the center of the composition, Gellert emphasized the idea that technology can solve the conflicts artificially provoked by isolationism and nationalism, by superimposing a black linear form representing an electric circuit over the flags of many nations.

Conforming to local 829's resolution "¹²³ that all mural designs to be executed on the walls of the New York World's Fair must carry the Union Label," Gellert's sketch bears this label at the bottom of the mural, just left of center.

¹²³ Daft of Resolutions of Mural Artists Guild of the local 829 of the United Scenic Artists of America, ca. December 1937. Gellert papers, box 2.

CONCLUSION

The New York World's Fair marked the peak of Gellert's organizational activities. No fewer than three large inter-related artists' groups of which he was an active founding member had an effect on art events at the Fair. Gellert and The Mural Artists Guild local 829 unionized the Fair artists. On October 2, 1939, during the Fair's first Art Week an American Artists' Congress Day took place, which included *Art of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, "an open forum on current matters of vital importance" mediated by Margaret Bourke-White, Ruth Reeves, Stuart Davis, and Philip Evergood.¹ Moreover, The American Artists' Congress, with the support of the other groups under the aegis of the Artists' Committee of Action, successfully lobbied the Fair's president Grover Whalen and the Board of Design for *American Art Today*, the vast survey of contemporary painting, sculpture, and graphics. As with the American Artists' Congress December 1936 exhibition, *America Today*, Gellert served as a jury-member for the graphics section of The World's Fair's *American Art Today*. His own contribution was a lithographic portrait of his friend the actor, singer, and Communist sympathizer Paul Robeson (1898-1976) (fig. 5.1). The lithograph is a mirror image of the drawing that appeared in the September 29, 1928 *New Yorker* feature on Robeson, and Gellert apparently made the lithograph from the drawing using photomechanical means (fig. 5.2). Gellert's choice to revive the image is significant. Throughout the 1930s Robeson established himself as an outspoken

¹ World's Fair Corporation Board of Design to Hugo Gellert September, 7 1939, New York World's Fair 1939-1940 papers, New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Box 518, Governing and Artists Committees folder, and Box 519, Art Week folder.

civil rights activist. His visit the Soviet Union in 1934 through the invitation of filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein became well publicized after Robeson praised the Soviet Union as a land without race prejudice. In 1938 his experience as an entertainer supporting the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War led him to declare, "the artist must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice; I had no alternative."² Robeson broke racial stereotypes in a very visible and undeniable way. Not only did he possess uncommon musical talent, dramatic and oratory abilities, and physical strength, but also, Robeson was a formidable intellect who spoke many languages including Chinese, Russian, and Hebrew. Gellert's portrait of Robeson paid homage to a great American cultural figure upon his return to the United States after living abroad most of the decade. But more than that, because Robeson was an internationally recognized figure "symbolizing on a world scale the unity of the antifascist and anticolonial struggles,"³ Gellert's choice to exhibit the portrait was pointedly a broader comment supporting the interface of art and activism. When the exhibition closed in 1940, the lithograph was acquired and donated to the Birmingham Library through the American Art Today Purchase Fund. This account was derived from five percent of the proceeds generated by the exhibition, including the regular twenty-five cent admission, plus a share of special, and souvenir tickets.⁴

² Paul Robeson, in Paul Robeson Jr., "Robeson, Paul Leroy (1898-1976)," *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 655.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Purchase Fund document, 1940. New York World's Fair 1939-1940 papers, New York Public Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Box 521, Purchase Fund folder.

Through these activities, exhibitions and events, The Worlds Fair represented a high point for the radical artists' groups acceptance by, and participation in, the American mainstream. At this time membership in the CPUSA approached 100,000.⁵ Yet the spring of 1939 was also a watershed for the Popular Front. Its unity was irreparably disrupted by world events shortly after the Fair opened in April 1939. On August 23rd the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a mutual non-aggression pact. As a result, fellow travelers and even party members, quite a number of whom had been deeply disturbed by Stalin's purges of the previous four years, openly questioned the Soviet leader's devotion to the ideals of the October revolution. Throughout the Popular Front period, to allay any misgivings, Communism had been upheld as the antithesis of, and most effective way to combat, fascism. When Germany invaded Poland nine days after the pact's signing, it was difficult for many not to see the Soviet Union as a collaborator with the Nazis. Yet Gellert saw the non-aggression pact as a desperate, defensive move by the Soviet Union, whose political isolation from England and the United States necessitated such a deal with the devil in light of an inevitable war. The final blow to the Popular Front came in December 1939, when the Soviet Union invaded Finland. All but the most committed Communists broke from the party bitterly disillusioned, and the Popular Front artists' organizations fell into disarray.⁶

⁵ Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, xxxii.

⁶ See Gerald M. Monroe, "The American Artists Congress and the Invasion of Finland," *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1975, 14-20.

Gellert was one of the loyalists who remained faithful to the party leadership. He upheld the party line. According to a confidential informant for the FBI, at this time Gellert was a member of the executive committee of the "English branch of the Communist Party in New York City" and the "general secretary of the Hungarian Democratic Ass'n, a Hungarian Communist group."⁷ In the summer of 1940 Gellert had been trying to organize the Hungarian group to oppose conscription. Gellert opposed the war for the next year and a half until June 22, 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. At the end of that year, after the United States declared war on the Axis following the December 7th attack on Pearl Harbor, Gellert once again organized a substantial group of artists, this time to back the war effort. On December 17, 1941 six hundred artists met at the Museum of Modern Art and resolved to

offer the government the full use of their talents, and ask that a centralized government agency of simple structure which will put to use the services of the nation's artists, be established by the President of the United States through executive order or other means.⁸

The group soon incorporated on March 5, 1942 as Artists For Victory. Similar in structure to the Artists' Coordination Committee, Artists For Victory was made up of an association of divergent artists' societies.⁹ The group organized exhibitions

⁷ "Summary of information placing subject in C.D. Status, (orig., Conf. Inf. NYC, 8/19/40; 61-7559-10020),"Hugo Gellert file, FBI, File number: 100-NY-9645, volume 1, serials 1-104.

⁸ Resolution adopted at a meeting of six hundred artists at the Museum of Modern Art in the City of New York on the evening of December 17, 1941 co-chaired by J. Scott William and Hugo Gellert. Gellert papers, AAA, box 2.

⁹ At the time of its incorporation Artists For Victory consisted of the following twenty-six affiliated societies, a number of which had been members of the Artists' Coordination Committee, Allied Artists of America; Alumni Association of the American Academy in Rome; American Abstract Artists; American Society of Miniature Painters; American Veterans Society

such as the December 1942-February 1943 *Exhibition of Contemporary Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *America in the War*, "a graphic arts exhibition of 100 prints ... shown simultaneously in 24 cities of the nation" in October 1943,¹⁰ and *Portrait of America*, which opened in nine

of Artists; American Water Color Society; An American Group, Inc.; Architectural League of New York; Federation of Modern painters and Sculptors; Municipal Art Society of New York; National Academy of Design; national Association of Women Artists; National Sculpture Society; National Society of Mural Painters; New York Chapter of the American Artists Professional League; New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects; New York Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects; New York Society of Women Artists; Sculptors Guild, Inc.; Society of American Etchers; United Scenic Artists; Bombshell Artists Group; American Institute of Decorators, Artists league of America; Pittsburgh Artists For Victory; New York Society of Craftsmen Salmagundi Club. Artists for Victory, Incorporated, Statement, Gellert papers, AAA, box 2.

¹⁰ *America in the War* exhibition announcement, Gellert papers, Mary Ryan Gallery, New York, Artists for Victory file. In addition to the twenty-four museums and galleries mentioned in the announcement, two others were subsequently added. The twenty-six that hosted the exhibition were,

- Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis, Tennessee
- The Butler Art Institute, Youngstown, Ohio
- Carolina Art Association, Gibbes Memorial Art Gallery, Charleston, South Carolina
- The Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio
- The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio
- The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
- The Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire
- Everhart Museum of Natural History, Science and Art, Scranton, Pennsylvania
- Fine Arts Gallery, San Diego, California
- Fort Wayne Art School and Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana
- Layton Art Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- The Museum of Fine Arts of Houston, Houston, Texas
- William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, Kansas City, Missouri
- Norfolk Museum of Arts and Sciences
- Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon
- The Print Club, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, California
- Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California
- Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington
- The Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts
- Swope Art Gallery, Terre Haute, Indiana
- Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia
- The Wichita Art Association, Wichita, Kansas
- The Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, Wilmington, Delaware
- Kennedy and Co. Galleries, New York, New York
- The Wisconsin Union Gallery, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin

cities in the Fall of 1944. In addition, Artists for Victory sponsored contests, such as the 1943 *Four Freedoms Poster Competition*, raised money for prizes, and disseminated other war effort propaganda, such as parade floats. Gellert headed the construction team of at least one float for the New York At War Parade in June 1942. The float included a three dimensional figure of an eagle twelve feet high and eighteen feet wide made of wood, wire, beaver board and *papier mâché*. The eagle sat on a base that was twenty feet wide, thirty feet long and ten feet high, that featured two side boards and one rear board decorated with slogans.¹¹

Gellert's most significant project of the war years was his 1943 *Century of the Common Man* portfolio of nineteen silkscreen prints illustrating Vice President Henry A. Wallace's speech of the same name. Gellert's choice of the medium is significant. In 1943 silkscreen was an extremely young technique. Though the method of reproducing a design by wiping inks onto a surface through stretched mesh screens affixed with stencils had been in use since the turn of the century, it had primarily been employed for commercial applications. It was introduced to printmakers in 1938 under the auspices of the Federal Art Project. Silkscreen enabled the artist to make color prints without a printing press. It was economical and extremely flexible. Unlike many artists who made silkscreen prints at the time, Gellert did not set out to imitate the characteristics of painting. Instead he

¹¹ Purchase order from The Greater New York Fund to Hugo Gellert, June 5, 1942, Gellert papers, AAA, box 3.

exploited the medium's inherent qualities; hard edges and flat areas of solid color.

Like Gellert's other elaborate graphic undertakings, *Century of the Common Man* featured a page of text accompanied by a related image on the facing page. For instance, in response to "The Four Freedoms" President Roosevelt spoke about in his famous January 6, 1941 message to Congress, Wallace added four wartime duties:

1. The duty to produce to the limit.
2. The duty to transport as rapidly as possible to the field of battle.
3. The duty to fight with all that is in us.
4. The duty to build a peace — just, charitable and enduring.

Gellert depicted these four duties in four separate prints. In *Free Man's Duties 1* a black woman operates a drill press (fig. 5.3). Significantly, to epitomize the new wartime home front production culture, Gellert's version of Rosie the Riveter was a member of the work force who had been doubly marginalized by sexism and racism. A Marxist reading of this image would recognize it as a comment on race prejudice, which the new idealistic wartime spirit of cooperation revealed as a construct that had been used in capitalist societies to keep the proletariat in disarray. The image is at once patriotic and revolutionary. Overtly it declares that industrial production will win the war. However, its subtext suggests that a united working class will bring about a better world. For *Free Man's Duties 2*, Gellert also asserted that the labor force was the true power of the military. He portrayed

a giant sailor of the merchant marine literally pulling a fleet across the Atlantic. In the monumental seaman's hand is a Nazi U-boat, which he has plucked, dripping, from beneath the ocean's surface (fig. 5.4).

A major theme of Wallace's speech was U.S.-Soviet cooperation. In *Fighting with All Our Might*, Gellert illustrated this ideal as a handshake (fig. 5.5). One hand emerges from a sleeve adorned with a Soviet star. The other sleeve's American eagle symbol indicates it belongs to a United States uniform. A diminutive Hitler is literally crushed in the grip. However, *Free Man's Duties 3* contains a stronger, if less obvious pro-Soviet statement (fig. 5.6). Though his uniform is devoid of insignia, the shape of the helmet worn by the soldier in the close-cropped composition is revealing. The designs of the Soviet and the American combat helmets of the Second World War were quite similar to each other. While easily discernable from the those of many of the other belligerents—such as the British saucer-like “Tommy” helmet, the crested French helmet, the hard angled, long flanged German helmet, or the conical Japanese helmet—without markings a relatively close comparison is necessary to tell the two apart. Both are rounded and thin lipped. However, the dome of the standard issue GI “steel pot” rises above the eyes almost vertically, while the Soviet helmet slopes from crown to the front at a slightly more gradual angle (figs. 5.7, 5.8). Therefore, according to the helmet, Gellert's heroic fighting man actually represents an infantryman of the Red Army.

During the Soviet-American alliance from late 1941 through the summer of 1945, Gellert may have officially been able to, even encouraged to praise and promote support for the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, he did develop enemies among certain conservatives in the United States Congress. Investigating the Communist presence in art organizations, Illinois Republican Representative Fred Busbey (1888-1966) concluded in 1943 that the Communist Party sought to bore from within into "patriotic and legitimate art societies."¹² He declared before the House of Representatives that since the United States entered the war "the Communists by all the subtle subversive subterfuge at their command, have made efforts to steal Artists for Victory as their own."¹³ To that end,

as vice president, the wily Communists selected one of their kind in Hugo Gellert, an artist on staff of the *Daily Worker* and other Communist publications. Gellert is one of the reddest of the Reds, and has long been a notorious participant in Communist activities. Gellert as vice president of the phony Artists For Victory, Inc., will encourage his communistic type of art. An example of Gellert's artful Communist art may be found in a booklet issuing from the International Workers Order, printed in 16 languages and in full color. Gellert, who illustrated the booklet, goes the Communist limit in a graphic effort to stir up race hatred, but how this effort may be made to conform with any patriotic efforts...is not made known by Communist Hugo Gellert.¹⁴

Congressman Busbey's classification of Gellert's relative "redness," was not incorrect. However, his prediction that Gellert would use Artists For Victory to "encourage his communistic type of art" did not come to pass. It appears that despite of, or more likely because of, Gellert's devotion to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, during the war his prime motivation was an urgent desire

¹² Illinois Republican Representative Fred Busbey, "Red Art Propaganda," report to the House of Representatives, n.d., c. 1943, 1. Gellert papers, AAA, box 2.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 2

to assist the Allied war effort. Busbey's interpretation of *Century of the Common Man* as an "effort to stir up race hatred" seems at first incomprehensible, unless the caricatures of Hitler were understood as an attack on the Aryan race. The portfolio's message of racial harmony, cooperation, and tolerance is relentless. But, if one considered the race relations *status quo* in the 1943 United States as acceptable, one could argue, as Busbey did, that a call for equal civil rights is equivalent to "an effort to stir up race hatred."

Busbey appears to have also conducted some investigation into Gellert's professional history, maintaining,

he has always been a prime mover on the Communist art front. He was active in forming the Artists' Union, a Red group in the Communist front, which was so patently communistic that Gellert and others dissolved it to form the United American Artists, affiliated with the C.I.O., which at the time seemed to have domination over the art commissions under W.P.A. But with W.P.A. on its way out, the C.I.O. fired most of the membership of United American Artists for failure to pay dues. This twice-defunct group of Communists found some fellow travelers of the same tinge in the American Artists' Congress, which in turn was quietly disbanded when it was unmasked as a Communist front.¹⁵

To be sure, the Artists' Union was not dissolved for being "patently communistic."

It functioned side by side with the other artists' groups of the late 1930s. The United American Artists must be a misunderstanding of the Mural Artists Guild local 829 of the United Scenic Artists Union of the AFL-CIO. Its supposed "domination over art commissions under W.P.A." is likely a reference to the unionization of World's Fair artists. Gellert longed to paint a mural for the W.P.A. If an organization he formed had control over W.P.A. commissions, he certainly

¹⁵ Ibid.

would have been able to realize this desire. Yet he painted no such mural. Finally the American Artists' Congress was not "disbanded when it was unmasked as a Communist front." Its party affiliations were known from the beginning. Non-Communists consciously affiliated themselves with the organization. The Congress broke up over ideological differences stemming from Soviet-Nazi non-aggression pact and the subsequent Soviet invasion of Finland. Since Busbey obviously made some effort to look into the chronology of Gellert's involvement with these artists groups, the resulting inaccuracies are most likely due to a combination of poor research and deliberate misrepresentations, a practice that would be used to great effect by Busbey's better-known colleague, Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908 -1957) throughout the Wisconsin demagogue's campaigns of repression during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Along with Michigan Republican Congressman George Dondero (1883-1968), who famously assailed modern art as a Communist plot to undermine the principle of eternal beauty, Busbey was one of the most vocal Representatives on the subject of Communism and art during the 1950s. His numerous accusations prompted Rockwell Kent to observe in a letter to Gellert,

what a ridiculous lot of twaddle Busbey talks! It would be interesting to compile into an article what the various members of Congress have denounced as "Communist" art. They ought at least to get together and have some kind of a formula to go by.¹⁶

As an outspoken and unapologetic Party member, Gellert was deeply affected by the anti-Communist fervor that would evolve into the paranoia and persecutions of McCarthyism. FBI records indicate that Gellert had been under surveillance as

¹⁶ Rockwell Kent to Hugo Gellert, February 19, 1954, Gellert papers, AAA, box 1.

early as 1920. But the more thorough, systematic investigations began in July of 1941. These included photographs of him, examples of his handwriting, and examination of records of various organizations (including the trash in vacated offices and banquet halls), as well as research and reports by confidential informants into his citizenship status, his affiliations, his movements domestically and internationally, and his income and expenditures.¹⁷ One Special Agent considered Gellert “potentially dangerous because of his power of appeal as a cartoonist.”¹⁸

As a result of this post-war political climate, in November 1946 Gellert and his wife Livia left the country for Australia, Livia’s former homeland. They remained abroad for three years. By the time they returned to New York, Gellert’s Workers’ Cooperative Cafeteria mural had been demolished, along with the entire building, and replaced by Klein’s department store, which took over the space. Similarly, in 1954 his Center Theater mural was destroyed when the Theater itself was replaced by an addition to the U.S. Tire and Rubber Building.¹⁹ The 1950s was an extremely difficult time for Gellert as it was for all Communists and accused Communists in the United States. With the demise of the federally-funded art projects of the New Deal and Artists For Victory, and the post-war commercial

¹⁷ When Gellert moved from 63 East 11th Street to 80 West 40th Street an informant who “thought it was quite unusual that GELLERT could jump from a \$45 monthly residence to a \$150 monthly residence” notified the Special Agent investigating Gellert. Anonymous (Special Agent), Memo Re: Hugo Gellert March 27, 1945, FBI New York Field Division file on Hugo Gellert, 100-9645-25, Volume One, Serial 1-104.

¹⁸ Memo. Re: Hugo Gellert, May 18, 1945. Anonymous (Special Agent), FBI New York Field Division file on Hugo Gellert, 100-9645, Volume One, Serial 1-104.

¹⁹ I thank John C. McCall and Tom Thurston, Editor of the New Deal Network, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute (www.newdeal.feri.org), for this information.

success of Abstract Expressionism, Social Realist artists found it next to impossible to show and sell their work. Consequently, Gellert, Rockwell Kent, and Charles White (1918-1979) formed the Art of Today Gallery as an outlet for blacklisted artists. Incorporated in February 1954, the gallery opened its space in the lobby of the Great Northern Hotel at 118 West 57th Street in September of that year.²⁰ Art of Today remained in business for the next two and a half years, exhibiting the works of Maurice Becker, Henry Glintenkamp, Harry Gottlieb, and members of the Mexican Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), to name a few.

Though the Party had been crippled by the internal strife generated by policies surrounding the Second World War, it was all but decimated by the subsequent Cold War. During this time Gellert continued to work for Communist publications, contributing regularly to *The Worker* (formerly *The Daily Worker*), and co-founding and editing *Masses and Mainstream* (1948-1956), and *American Dialog* (1964-1972), the successors to the *Masses*, *Liberator*, and *New Masses*. He also became increasingly active in the Hungarian language Communist journal *Amerikai Magyar Szó* (American Hungarian Word) (1952-), successor to the *Előre* and *Uj Előre*. He worked on Party-affiliated projects such as his 1951 poster for *Peace Will Win*, Dutch film maker Jores Ivens' (1898-1989) documentary about the 1948 Second World Peace Conference in The Hague (fig. 5.9), as well as pamphlets for Party-sponsored institutions such as the Jefferson School of Social Research, where he also taught sporadically.

²⁰ State of New York Corporation Franchise Tax Law Report for Art of Today Incorporated, Gellert papers, AAA, box 4.

Furthermore, throughout the 1950s and 1960s Gellert formed, or was involved with, several committees to assist Party members harmed by the Cold War. For instance, in 1951 Gellert co-founded the Committee to Defend V. J. Jerome when the former cultural liaison, who mediated between the Artists' Committee of Action and The Artists' Union, faced deportation under the 1940 Smith Act, which made it unlawful to

cause the overthrow or destruction of any government in the United States, to print, publish, edit, issue, circulate, sell, distribute, or publicly display any written or printed matter, advocating, advising, or teaching the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States by force or violence.²¹

Gellert was involved with similar groups to support Louis Weinstock, co-organizer of the Mural Artists Guild local 829 of the United Scenic Artists Union, and to defend accused "Atom Spies," Ethel and Julius Rosenberg (fig. 5.10). In the early 1960s, Gellert co-chaired the Committee to Free Siqueiros, and organized events such as an exhibition at A.C.A. galleries in October 1962, the proceeds of which went towards the Mexican muralist's legal expenses.

Because Gellert remained so involved with the Party press and activities, the FBI continued to investigate him. Roughly 3000 pages, compiled over the course of more than 35 years (1941-1976) by the New York Regional Office and the Bureau Headquarters in Washington, DC, make up the FBI's Gellert file. From them one learns, that at each encounter with the Bureau Gellert adamantly

²¹ "Fact Sheet," The Committee to Defend V. J. Jerome, pamphlet, c. 1951, Hugo Gellert papers, AAA, Mary Ryan Gallery, New York.

refused to cooperate. One such instance, which occurred during the early evening hours of September 26, 1955 is a testament to his defiance. According to the anonymous Special Agent's report, the fifty-nine-year-old artist was

surveilled to a point near the corner of 7th Ave. and 23rd St., NYC, where the approach was made. Upon hearing his name, GELLERT stopped and cordially offered his hand to agent. Agents immediately identified themselves as Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Before agents could say anything further GELLERT wrenched his hand free from the handshake, loudly and vehemently stated, "I have nothing to say to you," and walked rapidly away in the direction of his residence, the Hotel Chelsea.²²

Shortly after this confrontation, Gellert was summoned to testify in front of the United States Congress House Committee on Un-American Activities. On November 13, 1956, Committee Staff Director Richard Arens interrogated Gellert, who for the most part, invoked the Fifth Amendment. He departed from this strategy to explain that his two trips to the Soviet Union were "to see what it was like," and to clarify his involvement with the WPA, which Arens mistakenly believed included painting murals. Although a former Party member-turned-informer named John Lautner had testified against him the previous day, Gellert seems to have emerged from the hearing relatively unscathed.²³ He was not deported, but his income suffered as opportunities dwindled. Fortunately, he was able to work occasionally at Karavan Trading Company, the exotic furnishings and decorative arts store at 39 West 29th Street, owned by his brother Otto.

²² Office Memorandum to Director, FBI file on Hugo Gellert, File Number 100-19719, Section Number 2.

²³ Testimony of Hugo Gellert, Accompanied By Counsel, Isidore G. Needelman, Transcript, United States Congress House Committee on Un-American Activities, Communist Political Subversion, (source not cited) 6320, Hugo Gellert file, FBI, File Number: 100-NY-9645, Volume Number: 5, Serials: 291-371.

While Gellert shunned, and was shunned by the mainstream art world during the post-war years, he was revered in Communist circles. The Marx-Lenin Institute in Moscow hosted a retrospective exhibition of his work in 1967 that traveled to the Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest the following year. Unlike many of the artists of his generation Gellert lived to see the beginning of a revival in interest in the social art movements of the early twentieth century among non-Party academics and curators in the United States. Through the pioneering work in the 1960s and 1970s of scholars such as the art historians Francis V. O'Connor, Marlene Park, and Arthur Hughes, artists Gerald Monroe and David Shapiro, and historians Paul Avrich, Paul Buhle, and Gerald Markowitz, among others, Gellert's ideas, opinions, and memories have been published and preserved. As a result, during the last few years of his life, Gellert enjoyed a heightened level of recognition. In the late 1970s he was a featured speaker at several events in New York. One was a discussion between Gellert, Anton Refregier, and the 1970s Cityarts group of muralists, arranged by Gerald Markowitz and Marlene Park at John Jay College titled *Art and Politics in the 1930s and 1970s*. The other was a more formal conference at Columbia University on art and politics in the 1930s moderated by Paul Buhle. In 1981 Gellert appeared as one of the "eyewitnesses" in the film *Reds*, Warren Beatty's biography of John Reed. In October 1985, two months before his death, Gellert spoke at the *Art For the Masses* symposium at the Whitney Museum of American Art, held in conjunction with Rebecca Zurier's exhibition, *Art For the Masses (1911-1917)* at the Yale University Art Gallery.

Gellert's lasting contribution to twentieth century modern art did not involve revolutionary stylistic innovation. Yet as an activist-artist Gellert was a pioneer. He lived with the faith that collectively organized artists have the power to change society. Beyond that, he believed artists were nothing less than duty-bound to address contemporary social and political troubles. He found direction through the Communist Party. In his old age Gellert did not waver from these beliefs, nor did he soften his position. When Paul Avrich interviewed Gellert at his home in Freehold, New Jersey in 1972,

he was still reciting the orthodox Communist line—that the Soviet Union was a workers' state, that workers' councils controlled the factories and ran the economy, that Stalin was a great leader who saved the world from Hitler, and so on.²⁴

Ultimately, it was the Party, not a particular leader or country, that Gellert backed. As a stalwart, he considered public criticism of the Party's leadership or policies destructive to the objective of working class revolution. It may be significant however, that his only known portrait of Stalin commemorated the Soviet leader's death in 1953 (fig. 5.11).

Throughout his career as a Communist artist living in a capitalist country Gellert encountered numerous difficulties. In the 1940s he addressed the inherent contradictions of this condition.

On the heels of the Soviet Revolution, when the most advanced members of the Socialist Party formed the Communist Party, I

²⁴ Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, 241-242.

became a Communist. Many years have passed since then, spent in a capitalist society. It was not always easy to abide by the decision. It had to be reaffirmed again and again. But I never regretted having made it. I believe I have done as well as most artists and had much more fun. I had the satisfaction of being myself. Being a Communist and being an artist are but two cheeks of the same face and, as for me, I fail to see how I can be one, without also being the other.²⁵

Socio-political events of the 1980s seem to have strengthened his militancy. In a comparison between the 1930s and the 1980s Gellert acknowledged that in both periods the wealthy and powerful strove to enrich themselves at the expense of the working class. "But at that time," he asserted, "luckily, we had the Roosevelt administration, but today we have a Reagan."²⁶ He considered the Reagan administration's cuts in funding for the arts an attempt to silence voices of dissent. In the early 1980s Gellert declared the need for artists to organize was as great as ever. He reduced his advice for young artists to a simple formula: "Go out in the street and demonstrate. Yell like hell."²⁷ Ultimately, this is perhaps the most fitting description of Gellert's long career. For seventy years, through his art, he yelled like hell.

²⁵ Hugo Gellert, "The Role of the Communist Artist," draft of a speech, c. 1942-44. Gellert papers, AAA, box 3.

²⁶ Sequenzia interview.

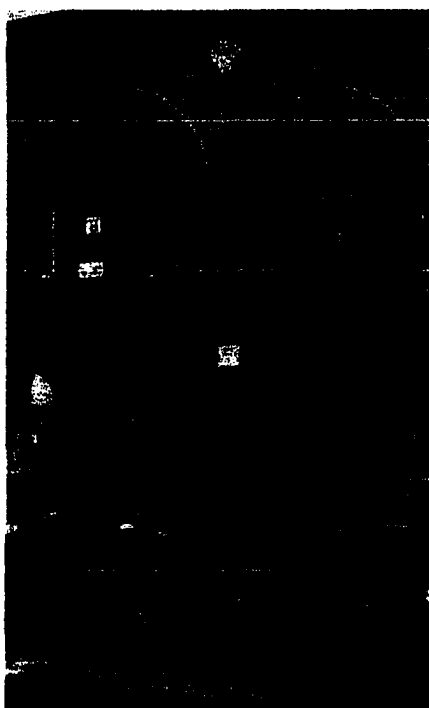
²⁷ Ibid.



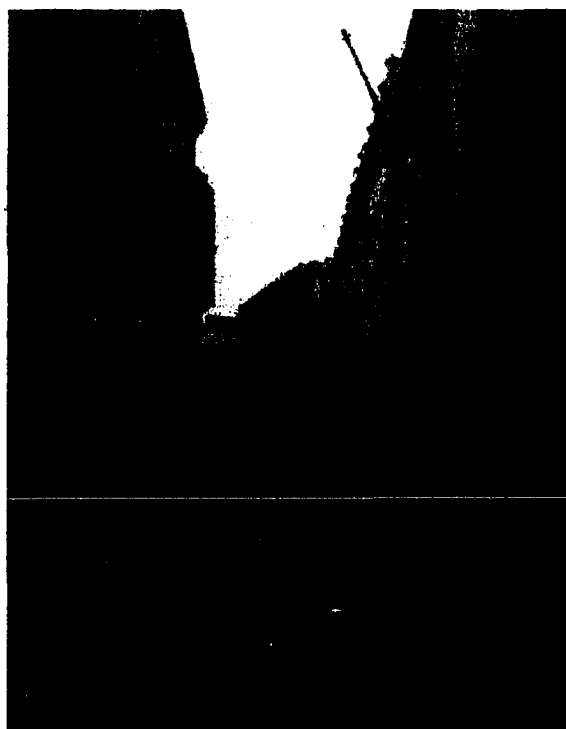
1.1
Katherine and Adolf Gellert



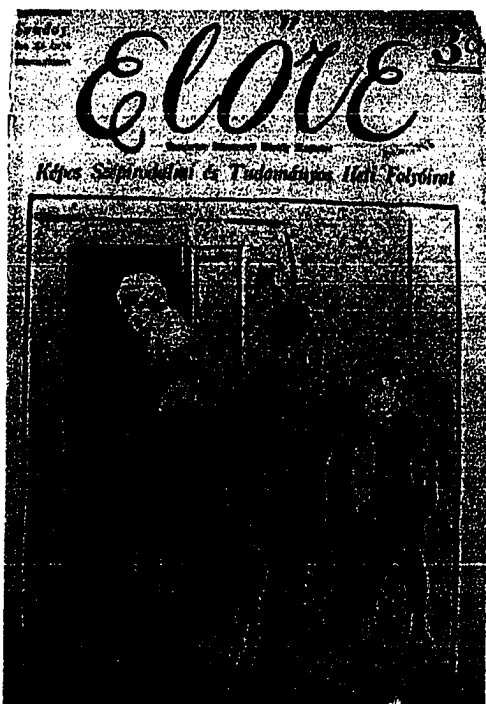
1.2
Hugo Gellert (left) and his four brothers and sister



1.3
Kazinczy utca 12
Budapest, Hungary



1.4
Kazinczy utca, looking towards
Kazinczy utca Orthodox Synagogue



1.5

Hugo Gellert

"De szeretnék kis kutya lenni!" ("I Wish I Were a Little Dog"), Előre Képes Folyóirat cover, January 23, 1916



1.6

Alice Beach Winter

*"He Ain't Got No Stockins'..."
The Masses, January 1913*

The **MASSES**



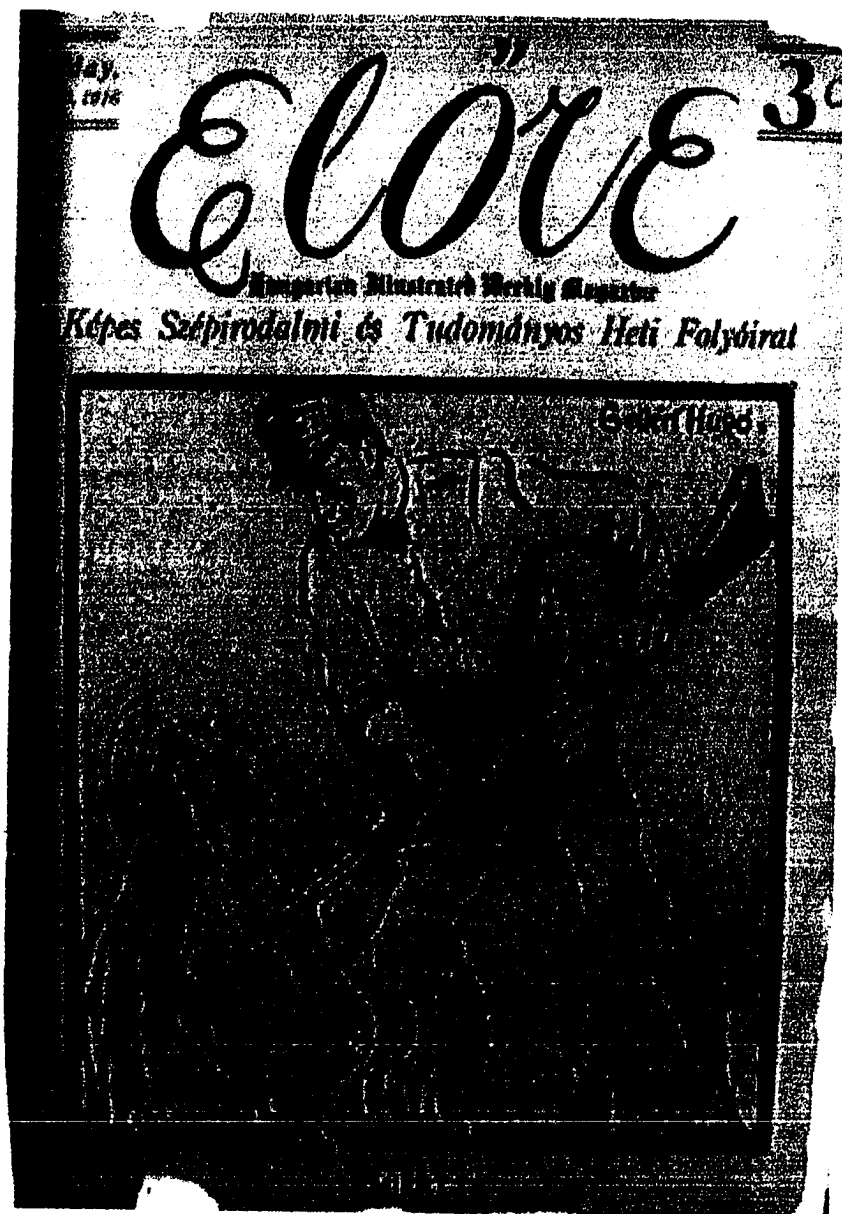
1.7

Stuart Davis,
*"Gee Mag, Think of Us Bein' on a
 Magazine Cover"*
The Masses cover, June 1913



1.8

Maurice Becker
Harbinger of Spring
The Masses cover, May 1916



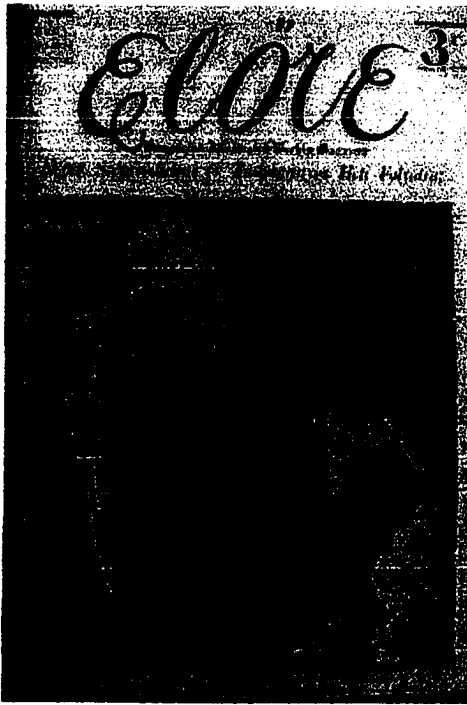
1.9
Hugo Gellert
Miért? (Why?)
Előre Képes Folyóirat cover,
January 30, 1916



1.10
Hugo Gellert
Háboru után (After War)
Előre Képes Folyóirat cover,
February 6, 1916



1.11
Félix Vallotton
Le Mensonge (The Lie)
Woodcut, 1897-98
From the portfolio *Intimités*



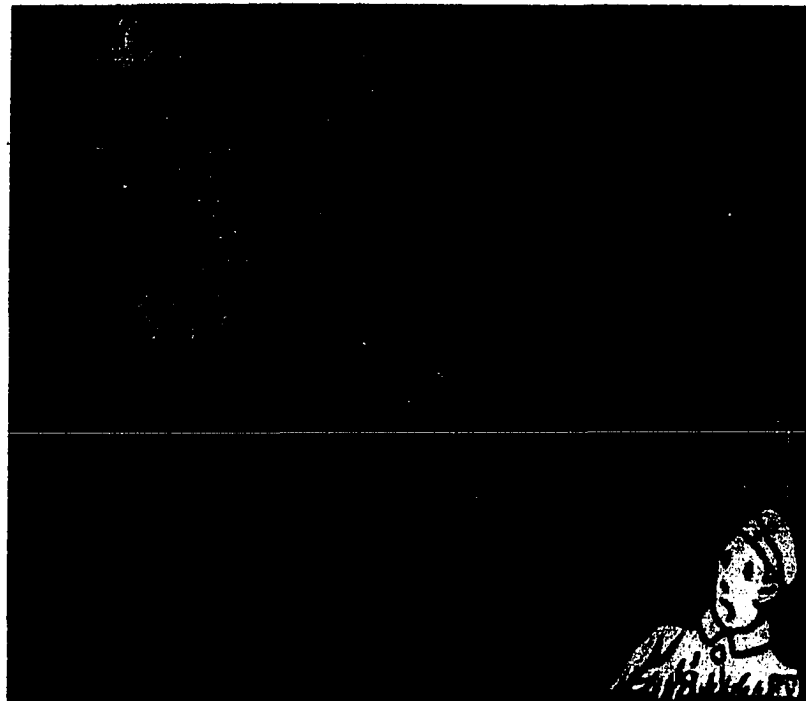
1.12

Hugo Gellert

Militarizmus: "Te kellesz nekem"
(Militarism: "I Want You")

Előre Képes Folyóirat cover

February 20, 1916



1.13

Félix Vallotton

Dans l'ombre (In the Shadows),
woodcut, 1916 from the portfolio *C'est la guerre!* (This is War!)

250



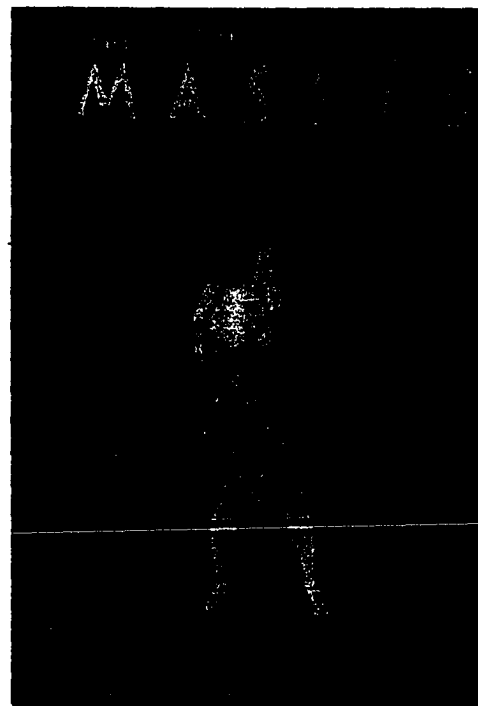
1.14
Hugo Gellert
Untitled (frolicking nudes)
The Masses, June 1916



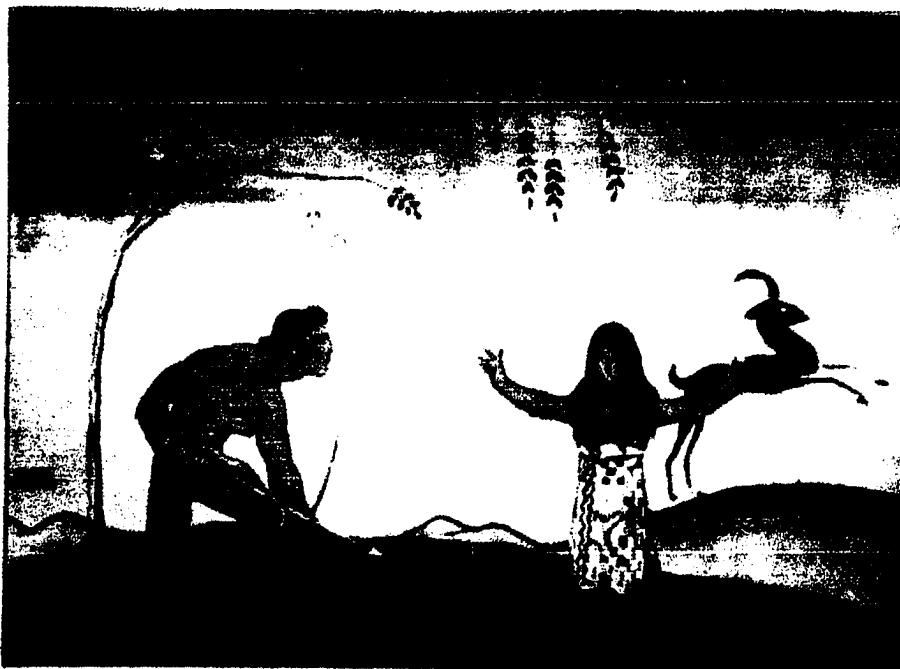
1.15
Hugo Gellert
Untitled (nude at pond)
The Masses, June 1916



1.16
Hugo Gellert
The Masses cover
June 1917



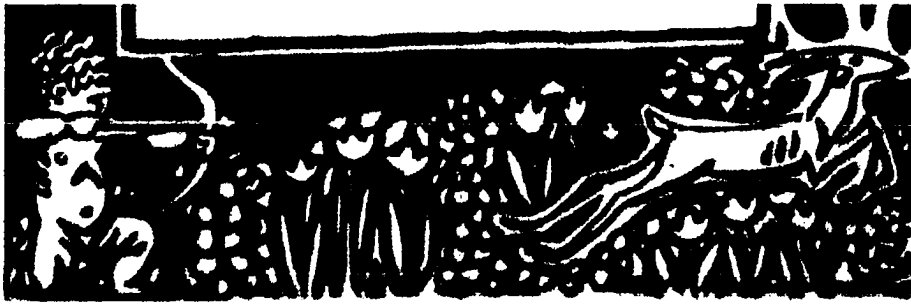
1.17
Hugo Gellert
The Masses cover
February 1917



1.18
Hugo Gellert
Untitled
The Masses, August 1917



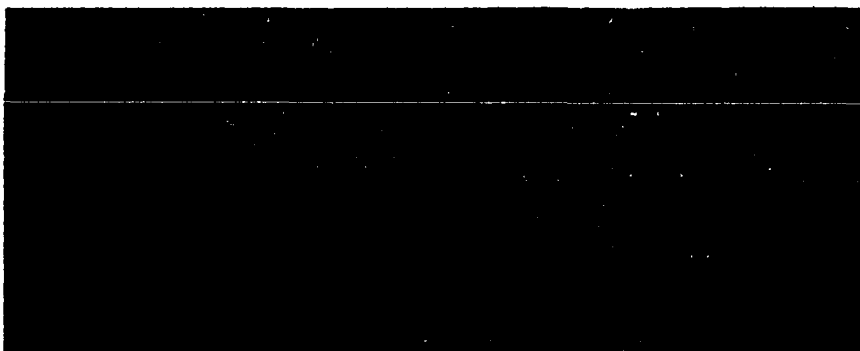
1.19
Hugo Gellert
Előre Képes Folyóirat
December 26, 1920



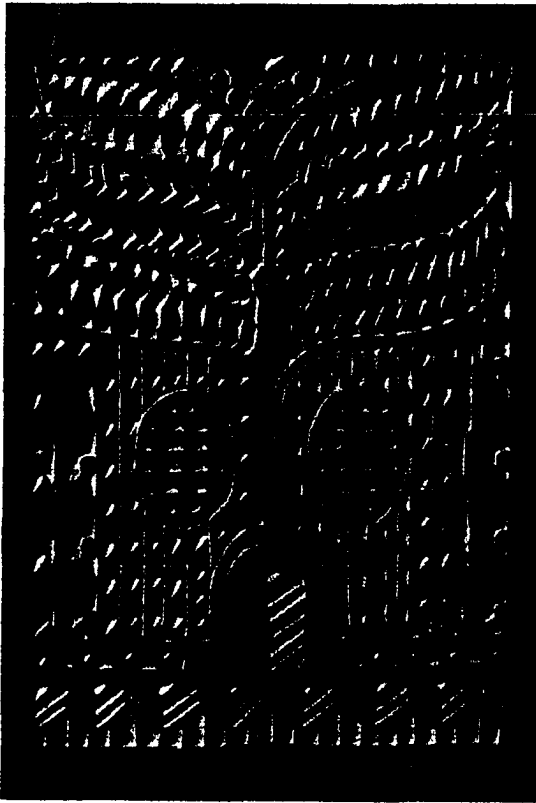
1.20
Hugo Gellert
Előre Képes Folyóirat cover
October 31, 1920



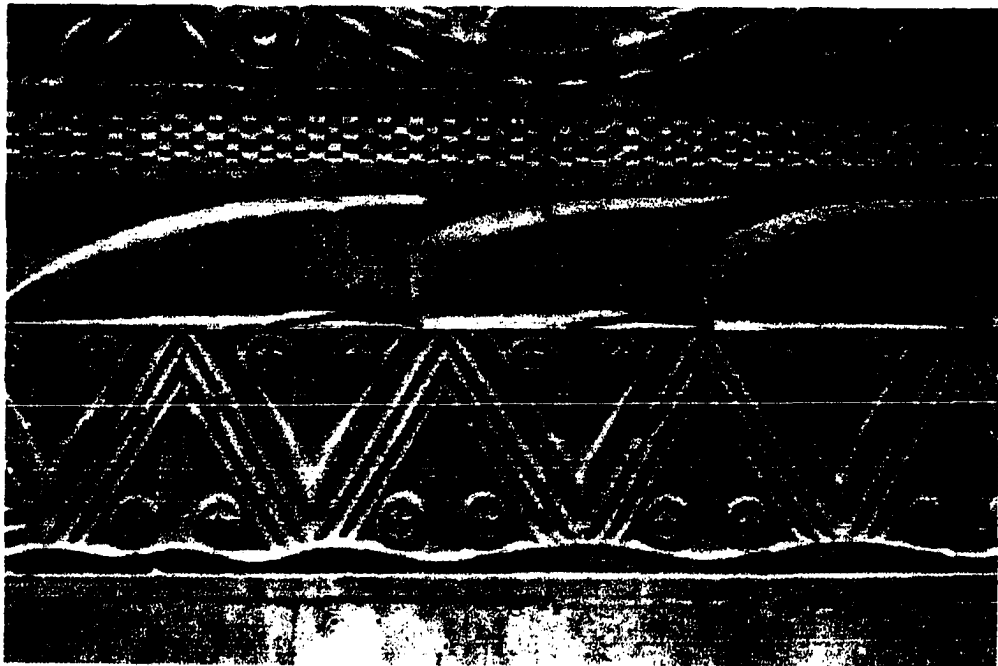
1.21
Alajos Stróbl
Fountain of King Matthais
1898-1904, Cast Bronze



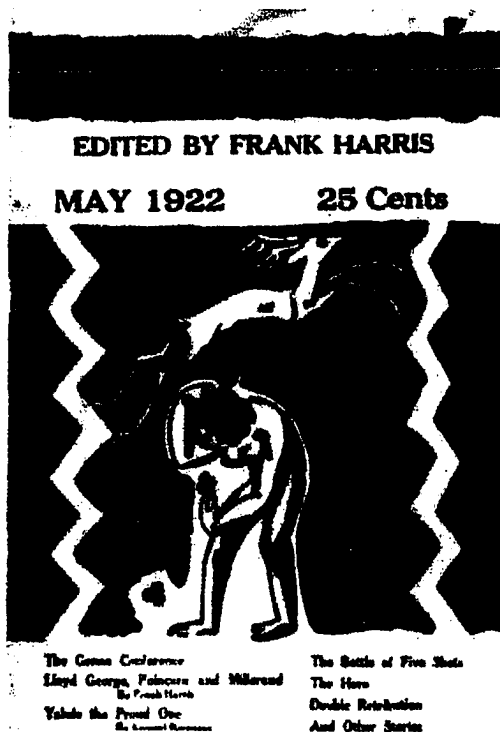
1.22
Sándor Nagy
Façade of István Medgyaszay's Theater of Veszprém,
Veszprém, Hungary, 1908



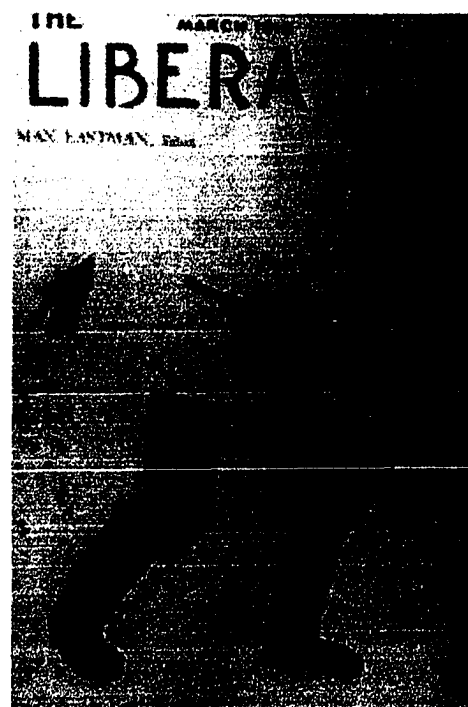
1.23
 Béla Latja
 Chip-carved doorway
 Jewish Institute for the Blind, 1908



1.24
 Béla Latja
 Concrete façade
 Isván Széchnyi Secondary School, 1912



1.25
Hugo Gellert
Pearson's cover
May 1922



1.26
Hugo Gellert
The Liberator cover
March 1918



1.27

Cornelia Barnes

"Good-bye dear, and do try to make a personal Friend of the Colonel," The Liberator, March 1918



1.28

Henry Glintenkamp

Physically Fit

The Masses, October 1917



1.29

M. A. Kempf

"Come on in America..."

The Masses, June 1917

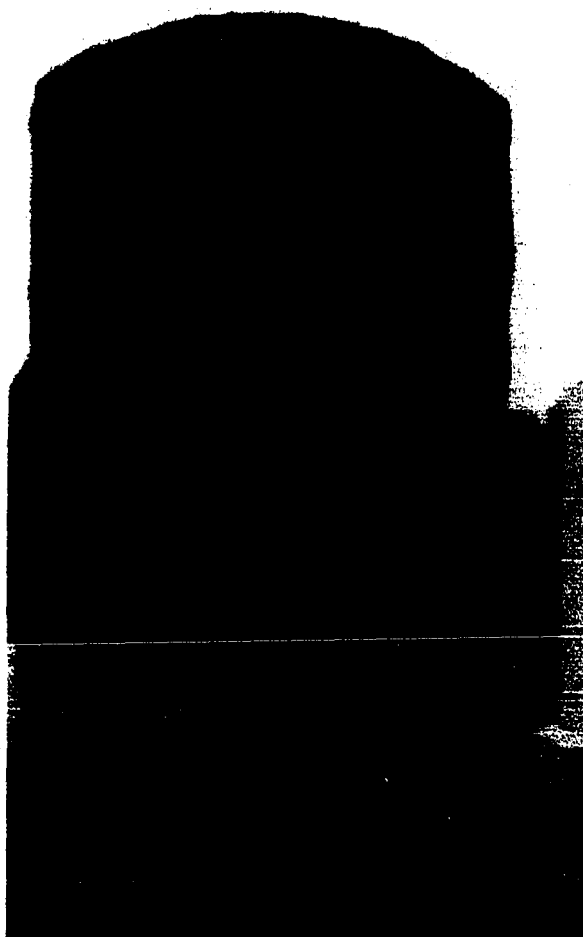


1.30

Ernest Gellert

Self Portrait, Mineola November. 5th 1917

Pencil on paper, 1917



1.31

Ernest Gellert's Headstone
Mt. Hebron Cemetery, New York

258



1.32

*Four Hours in the Snow—Ernest Gellert Before His Suicide,
The Workers Monthly, June 1925*



2.1

Modern School staff, c. 1921

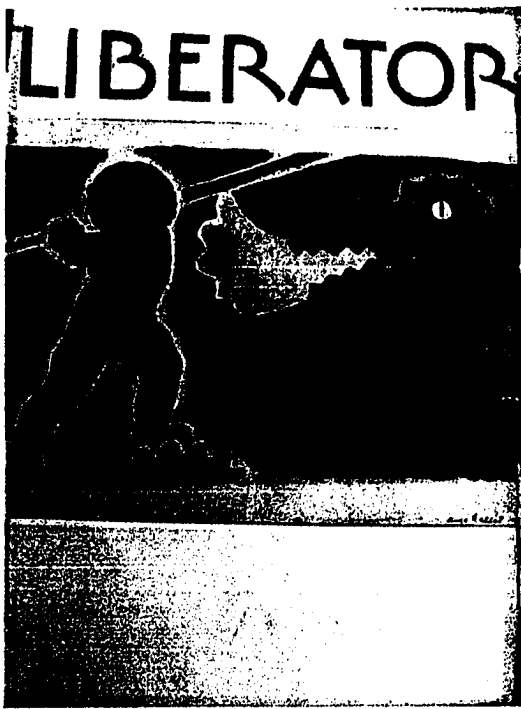
Gellert (with moustache) standing, rear row, center



2.2

Modern School staff, c. 1921

Gellert (with moustache) seated, far left



2.3
 Hugo Gellert
The Liberator cover, December 1920



2.4
 Hugo Gellert
Annual Costume Ball of The Liberator
The Liberator, April 1922



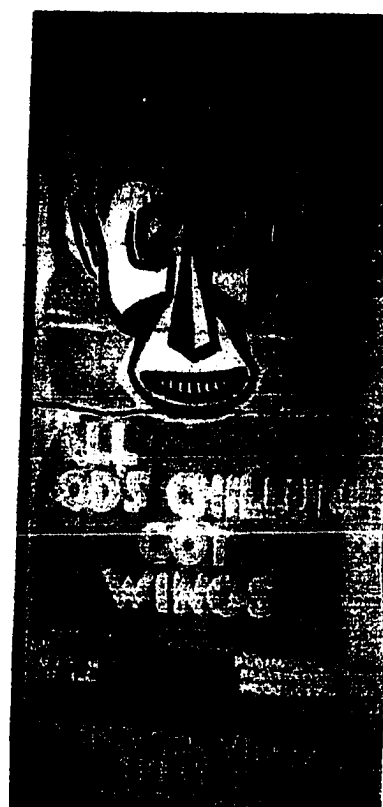
2.5
Portrait of John Reed with Marguerite Zorach's
poster, *Provincetown Players*, c. 1916



2.6
William Zorach
Sailing in Provincetown, linocut
Used on the cover of *The Quill*, June 1918



2.7
Hugo Gellert
Cover of *Színházi Ujság*, Hungarian
Theatrical Journal, October 15, 1921



2.8
Hugo Gellert
Poster for *All God's Chillun' Got Wings*
by Eugene O'Neill, 1924



George Cram Cook

2.9
Hugo Gellert
George Cram Cook
1923



EUGENE O'NEILL

Sketch by Hugo Gellert

2.10
Hugo Gellert
Eugene O'Neil, 1924

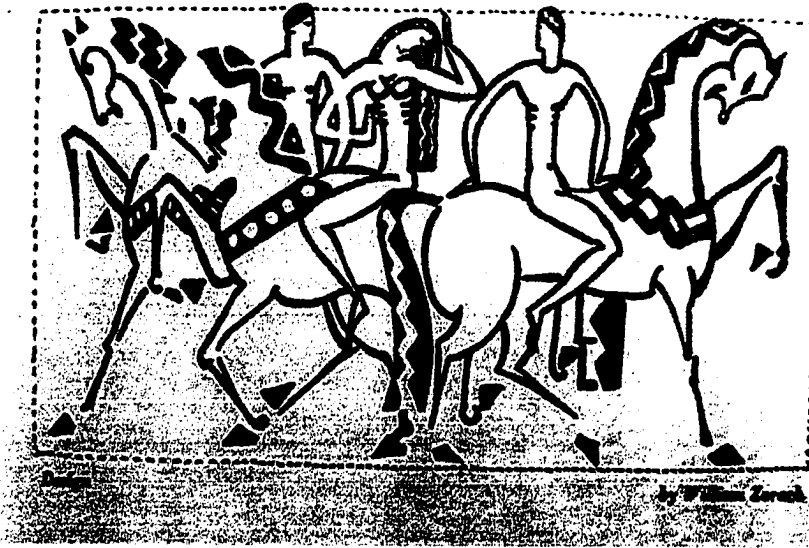


2.11
Hugo Gellert
Paul Robeson, 1924



His new play, "Fiesta," opens to-
night at the Garrick.

2.12
Hugo Gellert
Mike Gold, 1924



2.13
William Zorach
Design for a Tapestry,
in *Playboy*, January 1919



2.14
Hugo Gellert
Cover of *Playboy*, First Quarter, 1923



2.15
Hugo Gellert
Man, Woman, Child
Painting (medium unknown), c. 1923



2.16
Marguerite Zorach
Untitled
in *Playboy*, March-April 1919



2.17
Hugo Gellert
Untitled,
in *Előre Kepes Folyóirat*, December 19, 1920

...
 itünk, a munkások lere azonban az, hogy em-
 ság, szép és hasznos társadalmi munka, igazi
 gértés
 lehet
 . közt,
 esznek
 azok a
 . elvát,
 . ame-
 lyokra
 társa-
 a nem
 ezsák-
 és ki-
 tak, el-
 elnyor-
 ak és
 adagok
 k. Ha
 érzés
 tkeket
 rászija
 Ha ez
 ik a munkavégzésében, akkor valóban boldog

...
 kodok görcsösen ragaszkodnak a kochadt vil-
 a bünyösen csillogó, hazug és feselett társadal-
 nekí
 hata



A magyar munkásközösség egyik budapesti plakátja a nagy háború idején.

2.18

Béla Uitz

Vörös Katonák Előre (Red Soldiers Forward)

Poster, in *Előre Kepes Folyóirat* December 28, 1919



OPB

POSTER DESIGNER

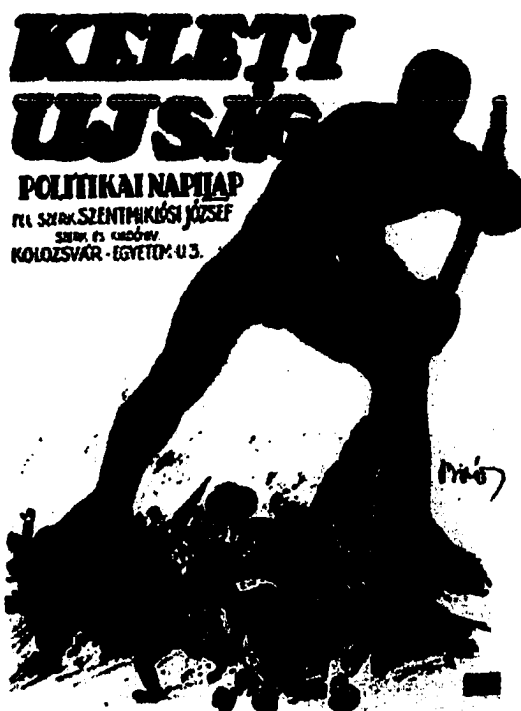
2.19

Róbert Berény

To Arms!, To Arms!

Poster, 1919

268



2.22
 Mihály Biró
Keleti Ujság
 Poster, 1919



2.23
 Hugo Gellert
Liberator cover
 May 1921



2.24

Hugo Gellert

Just a Look In, To Learn What it's Like
in The Liberator, August 1923

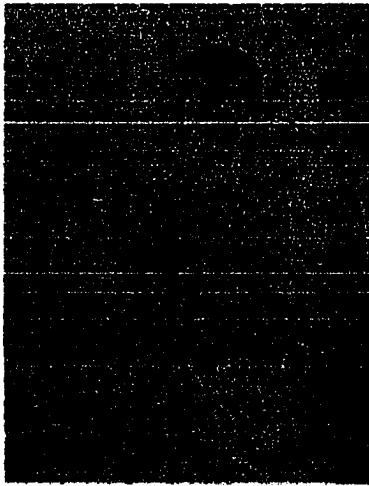


2.25

Mihály Biró

Politika, Radikális Folyóirat
(Politics, Radical Magazine), Poster, 1918

271



2.28
Hugo Gellert
Proletarian Poet
The Liberator, July 1922

2.29
Hugo Gellert
The Angel of the Lords
The Liberator, August 1922



The Angel of the Lords



2.30
Robert Minor
The Knight of the Round Belly
The Liberator, July 1922



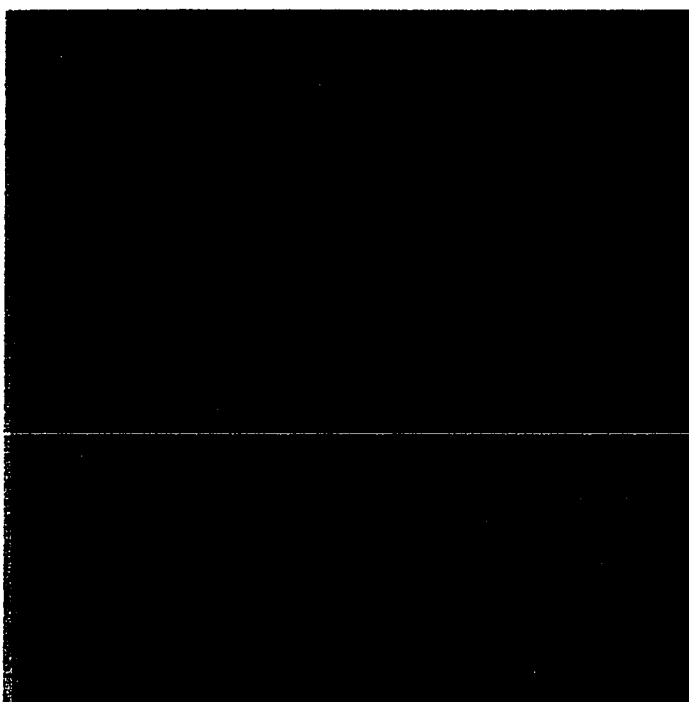
2.31
Hugo Gellert
Self Portrait, c. 1923
 Oil and graphite on board
 Collection of the Wolfsonian—FIU



2.32
Hugo Gellert
The Presser, c. 1923
 Painting (medium unknown)

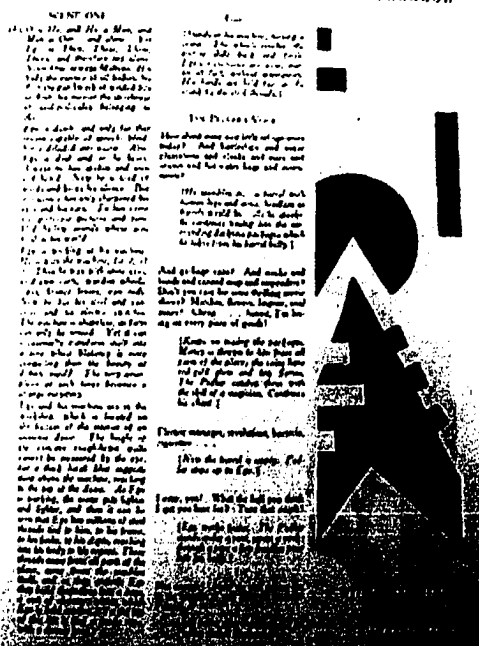


2.33
Hugo Gellert
Sewing Machine Operator, c. 1923
Painting (medium unknown)

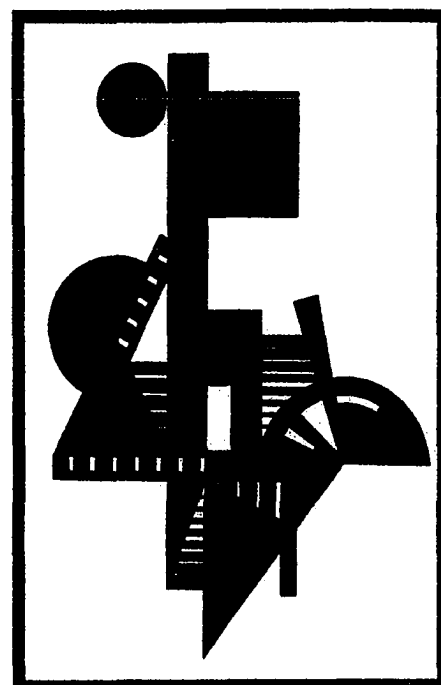


2.34
Hugo Gellert
Miner, c. 1923
Painting (medium unknown)

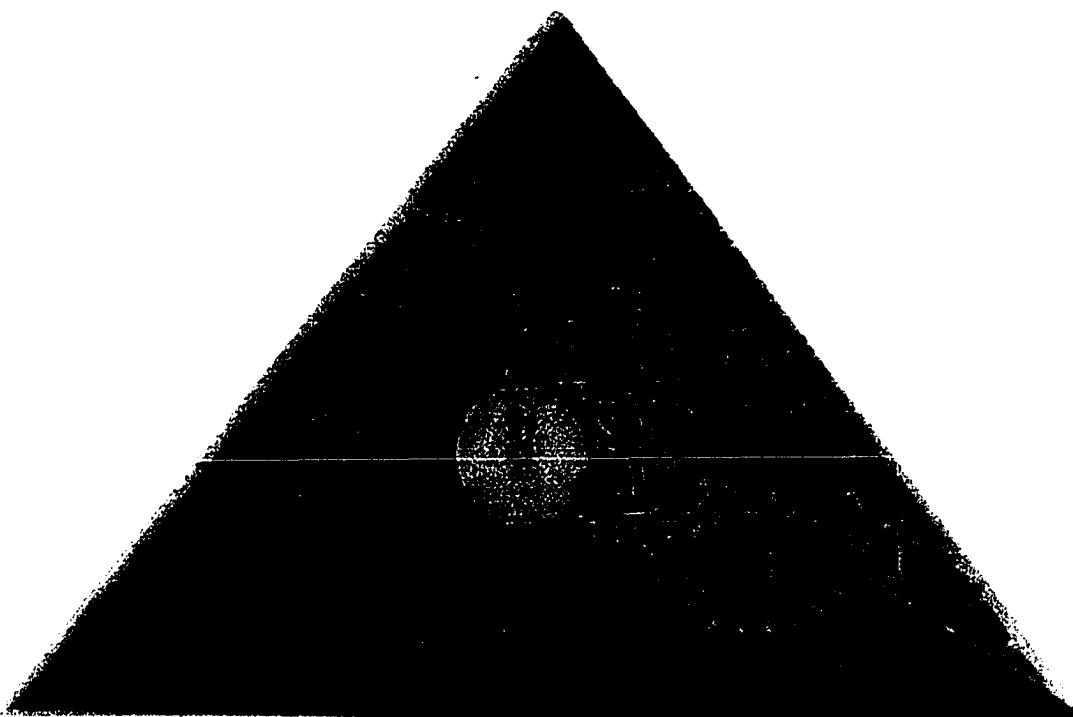
THE PLUG IN THE HOLE :: A PLAY
IN ONE ACT BY FRANCIS EDWARDS FARAGOH



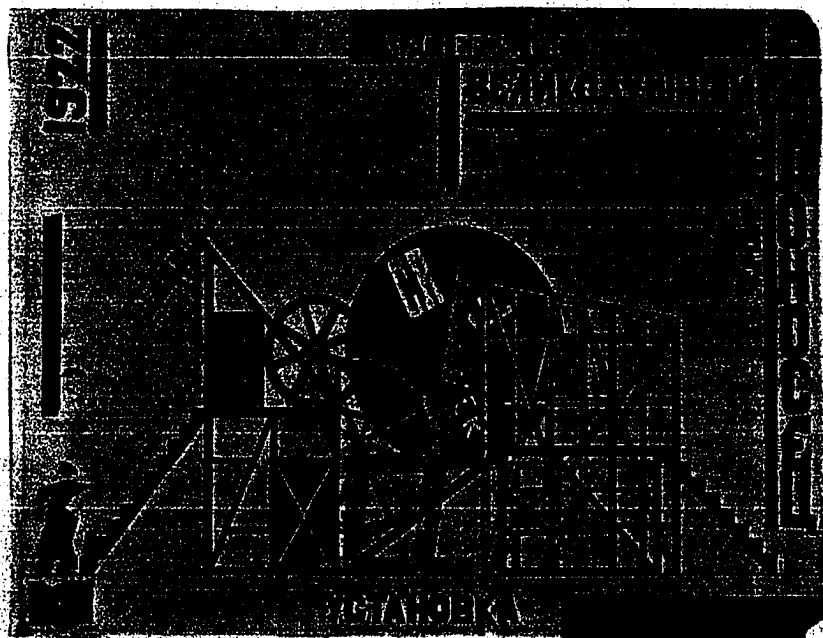
2.35
Hugo Gellert
Decoration for Francis Faragoh's
The Plug in the Hole,
in *Playboy*, July 1924



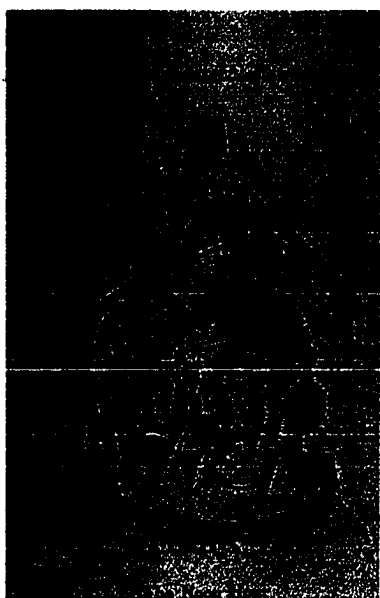
2.36
Louis Lozowick
Machine Ornament #1, 1922
Brush and ink on paper



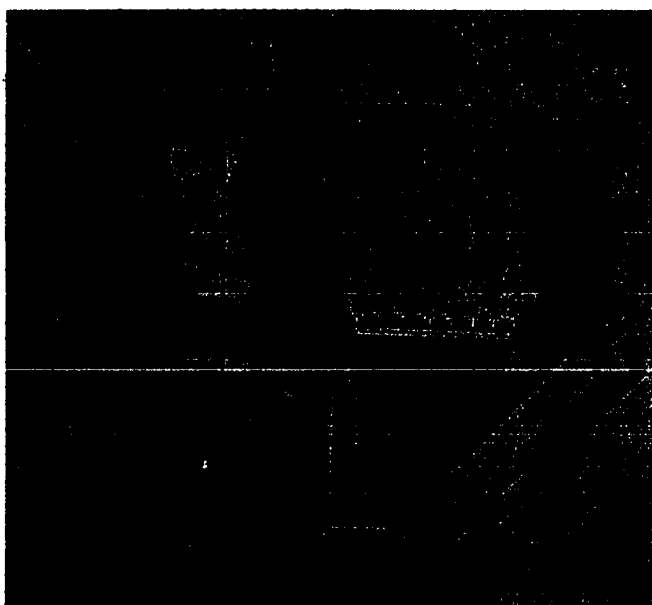
2.37
Hugo Gellert
First Scene of "Hakuba-Hekuba"
Gouache and pencil on paper, c. 1923



2.38
 Luibov Popova
 Set design for *"The Magnanimous Cuckold"*
 Collage, 1922



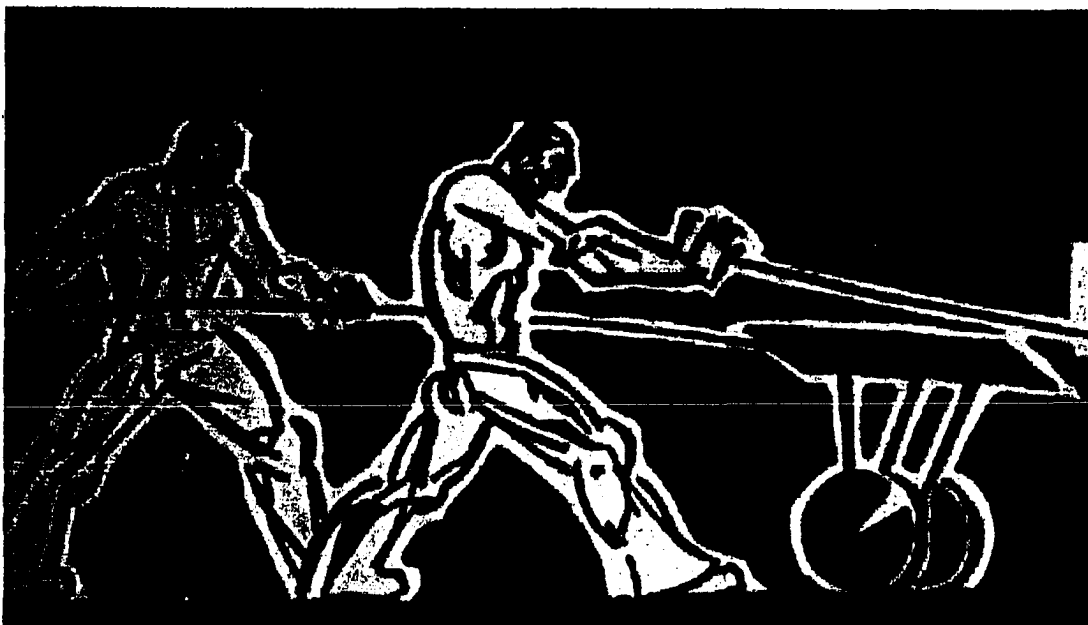
2.39
 Hugo Gellert
The Noon Hour
 In *The Liberator*, October 1923



2.40
 Alexandr Deineka
Female Textile Workers
 Oil on canvas, 1927



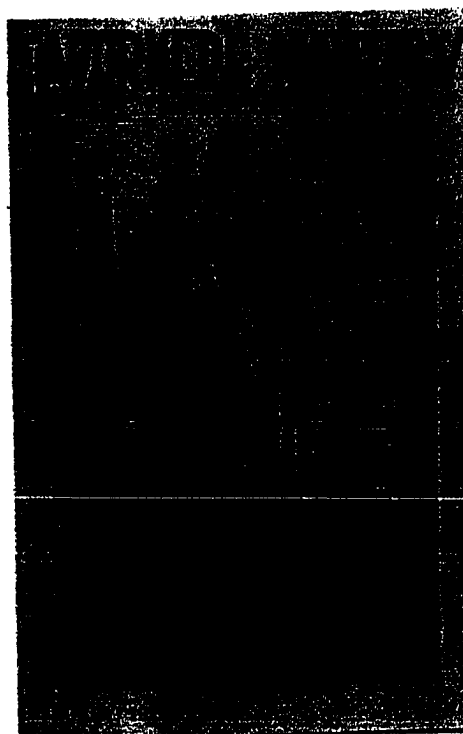
2.41
Iuri Pimenov
You Give Heavy Industry
Oil on canvas, 1927



2.42
Hugo Gellert
Steel Workers
The Liberator, cover, January 1924



2.43
 Vladimir Lebedev
 Untitled, used as cover
 of *The Workers Monthly*, January 1926



2.44
 Adolf Strakhov
 1870-1924 V. Ul'ianov (Lenin), 1924, used as
 cover of *The Workers Monthly*, January 1927



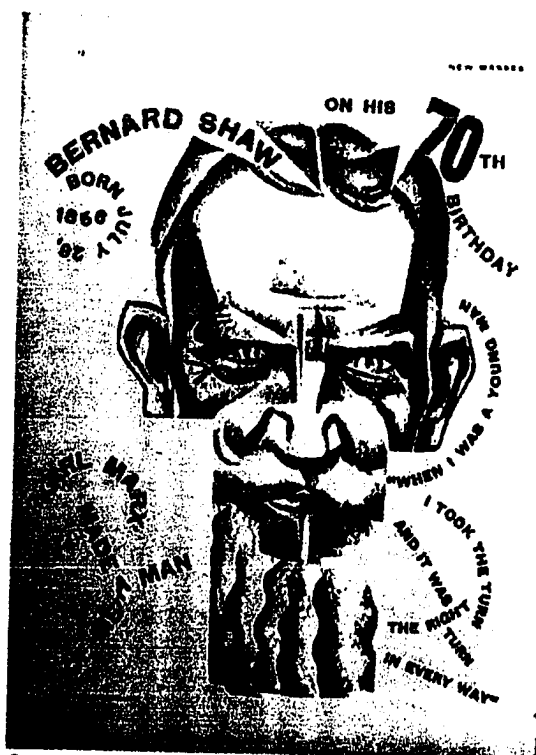
2.45
Hugo Gellert
Cover of *New Masses*
May 1926



2.46
Hugo Gellert
Vladimir Mayakovsky
Crayon on paper, 1925



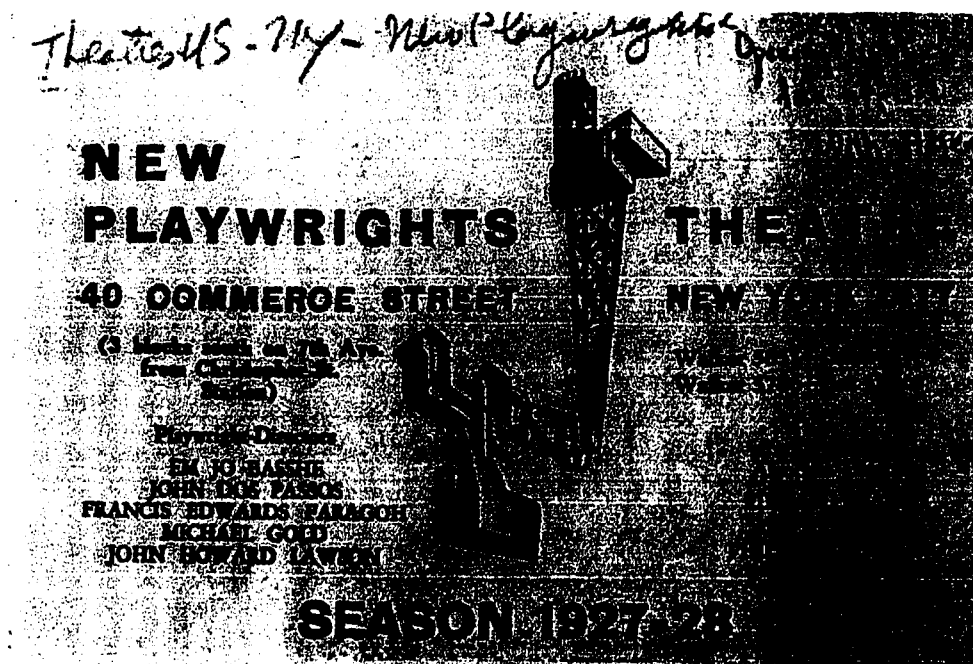
2.47
Vladimir Mayakovsky
Hugo Gellert
Medium unknown, 1925



2.48
Hugo Gellert
Bernard Shaw on his 70th Birthday,
in New Masses, September, 1926



2.49
Hugo Gellert
Poison (Mussolini),
In New Masses, February 1927



2.50

Louis Lozowick

Program for The New Playwrights Theatre production
of John Howard Lawson's *The International*, 1927



Incorporated

**52ND STREET THEATRE
306 WEST 52ND STREET
TELEPHONE COLUMBUS 3462**

2.51

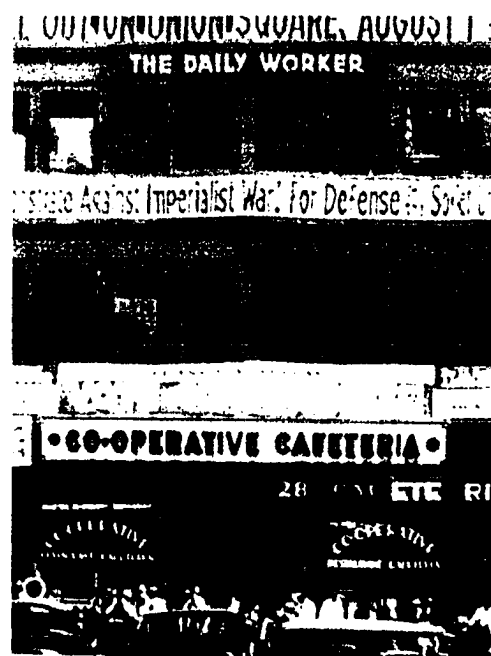
Hugo Gellert

Letterhead for New Playwrights Theater
c. 1927-1929

282



2.52
Hugo Gellert
Book jacket for Russian edition of
Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, c. 1927



2.53
Exterior, Proletcos Cooperative Cafeteria
Union Square, New York



2.54

Hugo Gellert
Strikers section, Proletcos Cooperative Cafeteria mural,
Casein on plaster, 1928, destroyed c. 1947-49



2.55

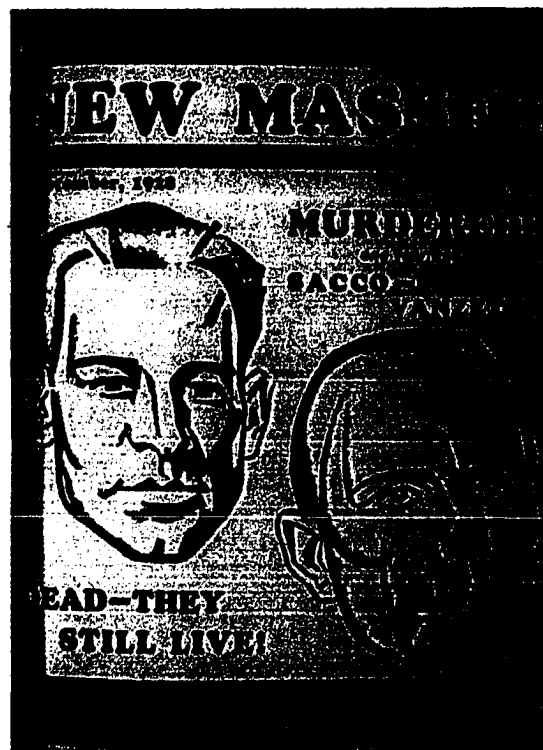
Hugo Gellert
Miners section, Proletcos Cooperative Cafeteria mural,
Casein on plaster, 1928, destroyed c. 1947-49



2.56

Hugo Gellert

Lenin, Proletcos Cooperative Cafeteria mural,
Casein on plaster, 1928, destroyed c. 1947-49



2.57

Hugo Gellert

Murdered One Year Ago, Sacco and Vanzetti
Cover of *New Masses*, September 1928



3.1
Hugo Gellert
Magyarország 1920-ban (Hungary 1920)
In Előre Kepes Folyóirat, December 1920



3.2
Janos Horvai
Kossuth, 1928
 Riverside Drive and 113th Street, New York



3.3

Hugo Gellert

How Dictator Horthy Made a Monument For Kossuth, The Lincoln of Hungary, In New Masses, April 1928



3.4

Anti-Horthy Demonstrators Arrested in Washington, DC
Gellert (with moustache), far left, Livia Gellert, center right
Washington Post, March 21, 1928



3.5
 Anti-Horthy League protest, New York, c. 1929, Gellert (with
 moustache), and Livia Gellert in front of doorway.



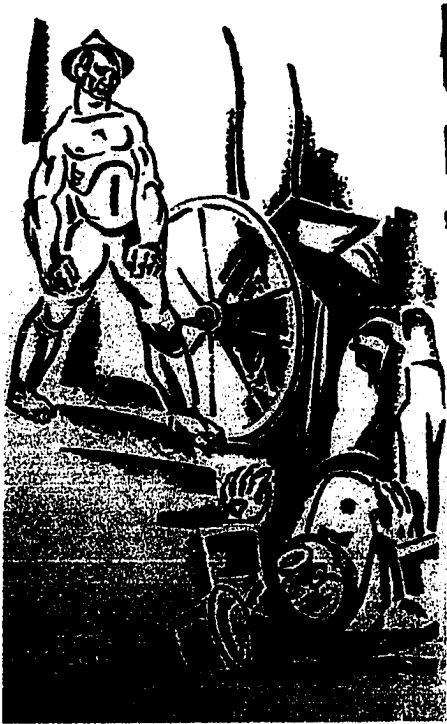
3.6
 Hugo Gellert
Tom Mooney, May 1, 1930



3.7
Louis Lozowick
Tanks #1
 Lithograph, 1929



3.8
Hugo Gellert
Milk For Miner's Children,
 in *New Pioneer*, December 1931



3.9
Hugo Gellert
"No Longer a Coolie," in
Literature of the World Revolution, 1931



3.10
Hugo Gellert
In the Land of Unemployment, in
Literature of the World Revolution, 1931



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26TH ST. & BROADWAY

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PHOTO LEAGUE
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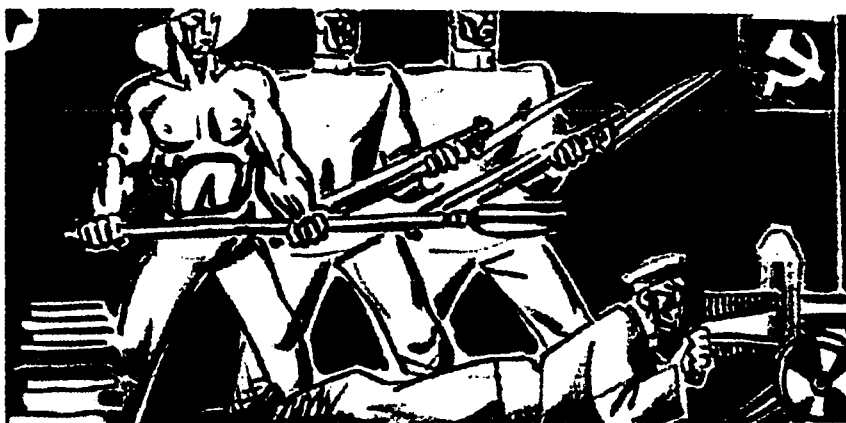


3.11

Hugo Gellert

Cannons or Tractors, c. 1930

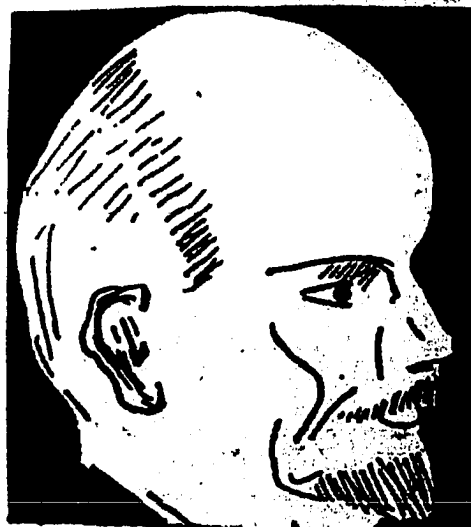
Collage, gouache and pencil



3.12-3.15
Hugo Gellert
Canons or Tractors (details)



3.16
 William Gropper
We Have Not Died in Vain, in
New Pioneer, September 1931



Our Great Leader—Lenin.
 Prize Winner Drawing by
 Josephine Samuelson

3.17
 Josephine Samuelson
Our Great Leader—Lenin,
 in *New Pioneer*, November 1931



3.18
Irving Reff
Untitled (Bill Worker and Red Pepper),
in *New Pioneer*, January 1932



3.19
Hugo Gellert
Cover of *New Pioneer*,
November 1932



3.20

Hugo Gellert

Law of Capitalist Accumulation, lithograph,
plate 52, from *Karl Marx' Capital in Pictures*,
1933, edition 133



3.21

Hugo Gellert

Gastonia, in *New Masses*,
November 1929

295



3.22

Hugo Gellert

The Working Day, Limits of the Working Day,
lithograph, plate 34 from *Karl Marx' Capital in
Pictures*, 1933, edition of 133

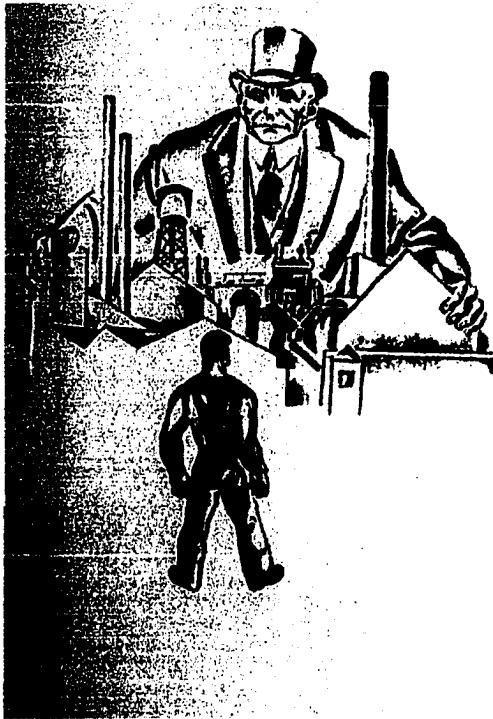


3.23

Hugo Gellert

Primary Accumulation, lithograph,
plate 9 from *Karl Marx' Capital in
Pictures*, 1933, edition of 133

296



3.24
Hugo Gellert
Primary Accumulation, lithograph,
plate 3 from Karl Marx' *Capital in*
Pictures, 1933, edition of 133



3.25
Hugo Gellert
Primary Accumulation, lithograph,
plate 19 from Karl Marx' *Capital in*
Pictures, 1933, edition of 133



3.26
Hugo Gellert
Machinery and Large Scale Industry,
lithograph, plate 49 from Karl Marx'
Capital in Pictures, 1933, edition of 133



3.27
Hugo Gellert
Primary Accumulation, lithograph,
plate 14 from *Karl Marx' Capital in*
Pictures, 1933, edition of 133



3.28
Hugo Gellert
Law of Capitalist Accumulation,
lithograph, plate 53 from *Karl Marx'*
Capital in Pictures, 1933, edition of 133



3.29
Hugo Gellert
Primary Accumulation, lithograph, plate 2
from *Karl Marx' Capital in Pictures*,
1933, edition 133

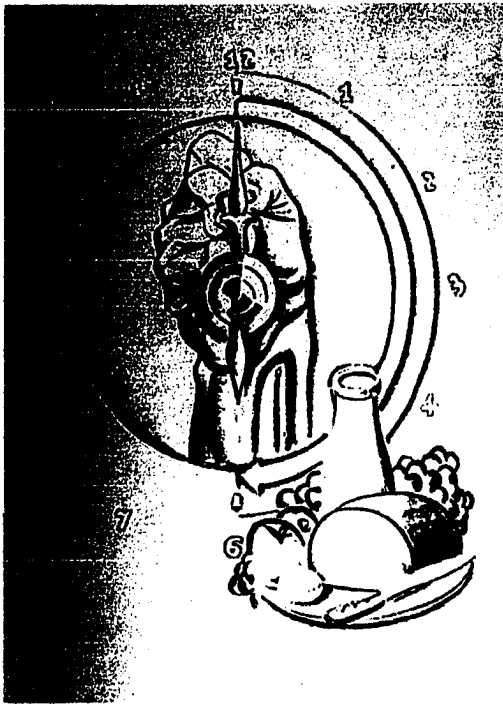


3.30
Hugo Gellert
Primary Accumulation, lithograph, plate 16
from *Karl Marx' Capital in Pictures*,
1933, edition 133

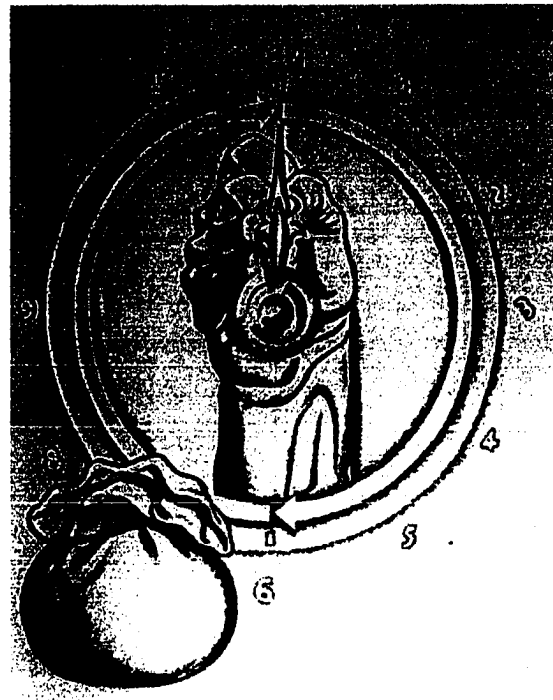


3.31
Hugo Gellert
Primary Accumulation, lithograph,
plate 13 from *Karl Marx' Capital*
in Pictures, 1933, edition of 133

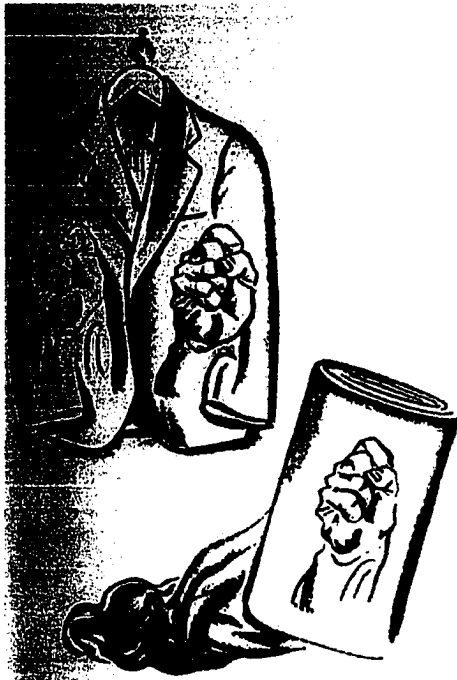
300



3.32
Hugo Gellert
The Production of Surplus Value, lithograph,
plate 30 from *Karl Marx' Capital in Pictures*,
1933, edition of 133



3.33
Hugo Gellert
The Production of Surplus Value, lithograph,
plate 31 from *Karl Marx' Capital in Pictures*,
1933, edition of 133



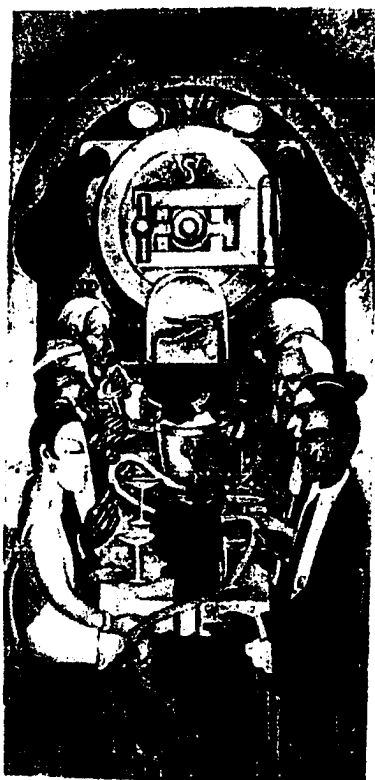
3.34
Hugo Gellert
Commodities, lithograph, plate 23
from *Karl Marx' Capital in Pictures*,
1933, edition of 133



Gasarbeiter gegen neuen Lohnabbau

Sie wollen sich den Lohnabbau von 1 Pfennig am 1. Januar nicht gefallen lassen — Das Gland der Gasarbeiter in Berlin

3.35
Hugo Gellert
Gas House Workers,
in *Rote Fahne* (Red Flag),
December 15, 1932



3.36
 Diego Rivera
Wall Street Banquet, 1926
 Fresco, *Court of the Fiestas*,
 Secretaría de Educación
 Pública, Mexico City



3.37
"Will Art be Touched in Pink?",
San Francisco Chronicle,
 September 25, 1930

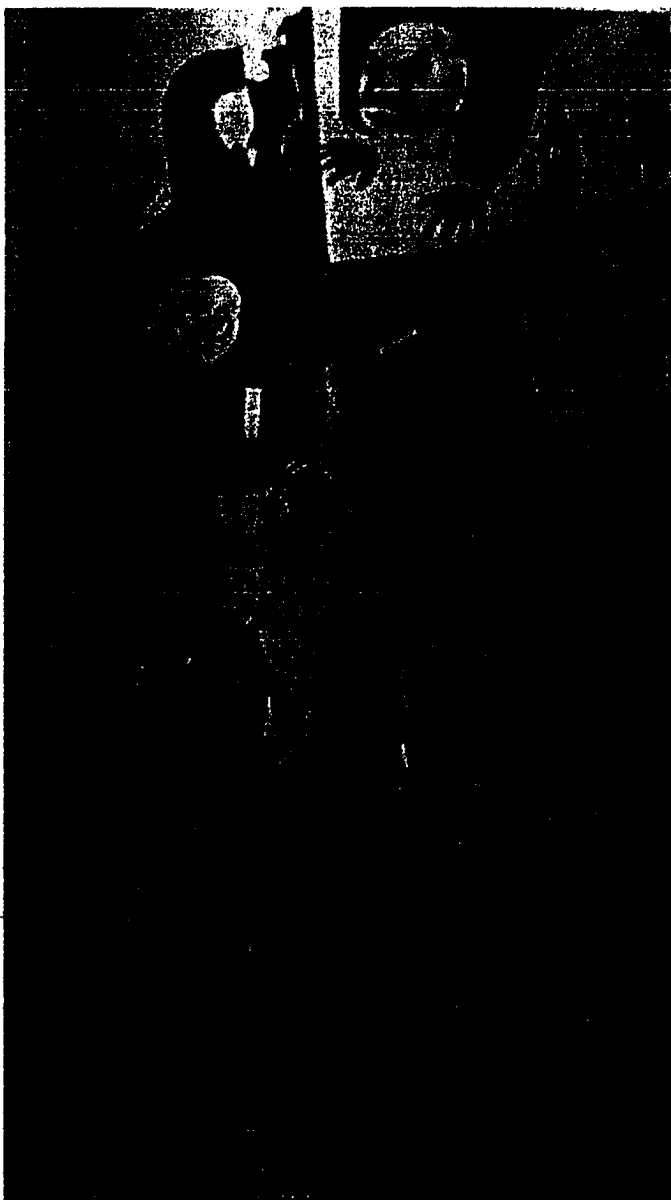


3.38

Hugo Gellert

Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together (Last Defenses of Capitalism), chalk on celotex and plaster, 1932.

The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian—
Florida International University



3.39

William Gropper

The Writing on the Wall, 1932 (lost),
in *New Masses*, June 1932



3.40

Ben Shahn

The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti,
tempera on canvas, 1931-32. Collection of The
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



3.41

Hugo Gellert

Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together (Last Defenses of Capitalism) (first version), chalk on celotex and plaster, 1932.

The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian—
Florida International University



3.42

Diego Rivera

Man at the Crossroads (Lenin detail)

fresco, RCA Building, Rockefeller Center,
New York, unfinished (destroyed 1934),



3.43
 Eugene Schoen
 Center Theater lobby
 Rockefeller Center, 1932 (destroyed 1954)



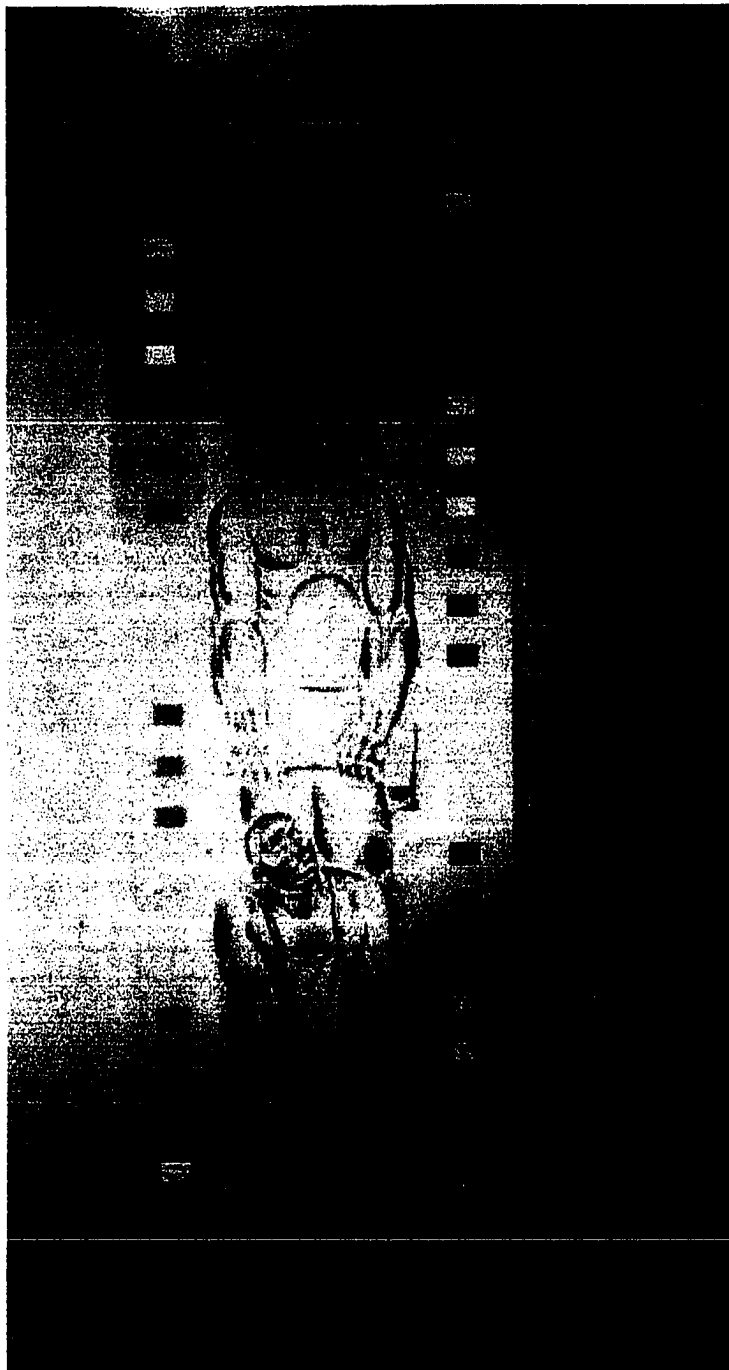
3.44
 Eugene Schoen
 Center Theater, Ladies Lounge, featuring an
 etched glass mural by Maurice Heaton
 1932 (destroyed 1954)



3.45
Eugene Schoen
Center Theater, Men's Lounge, featuring a
photo-mural by Edward Steichen, 1932
(destroyed 1954)



3.46
Eugene Schoen
Center Theater Second Mezzanine Lounge, featuring
a mural by Hugo Gellert, 1932 (destroyed 1954)



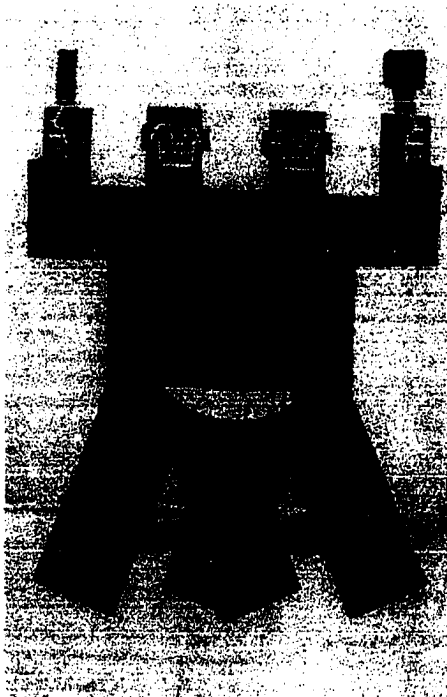
3.47
Hugo Gellert seated next to his Center Theater mural,
c. 1932



4.1
Hugo Gellert
Patronage, lithograph from
Comrade Gulliver, 1935



4.2
 Hugo Gellert, third from right, Chairman of the Artists' Committee of
 Action addressing a crowd at City Hall, May 9, 1934. Abraham Walkowitz
 and Alfred Stieglitz are to Gellert's left, in *Art Front*, November 1934.



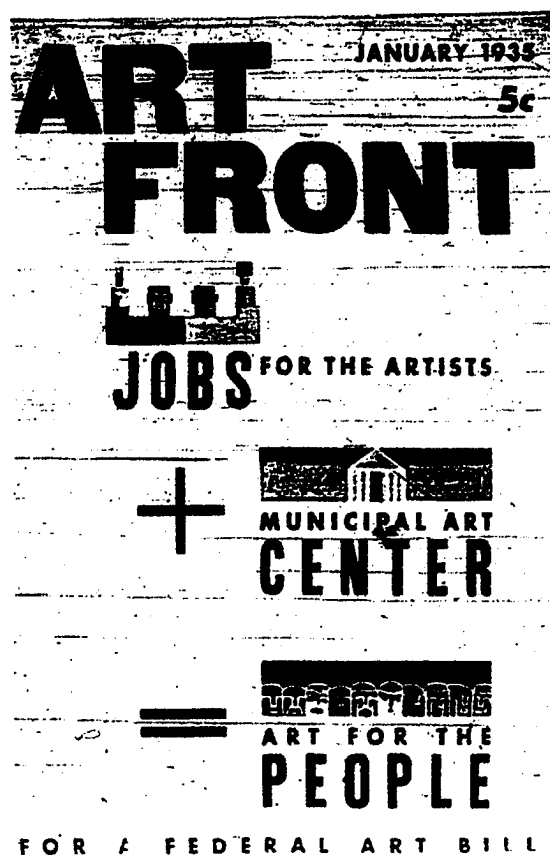
4.3
Hugo Gellert
Artists' Committee of Action emblem,
Art Front, November 1934



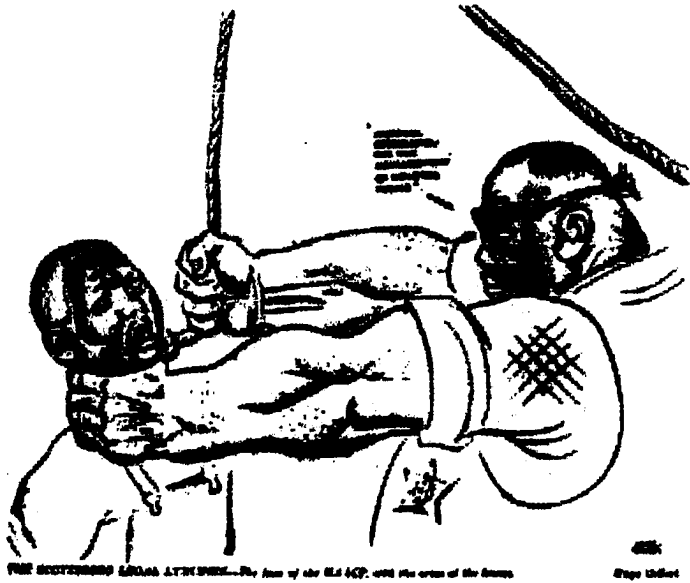
4.4
Hugo Gellert
Cover of *New Masses*
November 1926



4.5
Hugo Gellert
Masthead illustration
Art Front, November 1934



4.6
Hugo Gellert
Art Front cover,
January 1935



4.7
Hugo Gellert
Scottsboro Legal Lynching,
New Masses, February 1932



4.8
Hugo Gellert
See the Soviet Union in the Making,
Poster, c. 1932

VOTE COMMUNIST

FOR A WORKERS
AND FARMERS
GOVERNMENT

FOR THE
PARTY OF
THE CLASS
STRUGGLE

Against
Imperialist
War

Down with
Race
Oppression

For the
Recognition
and Defense
of the
Soviet Union

Against Capitalism
For Communism

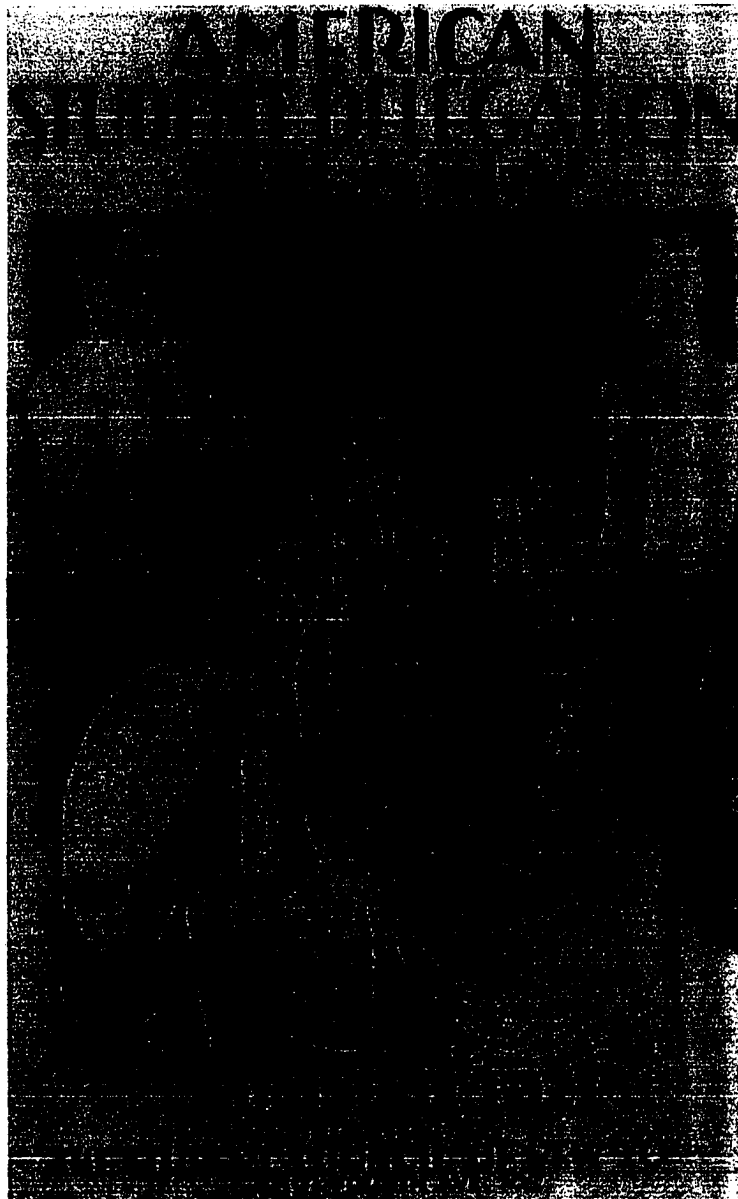
For President
Wm. Z. Foster

For Vice-President
Ben. Gitlow

Vote for
the Candidates
of the
Workers
(Communist)
Party



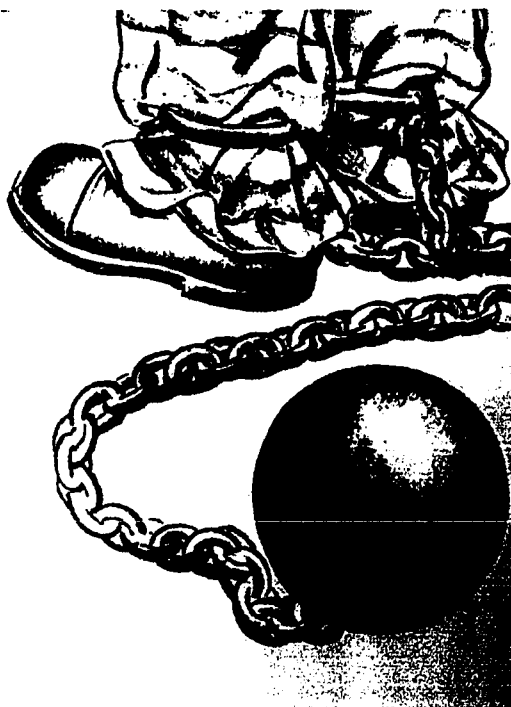
4.9
Hugo Gellert
Vote Communist
Poster, 1928



4.10
Hugo Gellert
American Student Delegation to Russia,
Poster, 1927



4.11
Hugo Gellert
A Stake in the Commonwealth, lithograph
from *Comrade Gulliver*, 1935



4.12
Hugo Gellert
Free Labor, lithograph
from *Comrade Gulliver*, 1935



4.13
Hugo Gellert
Higher Mathematics, lithograph
from *Comrade Gulliver*, 1935

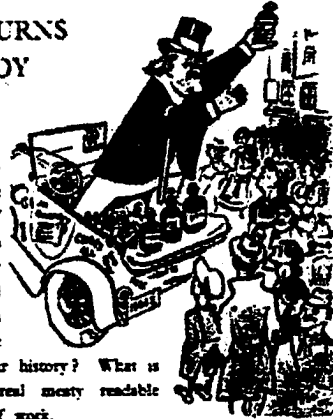


4.14
Hugo Gellert
By Products, lithograph
from *Comrade Gulliver*, 1935

THE ROOSEVELT ILLUSION

by EMILE BURNS
and F. M. ROY

After the "Prosperity" myth comes the Roosevelt "balloon." The illusion lies in thinking that any solution can be found by his methods. In whose interest are they? What is their history? What is their effect? A real meaty readable documented piece of work.



4.15

William Gropper
The Roosevelt Illusion,
pamphlet cover, 1934



4.16

Hugo Gellert
The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,
lithograph from *Comrade Gulliver*, 1935



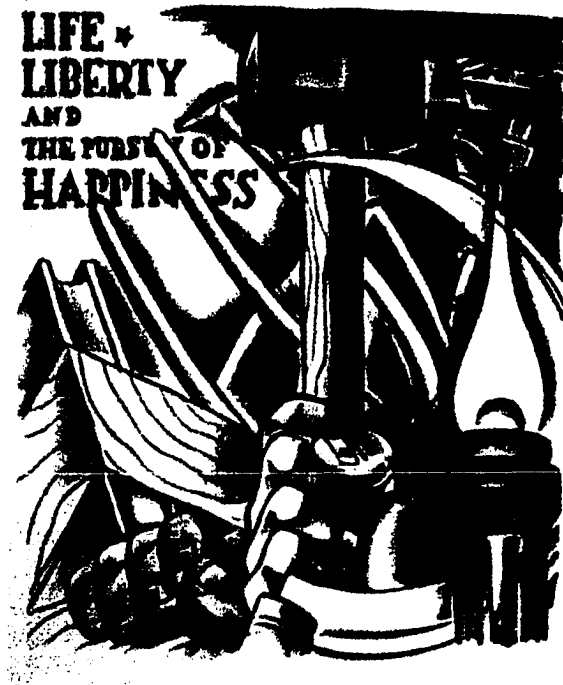
4.17
Hugo Gellert
Art News, lithograph from
Comrade Gulliver, 1935



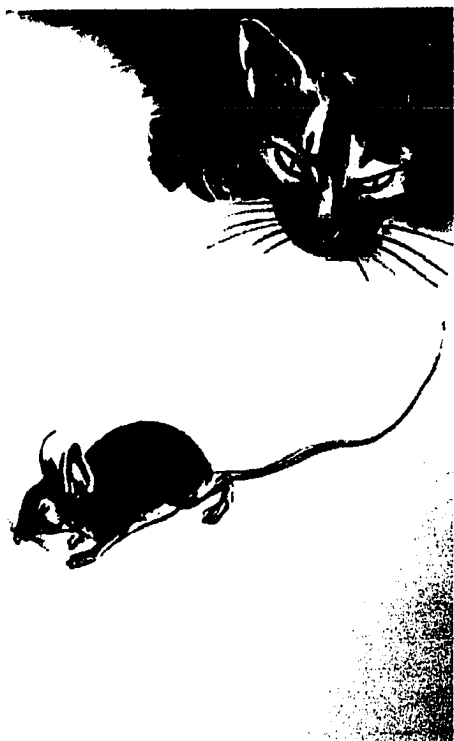
4.18
William Gropper
Hugo Gellert, from *William Gropper
Sees the American Artists' Congress*,
New Masses, February 1936



4.19
Hugo Gellert
*Fascism, War and the Gullible (The Bird
Catcher and the Lark)*, lithograph
from *Aesop Said So*, 1936



4.20
Hugo Gellert
*The Farmer-Labor Party,
(The Bundle of Sticks)*, lithograph
from *Aesop Said So*, 1936



4.21
Hugo Gellert
Life, Liberty..., lithograph from
Comrade Gulliver, 1935



4.22
Hugo Gellert
And the Pursuit of Happiness,
lithograph from *Comrade Gulliver*, 1935



4.23
Hugo Gellert
Roosevelt and His Two Wives
(The Man With Two Wives),
lithograph from *Aesop Said So*, 1936



4.24
Hugo Gellert
Hearst and Columbia (The Garbage
Man and the Laundress),
lithograph from *Aesop Said So*



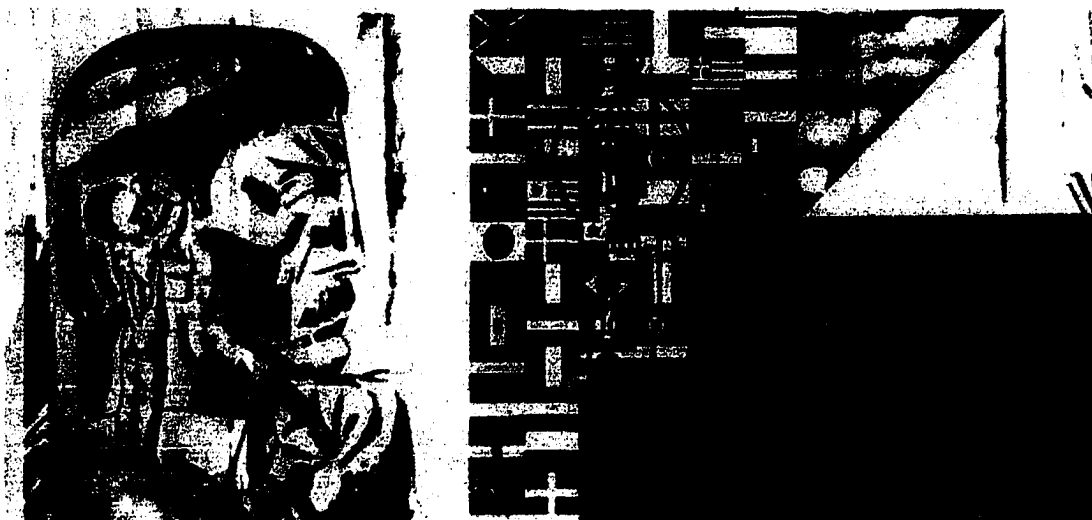
4.25
William Siegel
Hearst, Counterfeit American,
pamphlet cover, 1936



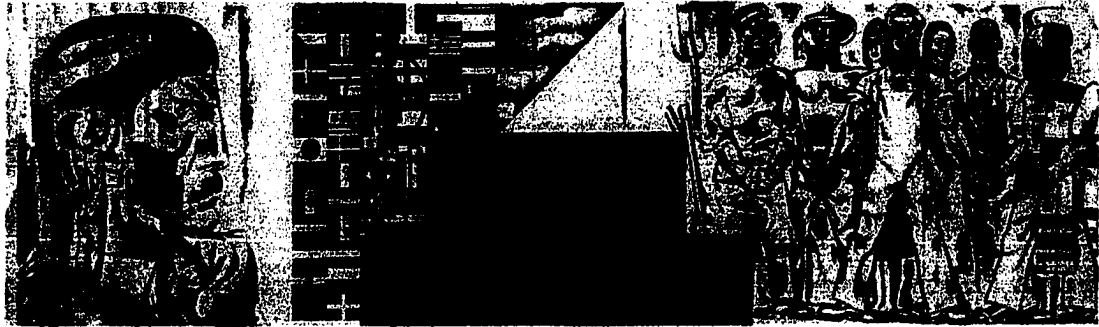
4.26
Hugo Gellert
Pieces of Silver, lithograph
From *Aesop Said So*, 1936



4.27
Hugo Gellert
Labor, mural study, 1937



4.28
Hugo Gellert
Communications Building Mural (detail)
New York World's Fair, 1939-1940



4.29
Hugo Gellert
Communications Building Mural
New York World's Fair 1939-1940



5.1
Hugo Gellert
Paul Robeson, lithograph
Exhibited in *American Art Today*,
New York World's Fair, 1939-1940

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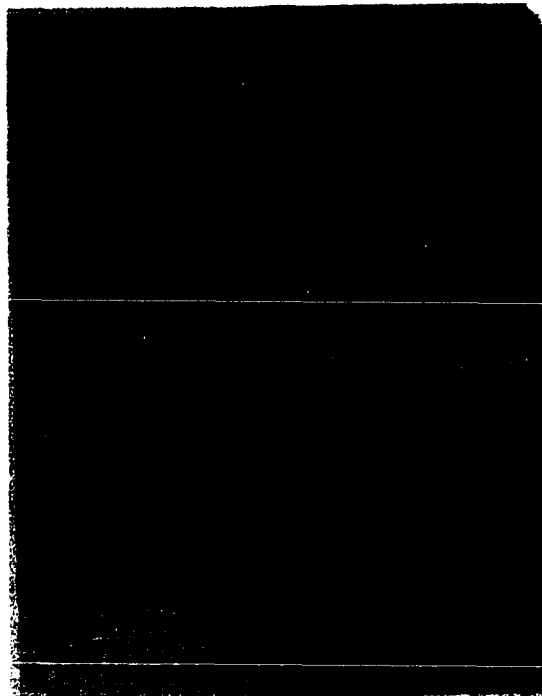


HUGO
GELLERT

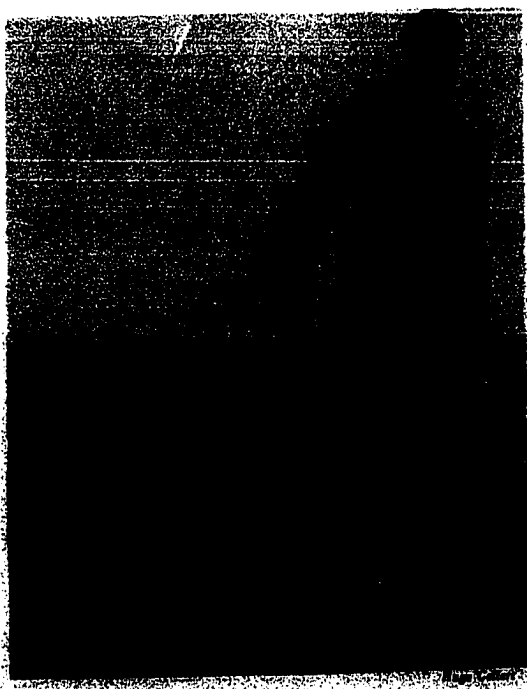
Paul Robeson

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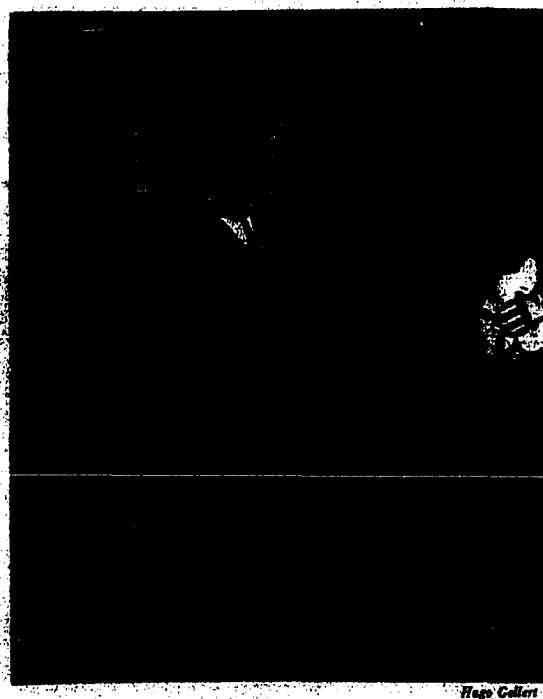
5.2
Hugo Gellert
Paul Robeson
The New Yorker,
September 29, 1928



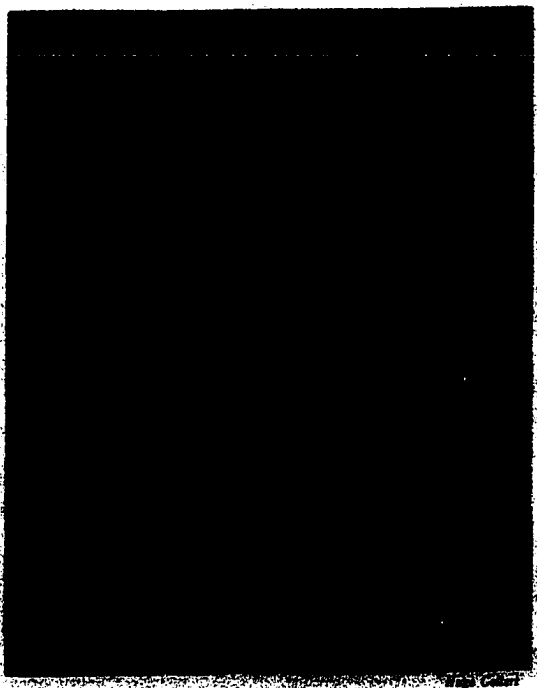
5.3
Hugo Gellert
Free Man's Duties 1
screenprint, from *Century of
the Common Man*, 1943



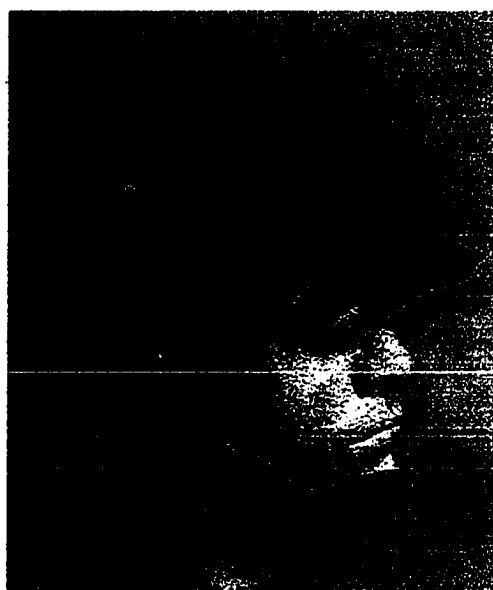
5.4
Hugo Gellert
Free Man's Duties 2
screenprint, from *Century of*
The Common Man, 1943



5.5
Hugo Gellert
Fighting with all our Might
screenprint, from *Century*
of the Common Man, 1943



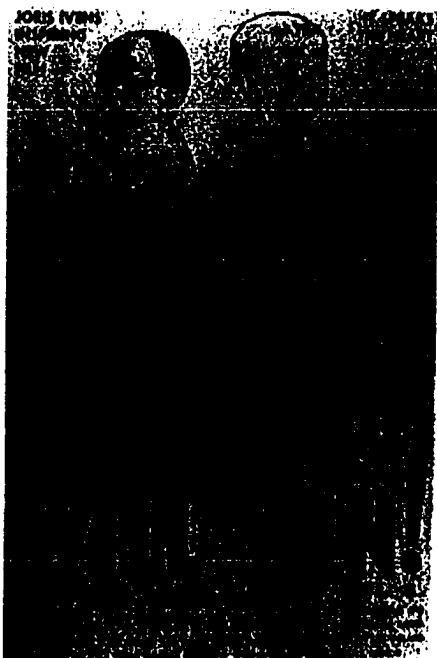
5.6
Hugo Gellert
Free Man's Duties 3
screenprint, from *Century of*
The Common Man, 1943



5.7
World War Two era
American G.I. helmet



5.8
World War Two era
Soviet helmet



5.9
Hugo Gellert
Poster for Jores Ivers'
Peace Will Win!, 1951



5.10
Hugo Gellert
Louis Weinstock's Story
Pamphlet cover, c. 1951



5.11
Hugo Gellert
Stalin
Masses and Mainstream cover
April 1953

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