

**Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2002, 357 pp., 10 black-and-white, 10 colour illus., \$50 U.S.**

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## Book Reviews

### Comptes-rendus de livres

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Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2002, 357 pp., 10 black-and-white, 10 colour illus., \$50 U.S.

The field of twentieth-century American art history has been undergoing revision for the past quarter century. General survey histories written in the 1960s at the height of formalist abstraction slighted the predominantly realist art of the Depression era: authors tended to denigrate it by quoting dismissive remarks such as Arshile Gorky's "poor art for poor people," or, if they treated the socially concerned art somewhat sympathetically, they either ignored or glossed over the political context.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, a spate of publications by "new left" academics in the United States have coincided in general with the shifts in art history toward contextual rather than stylistic studies. In Britain, a generation of Marxist art historians led by T.J. Clark also took a strong interest in American art and criticism. This group has been associated with the *Oxford Art Journal*, and Andrew Hemingway's *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* is indicative of the rigorous scholarship that characterizes that journal. Although, collectively, recent surveys and monographs provide a substantial coverage of left-wing American art from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s, Hemingway not only thoroughly summarizes the current research, but adds significant, previously unpublished material to provide a dense, richly textured account.<sup>2</sup> The product of over a decade of research and writing, the treatment of the subject is exhaustive, and the book will remain an authoritative source on American left-wing art for the foreseeable future. In his careful summaries of political, institutional, and intellectual contexts, Hemingway provides a valuable reference source. The book is also beautifully produced and includes a significant number of previously unpublished or lesser-known images, increasing its value as a resource.

The subject Hemingway tackles is an especially daunting one. The thirty years from 1926–56 were marked by continual upheaval, and artists whose careers fall into that span were likely to change their political allegiances with some frequency as the Depression gave way to World War II and, finally, the Cold War. Add to this the fact that the Left was often more divided against itself than it was united in opposition to capitalism and fascism, and you have a story that is written on constantly shifting sands. Hemingway teases out the buried threads that have made the relationships between left-wing art, Marxist theory, and radical politics so difficult to trace, but in laying out all of the evidence for the reader, his thoroughness sometimes defeats clarity. Just as Communist Party members expended much valuable energy in arguing over the correct "Party line,"

Hemingway is so intent on correcting other scholars' mistakes, omissions, and misinterpretations that he neglects to clarify the larger picture for the reader. One might argue that this book is more about contemporary scholarly disputes than it is about the period under discussion.

Because the book is so densely written and its main threads so difficult to follow, I will not attempt to summarize its argument; rather, this review will be confined to a few general observations and reservations. The text is divided into three parts: "Revolutionary Art: The CPUSA and the Arts in the Third Period"; "The Popular Front and the Transition to 'People's Art'"; and "From the Grand Alliance to Oblivion." Part one is devoted to the early 1930s, and is particularly valuable for its account of the development of the magazine *The New Masses* and the exhibitions of the John Reed Clubs. Hemingway dives right into the discussion, with little background on the formation of American Communism or on the changing policies in the Stalinist USSR. As a result, even the chapter heading, "The CPUSA ... in the Third Period," is confusing, as the reader is not reminded that 1929 saw the abolition of individual farming and the obliteration of the kulaks as a class in the USSR. The term refers to Russian history, not American history.

The definition of key terms is frequently insufficient throughout this text. Hemingway often uses Marxism and Communism in the same sentence, and although the enormous difference between the two is unquestionably obvious to the writer, the distinction begins to collapse in the reader's mind. For instance, Hemingway confesses early on that "the implications of Marxism for both artistic practice and aesthetics are far from straightforward and the CPUSA could offer little substantive guidance regarding either" (p. 8). Further, Hemingway does not provide the basic historical information about the formation of the U.S. Communist Party nor, more crucially, does he examine its ramifications for Communist-influenced art in the U.S. Although he states that the Cultural Revolution in the USSR had "considerable repercussions in the American Communist Movement" (p. 29), Hemingway only provides the briefest of descriptions, involving "a return to the spirit of the civil war years ... and a use of military-style slogans reminiscent of that time." The ramifications of this, beyond sloganeering, are unclear. Eschewing this broader context, Hemingway instead provides a minutely detailed account of the often shifting positions of left-leaning and Communist artists. Unfortunately, since, as Hemingway admits, it is often difficult to identify who was a Communist, he struggles to identify the "revolutionary" aspects of American art during this "Third" period and those to follow.

Compounding the problem are the continuing changes in the American political landscape, which Hemingway charts in

detail. (Because Americans seem incapable of learning their own history, this is a particularly valuable aspect of his text.) In tracing the development of left art during the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, Hemingway must try to draw distinctions between work done on various government projects (the Treasury's Section of Fine Arts versus the WPA's Federal Art Project, for instance), as well as work done for radical publications such as the *Daily Worker*, the *New Masses*, and *Masses and Mainstream*. His task is complicated by the fact that the dominant genre during this period was realism, and he must raise anew the question posed in every text on this period: in what ways did left artists develop a distinctive practice that set them apart from Regionalists such as Thomas Hart Benton or Urban Realists such as Reginald Marsh? Because during the Depression many of these artists were supported on projects initiated by the U.S. government, the radical artist with hopes for proletarian rather than corporate rule had little room in which to maneuver. If on the one hand, Communist Party policy had for political reasons become less dogmatic and more inclusive in the mid-to-late 1930s, with the rise of the Popular Front against Fascism, on the other hand, Communist artists or sympathizers could not put revolutionary messages on public walls or in mainstream museums such as the Whitney. In both locations, art by radicals was muffled either through self-censorship or by its placement near conservative work.

Hemingway must strain in order to argue that "high art" in this era could contain radical messages, especially since the clichéd image of the heroic male worker, seen most famously in William Gropper's *Construction of a Dam* (1938–39) for the Department of the Interior, often de-emphasized both race and class struggles. This point has been made variously by Barbara Melosh as well as by Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, and Hemingway's more nuanced arguments do not make the artworks themselves more convincing as expressions of the artists' Communist convictions. Nonetheless, by discussing somewhat lesser known figures such as Chicagoans Edgar Britton, Edward Millman, and Mitchell Siporin, whose murals for the St Louis Post Office Hemingway compares unfavourably and reasonably convincingly to Thomas Hart Benton's murals for the Missouri state capitol in Jefferson City, the reader can concede that some government-sponsored art contains more radical messages than it appears to initially.

However, other arguments are less convincing. For example, his chapter "Defining Revolutionary Art" in fact leads the reader to the conclusion that no such definition is possible. Is a painting by Joe Jones, who is identified, along with Louis Lozowick, as a committed Communist, truly "revolutionary" or an example of (reactionary) regionalism? In discussing Jones's painting *Wheat* (1934), Hemingway summarizes the argument of *New Masses* critic Stephen Alexander that Jones is an "anti-

Regionalist," but acknowledges that in this instance the differences are subtle. In attempting to confirm Alexander's claims, Hemingway piles on one speculation after another:

Not only does this [painting] suggest a kind of modern mechanized agriculture which never intrudes into Wood's Iowa or Curry's Kansas imagery, but one need only recall the extraordinary description of tractor power in chapter five of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) or the dramatic footage of Pare Lorentz's 1936 film *The Plow That Broke the Plains* to realize how redolent such an image could be of a whole process of technological change and social dislocation (It could also, of course, symbolize the promise of collectivized agriculture, as in photographs of Soviet Mechanized harvesters in *The Daily Worker*). ... this scene is not simply a rural idyll but is pregnant with a different order of things (p. 37).

Can this placid painting really be both a predecessor of key works of American Social Realism as well as an homage to Russian Socialist Realism's productive farmer? I would suggest neither. This peaceful scene of a lone farmer harvesting a rich field of wheat certainly would have been redolent in the Dust Bowl years, but of a fruitful past, not of contemporary social dislocation due to mechanization. As for Soviet style collectivization, we would at the very least need more than one farmer in the scene.<sup>3</sup> In his seminal lecture critiquing the New Deal arts projects, "The Public Use of Art" (1936), Meyer Schapiro, the preeminent Marxist critic in the 1930s, argued that naïve and sentimental "idylls of farm and factory" were all that were possible when art was commissioned by a capitalist government or shown in an elitist institution;<sup>4</sup> Jones's work, shown in the Whitney Museum's annual of 1934, confirms Schapiro's argument, not Hemingway's.

On the other hand, the author's speculations can at other times make inspired, if unverifiable connections. Hemingway suggests that Alice Neel's powerful "proletarian" portrait of Communist activist Pat Whalen (1935), which graces the cover of the book, may have been shown in an exhibition co-sponsored by The Artists Group and the Marine Workers Committee and held at the New School for Social Research in 1937. Although it is listed as *Waterfront Worker*, it does not seem much of a stretch to identify the painting as the portrait of Whalen, and if his guess is accurate, Hemingway is able to place Neel in the center of Communist activist art in the later 1930s, rather than on the periphery where she is usually placed. Although I have written on Neel, I did not know about this exhibition, and the speculation here is very intriguing. In sum, throughout this book, scrupulous scholarship expands our knowledge of this era, while the historical narrative alternates between spurious and inspired arguments.

Inexplicably, in his discussion of the government's mural and easel projects, the one painter whom introductory art students could identify as a social artist, Ben Shahn, is mentioned only in passing in the text, tagged dismissively as an independent left liberal. This is in fact the case, but the title of Hemingway's book is *Artists on the Left* and Shahn's importance to the movement remains central. Hemingway does provide a more extended discussion of the work of his wife, Bernarda Bryson Shahn, a true radical. However, her genuine contribution to the art of the Far Left in the 1930s is undercut by the fact that there is no reproduction of her work! Moreover, the Urban Realist paintings of Raphael and Isaac Soyer, who were never committed Communists, are highlighted, even though it takes an enormous stretch to find more than the barest hint of radical content in their paintings. He discusses the career of Charles White in detail, but omits entirely the contribution of White's first wife, Elizabeth Catlett,<sup>5</sup> despite Hemingway's argument that sculpture is as radical as painting during this period. The radical painter Marion Greenwood is also omitted, and so it falls to Alice Neel (and to a lesser extent Elizabeth Olds) to represent the considerable contribution made by women to social art in this era. Hemingway argues that current scholarship has skewed the history of left art because so much of it has concerned women and blacks, who are discussed in terms of identity politics rather than left politics in general.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, I am biased, but I have found that current scholarship is quite careful to trace the ways in which the radical political affiliations of women and people of colour influenced their art.<sup>7</sup>

Hemingway is more generous to women critics. In his discussion of Elizabeth McCausland and Charmion von Wiegand, however, he fails to credit the pathbreaking work on these critics found in Susan Platt's *Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism – Marxism – Americanism* (1999), on which his discussion is based. Moreover, by eliminating Ben Shahn from the book, he eliminates important scholarship by women art historians, notably Frances Pohl and Laura Katzman.<sup>8</sup> The groundbreaking book on left art from the Depression era, Cecile Whiting's *Antifascism in American Art*, like *Artists on the Left*, also published by Yale University Press (1989), is dismissed in a footnote as "erroneous in important respects." In his review of her book for the *Oxford Art Journal* he argued that her "overall project is a misconceived one. Her key term 'antifascism' is used to describe a wide spectrum of political positions, and blurs over crucial distinctions between socialist, liberal, and populist politics."<sup>9</sup> But Hemingway himself trips over these distinctions, and in writing about artists in the Communist Movement must include fellow travellers of many differing stripes, hence his title, *Artists on the Left*. Despite the tightness of his weave, large gaps remain between theory, politics, and artistic expression.

Finally, Hemingway confesses that left wing art is a story of

defeat.<sup>10</sup> In his last chapter, he quotes writer Charles Humboldt (editor of *Art Front* and later *Mainstream*), who expresses feelings of "utter powerlessness," a sentiment certainly shared by many on the Left today. Hemingway fails to assess the specific strengths of left art that might have relevance to our current reactionary climate, a time when, as he laments, we are facing "the death of all socialist ideals" (p. 3). Three hundred and fifty-seven pages are a lot to read when the tale is one of impotence. In a book so cluttered with minutiae as to obscure "the story" the author wants to tell, the genuine passion that motivated the Left for three decades is smothered completely. One is left with the impression that the author has little respect for the artists' genuine accomplishments. And so, the past remains the past, dead to the present. According to Walter Benjamin, "Historical materialism conceives historical understanding as an after-life of that which is understood, whose pulse can still be felt in the present."<sup>11</sup> There is no life after death here.

Perhaps despite the exhaustiveness of this study, there is yet another story to be told, one that was not limited to "high artists," that is, painters (plus a few printmakers and sculptors), but rather includes the workers that compiled the Index of American Design, the activists who worked at community centers, and the powerful political cartoonists. It is hardly surprising that neither painting nor the more democratic medium of printmaking were able to generate a new class consciousness or even tap into an existing one. To cite "The Public Use of Art" once again, Meyer Schapiro suggested that painting was an inappropriate medium for "revolutionary" or proletarian art, as the masses did not have the education to appreciate or understand work in that medium. He suggested instead that animated cartoons or films would be more appropriate vehicles for raising class consciousness. By including a wide range of media in a book cited admiringly by Hemingway, Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front* is able to reach a more optimistic conclusion about the relationship between art and politics. Referring specifically to the Popular Front, Denning argues that the work of left artists and writers represented:

a laboring of culture itself: the assertion of the dignity and beauty of working-class arts and entertainment; the alliance between unions of industrial workers and unions of artists; the defense of arts and crafts in the face of commercial exploitation; and the profound sense that the dialectic between work and art, labor and beauty, was fundamental to human culture.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to Hemingway's conclusion that "without a vital counter-hegemonic culture with some prospect of a mass base, there were no real possibilities for a vital Communist art" in the United States (p. 280), Denning concludes that despite

its failures, left art from the middle years of the century can provide a “starting point” for contemporary efforts. For Denning, the past still has a pulse.

I would argue that a brighter history of this period would require a redefinition of what counts as left-wing art. Like all mainstream art history, this book identifies “art” primarily with “painting.” But perhaps the most important works of Gropper, Jones, White, and others were their posters and cartoons. Perhaps with a shift in emphasis toward their “lesser” work, it might be possible to demonstrate that the convictions of left cultural workers from the 1930s to the 1950s did make a difference and can provide a working model for activist artists today.

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#### Notes

- 1 The most obvious case in point is Barbara Rose, *American Art of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1975); or Sam Hunter, *American Art of the 20th Century* (New York, 1972). Sadly, this is also true of more recent surveys as well, for instance, Erica Doss, *Twentieth Century American Art* (Oxford, 2002).
- 2 Hemingway’s “Select Bibliography” cites Patricia Hills, et al., *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Painting of the 1930s* (Boston, Mass., 1983); Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago, 1991); Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: the Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York, 1996); Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia, 1984); as well as standards by Francis V. O’Connor, *A New Deal for Art* (Washington, 1972) and *Art for the Millions* (Greenwich, Conn., 1973); and David Shapiro, *Art As A Weapon* (New York, 1973).
- 3 Park and Markowitz make this point in their discussion of another of Jones’s threshing scenes, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*, 158.
- 4 See Andrew Hemingway’s own outstanding article on Schapiro’s politics and his criticism: “Meyer Schapiro and Marxism in the 1930s,” *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no.1 (1994), 13–29.
- 5 See Melanie Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle, 2000).
- 6 Hemingway, “Epilogue,” 281. Editors note: On Marion Greenwood, see Catherine Mackenzie, “Place Really Does Matter: Marion Greenwood’s 1947 ‘China’ Exhibition,” *RACAR* XXV, 1–2 (1998).
- 7 For Neel, see my *Pictures of People: Alice Neel’s American Portrait Gallery* (Hanover, NH, 1998); and Susan Rosenberg, “People as Evidence,” in Ann Temkin, ed., *Alice Neel*, exh. cat., Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia, 2000).
- 8 Frances Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947–1954* (Austin, 1989). Deborah Martin Kao, Laura Katzman, and Jenna Webster, *Ben Shahn’s New York: The Photography of Modern Times*, (Cambridge, MA, 2000). Hemingway also laments the fact that a new book on William Gropper was not available at the time of his writing, when an important dissertation by Norma Steinberg, “William Gropper: Art and Censorship from the 1930s to the Cold War Era,” was completed at Boston University in 1994.
- 9 Andrew Hemingway, “Fictional Unities: ‘Antifascism’ and ‘Antifascist Art’ in 30s America,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 1, (1991), 107–17.
- 10 Hemingway, “Epilogue,” *Artists on the Left*, 280.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian” (1928), *One Way Street and Other Writings*, (London, 1979), 352. Hemingway states that this is the best essay ever written on historical materialism.
- 12 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1997), 462.

Joan B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2001, 254 pp., 60 black-and-white illus., \$41.50 U.S.

In *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France*, Joan B. Landes, a historian, or as she calls herself, a “cultural archaeologist” (p. 23), focuses on the gender politics of popular imagery created during the French Revolution. As France changed politically from monarchy to constitutional monarchy and then to republic, so artists constructed images that would support the redefinition of nation as a popular sovereign body. Intermeshed with this political change was the altered position of women, which shifted from one of power in the *ancien régime* within the public sphere of the salon and court into the public arena of the street and parliament during the Revolution and subsequently to a relegation to the

private space of the family. As this trajectory is traced, Landes offers a complex analysis of women’s relationships to the numerous female visual personifications of republican values, such as the Republic, Liberty, and Equality, arguing that “the exclusion of women from the practice of revolution and their inclusion in representation reaffirmed the masquerade of equality within the masculine republic” (p. 22). Equally, Landes explores the impact that various female allegorical figures might have had on the behaviour of Revolutionary male citizens. Landes is “chiefly concerned with the role played by images of the female body in the constitution of national identity, democratic equality, and political liberty, and in shaping the manner and morals that accompanied national identity in republican France” (p. 13).

Having previously written about eighteenth-century texts that authorized a societal shift based on gender difference into separate private and public spheres, Landes here equally applies political theories and feminist analyses to visual images. In one