The Proletarian Artist and the New Deal State: Marxist Aesthetics in the Rationale for Federal Art, 1920-1937

by

Michael V. Pepi
Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in General Scholarship

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2008
Table of Contents

Acknowledgments
Introduction
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Conclusion
Bibliography
Illustrations
Acknowledgments

Before I begin I must extend several counts of gratitude.

To my friends and peers, especially those at 20b, where there was always well-lit company at the end of long nights of writing and research. Being in the constant company of so many talented individuals inspired me to create something of my own.

To Ari Edelman for her seasoned criticism and unconditional friendship. I was very lucky to always have someone experienced to talk me through the difficult times. Serving as my personal writing tutor for over two years can be a harrowing experience, and it will never be forgotten.

To my parents and my brother Robert (and Shea), who supported and encouraged my efforts, made enjoyable visits, and reminded me to take frequent breaks.

To my adviser, Prof. John Paoletti, whose enthusiasm, encouragement, and congeniality has made this process a memorable and delightful experience. Not to mention his invaluable advice, and much appreciated editorial assistance.

Yet this entire enterprise might have had no start if not for my two grandfathers, Vincent Pepi and Robert Prestly, who instilled in me a high esteem for intellectual inquiry. From an early age the taught me to value scholarship and intellect, and for that I am eternally grateful. This work is dedicated to them both.
Introduction

No artist, if at all realistic, will tolerate this denial of the principle that a man must be paid for his labor.¹

So stated American artist and union member Stuart Davis, in the Artists’ Union’s monthly newspaper *Art Front* in January 1935. In this essay, Davis criticized the waning patronage of the Treasury Department’s year old Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). PWAP was the first of a series of government projects that paid artists in relief, yet by 1934, PWAP was hamstrung by diminishing funds, restrictive administrators, and protests from thousands of angry (and hungry) artists. Davis’s appeal to artist’s fundamental rights as contributing members of the American workforce provides a snapshot of the identity transformation that occurred in this community of radical artists immediately prior to federal art patronage. The rhetoric relied heavily on the belief that the artist must shed his bohemian and solipsistic tendencies and become a ‘cultural worker.’ Yet what sort of fundamental cultural shift precipitated such a drastic change? How did American artists come to be worthy of a position that warranted emergency relief amidst the other monumental tasks of the New Deal state? Further, how did artists come to identify their creative functions as ‘labor’ to a point that necessitated the organization of a union?

Beginning in 1933, F.D.R. extended relief to American artists with the formation of several cultural projects under the auspices of the New Deal. The largest and most significant was the WPA’s Federal Art Project. The WPA
Federal Art Project is of paramount concern to the questions raised in this work.

Before the WPA/FAP, the Treasury Department sponsored a short-lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). Beginning in December 1933 with an allocation of $1,039,000 from Federal relief administrator Harry Hopkins, PWAP employed approximately 3,700 artists for the embellishment of public buildings. Edward Bruce, head administrator of PWAP, stressed the quality of the art produced over the number of artists for which it provided relief. Artists were paid a salary of $40 a week. In general, the project’s ability to provide relief was hampered by a merit system that denied many artists assistance.

Within a year, artists and administrators deemed PWAP inadequate. Under the pressure of protests, mostly from the radical artists featured in this study, the project folded in June 1934. In October the Treasury Department created the Section of Fine Arts to replace the defunct PWAP. Again, the Treasury Department appointed Edward Bruce to as head administrator. Ironically, the Section of Fine Arts (known simply as ‘The Section’) had absolutely no concern for the relief of artists. All work was selected by juried competitions; artists won mural commissions for the adornment of local post offices and courthouses across the United States. In a little less than a decade, the Section of Fine Arts awarded a total of 1,400 mural commissions.

This brings us to the last and most audacious art program of the New Deal, the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project. Established in August 1935, WPA/FAP was one of four relief programs organized under the Works Progress Administration’s Federal One program. In addition to
visual art, the WPA Federal One Program included separate projects for theatre, writing, and music. The visual art section employed over 5,000 artists in various capacities, from mural and easel painting, to teaching and art research. The FAP required that 90% of its artists be chosen from federal relief rolls. These artists produced murals, easel art, and sculpture for schools, housing, and other public spaces. WPA/FAP paid artists at wages commensurate to the other industrial relief programs. With regard to aesthetics, WPA/FAP stands out among its peers since its artists were given complete freedom in subject matter and style; Edward Bruce’s Treasury Projects mandated depictions of the “American Scene.”

Holger Cahill led the WPA/FAP with an ideologically ambitious plan to create a “Cultural Democracy” in the United States. As expected, the project inspired strong criticism from politicians and artists alike; charges of ‘boondoggling’ were plentiful as thousands of artists received monthly checks in what was perceived to be most progressive of Roosevelt’s ‘make work’ programs. Cahill’s vision of a Cultural Democracy stood as the rationale behind the extensive artist relief state that FAP created.

In his own words, Cahill’s Cultural Democracy would occur after “the artist expresses...not only his own cultural problems, but those of society as a whole.” The Federal Art Program sought to extend art’s reach beyond the elite gallery and museum world towards the American masses. A lynchpin of Cahill’s FAP was the professionalization of the artist. Yet, this new role mandated a significant cultural shift. As Cahill declared, in a Cultural Democracy, the artist “is no longer a Bohemian—he has shouldered his duties and responsibilities as a good citizen.”
In the decade before the New Deal Art Projects, leftist intellectuals perceived American culture as belonging to a social elite who promoted art’s sanctity and disinteredness as a means of exercising cultural control. This general malaise endured throughout the decade much to the chagrin of leading American Marxist critics, principally Michael Gold and the editorial board of the radical cultural magazine the New Masses. The class-based criticism so central to previous Marxist analysis permeated the magazine’s views of contemporary American culture. As a further reaction to this apparent cultural decadence, this group of communist artists and intellectuals began to combine their radical political ideologies with their aesthetic practices by fostering a movement for revolutionary art in America. Proletarian art—as it was termed by the New Masses group—amalgamated several aesthetic positions of the young Soviet Union, borrowing its central elements from the Proletcult movement lead by Alexander Bogdanov.

The American revolutionary art movement flourished among the art editors of the New Masses; some its early luminaries included the artists and illustrators William Gropper, Hugo Gellert, Louis Lozowick, and Anton Refregier. As editor-in-chief of the New Masses, Michael Gold’s early calls for an artistic voice for the working class united the iconographic tendencies of this group. In 1929, they formed the revolutionary art collective known as the John Reed Club. However, in the years that followed, the Communist International’s popular front strategy denuded the hallmark characteristics of proletarian art down to its basic preoccupation with social content.

Chapter One highlights the foundations of the radical community of the New Masses and the John Reed Club that constructed the rationale behind
the New Deal Federal Art Project. By subscribing to the “Art as a weapon” aesthetic, artists engaged their social world; the identity of the proletarian artists made them act, speak, and paint with the élan of the new Soviet artist.

My second chapter examines the exchange of the cultural worker model from its roots in the Soviet Union to the United States. The cultural worker model viewed the artist as an essential industrial component of a given society, and regarded his or her contributions as indispensable. Many of the influential figures in this exchange were at the center of the social network of the *New Masses* and John Reed Clubs. I continually refer to several important figures that contributed to this development. The group that I follow in these years has no strict limitations: to mention only Gropper, Gellert, Lozowick, Refregier, and Stuart Davis is to leave out many, but these men formed the core of the group. They provided written as well as aesthetic proof of their commitment to the causes of proletarian art and New Deal Art.

As the artists of the *New Masses* and John Reed Clubs progressed towards the development of the New Deal Federal Art Projects, the project’s rhetoric repeatedly reminds us of its indebtedness to an ideological basis in Marxism. My final chapter deals with the reconciliation of two seemingly conflicting ideologies: the Marxist model of the artist as cultural worker and Holger Cahill’s Cultural Democracy. As I will illustrate, the two movements shared many aims: both appealed to the idea of the artist as a professional, attempted to desacralize art, and subverted formal mastery in favor of art’s capacities to register the social life of a given culture.

While this thesis does marshal aesthetic evidence, it is merely used as a means to illustrate these developments and not an end in itself. There is an
aesthetic component to the argument that runs throughout, but dwelling on the iconographic similarities between the works done in the proletarian *New Masses* and those under New Deal patronage is too readily apparent to stand alone as evidence. I go beyond the images and draw on statements made by the artists: theories, criticism, polemics, and other commentary serve to chart their development from revolutionary proletarian to industrial union member, and finally, to cultural worker.

As I proceed into an analysis of Gold’s proletarian criticism and Cahill’s Cultural Democracy I recognize that these were neither pure nor disinterested theories. Both the radical camp and the New Deal administrators were primarily cultivating rhetorical rationales. Nevertheless, their shared basis in a unique American brand of Marxist cultural thought begs comparison and reflection.

Despite the apparent similarities of proletarian criticism and the rationale for federal art, many scholars who deal with this period fail to explicitly draw the connections between the two men’s aesthetic ideologies. As I hope to illustrate in the coming pages, the radical community’s forging of a popular front in the early 1930s makes this link possible. Let us begin with Michael Gold in the early 1920s, and proceed in rough chronological order towards New Deal patronage.
1 “What now Mr. Bruce?” *Art Front* Vol. 2, No. 2 Jan 1935


Chapter One

A Basis in the Maelstrom; Gold’s Proletarian Criticism and the Conflict within the New Masses group

Of the host of spokesmen for the new proletarian virtue in American literature, none used language as strong, consistent, and passionate as Michael Gold. From the pages of the influential magazine the New Masses, Gold approached the question of proletarian culture with unprecedented vigor. His series of authoritarian manifestoes established him as the leader of a group of radical intellectuals associated with the New Masses and the John Reed Clubs. This group, with Gold as its ideological steward, erected the standard for revolutionary expression in American art. The result was a controversial yet profound aesthetic debate that allowed radical intellectuals to redefine the accepted role of the American artist. This shift, while significant, was ephemeral, and its revolutionary utility began to wane as early as the mid-1930s. Yet it was among the tenets Gold outlined for proletarian culture that this group of radical American artists derived their most powerful statements concerning their place in society.

Gold’s career with the New Masses reaches as far back as 1914 during its days as the Masses, where under the encouragement of editors Max Eastman and Floyd Dell, he published his first poem: “The Three Whose Hatred Killed Them.” After his debut as a contributor to the Masses, Gold emerged as a dominant force on the journal’s editorial board. In May 1926, when financial difficulty threatened the Masses’ survival, editors Joseph
Freeman, Michael Gold, and Hugo Gellert reorganized it under the name the *New Masses*. The founders of the *New Masses* conceived the magazine as a more proletarian successor to what Gold referred to as the “Bohemian-rebel” old *Masses*. Gold and the new editors aimed to provide a “monthly mosaic of American life, in which the tragedy and comedy, the hopes and dreams of the most obscure American mill town or cross-roads village will be chronicled with as much respect and sympathy as if they were reporting the political and artistic events of a European Capital.” The *New Masses* staff aimed to represent the long neglected voice of the American worker. The editors felt the source of inspiration for the magazine’s content had been latent in the American working class—in the words of its inaugural masthead, “We didn’t make it ourselves. We merely ‘discovered’ it.”

Gold “made virtue of the magazine’s poverty,” chose to rely more heavily on worker’s ideology and content, and, by 1927, was “pretty much his own boss.” The reorganization signaled the departure of many of the original editors who had once lauded the *Masses* as a non-partisan coalition of talented left-liberal intellectuals—a distinction that, under Gold, *New Masses’* staff could no longer claim. As the *New Masses’* editor-in-chief, Gold promoted his proletarian ideas from mere editorial material to the *modus operandi* of the magazine.

Before Gold’s rise in influence, the magazine routinely featured illustrations by Ashcan artists and younger artists who had studied with Robert Henri. The work of John Sloan, George Bellows, Henry Glintenkamp, Glen O. Coleman, Kenneth Russell Chamberlain, Maurice Becker, and Robert Minor, suited the non-aligned political tone of the magazine. Works such as
John Sloan’s *During the Strike* (1913) (fig. 1), Robert Minor’s *Pittsburgh* (1916) (fig. 2), and Kenneth Russell Chamberlain’s *At Wheatland: Waiting for the Charge* (1914) (fig. 3) made measured statements about the inequalities of capitalism, yet rarely suggested socialist action. Still, in many cases, the editors of the magazine attempted to supplant their socialist message onto works in spite of the artists’ less radical intentions.

Gold’s ascendance heralded an important shift in the magazine’s art editorial board as well. Joseph Freeman viewed the political orientation of the old *Masses* as “ideological chaos” and expressed, along with Gold, a desire to “tighten certain trends of thought” in the *New Masses* venture. A cadre of younger, more militant, and explicitly Marxist illustrators replaced the less virulent Ashcan illustrators. Louis Lozowick, William Gropper, Hugo Gellert, Anton Refregier, Jerome Klein, and William Siegel, among others, enthusiastically embraced Gold’s aggressive concept for creating an art which could represent the proletariat’s struggle. Both Gold and Freeman were convinced they could “count on the new generation of liberal and radical talents who had grown up since the war” to establish a “broad united front.”

Gold and Freeman envisioned this “united front” of artists and intellectuals on the *New Masses* as an agent of further radicalization. The new “proletarian” attitude of Gold and Freeman ultimately translated into the magazine’s corresponding move to the left, or, at least, a more limited role for liberal or progressive contributors.

The post-1926 shakeup in the *New Masses*’ staff saw the departure of the less-radical intellectuals who repudiated Gold’s aggressive proletarian orientation. One of these liberal defectors was Floyd Dell. In June 1929, Dell
submitted his letter of resignation to Michael Gold. At that point a renowned writer, Dell was a long time Masses and New Masses’ contributor and intellectual leader for the group of Greenwich Village bohemians whose socialism drove the old Masses. He had been co-editor of the magazine with Max Eastman as early as 1914. When Gold and Freeman took the editorial reigns in 1926, Dell’s name was kept on the masthead as a contributor. Even though Dell was writing for the magazine only sporadically, by the late 1920’s he had grown tired of being associated with the increasingly partisan New Masses:

Dear Mike,
    I’ve been intending for some time to ask to have my name taken off the list of contributing editors of the Masses. …I at first wished to have my name associated with the magazine because it was presented as a partly communist and at any rate rebellious literary tendency, with which I am in sympathy. However, what it seems chiefly to represent is a neurotic literary and pictorial aestheticism with which I am completely out of sympathy, and with which I would rather not be associated….So I hereby resign.

Yours for the Revolution,
Floyd Dell

Gold, as editor-in-chief, promptly pounced on Dell, exposing his disreputable bourgeois tendencies to the readers, calling him “just another victim of American prosperity” and an “artistic and moral failure” that at no time was a “real revolutionist.” Gold used him as an example to illustrate capitalism’s power to corrupt bourgeois artists. “He had none of the contacts with workingmen and strikes and battles” that were essential to Gold’s ideal proletarian artist.

What was a bitter end to Dell and Gold’s friendship also provided one of the first casualties caused by Gold’s inelastic proletarian disposition. The
resignation of Floyd Dell was indicative of the changing character of the *New Masses*’ staff. Gold’s character assassination of Dell served as the perfect articulation of the *New Masses*’ intolerance for “fellow travelers,” or those who were merely sympathetic to radical causes for political or artistic expediency.

One noticeable deviation from the old *Masses* to Gold’s *New Masses* was the publication’s virulent anti-bohemian stance, a trait derived from Gold’s attempts to craft a program that could claim fundamental links to the working class. Though many of Gold’s ideas once stood at the periphery of Communist Party thought—few individuals were as doctrinaire, especially in light of the conflicting American tradition—his work in the *New Masses* stood at the heart of the further radicalization of the publication and its committed circle of followers.

In addition to anti-bohemianism, Gold’s proletarian ideas shaped the *New Masses* in many other respects. Yet, before we delve into an analysis of Gold’s intellectual leadership of the *New Masses* and the magazine’s illustrators, we should explore the background and education of this man, one of the most enigmatic in American letters.

**Early Life**

Born Iztok Granich in New York’s Lower East Side in 1893, Gold grew up amongst the stench and vice of the red-light district tenements. He was

---

1 Granich changed his name to Michael Gold for protection during the Palmer raids of 1919-1921.
the son of poor Russian-Jewish immigrants who had “fled from European pogroms with prayer, thanksgiving and solemn faith,” to America in search of a “new promised land.”13 His father was a small-time entrepreneur whose ultimate failures both in health and business forced Gold to take on various jobs to help support his family.14 Growing up with limited means firmly established Gold’s emotional attachment to the urban poor.

Gold’s memoir, Jews Without Money (1930), chronicled his underprivileged youth. The memoir follows young Gold as he fraternized with the dregs of Manhattan, working and starving in the company of the city’s laboring class. The book’s eloquent description of ghetto life was a crowning achievement for Gold, whose underlying impetus for the memoir was to relate to his audience the virtues of the ideal proletarian novel. Gold achieved this goal, as the novel instructs the reader to find solace and beauty in the stark, dejected environment of his youth. Jews Without Money represented the highest form of the proletarian novel, and, since it was openly autobiographical, Gold cemented his proletarian identity to his readers. Through “proletarian realism,” the everyday events of the ghetto were given literary life in what amounted to a new proletarian hagiography—in the words of Michael Denning, Jews Without Money “was an emblem of the proletarian writing he called for.”15

Gold was a precocious student, but was forced to leave school due to the economic burden that it put on his family.16 From then on, he despised education: “I hated books; they were lies, they had nothing to do with life and work,” he said of his childhood in Jews Without Money. This animus did
not last, at least on the outside, as Gold returned to his education by enrolling in City College to earn his high school equivalency.

Despite his early aversion to academics, Gold maintained a habit of voracious reading throughout adolescence. While at City College he became friendly with a group of students who were Harvard-bound; they suggested Gold accompany them. Gold decided to go along, and left for Cambridge with $300 of savings he had earned through various odd jobs. A few weeks later, he gained admission as a ‘provisional student’ for the autumn 1916 semester. He earned money on the side by writing a column for the Boston Journal for 15 dollars a week called “A Freshman at Harvard.” His first foray into journalism failed to buoy the financial situation, forcing Gold to drop out of Harvard, signaling the end of his formal education. As had been the case with his high school education, Gold proved adequate in the classroom, though the demands of tuition were too much to bear.

Gold eventually left the Lower East Side for Greenwich Village, which throughout the early twentieth century was a hotbed for bohemian intellectuals, most with socialist leanings. By 1914 he had published a poem in the Masses inspired by a protest-turned-riot in Union Square a few months before. Gold viewed the clash at Union Square as a sort of final moment of conversion to socialism. All of his preceding frustration with the capitalist society that had mistreated him, that had forced him to drop out of school twice, and had caused his family so much suffering could be rectified by joining workers in the class struggle.

The 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia transformed Gold’s interest in socialism into a full-fledged political identity. Shortly after, he landed a job as
a reporter for both the *Bronxville Review* and the *Scarsdale Inquirer.* While working for the *Review* and the *Inquirer,* Gold was also a regular contributor to the *Masses,* forming friendships with the artists and writers who made up the “*Masses Group.*” Many intellectuals who considered themselves radical in the 1920’s belonged to this roughly define “*Masses*” group. The group formed around the early founders of the magazine, yet as the list of contributors steadily ballooned to upward of thirty-five, the stringency of the membership loosened. In this respect, the *Masses* and *New Masses* served as leading arenas for cultural exchange within the American left. The magazines united a host of artists and writers who, like Gold, dedicated their art as paeans to socialist revolution.

Gold had a knack for journalism. He eventually rose to the editor’s position for both the *Review* and the *Inquirer.* He was well on his way in his journalistic career when in 1921 he joined the *Masses* staff full time (though at this point it was renamed the *Liberator* to escape wartime censorship). By 1922, Gold was sharing the *Liberator’s* editorial responsibilities with Joseph Freeman and Claude McKay. As the decade progressed, Gold moved away from the “bourgeois socialism” of Max Eastman and Floyd Dell, the men who founded the magazine, preferring instead to align himself with the burgeoning proletarian cultural movements in Russia.

Although he ceased working manual labor jobs once he could support himself through journalism, Gold never relinquished his self-identification as a member of the proletariat. In fact, Gold cemented openly endorsed the notion that artists and writers were central figures in the worker’s struggle. This refusal to divorce the intellectual realm of art and writing from the
proletarian experience was the most profound and lasting characteristic of Gold’s early life. Joseph Freeman describes the impression Gold had on the Greenwich Village-bohemian staff of the *Liberator*:

“To us Mike Gold appeared to be the outstanding ‘proletarian’ of the group. He affected dirty shirts, a big, black, unclean Stetson with the brim of a sombrero; smoked stinking, twisted, Italian three-cent cigars, spat frequently...on the floor—whether that floor was covered by carpet at a rich aesthete’s studio or was the bare wooden floor of the small office where Gold’s desk was littered with disorderly papers. These “proletarian” props were as much a costume as the bohemian’s sideburns and opera cape.”

When Gold joined the staff of the *Liberator* he made an immediate splash with his provocative essay “Towards Proletarian Art.” A veritable manifesto, Gold’s debut firmly established the tropes of the coming proletarian criticism found in the *New Masses*. The essay treats bourgeois culture to a polemic related in apocalyptic terms, strikingly alienating in its fundamentalism—“We are prepared for the economic revolution of the world, but what shakes us with terror and doubt is the cultural upheaval that must come.”

The essay also established the ever-present principle of Gold’s theory that modern artists in the capitalist tradition have withdrawn from society: “...the old poetry, fiction, painting, philosophies, were the creations of proud and baffled solitaries.” Proletarian art involved the replacement of this old mold of artists—“the aristocrats of mankind”—with a new art rooted in the people. “The art ideals of the capitalist world isolated each artist in a solitary cell, there to brood,...suffer,... and go mad,” Gold inveighed. These words are the first example of Gold’s sense that an uprising of the masses would be
expressed by the proletariat’s art creations, organically rooted in their class experience. From this realization, Gold instructed the proletarian artist—“the [socialist] Revolution, in its secular manifestations of strike, boycott, mass-meeting, imprisonment, sacrifice, agitation, and martyrdom, is thereby worthy of the religious devotion of the artist.”

Gold’s essay is noticeably lacking in any articulation of a specific program and focuses more on exposing the Manichean nature of literature and art under capitalism. Gold disdained what he viewed as corrupting gentility, “cheap fiction,” and the “country club civilization” that surrounded him. All of these were, of course, symptoms of the bourgeois and their suffocating monopoly on culture. The cultural savior in this apocalyptic renewal would arise organically out the masses, for “the masses are still primitive and clean;” Gold mandated that “artists must turn to them for strength again.”

‘Towards a Proletarian Art,” in all its vagaries, was a first step in providing a solution for the cultural ills that directed a decade of Gold’s criticism. Gold and like-minded radicals endured the 1920s with much scorn; they reasoned the only antidote was the purposeful marriage of art with the interests of the workers. For this, they turned their attention largely toward the Soviet Union, where proletarian cultural movements were in more advanced stages.

It was into this frustrated cultural landscape that the New Masses assumed the voice of the culturally disenfranchised workingman. The New Masses regaled its readers with the wonderfully romantic promise of an apocalyptic upheaval that would “clear away the economic and cultural
debris of a sick and decadent society.” In this way, Gold’s proletarian cultural prophecy mimicked the structure of Marx’s sociological and economic predictions. This came as no surprise, since the 1926 editorial reorientation of the magazine brought the explicitly Marxist editors to the forefront. In the period that followed, the New Masses slowly revealed an increasingly tendentious affiliation with the Communist Party.

Gold’s Ideological Roots

Michael Gold was not the first to propose the creation of a proletarian art; in fact, he was very much in the company of previous Marxist cultural theorists. One cannot even begin a discussion of Gold’s ideas without mentioning their indebtedness to Georgi Plekhanov’s work in developing a Marxist sociology of art. Known as the ‘Father of Russian Marxism,’—before the rise of figures such as Lenin and Stalin—Plekhanov’s seminal work, Art and Society (1913), was specifically concerned with questions of ‘art for art’s sake’ that arose in French and Russian art of the day. The book provides an authoritative attempt to “relate different artistic ideologies to their social context,” and attacks the ‘art for art’s sake’ philosophy for its lack of content.

In Art and Society, Plekhanov observed that the art for art’s sake tendency “arises and develops where an insoluble contradiction exists between the artist and his social environment.” Gold’s theory of proletarian art mirrored this fundamental statement by Plekhanov. Gold’s call to root the arts in proletarian experience was supposed to re-establish the link between the realities of social life and the artist. Proletarian realism set out to provide
an alternative to the ‘modernist’ impulse of the disinterested bourgeois artists who created this “insoluble contradiction.”

Another pillar of Gold’s theory stands on Plekhanov’s insistence that there existed “no such thing as a work of art completely devoid of ideological content.” Therefore, Plekhanov reasoned that the merit of any artwork should rely on the “loftiness of its content” or the “extent to which it recognizes the major social trends of its time.” Following this precept, Gold determined that the art of the struggling proletariat was paramount to all other forms of expression.

Plekhanov hinged the imperative of proletarian art on the decline of the bourgeois, just as Gold did decades later. In 1912, in *Art and Society* Plekhanov explained that “the ideas of the ruling class lose their intrinsic value at the rate at which that class approaches extinction, and the art created in the spirit of that class decays at the same rate.” Plekhanov called for an adjoining cultural component to Marx’s proletarian triumph. Gold followed this line of argument in his own time, citing “bourgeois decadence” as evidence of the fall of the ruling class.

Here it is important to make the distinction about the way that Michael Gold and the *New Masses* group in general used the term ‘bourgeoisie.’ Unlike the technical definition of the bourgeoisie which, for most, denotes middle-class, the radical writers and artists in this period referred to anything not explicitly related to the exploited working-class as bourgeois. This was especially true when the term was used about the art world. ‘Bourgeois galleries,’ for example referred to cultural influence of the extremely wealthy aristocrats in addition to genteel middle-class intellectuals.
Other Marxist critics, like the German Franz Mehring, argued that the development of a proletarian culture was impossible within a bourgeois society. Followers of Mehring felt that only a total transformation of reality could produce a new culture, thus destroying the prospect that art might create an environment in which socialism would arise. Yet for Gold and the more assertive advocates of proletarian culture, the Bolshevik revolution created a fresh source of political and social content, giving hope to proletarian artists who strove to emulate the Soviet’s embodiment of socialist ideals. Gold argued that culture in general had been enduring a pre-revolutionary mood—typified by the Jazz-age decadence of the 1920’s. In this light, the October revolution was interpreted as a signal of the changing world order. Though he was no less Marxist in his desires for a proletarian art, Gold deviated from theorists who followed Mehring—and later Trotsky—since he advocated the creation of proletarian art within the capitalist United States.

Theorists like Plekhanov and Mehring provided the basic principles upon which Gold came to realize a Marxist aesthetic. However, the Soviet Proletcult group lead by Alexander Bogdanov was more specific to Gold’s ideological demands. The Proletcult organization, led also by Anatoly Luchanarsky, worked towards creating a culture that would correspond to the class struggles of the rising proletariat. Proletcult relied heavily on the Marxist axiom that the ideological superstructure of a society reflected its economic base. Proletcult posited a dominant proletarian culture in order to bring the ideological superstructure in line with the base of society. The proletariat, the economic base of society, should be given the ability to
express the collectivity of their industrial experience through artistic form.

Bogdanov’s method was simple: extend the class war to all areas of Soviet culture. To achieve this end, Proletcult developed literary and artistic clubs across Russia that trained and employed workers to sustain the class war through aesthetics. Bogdanov believed that “art was primarily a captive reflection of class consciousness,” and appealed to its capacity to “organize social experience by means of living images.” Thus, for Bogdanov, proletarian art was a means by which the workers could reflect on the virtues of their worldview, that of labor collectivism. Proletcult thought profoundly influenced Gold since it was the first time he encountered a socialist aesthetic in praxis.

The Proletcult movement set a few more vital ideological precedents for Gold. First, Bogdanov’s Proletcult organizations refused to make contact with intellectuals of non-proletarian origin. “Gold interpreted this Proletcult strategy—originally instituted to ensure Soviet intellectual consistency, that is, to purge “bourgeois falsifiers”—as a mandate to dismiss art of the past as essentially reflective of the bourgeois class. By valorizing an aesthetic within the principle characteristics of an industrial class (the proletariat), Bogdanov’s Proletcult ideology and its American reiterations effectively destroyed the dichotomy between the traditional laborer and the artist/intellectual. Both were viewed as inherently united in the class struggle.

Gold’s position on liberal intellectuals who temporarily co-opted radical causes was also borrowed directly from Bogdanov. Bogdanov aimed much of his animosity at these Russian fellow travelers because, in his view, they did not seriously represent the proletariat. As one of Proletcult’s splinter
organizations, the October Group, claimed: “the rule of the proletariat is incompatible with the domination of non-proletarian art.”\textsuperscript{37} The spirit of Bogdanov’s insistence on homogeneity found its way into Gold’s creed. He often scoffed at the *Masses* and especially the *New Masses* for including bourgeois liberals in debates about worker’s art.

Another characteristic that Gold borrowed from Bogdanov and the *Proletcult* movement was the total cultural rejection of past bourgeois society, especially the visual art traditions that it produced. This assumption forms the basis for a large segment of Gold’s argument. His early writings in the *New Masses* continuously criticized past artists and writers as hopelessly tied to the bourgeois class. Gold’s growing alienation from the former writers on the *Masses* staff was based on this anti-bourgeois rationale too, thus ultimately leading to the radicalization of the *New Masses*.

This vitriol towards past “bourgeois” art was in stark contrast to Lenin, who felt that communist art must not make a complete break with tradition as was advocated by Bogdanov. Lenin famously stated that new art “must retain the beautiful even if it is ‘old’.”\textsuperscript{38} As a historical materialist, Lenin’s views were based on the belief that all of history, including art, was dialectically rooted in the past. He admired past art for its possible contributions to the present and thus saw no use in abruptly erasing all of mankind’s cultural achievements.\textsuperscript{39}

However, Gold was not in total disagreement with Lenin’s treatment of aesthetics. Lenin considered the various modernist movements of the 1920s, such as Futurism, Expressionism, Cubism, and Constructivism, as wholly unsuited to Marxism. He argued, like Gold, that the masses could not
understand these detached modernist expressions. Lenin, sounding conspicuously similar to Gold’s message in the *New Masses*, stated directly: “Art belongs to the people…It must have its deepest roots in the broad mass of workers. It must be understood and loved by them. It must be rooted in and grow with their feelings, thoughts, and desires.”

The legacy of *Proletcult* manifested itself in Gold’s boldly apocalyptic view of bourgeois culture. If the bourgeois state was to be smashed, then bourgeois culture as an institution ought to be smashed as well. The new “proletarian society will, like its predecessors, create its own culture,” he preached in the *New Masses* in September 1930. The next logical step for Gold—as it had been for *Proletcult*—was the rejection of past art, as a means to ensure the purity of contemporary culture from the corruption of capitalist and bourgeois tendencies. Gold’s purist stance on what was acceptable as proletarian art fueled his polemic against those artists, “intellectual tourists” he called them, who had infiltrated the movement.

The various statements of Marxist theoreticians can rarely be expected to concur perfectly with Gold’s ideas. Instead, their relationship to Gold is relative because they provided a broad slate of assumptions upon which Gold knowingly engineered his brand of proletarian art. The comparison also serves to ground Gold’s thoughts at a time when many writers and artists were thinking along similar lines, yet illustrates manner in which Gold broke new ground in his writing and created something specifically his own. Michael Gold’s chief contribution to his followers in the *New Masses* and the John Reed Clubs lay in his reformulation of the *Proletcult* concept of ‘art as a
weapon in the class struggle’ into a tangible direction within an American context.

**Gold’s American Proletcult**

Regardless of the underlying Soviet influence over Gold’s revolutionary art, the *New Masses* group had to determine a method in which they might meld their aesthetic into the current American cultural context. The guidelines for the proletarian writer had been laid out quite literally by Gold and his followers; *New Masses* editors such as Granville Hicks and Joseph Freeman joined the litany of one-sided lectures on the role of the proletarian novelist and poet. However, the artists on the magazine’s staff were confronted with the task of effectively illustrating proletarian culture through a *visual* medium whose stylistics had yet to be defined. After the publication of a few seminal articles in which Gold laid out the tenets of proletarian art, artists on the *New Masses* staff such as William Gropper, Hugo Gellert, Louis Lozowick, and Anton Refregier responded with nuanced visual interpretations of Gold’s aesthetic. The debate that raged in the *New Masses* and John Reed Clubs eventually tempered Gold’s dogmatic and scientific approach because of its limited ability to resonate with an American audience.

While Gold’s audience was already converted to the cause of socialism, he did make some early attempts at Americanizing his views to encourage new converts—many of whom were reasonably skeptical of Gold’s alienating methods. Since the American political tradition so eschewed Marxist thought, Gold’s rhetoric had to overcome this opposition by connecting American cultural icons to the tropes of socialist thought. He turned to Walt Whitman
as a prime example of a writer who had championed a working class America often overlooked by the patricians of the day. Gold dedicated his *New Masses* editorial of September 1928 to the celebration of Whitman, who, according to Gold:

“taught us to see America for the first time; it was his great democratic oratory that inspired them [writers] to rise from their books of Keats and Tennyson’s swans, to walk in their own strong American sun, to push and crowd with the American mobman at baseball games and picnics, to love their own dooryard lilacs, and the robins of America, and the traffic roar and wheat field blaze of America.”

Gold painted Whitman’s work as one of the first attempts by an American artist to forge a closer connection between art and the American worker. Gold followed by claiming that Whitman’s cultural populism was as an effective renunciation of the bourgeois art tradition.

Here Gold carried out a Marxist reinterpretation of the spirit of Whitman’s “Democratic Vista.” He advanced the “Whitmanesque contemplation of the commonplace” a step further than his Ashcan predecessors. This Whitmanesque contemplation, which had so fueled the *Masses*’ Ashcan illustrators who preceded Gold, was characterized by the novel embrace of “saloons, prizefights, street scenes, and bedrooms” as legitimate subject matter. Such artistic expression was normally distinguished by its working class sympathies, but under Gold, these depictions were co-opted for their inherent power as revolutionary agitation. Gold linked the Ashcan group’s modern scenes depicting urban decay, industrial laborers, and poverty to proletarian art through a Marxist interpretation of Whitman’s tradition. Branding Whitman as a radical, or at
least a progenitor of proletarian art, was symptomatic of Gold’s method of organizing all American working class expression into an explicitly Marxist framework.

Between 1926 and 1933, Gold used his monthly pulpit of the *New Masses* to mandate that proletarian artists reject the tendencies of academicism and modernism. Gold warned that academicism and modernism only removed artists and their artistic process further from the realities of the masses.

In another tirade characteristic of his attitude toward past art, Gold attacked the Rococo for its inherent links to “the corrupt court intellectuals,” of pre-revolutionary France. Gold dismissed Rococo on the grounds that it reflected general celebration of the inessential—“the decadence of the time was reflected in those delicate and erotic curves, all that frivolous and futile ornamentation.”45 Both the patronage and iconographic representation of Rococo were, for Gold, indisputably aristocratic “Feudal Trash” stained with the blood of the monarchy.46 Gold was typical of most Marxist intellectuals in that he viewed art history within a class-based perspective. He assessed all former movements and schools upon their social basis, keen to the ability of art to represent and support a political or economic system. This approach corresponded to the overwhelming importance he placed on cultural elements and their class implications, a concept assimilated from Plekhanov and given revolutionary action through Bogdanov. Here, Gold merely restated these Soviet intellectual’s message for an American audience.

Gold strategically aimed to instill the principles of proletarian art in young artists. A major aspect of such inculcation was his attitude toward the
artist’s method, which he generally felt contradicted the fundamentals of proletarian art. He deemed that the artist’s tendency to look back on history for inspiration was detrimental to the development of a proletarian artistic sensibility. Gold’s stance on this issue was simple: he preferred living, breathing, and working subject matter. Specifically, Gold claimed the grand tradition of French art and literature was dead to American artists: “Young America can learn nothing from the 200-year old boulevardiers, except to sit at sidewalk cafés and sip aperitifs, literariously.” Proletarian art need only look to the masses for their inspiration.

Aware of the contemporary interest in deriving symbols from primitive cultures, as typified by Picasso and other modernists whose work was described as ‘primitivism,’ Gold offered an alternative subject material: “the young writer can find all of the primitive material he needs working as a wage slave around the cities and prairies of America.” Of the many tendencies associated with modernism, Gold specifically targeted primitivism, since he felt strongly that the American proletariat was itself “like a lost continent…there is no need to go to Africa or the Orient for strange new pioneering.” Gold particularly deplored the underlying notion of primitivism, because, like all modernist behavior, it dealt with frivolous and inessential subjects. Moreover, he believed the decadence of French, Russian, and Italian avant-garde movements was only the most recent iteration of centuries old bourgeois art traditions. Gold believed that contemporary artists, like the Rococo artists before them, had been corrupted by the absence of meaningful social content, and instead responded to the fleeting whims of a bohemian leisure class.
In 1929, after repeated calls to mobilize a proletarian front, Gold again urged young artists to “Go Leftward” in an effort to cleanse the rising group of artists in the New Masses’ intellectual circle of all bourgeois tendencies. “When I say ‘go leftward,’” Gold cautioned, “I don’t mean the temperamental bohemian left, the stale old Paris posing…no the real thing.”

To guard against any compromising effects of modern decadence, proletarian art should almost exclusively spring from “knowledge of [American] working-class life,” ideally “gained from first hand contacts.”

As the 1920s came to a close, Gold’s influence over the New Masses’ circle ballooned to its apex. His articles assumed an edict-like sense of authority and the frequency and tenacity of his diatribes increased. That said, Gold was quite careful to avoid the stigma of preaching dogma, which would drastically weaken his case. He addressed this critique in January 1929, asserting that proletarian art was “like any other science,” and, “unlike the dogmatic Catholic Church,” operated upon “laws, which have been discovered and tested.” Gold was clearly taking a page from the Marxist epistemological tradition, which distinguished its theories as that of scientific discovery rather than political opinion. In his mind, he had merely extended the “Marxian discovery of the laws of class struggle” into the realm of art.

In a momentary adoption of the vocabulary of a scientific observer, Gold proceeded to determine for his readers “several laws, which seem to be demonstratable” from his experience with proletarian art. Regardless of Gold’s denial of dogmatic intentions, he related his ideas about proletarian art with nearly unquestioned authority.
The achievement of proletarian art hinged on two central assumptions, both derived from a Marxist world-view. First, Gold operated under the assumption that all culture reflected a specific class in society. According to Gold, concepts borrowed from bourgeois-capitalist ideology controlled and limited the role of the modern artist and the manner in which society approached art. The contemporary conventions which governed art utilized privilege and luxury, and preyed upon the upper-classes dilatory sensibilities and excoriated workers as the unwashed base of society, effectively alienating them from the realm of high art. Through this tacit control over the elite levels of cultural expression—that is, the academy, museums, and galleries, and other ‘institutional extensions of capitalism’—the bourgeoisie achieved cultural class hegemony. Social thought that might develop organically from the proletariat, especially those communicated through images, was repudiated by the aesthetics of the bourgeois class. Gold reasoned that the propagation of proletarian art—the art of that deposed class—would elevate the Marxist conceptions of art and society above the vilified bourgeois concepts.

The second major presumption that fueled Gold’s campaign for proletarian art was the belief that the bourgeois class was on the decline and capitalism was in its death throes. Though this notion continually animated radical intellectuals of post-Marxian socialism, Gold could employ this rallying cry with heightened expediency given the international economic developments in the late 1920s and early 1930s that seemed to herald the collapse of capitalism.
Gold’s prophecy not surprisingly followed the proletarian class triumph scenario outlined by Marx, except that Gold attached a previously unmentioned—except for Plekhanov—cultural aspect to the dictatorship of the proletariat. As the proletariat rose to the level of the dominant class, theorized Gold, so too would it create a culture of its own to replace the current bourgeois cultural model. He reassured readers of the New Masses who might have been ignorant of Plekhanov’s theories that proletarian art “will reflect the struggle of the workers in their fight for the world.” The formal attributes of this proletarian cultural development would not be apparent until artists began to subscribe to the doctrine; only after this wholesale reevaluation would Gold and the New Masses begin to entertain stylistic concerns.

Such elemental artistic change escapes mention in most preceding Marxist documents, even those that deal exclusively with aesthetics. By envisioning a concomitant aesthetic shift alongside the traditional Marxist teleology, Gold once again separated himself from earlier theorists by foreseeing such a unilateral yet panacean future for art under socialism. As a purer theorist than Gold, Plekhanov left the more specific aesthetic questions unresolved. Gold ventured upon these unresolved questions with a new temerity derived principally from his polemical attitude toward bourgeois class art and the problems they presented. Thus, during their formative proletarian moment, Gold and the New Masses’ criticism more often concerned themselves with what proletarian art ought not to resemble.

In a broad sense, Gold argued two somewhat contradictory points when it came to the ultimate raison-d’être of proletarian culture. Simply, he
tried to have it both ways—his insistence on proletarian art as a means of engendering socialism through controlled aesthetic principles was an illogical response to his view that proletarian art would naturally arrive alongside a proletarian class triumph. At this point in his career, Gold explored the prospect of direct cultural action with growing anticipation, especially after receiving continuous news of the Soviet’s efforts on the artistic front. Still, Gold’s theory remained stuck on an internal chicken-or-the-egg dilemma—a point which middle-class intellectuals, non-aligned fellow travelers, and Trotskyite intellectuals in and around avant-garde movements employed as an effective wedge to undermine Gold’s early dogmatism. Whether Proletarian art was a phenomenon to be described or a goal to be achieved was still an unsettled issue.

Joseph Kalar, an avid reader and contributor to the New Masses, picked up on this incongruence with keen perceptiveness. In a September 1929 letter to the editor, he critiqued the New Masses editorial board’s strategy for fostering proletarian art: “the New Masses is publishing too many manifestoes on the desirability and significance of proletarian art,” and in doing so was “dissipating energies and space which probably could have been more profitably used in actually creating proletarian art.” Kalar felt that the magazine itself, and, by extension, the concept of proletarian art, were not being embraced by actual workers. He exposed the dual roles of the magazine: it sometimes it came off as a “snotty nosed” handbook for “literary aspirants,” with dubious connections to any proletariat. At other times, Kalar commented, “to my great joy it is what I would like to see it be, a magazine for the proletarian who reads and thinks.”
In an even more penetrating critique, Kalar deftly noted how the magazine’s polemical tone did more to alienate future proletarian artists than it did to expand the idea: “it seems to me that the New Masses hasn’t yet come to a point where it knows just what it is after, who it is trying to represent, and who it is trying to reach.”\(^5\) In reality, Gold knew his audience at the New Masses was already converted to the cause of socialism, which explains why he based many of his calls for proletarian art on unchallenged core principles of Marxism.

Gold used a doctrinaire approach because he knew he could assume a certain level of commitment among the readers, though Kalar’s critique was astute; the editorial page often took more pains to point out the limits of bourgeois art, rather than fostering positive advancements in the narrow yet undefined genre. Gold, Joseph Freeman, and Granville Hicks created this environment through repeated slanderous appraisals of popular figures’ bourgeois artificiality. Gertrude Stein received such treatment in Gold’s New Masses review titled “Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot”—her work deemed “a reflection of the ideological anarchy into which the whole of bourgeois literature has fallen.”\(^5\)

This dilemma remained unresolved. Gold’s theories, entrenched in the partisan language of the New Masses, failed to arrive at a definitive answer. In September 1930, Gold used methods to describe proletarian art that simultaneously sounded like an art historian’s observations and the cold directives of a theoretician, thus enforcing the precarious nature of Gold’s elaborate campaign. Without the “scientific” evidence once promised, Gold legislated several points concerning proletarian art and form. Despite his
remark that it would be “dogmatic folly to seize upon any single form” when creating proletarian art, Gold used the term “proletarian realism” to characterize the evolving cultural phenomenon. As it turned out, this characterization would exclude non-objective art, much to the dismay of Stuart Davis. Davis, the radical-yet-abstract American artist was once a star illustrator of the *Masses* and *Liberator*, though he ultimately resigned from the *New Masses* in 1926 after he sensed Gold’s ideological ascendancy.

In Gold’s view, proletarian realism had a few distinct elements. First, in his own words: “proletarian realism must deal with real conflicts of men and women who work for a living. It has nothing to do with the sickly mental states of the idle bohemians, their subtleties, their sentimentalities, their fine-spun affairs.” He cited the French writer Proust, the “master-masturbator of the bourgeois literature,” as the prime example proletarian artists should avoid emulating. The point stood clear that workers need not invent “precious silly little agonies,” since the “suffering of the hungry, persecuted millions” alone could suffice for powerful inspiration. Proletarian art, Gold assured readers, did not embody the art for art’s sake mentality, but rather instead should have a social function. Gold believed every piece of art “must have a social theme, or it is merely confectionery.”

Gold made forceful distinctions between true proletarian art and other movements that, though they used worker life as content, were still bourgeois movements that failed to take worker life as honest and adequate subject matter. “French populists and American jazz maniacs” were not in the same category of true proletarian art because they did not portray the worker with a clear revolutionary point. Gold opposed the cultural co-opting
of worker’s toil as seen in the work of Ernest Hemingway, who merely incorporated proletarian elements to create a “new frisson.”\textsuperscript{65} Gold compared such behavior to building machines that produced nothing; these imitators assembled the structure of worker sympathy yet failed to convey its underlying intent.\textsuperscript{66}

Throughout Gold’s period of prolific pontification, the \textit{New Masses’} art board was slated with the task of visually interpreting the well-articulated though fairly contradictory rules regarding proletarian art. The \textit{New Masses’} proletarian moment of 1927-1930 could be characterized by the aesthetic advancement of a utilitarian approach, insistence on expedient political themes, and a keen avoidance of prescribing any one form or technique.\textsuperscript{67} The illustrators, led by Hugo Gellert, Louis Lozowick, and William Gropper, attempted to embody Gold’s message in illustrations accompanying the magazine’s articles and poems. Gold persuaded members of the art staff to “deal with the more obvious aspects of the class struggle,” to avoid wasting effort on other motifs, and to cultivate a melodramatized iconography consisting of good workers and evil bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{68}

Several \textit{New Masses} images suggest that the illustrator’s visual interpretations of proletarian art were in accordance with Gold’s central tenets. The magazine’s illustrators rightly turned to the industrial scene; Louis Lozowick’s print, \textit{Loading} (1931) (fig. 4) takes for its subject a laborer in the midst of his toil. Hugo Gellert’s illustration for the cover of the October, 1930 issue of the \textit{New Masses} (fig.5) depicts the pioneering American journalist John Reed—an almost mythical figure for radical intellectuals in the United States—in front of what would appear to be the Red Army. William Siegel
valorized Soviet agriculture and industry in the magazine’s November 1930 issue (fig. 6), and a William Gropper drawing from June 1927 captured the action and excitement of the labor strike (fig. 7).

The illustrations of these men, taken individually, however, expose several different stylistic interpretations of Gold’s theories. While the illustrations share many of the ostensible principles of proletarian art, a great deal of the work submitted to the New Masses by the members of the art board refuted Gold’s homogeneous expectations. The literal imaging of Gold’s written theories would ultimately test the mettle of proletarian art as a concept propounded by the New Masses’ editors. Throughout the debate that followed, the sustained rhetoric of Gold prevailed in that his strong axioms influenced and controlled the iconographic language of self-styled proletarian artists.

The John Reed Club

Apart from the dialogue within the pages of the New Masses, the debate over what constituted revolutionary content extended into the halls of the New York John Reed Club. These discussions where often led by members of the New Masses staff. The precise genesis of the John Reed Clubs remains obscure due to the organization’s underground nature, though it certainly emerged from the organizational efforts of the New Masses’ editors, principally Michael Gold.

Bogdanov’s Proletcult literary clubs in the Soviet Union were perhaps the leading influence upon the New Masses’ group’s decision to found the
John Reed Clubs. Though numerous American workers’ art clubs served as precedents as well. With a history too extensive to explore here with any detail, these American groups often were diffused and divided by ethnic and geographic boundaries. According to one of Gold’s estimates in 1929, the American workers’ art movement contained approximately 50,000 revolutionary workers connected with some local group dedicated to the practice of worker’s art.69 The Bronx Hungarian Workers’ Club, the Worker’s Laboratory Theatre of New York, the New York Proletbuhne, The Lithuanian Federation of Proletarian Art, and the Spartacus Film League, just to name a few, existed separately throughout the previous decade, each practicing their own interpretation of proletarian culture.70

Gold’s “Letter to Workers’ Art Groups” in the September 1929 issue targeted theatre, film, dance, literary, and graphic arts clubs and urged them to consolidate into a national league to join the international proletarian art movement.71 Gold pleaded with the underground worker’s art movement: “Let us organize now...let every group engaged in worker’s cultural activities take the first step,” for the movement “fulfills a need, it has grown out of necessity...it is time the workers were organized.”72

By January 1930, the New Masses had announced the establishment of the John Reed Club of New York in the New Masses, humbly describing it as a “small group of writers, artists, sculptors, musicians and dancers of revolutionary tendencies.”73 According the Club’s constitution, its declared purposes were: “[t]o work within all cultural mediums for the international revolutionary labor movement, to clarify and crystallize our own theories of art and their relation to the revolutionary labor movement, to struggle
against all art and literature rooted in bourgeois ideology,” and lastly, “to help further an international movement of revolutionary cultural workers.”

The founding principles of its constitution used decidedly less partisan language than Gold and the New Masses. Simply by virtue of the all-inclusive term “international revolutionary labor movement,” it opened membership beyond the boundaries of the Communist Party. The ambiguous tone continues throughout the document’s membership clause: all artists and writers who “subscribed” to the “ultimate triumph of the working class” were eligible for membership. To the contemporary radical intellectual, this vague requirement might suggest any number of the nuanced ideological or party affiliations, from hard-line Stalinists, down to the liberal fellow traveler.

One of the first directives of the new organization pursued was the “creation and dissemination of American art and literature of a revolutionary or proletarian character.” The exact methods with which the club’s leadership sought to achieve this main goal would come to reflect their fluctuating aesthetic priorities. Nevertheless, the artist members’ identification as “cultural workers” was instrumental to their new construction of the artist’s identity that rationalized the New Deal art projects.

Early on, a preference for inexpensive and accessible visual media emerged within the club. Hoping to disseminate proletarian culture as widely as possible, they mandated the “publication of portfolios of drawings and lithographs for sale and exhibition.” Both Hugo Gellert and William Gropper participated in this activity: Gellert’s Karl Marx ‘Capital’ in Lithographs (fig. 8), an illustrated version of the communist classic, and Gropper’s book of detailed illustrations of soviet life, Drawings of Soviet Russia (fig. 9), were
aggressively marketed by the combined efforts of the New York John Reed Club and *New Masses*. A review of Gropper’s *Drawings of Soviet Russia* by an anonymous contributor identified only as E.E. praised it as “Art for life’s sake”—deliberately opposed to ‘art for art’s sake’ aesthetic—that was from a formal standpoint, “[f]ull of the Gropper gusto…fine design,” and “beautiful line.”

The review of Gropper’s work echoed the underlying spirit of the proletarian artist, especially his or her ideal commitment to social themes, saturation with political struggle, and triumphant realism. The Gropper prints matched proletarian art’s pretense of anti-intellectualism, as the images, without words, acted as visual reportage of Soviet life and values for the illiterate worker. The review went on—

“Here and there a picture that tells you what fellow artists Gropper has liked enough to absorb. There is a Moscow bedstead that brings back Wanda’s Tired Bed, and a roomful of people seen with the medical interest of Grosz. No imitation here but the power to absorb points of view and to see more richly because of others of the same penetration look at the same thing. He [Gropper] gives you a novel, a travel book, a poem, a hefty volume on political theory. They’re all there in these fifty pictures…meetings…a sense of a people who are making a great art of politics, and of social and political expression, a theatrical ritual that galvanizes the masses into chucking heaven and sowing better seed corn…here is a book that will let you see what it is that is the nucleus of revolution in our lives.”

The impressions of Gropper’s book provided an example of the ideal role for proletarian artists. By giving “new eyesight to the Soviet labor struggle,” Gropper’s drawings, both from a stylistic and iconographic standpoint, represented a zenith in proletarian illustration. The joint embrace of Gropper’s book by the *New Masses* and the John Reed Club members,
though not unexpected, set one of the seminal visual precedents upon which later John Reed Club revolutionary art debates would emanate.

Another central aspect of Gold’s proletarian art was its natural attraction to murals’ capacity to transmit political messages to the masses. The already legendary Mexican muralist and proletarian art icon, Jose Clemente Orozco, expressed this idea in a 1928 essay in *Creative Art* entitled “New Worlds, New Races, New Art.” The mural, Orozco wrote, “could not be hidden away for the benefit of a privileged few.”

Proletarian art’s acquired penchant for mural painting manifested itself in the official strategies of the John Reed Club: a central directive called for members to undertake the “painting of murals for workers’ clubs and organization headquarters.”

This John Reed Club strategy was to be expected, given the preponderance of murals executed by revolutionary artists in the previous decade. The *New Masses* regularly featured prints by Orozco, and heralded him as a living master of proletarian painting. In 1930, Orozco began working on his frescoes at New York City’s New School for Social Research (fig. 10). This afforded the John Reed Club members the opportunity to view an example of the vibrant school of communist Mexican muralists in person.

In the winter of 1928, Hugo Gellert completed his mural for the cafeteria of a cooperative labor society of left-wing workers called the Proletcos at 28 Union Square. The editorial board at the *New Masses* considered the mural, which depicted a series of figures and events throughout the history of American labor, to be revolutionary in character. Iconography aside, the site of the mural, a workers’ co-operative house, solidified Gellert’s mural as a paragon of art in service to the labor
movement. The *New Masses* featured a reproduction of Gellert’s mural in the December 1928 issue in celebration of one of the “leading revolutionary artists in America.”

The non-partisan tone that ran throughout the John Reed Club’s directives reflected its early commitment to fostering a dialogue concerning the exact nature of workers art. Even amongst the cacophony of Gold’s diatribes, the John Reed Club was designed as an open forum, which, accompanied by the writing in the *New Masses*, provided the most comprehensive pedagogy on the subject. The burning issues that permeated Lozowick, Gropper, and Gellert’s illustrations in the *New Masses*—images that figured so centrally in proletarian art’s iconographic and stylistic front—were fleshed out in open debate by the new members.

The club’s meetings aroused many new viewpoints, though discussion generally followed the course set by the *New Masses*, and once again, principally the path set by Michael Gold. For example, members of the *New Masses*’ art editorial board dominated the John Reed Club’s art school, which was founded within months of the club’s first meetings. Hugo Gellert directed the art school, while Louis Lozowick and William Gropper each taught thirty-person classes in “revolutionary drawing.”

Another directive of the John Reed Club that provided outlets for revolutionary art were their annual exhibitions. The exhibitions allowed the *New Masses* illustrators to dictate the conversation by virtue of their positions of authority within the New York proletarian culture intellectual circle. The school’s first show of worker art in December 1929 featured fourteen artists, all of whom were contributors to the *New Masses*. Lozowick, Gropper, and
Gellert, among others, submitted a total of 35 works to the show. Held at the Bronx Workers’ Co-operative house, the show attracted over 300 workers, and, according to a *New Masses* report, sparked a “furious discussion led by Lozowick, [Emma Jo] Bashe, Gropper, and [I.] Klein,” which raged till after midnight. "The workers like the strong modern stuff,” reported the *New Masses*, yet “razzed the still lifes, nudes, and other pieces of stale academicism.”

On January 16, 1930, a second John Reed Club exhibit of proletarian art went on display. It traveled to several workers’ clubs in New York City and featured symposia led by Lozowick and Gropper on the nature of revolutionary art. Despite efforts to control the debate through a symposium, one showing at the Brownsville Youth Center inspired an “enthusiastic discussion” which lasted for three hours. Joseph Pass, a *New Masses* artist and John Reed Club member, reported that over 150 “young workers from the shops of New York” participated in that particular symposium and that they were “eager for knowledge and alert to the struggles going on in the world.”

The furious debate from the first show carried over to subsequent symposia. The discussion led by a selection of *New Masses* artists at the Brownsville Youth Center lasted until midnight, leaving many with more questions than answers. Judging from the report in the *New Masses* the next month, several contentions were expressed by those in attendance. Pass summarized his impressions of the workers’ reactions:

“This painting with a red flag in it, yes, we like the red flag and the workers demonstrating but there is something lacking in it to give us any emotional value…these lithographs of oil tanks,
they look clean, sturdy and beautiful, that is how they will look after the revolution...what is cubism?...why always picture policemen beating workers, why not show a worker landing on a cop once in a while, we are in a militant period, comrade...do we want these pictures labeled? Some said yes, some said very definitively no, we understand them, they are our pictures and these are our artists.”

The remarks at the various symposia display the influence that Michael Gold exercised upon this group of young artists. The workers’ discussions of the problems of revolutionary artists in a bourgeois world closely resembled Gold’s general message, even down to the clichés Gold used in the New Masses. Gold’s theories essentially dictated the conversation. However, some of Gold’s more doctrinaire assertions simply did not gain traction among the John Reed Club’s members. Gold’s vilification of still lifes, landscapes, and non-representational work was a chief concern at the discussions. When the question arose as to whether such pieces of art should be excluded from the category of “proletarian,” Pass reported that the “group as a whole was not antagonistic to them.”

Unfortunately for Gold, opening the proletarian art debate to the John Reed Clubs and beyond cast doubt on the ability of visual art to adhere to all of Gold’s principles in a doctrinaire manner. Others on the New Masses staff had countered Gold’s dogmatism in this respect on previous occasions. As the John Reed Clubs continued to hold exhibitions it became apparent that a measured redaction of Gold’s strictest tenets was necessary for the further expansion of proletarian art.
The radical novelist and *New Masses* contributor John Dos Passos had already expressed such dissent in the midst of Gold’s ideas, focusing his criticism on Gold’s policy of alienating middle-class intellectuals. Dos Passos, no less radical than Gold, sought to redirect proletarian criticism to tap the potential of middle-class intellectuals. He worried that Gold’s vision unfairly excluded these men and women who, in their roles as engineers, scientists, independent manual craftsmen, writers, artists, actors, and technicians, were “a necessary part of industrial society.” While Gold denigrated the “petty-bourgeois,” viewing them as inimical detractors of proletarian art, Dos Passos urged the *New Masses* to appeal to the middle-class technicians and white-collar workers because, “if you could convince them of the fact their jobs don’t depend on capitalism” then they might join the fight or at least stay neutral. This strategy similarly refuted Gold’s staunch anti-fellow traveler stance. Dos Passos embodied several voices within the *New Masses* group who felt that Gold too strictly limited his definition of ‘proletarian,’ thus weakening the base of intellectuals and artists eligible for the movement.

Louis Lozowick’s response to the discussions at the John Reed Club shows “What Should Revolutionary Artists Do Now?” also expressed points that countered Gold’s harsh characterization of middle-class, liberal intellectuals. Lozowick began by defending colleague’s work in “capitalist” magazines, such as Gellert’s part-time job at the *New Yorker* that had been brought up in a recent flurry of letters to editors of the *New Masses.* One letter accurately pointed out that many of the *New Masses’* so-called revolutionary artists exhibited their work at bourgeois galleries. In addition,
some questioned the John Reed Club’s acceptance of fine art at their shows; some felt the action-driven agitational cartoons and posters seemed more appropriate.

Lozowick, however, did not embrace this Gold-inspired backlash, as he countered these charges, arguing against the strict proletarian requirements. “Since art embodies ideology,” Lozowick wrote, “the difficulty is how far the artist can travel without compromising his revolutionary convictions...to illustrate: we should condemn a drawing attacking the Chinese revolution but not one illustrating an aeroplane.”95 In other words, lack of explicit revolutionary content, according to Lozowick, did not always disqualify the piece of art or the artist from radical conveyance.

Lozowick even reexamined the necessity of social content in works of proletarian art. Lozowick’s “machine art” creations were stylistically indebted to the Russian constructivists, and the industrial landscapes that followed were stark reminders of proletarian strife, but often left the workers out of the composition. Quasi-Futurist methods in the breakdown of space and suggestions of motion crept into some of Lozowick’s New Masses illustrations as well. As Lozowick’s desolate, geometric urban scenes appeared throughout the 1928-1930 editions of the magazine, his lapses into constructivist and futurist motifs drew the ire of a fellow contributor. Pauline Zutrinker, in a letter entitled “Machine Art is Bourgeois,” criticized Lozowick’s expression of a modernist tendency since she felt it did not adequately celebrate the cause of the laboring masses: just as the “jazz artist composes for a bastard capitalist generation and Mozart for a romantic bourgeois, the machine artists merely exploit opportunities in the world of
art.” According to her view of revolutionary art, Lozowick’s constructivist styles only benefited an “enlightened bourgeois” and failed to champion the worker’s struggle. Zutrinker maintained a strict Marxist view of the proletariat: “the heroes of the working class are like Atlas, carrying the burden of the universe on their shoulders. The worker hero represents the forces of creation. He is the embodiment of the new world order.” The vastly important role of the worker, Zutrinker reasoned, should not be ignored for the “slime sophistication of the petty bourgeoisie.”

Zutrinker’s criticism is once again testament to the intellectual leadership of Gold’s hard-line approach. Her dismissive interpretation of Lozowick’s proletarian art was based solely on his stylistic resemblance to the modernist, and in her mind, bourgeois, Constructivist and Futurist movements. Lozowick’s reply to Zutrinker highlights his reverence for the analytic approach of the constructivists—“[o]ne way in which a revolutionary can affirm allegiance to his cause is... by recognizing the paramount importance of machinery and technique in the achievement of the revolution and the functioning of the new society.” Despite the direct physical absence of a heroic worker, Lozowick celebrated workers’ triumph and importance through a more subtle technique, heavily influenced by the revolutionary expressions of the Russian avant-garde. Lozowick’s “machine art” achieved its revolutionary content through rather indirect, less didactic means.

Lozowick argued that revolutionary caricature, or cartoons, was inherently negative, and limited the reach of proletarian art. By depicting an image of all the aspects of life by which the revolutionary standpoint is more implicit—meaning the industrial scene—the artist’s work can make a lasting
positive contribution to proletarian culture. Thus, compositions of geometric forms resembling or evoking images of steel, iron, gears, and other machines, despite their apparently abstract qualities, could suffice as revolutionary worker art.

Unlike Gold, Lozowick did not compel proletarian art to exclude any and all traditional methods associated with fine art; some measure of borrowing from past masters was permissible. For example, he had no qualms about revolutionary art’s appeal to bourgeois aesthetic standards. For Lozowick, art qualified as proletarian as long as it made an effort to investigate or reify an essential social or economic concern of Marxism. Lozowick reminded readers of the Soviets’ attitude towards the arts—“[E]ven in the days of deepest famine and civil war the Bolsheviks made every effort to preserve old art and encourage the new.”

In these supporting arguments Lozowick refuted a deep tenet of Gold’s dogma, effectively taking the first step in breaking down the formal elements of proletarian visual art. By asserting his belief that the audience must be more tuned to the artist’s general ideology, rather than dismissive of iconography not explicitly inciting revolution, he disambiguated the character of proletarian visual art from a central tenet of Gold’s theory. That said, it would be wrong to come away thinking that Lozowick and Gold completely disagreed, since they both felt strongly that art should constitute a register of the reality of the worker’s life. The impasse between the two essentially breaks down to a style vs. content debate, with Lozowick offering a new slant derived from his attempt to fit proletarian criticism into the visual arts.
It should be noted that Lozowick was a devoted admirer of the Russian Constructivists, which invariably biased his conception of revolutionary art in its formative American stages. In 1930, Lozowick co-authored a book with Joseph Freeman and Joshua Kunitz on art at the eve of the Bolshevik revolution entitled *Voices of October*. Lozowick referred to the Constructivists as “perhaps the most typical school of the revolution.” “Rising on the wreck of capitalism,” the Constructivists created the “most ambitious revision of aesthetic theory and practice...to meet the requirements of the new collectivity” wrote Lozowick. Another passage draws parallels between the constructivists’ methods and his ‘machine’ art—

“The Revolution, the Constructivists said, requires an art that will have roots in the standardized industry of its time, embody the collective aspiration of the revolutionary workers; an art which, by making its appeal through vision to consciousness, will mould the will of the masses to revolutionary ends. This aims could be attained by choosing the materials which form the daily environment of the workers and which are the true product of our age: steel, concrete, glass, paper, coal...This does not mean that he [the artist] will copy the machine; he will build his own work with the same precision of clearly defined form with the same order in mathematical relation of parts, with the same economy in the choice of means and the adjustment of structure to function.”

Clearly the Constructivist style had permeated Lozowick’s images; many of his lithographs contain further evidence of the similar use of industrial elements (fig. 11). Like the constructivists, he also reasoned that the ability to reproduce the environment in which the masses existed counted among the proletarian qualities of a work of art.

Lozowick and Gold’s disagreement essentially paralleled the cleavage within the party over the Constructivist’s legacy. Almost completely reviled
in Russia by 1930, the Constructivist aesthetic had been lambasted as an enemy to the revolution ever since the rise of Stalin and socialist realism. In essence, Constructivism was susceptible to dual interpretations: as an abstract avant-garde movement which rarely depicted social themes, it violated Gold’s insistence that proletarian art emanate organically from the workers and represent their struggle. Yet in another sense, its figurative use of industrial elements attempted to symbolize the daily labor of collective socialism. In America, however, the Constructivist’s modern and decorative appearance, lack of utilitarian qualities, and its embrace by a ‘bourgeois’ avant-garde hampered its reputation among communists in the New Masses circle. Americans were troubled by the depersonalized, mechanic images, contending that they celebrated the most powerful tool of capitalist oppression, the machine. For Americans rooted in Ashcan realism and opposed to the stylistics of Cubism, the proper approach to proletarian art required, as Gold directed, the depiction of laborers, not their oppressive mechanisms.

Even Lozowick, despite protests of Gold’s basis in content, found himself gravitating towards a John Reed Club aesthetic norm by the end of the 1920s. Lozowick synthesized the Constructivist elements of geometric abstraction with representations of workers in industrial situations. His print in the November 1930 issue of the New Masses entitled Birth of a Skyscraper (fig. 12) exemplifies this reconciliation. He recalls in his memoirs:

“...I changed to a more realistic style. I do not think that it was due to a feeling of guilt but it was due to a feeling that this was a little bit more adequate to the times. But I still retained the formal qualities that were found in my early work. My work was industrial, factories and so on. I always believed,
then and now, that this does not necessarily represent capitalism; it represents something that will ultimately be the property of the worker." \(^{104}\)

Ironically, it was during a highly anticipated lecture by Diego Rivera at the club’s New York headquarters that the deepest ideological divisions within the John Reed Club School of Art were laid bare. Rivera, along with Orozco and David Alfar Siqueiros, were responsible for the powerful revival of mural painting in fresco in both Mexico and the United States. \(^{105}\) American radicals were influenced by their mural work in Mexico, specifically the large-scale project at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City. Both Siqueiros and Rivera were involved in the radical Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, Sculptors and Allied Trades, a revolutionary union under control of the Mexican Communist Party. \(^{106}\) In 1931, Rivera received a commission to execute a series of frescos (fig. 13) at the Detroit Institute of Fine Arts, where Edsel Ford, president of Ford Motors, sat as board Chairman. Rivera’s Detroit murals, while not outwardly agitational, took as their main subject the daily labor of the Ford factory automakers Rivera’s realistic portrayal of workers gave communists and some proletarian aestheticians enough iconographic material to allow a revolutionary interpretation of the panels. The radical community knew of Rivera’s true opinion on art. That very year, he stated quite clearly in the influential *Modern Quarterly*, “I want to be a propagandist of communism and I want it to be in all that I can think, in all that I can speak, in all that I can write, and in all that I can paint. I want to use my art as a weapon.” \(^{107}\)
Still more controversial than his Detroit murals were the frescoes Rivera executed for Rockefeller Center. In 1933 they were torn down due to a portrait of Lenin included in the mural. This episode quickly became a rallying point for artists and radical intellectuals alike, as both were outraged at the breach of artistic freedom. Rivera, like the rest of the Mexican muralists, was a hero to the aspiring proletarian artists in the *New Masses.*

Even through all of the debating at club meetings, those who organized Rivera’s visit to the John Reed Club could have expected the reception to be nothing less that reverent. After all, Rivera not only echoed many of Gold’s larger themes, but his murals also combined his communist ideology with rarely matched aesthetic proficiency. Rivera’s work literally was the basis upon which much of the proletarian art debate had been advanced heretofore; his experience in Mexico was a living testament to the axiom ‘art as a weapon in the class-struggle.’

Rivera’s lecture to the club addressed and reiterated the poignant issues of proletarian art. He addressed the packed house in French and regaled the applauding audience, punctuating his lectures with familiar communist party one-liners. “Every proletarian artist must be a dialectical materialist,” he proclaimed to the crowd, “We shall use our art as weapons as we assault the barricades of our reactionary enemies.” Yet, according to one account of the occasion, in the middle of Rivera’s lecture, some individual members exposed the artist’s apparent deviations from the assumed program of proletarian art. Bill Dunne, editor of the Communist newspaper the *Daily Worker,* spoke first: “Comrade Diego Rivera, you are an opportunist who sells his talent to the Rockefellers and other capitalists!” Portions of the
crowd that were angry with Rivera continued with the insults; Albert Halper, a writer, remembers people in the audience calling Rivera a “traitor to the revolution,” a “traitor to the struggling masses,” and still worse, a Trotskyite and a rat.¹¹⁰

Dunne’s denigration of an artist who worked for capitalist outlets, though contradictory given the experience of many of the New Masses’ illustrators, represented a serious concern for John Reed Club members eager for a definition of a true proletarian artist. In theory, Rivera’s Detroit and Rockefeller murals violated Gold’s directives. Sadly even Rivera himself forcefully delineated the dichotomy between bourgeois patrons and authentic proletarian art. Rivera identified two fronts upon which the proletariat should “take possession of art to serve as a weapon in the class struggle,” one being the struggle against the production of bourgeois art, and the other being the struggle to advance the ability of the proletariat to produce art on its own¹¹¹—neither of which was advanced by his American murals.

Yet, in a statement revealing his Trotskyite beliefs, Rivera defended his contributions to Ford and the Rockefellers. “Since art is a product that nourishes human beings it is subject to…the law of supply and demand just as is any other product necessary to life,” Rivera observed. Therefore, proletarian artists must presently be a “striking and heroic exception,” and accept the fact that “art of a revolutionary character can be produced under the circumstances of bourgeois demand.”¹¹²

As it turned out, Rivera later became a sympathizer of Trotsky, mostly due to his falling out with Stalin after a trip to Russia in 1927.¹¹³ Though he
had been a staunch propagandist during the early 1930s, by 1938 he espoused an anti-Stalinist aesthetic position associated with followers of Trotsky. In a manifesto drafted with André Breton entitled “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” he advocated formal freedom for artists. In fact, it was through Rivera that Trotsky was able to secure asylum in Mexico. Still, even at his most ideologically Trotskyite point, he never wavered from the belief that “the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively… in the Revolution.” Internationally, the avant-garde latched onto Trotsky’s aesthetic writings as a tool justifying the revolutionary potential of their non-objective experiments. This was far from the case with Rivera, whose work throughout the 1930s happened to abide by the artistic principle of the Socialist realism, the Stalinist aesthetic policy instituted in 1934.

Apart from the obvious indication that the John Reed Club members were extremely harsh towards sympathizers of Trotsky, the incident at Rivera’s lecture shows us that by the mid 1930s, Gold’s hard-line approach gained little traction once transferred into the plastic arts. The John Reed Club responded to the tumult within its ranks by reevaluating some of the critical assumptions of its strategy, especially toning down the alienating class war that they launched at middle-class liberals.

As the John Reed Clubs continued to hold their annual shows, the content that passed as revolutionary moved further and further away from Gold’s firm definition of proletarian art toward a revised and much compromised aesthetic. The criticism Gold endured from 1926 to 1931 proved in large part to be the catalyst of this shift; caricature came to be viewed as
narrow, the directly agitational images demurred, and eventually the shows solicited work from fellow travelers.

The leaders of the John Reed Club art school refigured proletarian art for the sake of its own survival and gradually moved toward soliciting the liberal fellow traveler and other less-stringent revolutionary artists to the John Reed camp. A sequence of group shows held at the Club’s gallery from 1932 to 1935 provides the best illustration of this trend. By 1935, the line between what constituted revolutionary proletarian images from those simply concerned with ‘social content’ had been effectively erased.

The new campaign that tacitly courted “sympathetic”—though not formally committed—intellectuals stemmed from changes in strategy suggested at the John Reed Club’s 1932 national convention. The members of the club derived their intellectual identities with Manichean disregard for subtlety; “bourgeois intellectuals,” were to them the “other” force against whom they competed as sworn enemies of the working class. However, since their goal was to attract new members through conversion, they accepted minor reversions of their core revolutionary principles and permitted contact and dialogue with capitalist intellectuals.

The clubs adopted several resolutions that were indicative of this change. They stressed establishing contacts with organizations that might harbor “potentially sympathetic elements” and went so far as to permit “exhibiting art in bourgeois galleries whenever the opportunity presents itself.” Alongside their usual strategy of submitting contributions to revolutionary periodicals, they encouraged “contributions to bourgeois periodicals” for the purpose of instigating “controversies with bourgeois
critics and writers” concerning the “relation of intellectuals to the class struggle” and “the role of the intellectual” in general.

In some respects, the compromising strategy was refreshing to the proletarian culture movement, which had long experienced the drawbacks of preaching its beliefs to an already-converted audience. The New Masses circulated to a small and politically homogeneous audience of communists, disappointingly few of whom, it seemed, were actual workers. With the hardship brought on by the great depression, the communist party felt its message could resonate with an economically disenchanted middle class. Logistically, this appeal had to look beyond the forums of the New Masses and the Daily Worker. Yet to gain traction outside of their intellectual realm, artists and writers of the John Reed Club were forced to make concessions to coincide with this new target class that could potentially be radicalized by the depression.

During the early 1930s a host of voices within the United States Communist Party began to suggest a strategy of class collaboration to combat the rising tide of fascism in Europe. A measured alliance with other liberal groups, they reasoned, could create a ‘popular front’ of sympathetic causes. In one sense, the aesthetic component of this shift preceded the political embrace of the Communist party’s popular front. As early as autumn 1932, Diego Rivera had articulated the necessity for class collaboration in the arts. Rivera argued that for the proletariat to “learn to make use of beauty” and “develop its sensibilities,” it ought to use the “works of art which the bourgeoisie, because of special advantages of training, has produced.”119 Rivera also mandated proactive development of
proletarian culture. The proletariat should not “wait for some painter of good will or good intention to come to them from the bourgeoisie.”¹²⁰ In order to create an art superior to that of the bourgeoisie yet still proletarian in spirit, artists must collaborate with those “who sympathize and are in alliance with the proletariat.”¹²¹

In Rivera’s quest for the ideal proletarian art, the ends justified the means, in the sense that he was prepared to borrow elements from bourgeois artists in order to placate the masses’ thirst for art. Rivera’s approach diametrically opposed Gold’s theory: Gold categorically ignored the bourgeois standards of beauty and instead focused on the work’s content and its relationship to real life proletarian struggle. Gold never drafted his theory with a strategy in mind, since in his estimation, the art of the bourgeoisie would disappear with the fall of the capitalist world order. Rivera was considerably more battle weary and pragmatic. Having witnessed failure, defeat, and counter-revolution in Mexico, he was among the first to approach the question of proletarian art from a realistic point of view. The John Reed Clubs followed his pragmatism.

Held at New York’s ACA gallery in November 1932, “Twenty John Reed Club Artists on Proletarian and Revolutionary Themes” was the first exhibition in the string of shows that were demonstrative of the club’s relaxed proletarian criteria. All of the participants were familiar to the *New Masses*, and many of the participants in the show were active in the communist press outside of the *New Masses* as cartoonists and pamphlet illustrators, including Jacob Burck, Adolph Dehn, Walter Quirt, Phillip Ribak, Raphael Soyer, Phil Bard, and Max Spivak.¹²² As a result, the contents of the
exhibition were more on par with the directly political strategy of the communist press, employing cartoon-like images that conveyed explicitly revolutionary themes. The images on print and lithograph were particularly reliant on didactic political scenes intended to arouse the audience’s class-consciousness. Four lithographs from Gellert’s *Karl Marx, ‘Capital’ in Lithographs* that were included in the show exemplified these aesthetic traits. Gellert opposed heroic and burly worker-protagonists against the thoroughly lampooned capitalist owner class to illustrate some of Marx’s most mundane economic concepts.

Still, embedded within the shallow cartoon genre were formal characteristics of proletarian art that satisfied the *New Masses*’ ideal. In Gellert’s *Secret of Primary Accumulation* (fig. 14), for example, a proletarian figure inhabits a roughly cubist industrial landscape larded over by a capitalist Goliath. Similar to the strategy of his earlier labor murals, Gellert invests immense power in symbolic figures. At once it becomes apparent how much his visual language was in accordance with the lucid class-antagonism mandated by Gold’s fiction and criticism. The traditional symbols of worker oppression are at work and occupy an essential allegorical role.

This proved to be the last of the John Reed Shows to adhere faithfully to Gold’s inelastic proletarian requirements. In 1933, the John Reed Club opened its exhibition doors to fellow travelers and liberal artists, including some Regionalists and urban scene painters, whose art loosely dealt with ‘social content.’ Many of the luminaries inside the John Reed Clubs felt proletarian expression was hampered by the limits of cartoon-like caricature. Worse yet, the functionalism associated with ‘Art as Weapon in the Class
Struggle’ gained little respect outside the tight _New Masses_ circle. Lozowick led in this regard, as his industrial landscapes often seemed more sublime than revolutionary. _Barge Dwellers Sunday_ (fig. 15) printed in the _New Masses_ January 1929 employs an indirect reference to socialism by depicting the proletariat. Such work fit into the John Reed Club ideology since the class struggle of the masses and their alienation under capitalism was implicit in the image. Lozowick’s _Barge Dwellers Sunday_, however, operated within the ‘art as a weapon’ ideology without the vulgarity of agitational caricature. Lozowick’s work typified a gray-area in proletarian art where visual artists fell short of enforcing a rigidly defined pictorial aesthetic due to fears of relinquishing their possible consideration as ‘fine art.’

“The Social Viewpoint in Art” opened January 26th, 1933, at the club’s loft at 450 6th Avenue. The exhibition’s title alone was uncharacteristically vague for a club that swore to the inseparability of art and revolutionary politics. The exhibition maintained the John Reed Club’s pedagogic intentions, however. The organizers differentiated between the work of John Reed Club members and that by various non-members with small red cards next to each piece by a member. Still, this show was a crucial redaction of most of Gold’s vitriol against the so-called bourgeois artists. A handful of the artists present had minimal connections to the left, including the Regionalists John Stuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton, and urban scene painters Isabel Bishop and Kenneth Hayes Miller. Also worth noting was the presence of pieces by foreign radical artists, including Orozco and Siqueiros, and the German expressionist George Grosz.
With the John Reed Club’s embrace of social content as the focus of the show’s 200 works, the group elevated art’s iconographic pertinence above the artists’ ideological purity. Still, competing conjectures about the rationale behind the show’s theme exist. Andrew Hemingway’s interpretation holds that the inclusion of the American scene painters was to juxtapose their “unclear though sympathetic social viewpoint” from the club members’ revolutionary viewpoint.\(^1\) The purposeful demarcation of John Reed Club work supports this conjecture, as does the introduction to the shows’ catalogue in which Lozowick and Jacob Burck state how the visiting artists “simply depicted the scene around them,” as opposed to the proletarian artists, who strove to depict the “revolutionary class struggle.”\(^1\)

The young art critic Meyer Schapiro, who reviewed the show in the *New Masses* under the pseudonym John Kwai, took a different view. He interpreted the show as a confused effort to rally artists to a united front, pitting any artists who depicted factories, workers, and farmers against the modernists, whose tendency of representing “bananas and prisms” was such an anathema to the spirit of proletarian art.\(^1\) Schapiro challenged the John Reed Club’s expansion of its show’s ranks, claiming that the mere depiction of everyday life did not constitute any measure of liberalism on the part of the artist—“tame picturesque views of cowboys, crap-shooters and fat shoppers issuing from department stores” (referring to Wood, Benton, and Bishop respectively) “were to be expected, for they are exactly what these artists have been making with the applause of bourgeois critics for many years.” Schapiro lamented that the “social viewpoint in art” inaccurately
“include[d] any picture with a worker, a factory or a city-street, no matter how remote from the needs of a class-conscious worker.”

While Schapiro’s critique of the lack of revolutionary integrity at a John Reed Club Show seems entirely legitimate, Jacob Burck’s fiery rebuttal of Schapiro’s review in the *New Masses* defended the show’s strategy on several counts. Burck denied that the club had taken a step backward or relaxed its proletarian standards. To the contrary, the Club believed that the invited non-member artists were the “leaders in the leftward movement of artists...interested in building a new cultural movement.” They were invited to the John Reed Club show to encourage their revolutionary artistic development. Burck and the club members hoped that by exhibiting alongside trained proletarian artists, their revolutionary art might persuade the American scene painters and their followers to join the cause. Burck pointed to Schapiro’s “extreme leftism”—meaning he held the Trotskyist view that ‘proletarian art can exist only in a class-less society,’—to explain his incapability of fathoming the Club’s ‘united front’ strategy.

Schapiro, who harbored contradictory and fluctuating Marxist sentiments throughout this decade, was in fact no less seriously committed to the development of socialism through art than Gold. Having written on the “social mission” of architecture just a few months earlier in the *New Masses*, he noted that the new international style of Le Corbusier “impl[ied] social revolution” and “anticipate[d] the style of a socialist republic.” At the end of his review of the “Social Viewpoint in Art” exhibition, he voiced support for the former strategy of the John Reed Club and echoed Gold’s vilification of the bohemian artist—“The artist who must produce daily a
trenchant pictorial commentary on events for a workers’ newspaper,” essentially referring to the caricature approach of the *New Masses*’ artists, “quickly develops an imagination and form adequate for his task.” “But the artist left to himself”—or the disengaged bohemian loathed by Gold—“remains a confused individual, struggling for a precarious living, fussing over a picture of ‘American life.’” Thus, by clamoring for recently abandoned functionalist agitprop, Schapiro became the first to point out the practical flaws of proletarian art’s new ‘united front’ mentality.

Under this guise, American followers of Trotsky would oppose this brand of proletarian art, whose iconographic cornerstone lent itself to class-collaboration in the coming decade. Though still deeply radical in their ideology, the artists who followed the John Reed Club’s logic agreed on social content as a new unifying aesthetic program. William Gropper, Anton Refregier, Hugo Gellert, and other foreign born radicals whose art once seemed to provide the literal imaging for Gold’s Marxist iconoclasm, now found themselves lumped together with a host of American realists, who were frequently co-opted by reactionary critics for nationalistic purposes.

Gold’s ideas did have some desirable impact for the cadre of artists around him. Gold’s audacious assault on bourgeois aesthetes, who conceived of all artists as abiding by the model of a detached bohemian, a kind of playboy with no certain role in society except as an outsider, slowly showed signs of success. Though Gold was helped by the dire economic situation of the 1930s, a significant number of artists during this period repudiated the once celebrated modernist detachment. However, in order to continue to subscribe to the new meaningful position within society, artists with radical
social content were pigeonholed into the stolid iconographic demarcations that stumbled out of the John Reed Club meetings. Thus, a preoccupation with social content became the criterion upon which an artist could celebrate his or her connection to society, while the iconographic choices of modernism and academicism appeared further removed from the masses.

This was quite a beginning to a debate that witnessed two conflicting iconographic notions battle for the production of proletarian art. One based on Gold’s insistence that art be a realistic, tacitly agitational register of the workers’ struggle, suitably crafted for mass dissemination, faltered. The counter interpretation, which maintained for proletarian criticism the traditions associated with ‘fine art,’ elevated a work’s ideological capacity above it mere iconography; this constructed a loophole allowing artists whose art was socially relevant to join the vibrant company of leftist intellectuals.

The haphazard track that led to the popular front strategy was not the only step towards New Deal collaboration, (the concept of the cultural worker as developed through the John Reed Clubs was of paramount importance) but it formed one of the central iconographic precedents out of which the Federal Art Projects were envisioned.

For these Marxist artists, proletarian art and proletarian criticism was an effective method by which artists could illustrate—both literally and figuratively—the class virtues of the workers. Simultaneously, it served as an agent of enlightenment that would precipitate the fall of capitalism through forceful expression of the aesthetic and social limitations of the bourgeois class. In these formative years, proletarian artists participated in a dialogue
about the limits and methods by which their art might advance a socio-political viewpoint. They were ingrained with art’s powers to engage social change and express ideology. Under Gold’s leadership, the prominent artists and illustrators in the *New Masses* and John Reed Club established the visual groundwork for the artist as cultural worker identity.

As the next chapter will show in greater detail, the aesthetic policy that eased the radical artists into New Deal collaboration fell upon the official proceedings of the Artist’s Union and the American Artists’ Congress. These leftist organizations propagated the cultural worker model with heightened urgency and built off of the aesthetic basis of the John Reed Clubs. Meanwhile, the federal government planned for massive patronage programs in order to ease artists’ economic situation during the Great Depression.
2 Gold, Michael, “Is this it?” New Masses (May 1926) p. 3
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
7 Gold, Michael, “Floyd Dell Resigns,” New Masses (June, 1929) p 10
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Trotsky is credited with referring to artists and intellectuals who were not formally committed to the Russian revolution as ‘fellow travelers.’ The term was picked up by American radicals, especially Gold, who wields it as somewhat of an insult, despite it actually denoting a serious group of artists in Soviet Russia.
17 Ibid. 226
18 Cahill, Holger, The Reminiscences of Holger Cahill, 1887-1960 (Columbia University Oral History Collection, 1957) p. 54
22 Granich, Irwin, “Towards a Proletarian Art” The Liberator (February, 1921) p. 20-3
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid. 170
29 Ibid. 16
31 Ibid. 90
36 Ibid. 26
37 Ibid. 29
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid. p. 678
41 Gold, Michael, “Proletarian Literature,” New Masses (September, 1930) p. 4
42 Gold, Michael, “3 Schools of U.S. Writing,” New Masses (September, 1928) p. 13
44 Ibid.
45 Gold, Michael, “America Needs A Critic.” New Masses (October, 1926) p. 7
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Gold, Michael, “Go Left, Young Writers!” New Masses (January, 1929) p. 3
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 “Letters From Readers,” New Masses (September, 1929) p. 22
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Gold, Michael, “Gertrude Stein: A literary Idiot,” New Masses (January, 1933) p. 20
60 Gold, Michael, “Proletarian Literature,” New Masses (September, 1930) p. 4
62 Gold, Michael, “Go Left, Young Writers!” New Masses (January, 1929) p. 3
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Murphy, James F., The Proletarian Moment; The Controversy over Leftism in Literature (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinos, 1991) p. 122
69 Gold, Michael, “A Letter to Workers’ Art Groups.” New Masses (September, 1929) p. 16
70 Hemingway, Andrew, Artists on the Left; American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956 (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002) p. 20
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 “ A New Program for Writers,” New Masses (January, 1930) p. 6
76 “Gropper on Russia,” New Masses (February, 1929) p. 21
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
81 Reed, Alma. Introduction, José Clemente Orozco (New York: Delphic Studios, 1932)
82 In New Masses (December, 1928) p. 12
83 “A New Program for Writers,” and Walt Carmon’s notes of the activities of the John Reed Clubs detail announced the art school program, New Masses (January, 1930) p. 6
Ibid.
Ibid.
Carmon, Walt, “John Reed Club,” New Masses (January, 1930) p. 10
Pass, Joseph, “At a Worker’s Art Exhibit,” New Masses (May, 1930) p. 26
Ibid.
Ibid.
Dos Passos, John, “Intellectuals in America; Whom Can We Appeal To?” New Masses (April, 1930) p. 14
Lozowick, Louis, “What Should Revolutionary Artists Do Now?” New Masses (December, 1930) p. 23
Jessup, Harry, “Letter to the Editor,” New Masses (October, 1930) p. 27
“Machine Art is Bourgeois.” New Masses (November, 1929) p. 31
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Egbert, Donald Drew. “Socialism and American Art.” In Socialism and American Life (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1952) p. 723
Ibid.
Diego Rivera, “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art,” Modern Quarterly, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Autumn 1932) in David Shapiro, Social Realism; Art as a Weapon (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973) p. 64
Rivera as quoted in Albert Halper, Good-Bye Union Square; A Writer’s memoir of the Thirties (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970) p. 94
Ibid.
Halper, Albert, Good-Bye Union Square; A Writer’s memoir of the Thirties (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970) p. 96
Ibid.
Egbert, Donald Drew. “Socialism and American Art.” In Socialism and American Life (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1952) p. 723
Ibid. p. 724
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid. 51
John Reed Club, Exhibition: Sculpture, Painting, and Drawing: The Social Viewpoint in Art, 26 January-16 February, in Hemingway, Andrew, Artists on the Left; American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956, p. 51
Kwait, John, “John Reed Club Art Exhibition,” New Masses (February, 1933) p. 23
Ibid.
Burck, Jacob, “Sectarianism in Art,” New Masses (April, 1933) p. 26
Ibid.
Ibid.
Kwait, John, “John Reed Club Art Exhibition,” New Masses (February, 1933) p. 23

68
Chapter Two

The Cultural Worker in an American Context

“The revolutionary workers have hammered out, in years of strife, their own ethics, their own philosophy and economics. Now, when their ancient heroism is entering the cankered and aristocratic field of art, there is an amazing reevaluation of the old value manifest there. We hear strange and beautiful things from Russia. We hear that in the worker’s art there are no longer the obsessions and fears that haunted the brains of the solitary artists. There is tranquility and humane strength...the new artist feels the mass-sufficiency, and suffers no longer that morbid sense of inferiority before the universe that was the work of the solitaires.”

-Michael Gold

We have already explored the ways that Gold’s championing of the ‘Art as a Weapon’ ideology had manifested itself in the iconography of the art of the New Masses group towards the beginning of the 1930s. In addition to the aesthetic developments that emerged out of early proletarian art, the work of Gold and his followers in the New Masses and the John Reed Club transformed how the artists viewed themselves in society. This chapter takes sharper focus on the way that the New Masses and John Reed Club artists came to define a role for themselves which rationalized their inclusion in New Deal relief programs such as the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (the Section) and finally the Federal Art Project under Holger Cahill (FAP). Stemming from their original contempt for disengaged bohemians, the John Reed Club and the New Masses group constructed the artist as ‘cultural worker.’ The artist moved away from the
cultural province of the bourgeois elite in an affirmation of Gold’s early theories.

Although the John Reed Clubs and the New Masses still figured centrally at the beginning of this process, two new institutions quickly replaced them. The Artists’ Union and the American Artists’ Congress assumed the roles of chief spokesman for the advancement of the cultural worker identity to supply the rationale for artists’ relief through federal patronage.

Any serious consideration of the artistic identity of the New Masses’ group cannot ignore the colossal influence of the artist’s groups in the Soviet Union during this time. The leading voices within the New Masses and the John Reed Clubs looked to the Soviet Union for cultural cues. Radical American artists lionized the experience of the artist in post-revolutionary Russia; in many cases, they borrowed rhetoric or replicated the concrete Soviet plans for organization. Yet most importantly, they envied the Soviet artists’ professional engagements with their own government.

The New Masses and the John Reed Club demand reexamination under a new lens: one that explores the relationship between the Clubs and the Soviet’s new cultural policy that elevated the artist to the larger role of a cultural worker. By the end of 1932, the New Masses group had successfully cultivated the artist-as-cultural-worker paradigm and transformed the proletarian ‘Art as a Weapon’ aesthetic into a campaign for the public use of art.
Gold and Trotsky

In 1925, International Publishers released Rose Strunsky’s English translation of Leon Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* in the United States. The distribution of this monumental work of early Soviet cultural criticism sent shockwaves though the international socialist community. The publication of Trotsky’s work inaugurated a devoted following among intellectuals seeking a socialist aesthetic that rationalized the value of artistic freedom and encouraged avant-garde experimentation.

Scarcely a year after its translation, Gold read the monumental work, carefully considering his relationship to the arguments Trotsky had set forth. On some counts, Gold enthusiastically embraced Trotsky’s positions. Gold’s comments in the *New Masses* approved of how “Trotsky [went] through all the schools; touch[ed] on their falsities,” and decried “the mere veneer of art that coated all of these Parnassians and Symbolists…” Gold, too, had much contempt for such literary and artistic charlatans, who despite external commitment to socialism “lived only for art,” and once exposed to power “became transformed into hysterical enemies of the working-class.”

Gold acknowledged that his position, similar to Trotsky’s, relied on the condemnation of aesthetic groups “born in bourgeois bohemianism.” Gold and Trotsky even agreed on their essential estimations of art: Gold, like Trotsky, approached it “with the scientific tools of Marxian methodology.” Both men championed revolutionary working-class art that expressed Soviet goals for socialist construction. In the art of the socialist future envisioned in Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution*, “the direct cooperation of art and all branches of technique will become of paramount importance.” Gold’s
general accord on these themes permitted his partial celebration of Trotsky’s book as “an amazing performance” of objective class-conscious criticism.\(^5\)

That said, Trotsky’s main point in *Literature and Revolution* ran contrary to Gold’s theories. In a single sentence, Trotsky states his opposition to Gold’s concept of proletarian art: “It is fundamentally incorrect to contrast bourgeois culture and bourgeois art with proletarian culture and proletarian art,” the latter of which “will never exist, because the proletarian régime is temporary and transient.”\(^{16}\) Trotsky maintained that the goal of the revolution was to create a classless society brought about by the rise of the proletariat, thus rendering Gold’s calls for art based on the transitory proletariat class distinctions shortsighted. Trotsky’s critique was in no way a conscience response to Gold’s combative American version of proletarian culture. We know absolutely that Trotsky’s essays were a direct critique of his contemporary A.A. Bogdanov and the *Proletcult* ideology that Gold had tried to emulate in America.

Sensing his ability to escape specific criticism, Gold concentrated his discussion of *Literature and Revolution* on American culture, highlighting how Americans, and especially the *New Masses*’ group, should emulate Trotsky’s critical engagement of art. Gold’s title for the review, “America Needs a Critic,” might have been a shrewd piece of self-promotion on Gold’s part, since his essays in the *New Masses* celebrated Trotsky’s virtues. His prophetic call for an American version of Trotsky, one who would treat American art with the same scientific and class-conscious criticism as the Soviet, tactfully ignored Trotsky’s denunciatory stance on proletarian art. Whether or not his audience believed Gold to be the “critic” that America needed, Gold carefully
mined Trotsky’s book for larger points on which he and the Soviet intellectual wholeheartedly agreed.

Gold might have preferred to keep his readers in the dark about Trotsky’s formidable challenge to proletarian art, since they were for the most part naïve to the finer points of Trotsky’s philosophy—especially the fact that Literature and Revolution targeted Bogdanov’s Proletcult group. Regardless, Gold once again took a well-founded criticism of proletarian art’s dogma and turned it into an impassioned ideological rallying cry.

Trotsky recognized that the brief and transitory nature of the dictatorship of the proletariat would pose a serious challenge for proletarian art. Trotsky wondered:

“Would the proletariat have enough time to create a “proletarian” culture? The proletariat regards its dictatorship as a brief period of transition... [t]he period of revolution, on a world scale, will last not months and not years, but decades—decades, but not centuries...”

Gold steadfastly defended his position concerning the proletariat’s ability to create art. In his review, Gold directly answers Trotsky’s question above:

“Even if for only fifty years the proletariat remains in subjection to capitalist society, will there not be some art growing out of this mass of intense, tragic, active human beings? Will they not sing, and need cartoons, plays, novels, like other human beings? Are they not studying, groping, reaching out hungrily for culture? It is not a matter of theory; it is a fact that a proletarian style is emerging in art. It will be as transitory as other styles; but it will have its day.”

The extent to which Gold was embroiled in the cultural conflict that defined the late 1920s and early 1930s, as a subject, is too detailed to explore here entirely. In hindsight, Gold’s squabble with Trotsky in 1926 was an early indication of what would become Trotsky’s controversial anti-Stalinist or
“leftist” ideas. Not only did his factionalist “left-opposition” get him expelled from the Communist Party, on the aesthetic front, Trotsky’s ideas would make him the chief enemy of Gold’s brand of proletarian art in America and of socialist realism in the Soviet Union.

This tumultuous relationship need not cloud our comprehension of the most meaningful element of Gold’s relationship to Trotsky and other early Soviet cultural theorists. The two intellectuals shared an underlying goal that sought to combine art with the more practical areas of society. Quite simply, Gold was enthralled by the high priority that Trotsky gave to cultural issues in the new Soviet state. Gold wrested art from the vice grip of aristocratic bohemians and the avant-garde cultural elite, while Trotsky spoke of a utopian socialist state where a “new art would signify that the historic seed”—the proletariat—“has not only grown into a plant, but has flowered.”

Gold illustrated to readers that, despite “occupying a group of positions that would correspond to several cabinet offices in this country,” Trotsky still found time to devote an entire book to the examination of the Russian arts. “Art is not a plaything,” Gold added to his exaltation of Trotsky, “it is an organic part of the [Socialist] Revolution, and therefore it wins his concentration as intensely as the defense of Petrograd against the British invaders.”

Just as Gold’s Americanization of the Proletcult credo “Art as a Weapon in the Class Struggle” animated the aesthetic debate within the New Masses circle, his presentation of the early Soviet contention, via Trotsky, that art was “as necessary as bread” introduced the New Masses circle to what would be a decade long embrace of this expanded role for art in society. In this respect,
the message that accompanied Gold’s review was typical of the New Masses clientele’s mimetic relationship to the Soviet Union. Several ideological leaders within the New Masses and the John Reed Clubs propagated this development through the identification with key cultural aspects of the Bolshevik’s second five-year plan. This identity was crucial to this period, when the new identities of leftist American artists lead to the formation of their own Artists’ Union.

**The Logistical Dilemmas for Cultural Exchange**

John Reed, the radical American expatriate journalist (and namesake for the John Reed Clubs), came to be so revered due in part to his firsthand accounts of Russia on the eve of the October Revolution. These reports were published in the Masses, providing American radicals with a relatively accurate source of information on the cataclysmic socialist upheaval. *Ten Days that Shook the World*, his manuscript detailing experiences during the Bolshevik Revolution, was published in March 1919 to enthusiastic reviews.\(^{11}\) The book sold nearly 6,000 copies.\(^{12}\) Yet after John Reed’s death in 1920, the privilege of receiving monthly accounts of the violent and convoluted political situation in Bolshevik Russia ceased.

From that point on, all organs of the American left that depended on timely news from Soviet Russia were forced to rely on American intellectuals who infrequently made the arduous trip to the new Soviet Union. During the revolutionary war, counter-revolutionary (White) forces made entry into Russia extremely difficult. It is therefore easy to comprehend the limited nature of communication between the C.P.U.S.S.R. and Gold’s New Masses
during the 1920s. The depth and detail of Gold’s direct exposure to, and even ability to read, seminal Soviet texts have not been explored by any full-length study. Moreover, the numerous obstacles for precise cultural exchange provides some cause for skepticism about Gold’s ability to represent the diverse and ever-changing Soviet stances on art with accuracy.

Joseph Freeman, an original editor of the *New Masses*, commented on the *New Masses* group’s relationship to Soviet ideas and news: “We were always three or four years behind events, and operated with vague rumors, assumptions, hopes, in light of which we interpreted all the partially reported actions of the October revolution from phase to phase.” The development of revolutionary art in America roughly mirrored Soviet policy toward art and literature, albeit in a loose and delayed manner unmoored from the discipline of party policy. As a result of this filter, the continuing struggle to define a socialist aesthetic, as one eminent scholar said, “reverberated in confused echoes in the American movement.”

We know that Gold visited the Soviet Union in 1924. Unfortunately, that is the extent of our knowledge of this trip. More fruitful to our discussion is Gold’s stopover in Britain where, he stayed with the editors of the journal *Plebs*. Similar in scope to the later *New Masses*, *Plebs* was the official voice of a radical independent worker’s education organization, and an early publisher of articles by prominent *Proletcult* ideologue Anatoly Luchanarsky. The first major English account of the *Proletcult* group existed in Eden and Cedar Paul’s book *Proletcult*, published in Britain in 1921; according to Joseph Freeman, both he and Gold read it before the spring of 1923. Before Paul’s account of *Proletcult*, there existed few English articles, outside of The *Plebs,*
that would have been accessible to an American audience. Perhaps the most comprehensive were a series of Bogdanov’s lectures in Labor Monthly in May, 1923.¹⁸ We know unequivocally that Gold had some vague idea of Proletcult activities as early as 1921 as he makes passing mention of them in one of his earliest essays, “Towards a Proletarian Art.”

Apart from Gold’s first trip to the U.S.S.R., several other prominent intellectuals visited the country throughout the 1920s, affording the American intelligentsia a haphazard familiarity with Soviet politics and culture. In the view of scholar Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, it was these trips, taken by such notables as John Dewey, Theodore Dreiser, Scott Nearing, Rexford Tugwell, and of course Michael Gold, that imbued the 1920s with a rebellious interest in the socialist experiment abroad.¹⁹ Even limited to the social circle of the New Masses, several men, including Max Eastman, Joseph Freeman, and Louis Lozowick, traveled to the Soviet Union. Their discoveries were cultural watersheds for eager American intellectuals.

The New Masses’ proletarian moment during the late 1920s coincided with this second wave of measured cultural exchange, which only partially filled the vacuum left after John Reed’s death. The paucity of information about the Soviet’s precise cultural policy left the New Masses group quite unmoored from the specific Soviet positions, allowing Gold to promote a unique, though bastardized, version of contemporary Soviet-Marxist criticism.

Lozowick’s trip to the Russia lasted for the better part of 1922. While on his way, Lozowick stopped in Berlin for the city’s 1922 exhibition of Russian contemporary art. He met the Russian artists Marc Chagall, Naum
Gabo, and Ivan Puni. Some of the Russian artists invited Lozowick to the Soviet Union to view more of their work and to meet other artists. Despite the danger associated with an American visiting the Russia, Lozowick could not resist the chance to have a firsthand encounter with the “revolutionary changes that had been accomplished in the [Soviet] art institutions.”

Once in Russia, Lozowick familiarized himself with the foundations of the Constructivist, Futurist, and other modernist movements that had taken root during the Bolshevik upheaval. He met the leader of the Suprematists, Kazimir Malevich, who gave him one of his pamphlets, From Cézanne to Suprematism, and Vladimir Taitlin, who eagerly explained to Lozowick the tenets of Constructivism. The year Lozowick spent in Russia proved to be of critical importance for the various aesthetic groups that struggled for supremacy for Soviet cultural supremacy. Lozowick witnessed the breakup of the Constructivists as the “heroic realism” of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia gained support. He returned to the United States in 1924 with a wealth of information—the enthusiastic Russian modernists saturated him with material—which he shared with the New Masses group in a series of lectures, exhibition catalogues, articles, and informal gatherings with the magazine’s staff.

Michael Gold, his magazine, and the John Reed Club’s embrace of an American Proletcult (or in their terms, ‘proletarian art’) was evidence of the American’s belated enthusiasm for Soviet culture. When we compare the dates of the American debate over socialist aesthetics to those in the Soviet Union, the delay is striking. During the late 1920s, the John Reed Club debated issues that had been long settled or dismissed by Soviet intelligentsia.
This fact demonstrates the importance of the Soviet’s cultural influence on the American proletarian artist.

In 1917, Alexander Bogdanov returned from exile to expand the Proletcult movement. By 1920, Proletcult had reached its influential climax, claiming upwards of 300,000 members. The organization operated with support from individuals high in the party hierarchy, including Nikolai Bukharin, editor of the Communist Party newspaper Pravda. Lenin, however, grew weary of Bogdanov’s growing power and balked when Bogdanov insisted on Proletcult’s organizational independence. Bogdanov’s attempt to organize a rivaling and independent Proletcult International was the last straw for Lenin. In 1920, Lenin effectively removed Bogdanov from political life by bringing the Proletcult organization under party control.

The move vastly weakened the Proletcult movement in the Soviet Union, but many of its basic tenets survived. The notion of ‘art as a weapon in class struggle’ and its concomitant anti-bourgeois sentiment enjoyed an enormous appeal among later soviet theorists and practitioners.

Prior to Bogdanov’s expulsion, the debates concerning art and literature were relatively tepid, since neither Marx nor Engels addressed the topic with much specificity. Soviet intellectuals viewed Lenin’s intervention into Proletcult’s affairs as a denunciation of Bogdanov’s aesthetic views, thus inaugurating the first major debates on art in the new Soviet Union. After 1920, conflicting views of socialist aesthetics were often entangled with political disputes, due precisely to the interconnectedness of aesthetic and political ideology in Soviet society.
The rejection of the *Proletcult* ideology brought numerous aesthetic issues to the forefront of party policy, the three most important being the necessity and capacity to create a true proletarian culture to correspond to proletarian political control, the role of the communist party in artistic activities, and the attitude toward pre-Revolutionary culture. Bogdanov’s stance on these issues survived in the Soviet Union in distorted versions. Yet more importantly, Bogdanov’s positions were the driving forces behind Trotsky’s position on art and its relationship to society in *Literature and Revolution*. In short, much of the cultural conflict that reverberated among international leftist intellectuals emanated from the early Soviet ideas associated with *Proletcult*. All forthcoming cultural theories were, in essence, a reaction to Bogdanov’s positions.

Gold and the *New Masses*’ staff went about the greater portion of the 1920’s ignorant to the specifics of Soviet policy and were tragically unaware of the nuanced details of the Bolshevik’s debate concerning party art. When Gold discovered *Proletcult* in roughly 1920, Lenin had already stripped the organization of its independence. In championing Bogdanov’s *Proletcult*, Gold found himself expounding the cultural theories of a Soviet persona non grata—quite ironic for Gold, as he was an ideologue who usually demanded a dogmatic compliance to party line. That revolutionary art must reject the artistic achievements of the previous bourgeois age—a hallmark of Gold’s position—was denounced by a 1920 resolution of the C.P.U.S.S.R.’s central committee. The resolution affirmed that “a proletarian culture could arise only on the basis of the ‘bourgeois’ thought and culture which already
existed,” thus divorcing Gold’s staunch anti-bourgeois sentiments from the official aims of the Party’s cultural policy.\textsuperscript{28}

The tolerance of the bourgeois tradition as a functional instrument—that is, to preserve it for the advantages of the proletariat—was based on Lenin’s application of the principle of dialectical history. The basic principle of Marxist thought, historical dialecticism, assigned positive value to the proletariat’s assimilation of the culture of the past. From Lenin’s speech “On Proletarian Culture,” it became evident that this was the rationale behind the Bogdanov putsch.\textsuperscript{29} In the 1920 speech, which Lenin ordered Lunacharsky to deliver to the central committee, he compared the need to accept past art to political Marxism: “Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has...assimilated and refashioned everything of value.”\textsuperscript{30} Hence, the proletariat, like “its vanguard—the communist party” should not cut itself off from the cultural achievements of the bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{31}

While Trotsky flatly denied the prospect of a flowering proletarian culture due to the proletariat’s transitory existence as an oppressed class, Lenin meant to temper the spontaneity and iconoclasm of proletarian art that defined Bogdanov’s and Gold’s rhetorical appeal.

\textbf{Artists’ Groups in U.S.S.R.: Models for America}

Though they appeared in America almost a decade after the last \textit{Proletcult} studios, the John Reed Clubs were a manifestation of the \textit{Proletcult}}
influence in the *New Masses* circle. Like the John Reed Clubs, *Proletcult* achieved its goals of the artistic education of the proletariat through special literary studios. A *Proletcult* resolution stated that “for the accomplishment of our aim it is necessary to create a wide network of literary studios in which work should be carried forward...to acquaint the [proletarian] members with ...the history of culture.” Of course, similar to the John Reed Clubs, *Proletcult* courses in art and literature were instructed “from the viewpoint of the working class.”

Apart from their pedagogical capacity, the *Proletcult* studios facilitated the actual creation of art by its members. *Proletcult’s* commitment to generating proletarian creativity set a major precedent for the John Reed Clubs, one of whose stated founding principles was to “equip potential artists to express the point of view of the revolutionary working class in art forms.”

The demise of the *Proletcult* in the Soviet Union resulted in a sort of cultural vacuum that generated various offshoot groups who all claimed to be the true artistic voice of the October revolution. The “Smithy” group emerged immediately, espousing painfully subtle differences from the *Proletcult*, most of which hinged on esoteric issues such as the ‘epistemology of art’ and the nature of reality. One scholar referred to the numerous splinter groups as “the peculiar ‘legs’ a single long journey.” Though the Smithy group was primarily concerned with literature, its utilitarian philosophy informed later movements devoted to the plastic arts. The Smithy group subscribed to a Plekhanovian view of the aesthetics, that all art was a social product that served as an instrument of a particular class.
The most important achievement of the Smithy group came in May 1920 when the members organized an All-Russian Congress of Proletarian Writers. Like Gold’s “call to workers’ art groups” in the *New Masses* ten years later, the congress set out to amalgamate a number of provincial proletarian groups to standardize revolutionary art in the Soviet Union. The result of this meeting was the formal establishment of the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (VAPP) that eventually established a counterpart group specific to the visual arts called the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (abbreviated in Russian, AKhRR).37

The class distinctions present in *Proletcult* ideology and the belief in the inseparability of art and socialist construction persisted in AKhRR’s institutional philosophy. AKhRR’s direct lineage to the Smithy meant its members maintained the underlying belief that “art [was] just as necessary for the proletariat as are its army, its transportation system and its factories.”38 The organization of poets, writers, and visual artists into VAPP and AKhRR guaranteed both aesthetic and ideological compliance to the interpretation of Soviet Policy from top party officials.

Although Gold did not follow the post-1920 tumult in any great detail—it was Lozowick who kept abreast of these developments during his trip to Moscow in 1922—he did co-opt rhetoric from the various Soviet proletarian art groups. Gold used *Proletcult* phrases, perhaps clichés he heard from Lozowick, which, though worn out by Soviet standards, remained potent for an American audience naïve to their relatively dated origins. Still, the similarities between AKhRR policy and Gold’s insistence that art was “as necessary as bread” ran deeper than their use of similar rhetorical devices.
The official aesthetic of AKhRR came to be known as heroic realism, and limited itself to the reproduction of Soviet everyday life, as exemplified by Aleksandr Deinka’s *Defence of Petrograd* (1927) (fig. 16). A declaration of AKhRR asserted the artist’s role as a “spokesman of the people’s spiritual lives.” Like Gold, AKhRR denounced the nihilism of the Constructivists and other modernist schools. In “reveal[ing] our artistic experiences in the monumental forms of heroic realism,” AKhRR artists claimed, “we will provide a true picture of events…which have aroused the consciousness of the masses.” In this respect, many view their stylistics as an important forerunner to the Stalinist policy of socialist realism.

Most of the specifics of Soviet Art in this period came to *New Masses* and John Reed Club members via Lozowick, who, apart from overseeing the club’s symposia on revolutionary art in America, lectured extensively on modern Soviet art. Lozowick was careful to comment on the events in Soviet Russia without undermining any of the John Reed Club’s positions. Lozowick downplayed the role of avant-garde artists in many of these developments since modernism had, for the most part, fallen out of favor in the circle. The proletarian character of Lozowick’s John Reed Club lectures differed drastically from his first lectures on Soviet art at the Société Anonyme’s 1924 exhibition on Russian Constructivism and Suprematism. Lozowick himself was included in the 1924 show and was the only American invited. Of course, at this time, the Russian avant-garde movements had yet to be disparaged, and many still claimed to be the true artistic voice of October revolution.
As the 1920s progressed, the AKhRR’s “Soviet everyday” content assumed the mantle of the true proletarian culture. The tone of Lozowick’s lectures seemed to reflect this change, if in a muddled and no doubt pressured manner. When Lozowick stressed the supremacy of content in lectures such as “The Marxian Approach to Art (1932)” and “Art under the Proletarian Dictatorship (1934)” he mentioned AKhRR by name.\(^42\) Lozowick delivered a statement of AKhRR principles to the John Reed Club members:

“[o]ur civil duty to mankind is to fix in artistic and documentary fashion the greatest moments of history in all the revolutionary upsurge...[w]e shall depict our own day: the life of the red army, the life of the workers, the peasants, the revolutionaries, the heroes of labor.”\(^43\)

The most important distinction of AKhRR, that they “consider[ed] content the sign of genius in a work of art,” illustrates their central contribution to the aesthetic practice of the New Masses and John Reed Clubs. Thus, American artists who fancied themselves extensions of the October revolution in Russia dutifully accepted the supremacy of social content. Identification with heroic realism not only linked them to most accurate tendency of socialist culture, but it also gave them a rationale upon which to organize the nation’s artists into powerful groups vis-à-vis the government. Independent of aesthetic issues, the Soviet example underscored the crucial relationship between art and the state, central to the Marxian view of culture as a base-superstructure formation. Simply by including participating in these squabbles, the Soviet state demonstrated the interconnectedness of art and society.
Through the articulation of AKhRR principles to Americans, the John Reed Club established a fundamental tenet of revolutionary art in this country. Hugo Gellert’s and Anton Refregier’s drawings in the *New Masses* helped to galvanize the supremacy of social content in proletarian art. Gellert’s worker in *Gastonia* (1929) (fig. 17) and the heroic triumph in Refregier’s *Revolt* (1927) (fig. 18) were emulative of the ‘heroic realism’ in the Soviet Union.

This notion of artists as cultural workers, as borrowed from Soviet conventions throughout the 1920s, had permeated the *New Masses* group from other sources. Whereas some of the *New Masses* and John Reed Club’s leading intellectuals were lucky enough to engage Soviet culture second hand, their followers were forced to turn to the American revolutionary press for the greater part of their knowledge. Articles in the *Daily Worker* newspaper and the *New Masses* magazine took on heightened importance.

Robert Minor, a communist illustrator for the *Masses, Liberator, New Masses*, and editor for the *Daily Worker*, professed enthusiasm for the Soviet use of art in the popular press to advance its societal values. Minor’s article in the *Daily Worker* “Art As a Weapon in the Class Struggle” took the example of the Moscow news magazine *Bezbošnik* to illustrate the Soviet’s enlistment of artists to represent the proletarian regime’s class ideology. He compared the *Bezbošnik* to the United States’ *Saturday Evening Post*, whose adaptation of the past’s “cultural accumulation”—by which he meant the “slowly developed culture, from the forgotten ages of the men who carved images of the buffalo on their dwellings…to Modern times”—was fit for the purpose of preserving capitalist civilization.⁴⁴
According to Minor, art “in all of its phases” was “perverted and constricted within the frame of capitalist society.” In the same way that a capitalist civilization enlists its artists to preserve capitalism, so to does the revolutionary Bolshevik press rely on its own artists to advance the workers’ revolutionary movement. Minor claimed that “the definitive character of the artist is in that he, to a high degree, responds to and expresses in harmonious, unifying form the stimuli of life’s experience.” This was why the workers’ revolutionary movement, or socialism in general “has always exercised a magnetic influence upon artists.” The growth of socialism necessitated the artist to be a cultural worker, whereas capitalism inhibited in this aim.

In “Art as a Weapon in the Class Struggle,” Minor uses comparative analysis of the artist’s significant roles in Soviet society to reason that artists in this country might alleviate their marginalized position through the growth of socialism. This garnered massive popular support from Daily Worker readers, since it drew connected their socialist ideology the idea of the artist as cultural worker.

Within his central point about the cultural worker, Minor opened a separate line of argument revealing a deeper contempt for culture and capitalism. Minor bluntly compared the artist under capitalism to a prostitute:

“In order to obtain the cash payment that enables him to live (and which may even exalt him into luxurious wealth), the artists in capitalist society must subject himself to a process of elimination of artistic qualities, comparable to the process thru [sic] which a street-walker is subjected by long practice of her profession of mock-love. The prostituted artist becomes sleek and witty, but nevertheless remains an affluent mock-artist.”

Opposing the “mock artists” in the Saturday Evening Post, Minor lauded the “comparatively released and happy vigor of the true-artist in the
Here he contrasted the workers’ innate desire for true art with the demonstrated philistinism of capitalist societies. Removing elements of capitalism from the artistic process would not only liberate the artist creatively, Minor argued, it would also allow the artist to assume a “clearer appreciation” of the effectiveness of art as a weapon in the class struggle.

Similar sentiments regarding Soviet artists prevailed in the pedagogy of the John Reed Club. Throughout the period immediately prior to the formation of the Artists’ Union, the clubs featured various lectures on Art in the Soviet Union. Guest lecturer A. I. Kravchenko presented a paper dealing with the life of the pictorial artist in the Soviet Union. Kravchenko reinforced the image of Soviet artists as cultural workers: “[T]o speak of Soviet art of the past ten years is identical with speaking of the artists’ fight, soldiers of the revolution, the artist-sociologist, and the artist-worker.” Kravchenko pointed out that in Soviet Russia, unlike in the United States “pictorial art is considered as a profession and its role in the social community is defined by this consideration.”

The positive news about Soviet painters was perhaps shocking to John Reed Club members, since their visions of government support for the arts were troubled by the logistical inability of easel art to function on a mass scale. This notion was so ensconced in their collective psyche that, in a 1930 New Masses review of Lozowick and Freeman’s Voices of October, the reviewer commented on the book’s appropriate lack of space devoted to easel art “since this is the least social of the arts.” Kravchenko, however, related developments in Soviet Russia that allayed these fears—
“From the dim, dank corridors of the bureaucratic Academy, Art now emerges into the socially active scheme [of] things. Palaces of art, palaces of Labour, triumphal arches, city streets and squares, buildings and halls of social organizations—all these were decorated by the hands of artists. Huge masses of people began to see art. The art amateur and collector vanished; his place was taken by the flaming, revolutionary masses, destroying the old and heroically creating the most romantic period of the revolution.”

Once again, Marxist artists and intellectuals who had witnessed the Soviet experience firsthand infused the John Reed Club with a sense of the artists’ active role in the Bolshevik revolution. In doing so, they created the prospect for an American acceptance of the artist as cultural worker paradigm.

The John Reed Club’s official affiliation with the Communist Party in the United States is unclear, but by 1930 the clubs sought recognition from the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW). Gold was among the leaders of the New Masses group seeking to bring their activities more in line with the dictates of the Communist International, a move that he felt would legitimate the clubs in the face of those who critiqued their tolerance of fellow-travelers.

In November 1930, several members of the New Masses, including Michael Gold and William Gropper, traveled to the Soviet Union to represent the United States at the second world plenum of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers. The self-described purpose of this meeting was to “formulate a common international program for art and literature.” The American delegation valued this opportunity for a first-hand exchange of ideas with the Soviets. The results of the Karkhov conference proved fortuitous for the American participants, as the John Reed Club and the New
Masses were officially recognized by the IURW, who deemed them the cultural mediator between the United States and the Soviet Union. In addition, the New Masses and the John Reed Clubs were responsible for carrying out Karkhov’s political and cultural program in America.

Created from the ashes of the failed Proletcult international of 1920, the International Union of Revolutionary Writers was established through the joint action of Proletcult aesthetician Anatoly Lunacharsky and prominent members of AKhRR at the Comintern Congress, July 1924. Later, in 1927, at the First International Conference of Proletarian and Revolutionary Writers, the IURW stated its mission to assist the organization of “associations of proletarian and revolutionary writers in the capitalist countries.” Americans accepted the IURW journal, Literature of the World Revolution (later renamed International Literature), as the orthodoxy of proletarian culture in the Third period. The Soviet’s ‘Third Period’ doctrine stemmed from the notion that capitalism was experiencing its third and final stage of imperialist war and economic decay. The result was a new widespread urgency on the question of art and literature in capitalist countries, especially the United States. Because IURW turned its attention to capitalist countries, the organization’s policies stressed the commitment to conduct cultural activities in toleration of fellow travelers.

The delegates at the Karkhov conference listened to ideas about proletarian culture from leading international figures, considered by many to be “the most politically mature artists in the world’s working class movement.” The American delegation brought back a seven-point resolution drafted by the Karkhov conference that guided the policy of the
John Reed Clubs and the *New Masses*. In 1932, the *New Masses* printed the program that “consisted of seven points which all intellectuals regardless of their background may unite in the common struggle against capitalism,” alongside a draft manifesto for the John Reed Club. The manifesto was a reiteration of the John Reed Club’s principles; its authors planned to present the speech to the John Reed Club national convention in Chicago with a few Karkhov-inspired revisions.

New priorities seeped into the John Reed Club rhetoric during the convention as a result of its ties to the IURW. The IURW policy proved to be forerunner to the Communist popular front, which ultimately compromised Marxist principles for the sake of defeating international fascism.

Karkhov instituted a more lenient policy on the acceptance of fellow travelers, stating that it was the task of workers’ cultural groups to “bring in also those who are of the middle class, which [was] in a state of collapse,” due to the economic collapse. The intellectuals at Karkhov were decidedly more realistic than Gold and the majority of the John Reed Club members, who only until recently had begrudgingly tolerated the work of fellow travelers.

Not surprisingly, one of the IURW-influenced shifts caused the John Reed Club to focus more on art that combated the rising tide of fascism “whether open or concealed, like social-fascism.” A press release from the 1932 Chicago convention indicates their new strategy. The release called on American intellectuals “to join the John Reed Club campaign of active struggle against immanent imperialist war,” by which they meant the armies of fascist Germany and militarist Japan that threatened the Soviet Union.
The official recognition of the John Reed Clubs by the IURW improved communication between the American adherents to proletarian culture and the C.P.U.S.S.R. In 1931, the IURW sent the New Masses a detailed critique of their magazine. The IURW commented on the New Masses’ ability to attract fellow traveler art that related the goals of socialist construction. The IURW also strongly urged worker correspondences and worker education. The general secretary of the IURW, Bruno Jasienski, commended the magazine’s editorial board on their recent efforts to draw in radicalized American intellectuals. In a letter of June 27, 1932 to the editorial board, he cited the recent contributions of Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Edmund Wilson to the New Masses as great achievements.63

Letters from the IURW’s plastic arts section, International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists (IBRA), flooded the John Reed Club secretaries after their joint affiliation. In 1931, their general secretary, Bela Uitz, petitioned his “American comrades” in the John Reed Club for submissions to an international exhibition celebrating the “15th anniversary of the Red Army of workers and peasants of the Soviet Union.”64 All sections of the IBRA, in addition to “all revolutionary and sympathizing artists in the capitalist countries” were called upon to help “give an artistic survey of the struggles of the working class in capitalist countries, especially the role of the first Red Armies of workers in Germany, Hungary.”65

The influences of AKhRR’s heroic realism on IBRA’s aesthetic policy was clear by the topics suggested to be “of the greatest political significance.”66 Among the dozen subjects enumerated by the solicitation were the “Red Army of Finland, The Reval Uprising of 1924, The Bulgarian
Uprising of 1923, The Latvian Red Army of 1919, Portrayals of military and semi-military fascist organizations (showing their true character), and Social-fascism or White Terror." In addition, the letter persuaded artists to consider depictions of the defense of the Soviet Union, viable subject matter included “the active participation of the workers and poor peasants in defense of the Soviet Union during intervention (strikes...etc.), preparation for a new world war by the imperialists against the Soviet Union, the war industry,” and finally “the Soviet Union as the shock brigade and fatherland of the world proletariat.”

The inclusion of an article by Lozowick in the IURW’s magazine Literature of the World Revolution indicated the Comintern’s respect for its American counterparts in the New Masses and the John Reed Clubs. In Literature of the World Revolution, Lozowick’s “Art in Service to the Proletariat” indicated the American’s adherence to IURW line by at once dismissing the internal strife of the revolutionary artist—“the battles that artists have fought have been battles of a purely formal nature”—and emphasizing the concern of style as trivial. The work of the revolutionary artist, according to Lozowick, can exhibit “certain varieties of method and theme.” The vague position on style reflects the IURW resolutions that intentionally relegated the importance of stylistics below its overarching political purpose. Lozowick dances around this point with reticence:

“The revolutionary artists are gradually working towards the acquisition of a synthetic style. They insist on the highest technical quality, not however at the expense of the message but only as something that can best help the effective delivery of that message. They have profited by the experiments in art of the past twenty-five years. Thus they...take liberties with natural appearance whenever their theme requires it. They
strive towards a style which must develop and mature as the movement grows.”

In the midst of a review of Gropper’s 1931 exhibition at the John Reed Club for the *Nation*, Lozowick laid out the aims of the revolutionary artists, which he identified as two-fold. First, Lozowick reaffirmed the utilitarian end of revolutionary art: “to hearten and encourage those already in the revolutionary ranks.” It was in the second aim that he lists—“to win new [emphasis added] recruits into [our] ranks”—that Lozowick directly responded to the program derived at Karkhov. This position effectively forwent all former opposition to middle-class infiltration for the sake of cultivating a broad coalition of revolutionary sympathizers. The decline of aesthetic pluralism within proletarian criticism was precisely what the IURW leaders at Karkhov had intended; they saw such disagreements as an obstacle to combating the rise of international social-fascism.

Another such reversal of the *New Masses*’ former proletarian requirements came in 1932 when the John Reed Club convention enacted policy that reflected the IURW’s openness to coalition building. Max Eastman, in a controversially leftist interpretation, nonetheless declared that the intellectuals at Karkhov had determined that “proletarian culture is not necessarily created by the proletariat, it can also be created by the petty-bourgeoisie.” Eastman, an original editor of the *Masses*, was among those communists who, like Rivera, had been swayed to the left by Trotsky. Rivera, Eastman, and many Trotsky sympathizers proposed that broad coalitions across class lines would embolden a strong cultural front for revolutionary
art—in other words, class collaboration was on the agenda of many ‘Trotskyite’ revolutionary intellectuals at this time.

Eastman’s critique of Karkhov conference, while tainted by internecine bias, still hits on a relevant point. In his widely acclaimed critique of Karkhov, *Artists in Uniform* (1934), Eastman expressed disapproval of the conference’s inability to articulate a specific program:

“…it remains astounding that such an array of international talent…pledging to make it their ‘life task to serve the proletariat with the weapon of their art,’ should never once raise the question what that weapon is, how it differs from education, agitation, or propaganda.”

The John Reed Club, in its solemn obedience to IURW and the Karkhov resolutions, abandoned most attempts to parse out specific details of method or strategy. Such indefinite criteria allowed the movement to be more attractive to outside sympathizers who might not be necessarily Party members. This set a critical precedent towards the formation of an Artists’ Union. New Deal collaboration would not only demand a watered down and toothless ‘social content’ aesthetic, it would also mandate that the John Reed Club members expand membership to non-Communist Party members.

Eastman lamented that the issue of aesthetics was marginalized by political expediency and practical concerns. For a John Reed Club in need of new direction the IURW recommendations provided a reprieve of its alienating class war rhetoric.

Gold’s May 30 address to the 1932 John Reed Club convention was tantamount to a surrender of his former proletarian zeal—

“At Karkhov the platform was simple and political. Any writer who subscribed to the political platform was admitted. It should
be clear that no one is asked to change his mental habits. Nothing will be dictated to him. You who are here believe in proletarian or colloquial or journalistic writing, and some middle class liberal believes in Proustian writing—but I say bring him into the movement if he is a writer of influence and talent. We can not afford to have aesthetic quarrels.”

Gold’s retreat from the “aesthetic quarrels” reflected the American revolutionary art community’s position at a crossroads: at one end, AKhRR was headed towards Stalin’s strictly political and overtly chauvinistic policy of Socialist Realism. The John Reed Clubs were not prepared to follow the short road to the ruthless policy of Zhdanovism—a highly censored and utilitarian post-war Soviet aesthetic policy that stressed art’s capacity for artifice and myth. Yet with preliminary onset of the popular front, the IURW encouraged Communist cultural organizations in capitalist countries to provisionally accept non-party collaboration. After receiving such conflicting messages, the John Reed Club dropped the responsibility of aesthetic pedagogy and instead opted to settle on the broader issue that artists must unite themselves with the advancement of socialism. The most the John Reed Clubs could demand was that artists preoccupy themselves with ‘social content.’

As early as 1932, the John Reed Club artists were actively changing the “outworn” definition of art as one of society’s luxuries—one that had made wide-scale government relief unfeasible—towards the Marxist concept of the cultural worker. The view of the artist as a cultural worker was clearly more suitable to the inclusion of artists on the New Deal’s mass-relief programs. The formation of an Artists’ Union was the next logical step for the John Reed group once Roosevelt began to issue preliminary plans for massive relief
projects. When American artists emulated Soviet art, either stylistically or through other means, they strengthened their own case for unionization. Lozowick reminded the radical American artists that in the Soviet Union “artists are considered part of the vast army of workers and an indispensable factor... [They] enjoy full member[ship] in trade unions... and carry insurance against sickness, accident, and unemployment.”

Thus, by appealing to Soviet progress in the arts, the John Reed Club artists challenged the boundaries that defined the “bourgeois” separation of artist from society. Gold and the John Reed Club intellectuals Americanized the notion of the Soviet cultural worker. It was the practical manifestation of Trotsky’s socialist vision wherein the “wall will fall...between art and industry.” Despite the sustained aesthetic differences between individual members such as Stuart Davis and Hugo Gellert, the desire to achieve cultural capital for American artist unified this group through the formation of the Artists’ Union.

**The Artists’ Union: Militant Artists as Cultural Workers**

The John Reed Club members left the 1932 convention having betrayed the original intentions of its founders. Their newly acquired tone of their rhetoric was evident in the pages of the *New Masses* beginning in 1933; the editors divined the party’s remittance to the popular front strategy, even though the popular front did not officially begin until Georgi Dimitrov’s 1935 proclamation to the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International. By responding to popular front pressure and anti-fascist coalition building, the John Reed Club members nursed a compromised
proletarian aesthetic that shrunk to an anemic basis in ‘social content.’ It was barely reminiscent of the club’s original revolutionary vitriol.

Also by 1932, the economic collapse in the United States that would come to be known as the Great Depression was in full swing. In that critical year, 10 million Americans were unemployed, with an additional million expected to lose their jobs by the end of the year. Such vast unemployment—afflicting roughly one in four men—was comparatively devastating next to the British figures of the same year: 17.1% unemployment rate in May 1932. Having summarily abandoned art’s ideological potency in the class war, members of the John Reed Club focused instead on practical solutions to the dejected economic state around them.

In the summer of 1933, the conversation at the John Reed Club meetings shifted toward plans to organize the campaign for government patronage. The meetings began as informal discussions, but within months the group drafted a manifesto signed by twenty-five artists. Present among these twenty-five men and women were leading figures in the John Reed Club, namely Max Spivak, Boris Gorelick, Phil Bard, and Joe Vogel, all of whom had contributed illustrations to either the New Masses or the Daily Worker. Phil Bard had been instrumental in the John Reed Club art school and had exhibited his work in several of its shows.

During their early struggles, for relief these men began to refer to themselves as the Unemployed Artists Group. With an initial membership of about 300, they began a campaign demanding the allocation of state funds for jobs for artists. In December 1933, the Unemployed Artists Group sent a letter to Harry Hopkins, then the administrator of the New Deal’s Civil
Works Administration, outlining an audacious plan “for teaching, mural painting, easel painting and commercial and applied art jobs for all unemployed artists.” After the provisional art programs were instituted at the municipal and federal level and thousands of New York artists were receiving relief wages, the organization dropped ‘unemployed’ from its title, and became the Artists’ Union. The Union’s Wednesday night meetings functioned much like the John Reed Club meetings. They began at 8:30 and usually lasted until after midnight, playing host to “lively and contentious” debates concerning concrete plans of action. On occasion, the members discussed what they perceived to be pressing aesthetic issues.

When the Artists’ Union was formed in 1933, its first consideration was the immediate creation of a federal art project to employ all needy artists. The project needed to include measures to immediately create jobs for unemployed artists, mural painting and decoration programs for public buildings, appropriations for monumental and decorative sculpture in public buildings, and at last should have some permanent guarantees of federal art patronage. Such provisions were necessary, the union reasoned, because the American artist could “no longer function with the waning guarantees of private patronage.” Boris Gorelick, the acting executive secretary, framed the action of the Artists’ Union as a solution to the “acute destitution” which “placed before the artist an inescapable alternative: either abandon his art and seek his subsistence in some other distressed field, or [ ] build a new support for his creative activity.”

The founding members of the Artists’ Union believed that the American artist participated in the world crisis in the same capacity as any
other individual. They appealed to the artist’s need for food like any other citizen would. Boris Gorelick organized a “mass demonstration” on Oct. 27, 1934 at city hall for “jobs and immediate relief for all artists.” The alacrity with which the radical artists joined protests earned them the nickname “the fire brigade.”

The movement towards New Deal cooperation undoubtedly represented a compromise in radical thought, however. The Daily Worker routinely identified the New Deal with the aims of Fascism and war; at best the orthodox communist viewed it as a Rooseveltian plot to keep the working class in industrial bondage. Despite the apparent compromise associated with radicals collaborating with the New Deal, the essential Marxist ideology of the founders persisted in the Artists’ Union. In fact, the very essence of the Artists’ Union organization hinged upon the founders’ Marxist aesthetic theory. The Union’s ideology relied heavily on a combination of the ‘social content’ style and the examples of the Soviet cultural worker to construct a usable definition of the artist vis-à-vis the New Deal state.

Statements by Diego Rivera were particularly instructive to the concept of the Artists’ Union seeking government patronage. In his 1932 essay in the Modern Quarterly, Diego Rivera outlined a strategy that suggested the effectiveness of revolutionary art’s utilization of public property. Such a statement was accurately construed as a call for class collaboration. Rivera’s ideological defection to Trotskyism explained his tacit approval of large-scale class collaboration, since Trotsky’s Leftism did not stress the proletarian origin of a revolutionary artist. Rivera maintained that any real development of revolutionary art in America would necessitate the
unification of “a single party of the proletariat,” that should plan “to take over the public buildings, the public resources, and the wealth of the country.” Rivera’s ideas were based on his experience in Mexico, where worked under the Revolutionary Union of Technical Workers, Painters, Sculptors, and Allied Trades—an important precedent for the Artists’ Union in the United States. Though the Mexican Revolutionary Union of Technical Workers in Mexico occurred long before the New Deal, they were involved in tasks similar to the American Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). The Mexican organization decorated public buildings and spaces in Mexico City with enormous murals, many of which championed the revolutionary cause.

The language of the initial manifesto drafted in the infancy of the Artists’ Union was also indicative of the group’s founding Marxist ideology. The Artists’ Union stated its aim to liberate the artists from the “caprice of private patronage,” what they perceived to be the main handicap of culture under a capitalist system. Following Robert Minor’s ideas in the Daily Worker, the framers of the Artists’ Union were taken with the notion that capitalism was detrimental to artistic purity and ultimately served as a vulgarizing agent. Jerome Klein, one of the host of prominent John Reed Club intellectuals who were also Union members, summarized the artist’s situation: “the very position of the artist under capitalism as a free producer, working in isolation in a highly individualized manner, has for a very long time insulated him, strengthening his conception of artistic creation as an end in itself—l’art pour l’art.”

An early skirmish with Art News revealed the Artists’ Union’s vague yet undeniable Proletcult heritage. On October 13, 1934 Art News published an
editorial, “Art and Politics,” in critical response to the reported activities of the Artists’ Union. “The sincere artist will derive little benefit from identifying himself with the turmoil of political parties,” the editorial stated, attacking the Artists’ Union appeals to Roosevelt’s New Deal. “The artists’ objectives and those of the politicians are miles apart,”93 Art News’ editors continued. Clearly, the editorial board at Art News did not share the union’s beliefs about the interconnectedness of art and social life.

The future envisioned by the Union’s leadership was a society “where the artist, one with all the workers, will be able to function freely aided by the wise appreciation of his fellow citizens.”94 Such rhetorical visions hearken back to the underlying argument of the American Proletcult ideology of the New Masses, one where Gold and his illustrators operated in resistance to an aesthetic which allowed artists to retreat to the ivory towers, and, thereby fell short of engaging concrete societal issues.

The Artists’ Union saw its efforts as part of a sustained effort to encourage artists and society work toward common objectives. The Union was primarily concerned that the New Deal began to realize the necessity of art for the general population. The Union’s conceived all its actions toward this end. Only after these goals were achieved could the “cleavage between the old world and the new”—the Union used such charismatic references to the teleology of proletarian art—be reconciled.95 As one Union official explained: “we bring forward [the program of federal support for the arts] not merely in order to solve our economic problem. We regard it as the only solution for the permanent incorporation of the arts into the life of every American citizen.”96 The revolutionary aesthetic of the radical illustrators of
the *New Masses*, though plagued by derisive critics from all directions, continued to serve the ideological purposes of the Artists’ Union. Devoid of its Marxist vitality in an agitational sense, the preponderance of social content art embodied an aesthetic philosophy that advanced the notion of the unity of art and progress in the public sphere. Yet, concurrently, ‘social content’ avoided the alienating class-war didacticism of the early John Reed Clubs.

The John Reed Club’s comrades in the Soviet Union operated under a government that had the utmost belief in its role as steward of the arts. In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution and civil war that followed, the commissariat of education, along with individuals at the highest levels of power, sought to bolster aesthetic groups according to the perceived ideological needs of the new state. The radical artists in America took note. The Soviet government’s fostering of art had been, according to Louis Lozowick, “part and parcel of a planned policy inseparable from all other social and economic planning.” The Soviet Artist enjoyed a high status in society, since “among the earliest government decrees adopted were those for the preservation of art...[and] for supplying studios and employment to artists.” The John Reed Club artists reasoned that the American government, in its own period of economic and soon-to-be social crisis, should come to the aid of artists as well.

On an even more basic level, the Union’s activity affirmed the Marxist notion of “art as an essential human concern.” The Artists’ Union was among the first to recognize the latent cultural crisis that would accompany the economic depression. One of its first goals was the establishment of a municipal art gallery in New York to be administered by artists. Through this
artist-run gallery, the ‘exploitation’ of artists by wealthy gallery owners and patrons would cease; it was the fine-art equivalent to the socialist aspiration of the workers owning the means of production.

It followed, then, that the artists in the union thought of themselves as workers exploited by capitalists through an unfair economic system—that system being the gallery and museum world. Stuart Davis, in explaining the official viewpoint of the Artists’ Union in the August 1935 American Magazine of Art explained: “Looking about him, [the artist] sees sharp class distinction, those who have, and those (the great majority) who have not. [The artist] recognizes his alignment with those who have not—the workers.”99 In an article in the Union’s newspaper Art Front, entitled ‘Why Artists Picket,” the editors reminded the readership of their challenges ahead: “the organization of workers to gain shorter hours, better pay or improved working conditions is seldom in harmony with the plans of their bosses and employers.”100 By this it was clear that these artists conceived of themselves as exploited laborers.

Similar to the New Masses in format and purpose, Art Front served as the official magazine of the Artists’ Union. The magazine began publication in November 1934. The editors of the magazine—Hugo Gellert, Stuart Davis, Boris Gorelick, Max Spivak, and others—billed the magazine as the only organ which “[spoke] for the artist, battle[d] for his economic security and guide[d] him in artistic efforts.”101 Art Front’s editors built the magazine in opposition to mainstream art magazines, which they charged “support[ed] outworn economic concepts as a basis for the support of art [that] victimize and destroy art.”102
The *Art Front’s* advocacy for the artist centered on the campaign for a permanent New Deal art project. The editors wrote editorials, reviews, essays, and monthly reports on the progress of the new Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). For the most part, these reports were critical of the project, calling the amount of relief inadequate, the merit system as unfair, and the administration as backward and academic its tastes. One of PWAP’s fund retrenchments in New York City drew particular ire—“Of the thousand unemployed artists in the city of New York, only 300 received jobs at 24.00 a week,” *Art Front’s* editors complained.103

About half of *Art Front* dealt with the aesthetic issues that confronted the group in its campaign to secure extended government patronage. The Artists’ Union and its magazine, as a point of policy, maintained a façade of impartiality to any one style or school. This was purely a move of political discretion, for the Union wanted to attract as many artists to its membership roles as possible. The reviews that commented on art clearly privileged the proletarian realism of the John Reed Club persuasion. The Marxist influence was apparent as insults towards “bourgeois critics” and lamentations of the “social sterility of painters” ran throughout the text.104 However, it is important to realize that this was not merely a virtue of the aesthetic lineage of the editorial board, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority were former John Reed Club members.

*Art Front’s* aesthetic aspirations were part of a larger attempt to influence the ideological basis of the impending public mural projects in its own right. By 1934, the editors of *Art Front* realized that the Federal Art Projects—Independent of their roles as relief programs—would serve as
important influences on a new American visual language. Unfortunately for
the Artists’ Union, previous arrangements had deemed a small group of
American Scene painters as the heirs for the project’s new national mural
school. The early solicitations for a Public Art project by the artist George
Biddle to federal administrators—which Biddle maintains were the genesis for
the project—named several likely candidates for the endeavor. Sensing
Roosevelt’s objection to “modern art” in their correspondence, Biddle
responded by identifying a “selected group” of “liberal, socially conscious”
painters who “must have some cohesion,” and could express through art
“the social and democratic ideals for which the present administration is
fighting.”105 Biddle carefully selected artists that would exhibit these amiable
qualities: Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry, Edward Lanning,
Boardman Robinson, Henry Varnum Poor.106 Artists of a more proletarian
persuasion, despite Biddle’s familiarity with them, were noticeably absent.

As a result, on the Section’s very first job, top administrators
appointed an advisory committee to select artists of “distinguished
authority.”107 The job was not open to all artists, since, as the Section’s
director Edward Bruce noted, “we were facing a very conservative group of
people.”108 Much to the dismay of the Artists’ Union, the Section’s advisory
committee invited Wood, Benton, Poor, Biddle, and Curry. Gorelick lamented
the Treasury Section’s method: “[The Section] neglected the great mass of
competent artists who, somehow, could not find their way into its original
and sometimes even fantastic category of selection.”109

To combat the American Scene’s dominance, Art Front ‘s criticism
embraced an agenda that supported the proletarian method of expression
cultivated by Gold and the John Reed Club shows in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Several characteristics of the work of the artists associated with the John Reed Club and New Masses were, in theory, favorable to vast public art projects. The didactic quality of their work, along with their constant preference for more egalitarian forums beyond solipsistic studios or bourgeois galleries, suggested their natural inclination toward the populist appeal of the New Deal art programs. Since many of the most well known American Scene painters lacked the political ideology that first gave rise to the notion of the cultural worker, the Artists’ Union viewed the Regionalist’s dominance as inimical to the further advancement of the precarious federal projects. In addition to the theoretical similarities between the John Reed Club aesthetic and the public art called for by New Deal statism—namely the triumph of industry, the celebration of the workingman, and the march of progressive ideals throughout society—existed the Artists’ Union’s concern that the dominant style or school under the project be consistent with the concept of the cultural worker.

Art Front’s impending skirmishes with the American Scene provided a platform for the union to campaign for the public use of art. Though campaigning for the ‘public use of art’ was no doubt central to its goals, the Artists’ Union had heretofore limited itself to concrete achievements, such as boosting membership and securing wages. The radical editors of Art Front expressed their standpoint on aesthetic issues—which were obscured from the prima facie concerns of the organization—through confrontations with the rival aesthetic of the Regionalist landscape painters.
Thomas Craven, acting as the “principal ideologue of the American Scene,” was a chief instigator of the tense schism between the communist revolutionary artists and the American Scene realists. In March 1934, Craven’s highly critical essay “Art and Propaganda” in Scribner’s magazine established the ideological wedge that touched off antagonisms between the two camps. Communism, Craven said, “with its well-bolstered doctrine…appears to be the most portentous movement in art today.” In “calling art to its service,” Communism appealed to the art object as “a communicative instrument,” yet the communist artist did not communicate, as the true artist should, the “original discoveries in life and nature,” but rather communicated that which “an economic theory impose[d].” Communism enslaved art to an unhealthy pattern by limiting its depictions to a given subject matter with an interested political message.

Therefore, Gellert’s exploited worker (fig. 17), no doubt rooted in “real life experience and American traditions,” had none of the originality that Craven admired in the work of the American Scene painters. As Craven pointed out, “you will have noticed that propaganda artists display very meager… knowledge of the figure in the way in which behavior and occupational interests actually affect the human anatomy.” Communist artists “turn out dreadful concepts—bestial stuffed shirts, monstrous forms so fiercely exaggerated, so remote from reality as to defeat their own purpose.” Craven noted how Thomas Benton’s murals, in contrast, “take their final form and character from the American environment…the meaning of [Benton’s] mural are consistent with their form…and [Benton’s murals] reveal and communicate the actual conditions of his native land.”
Craven’s harsh, divisive words inspired serious counteraction from Stuart Davis and other revolutionary artists within the ranks of the Artists’ Union. However, the opinions from the American Scene camp provided rhetoric that the Artists’ Union used to define its own aesthetic. Throughout the pages of Art Front, the editors published articles aimed at discrediting the exemplars of the American Scene. The radical artists could effectively argue against what they viewed as the Regionalist’s outworn conceptions of art. For the cultural workers who made up the Artists’ Union, the Regionalist’s work lacked the political imperatives demanded by the artist’s responsibility in the world crisis.

In its second issue, Art Front took aim at the American Scene group with a scathing review by Stuart Davis. Though Davis painted in an abstract style, he remained a pillar of John Reed Club thought when it came to the artist’s role as a cultural worker. In what was not so much as a review as polemic, Davis tore into contemporary artists of the American Scene, namely Thomas Hart Benton and John Stuart Curry. Davis’s “The New York Scene in American Art,” referred to a previous exposé on the American Scene painters in Time Magazine on December 24, 1934 that lauded the Regionalists’ impressive “passion for local Americana.” Davis’s title for the Art Front article, “The New York American Scene in Art [emphasis added],” was a purposeful tongue-in-cheek reference to the Greenwich Village apartment in which roommates Craven and Benton had developed their artistic credo. Davis intended to expose the geographical hypocrisy of their beliefs, which supposedly pledged allegiance to the simple and pastoral American landscape, despite its origins in Greenwich Village.
Much to Davis’s dismay, the *Time* magazine article in question noted how Benton and Curry were “destined to turn the tide of artistic taste in the United States” by offering audiences “direct representation in place of introspective abstraction.” Unfortunately the “direct representation,” described here by *Time*, though related formally, was not the *modus operandi* of proletarian art as practiced in the social content work of the John Reed Club. Further, Davis, who in the past had reconciled his abstract style with a proletarian message and communist ideology, took stronger issue with *Time’s* characterization of the supposed proper American Scene method. *Time* magazine set the Regionalists in opposition to a vilified non-objective style. Davis combated Benton’s and Curry’s aesthetic beyond the mere question of realism versus abstraction. He condemned the Regionalist’s lack of “social understanding,” or deeper ideological dialogue with the social problems of the day.

According to Davis and other revolutionary artists, the most despicable trait associated with the Regionalists was the Babbittry and patriotic flair with which their work was interpreted. Apart from the nationalism involved in Craven’s analysis, it was also the antiseptic nature of the Regionalist’s depictions of the American Scene that so irked the revolutionary artists. The cultural worker ideal arose in the John Reed Club circle due to the perceived need for art to convey the economic and social hardship of the early 1930s from a proletarian perspective. Davis criticized the Regionalists on this point—“They [Benton, Marsh, Curry, Wood, and others] have the ‘my country, right or wrong’ attitude and are suspicious of strangers.” Davis lambasted their common “contempt for the foreign artist
and foreign influence,” such as Curry, who paints “without the slightest regard for the valuable, practical and technical contributions to painting which have been carried on in the last fifty years.” “How,” Davis asked, could such men be considered an “asset to the development of American painting”—as *Time* said—when they “ignore the discoveries of Monet, Seurat, Cézanne, and Picasso?”

Davis compared the contemporary American Scene painters to their pioneers in the Ashcan group mainly to expose the Regionalist’s inferiority:

> “With all respect to their individual talent, the ideological content of the work of these painters was in a very general sense provincial, melodramatic, and sentimental. Their direct representations were much the same in substance as the group referred to in the article in *Time* [the Regionalists]. The earlier [Ashcan] group, however, had the advantage of not being burdened by the chauvinistic ballyhoo carried on in their defense by a writer like Thomas Craven whose critical values may possibly be clouded by a lively sense of commercial expediency. His efforts to bring the art values to the plane of a Rotarian Luncheon are a particularly repellent form of petty opportunism...”

> “Craven’s ideas are unimportant,” Davis continued in *Art Front*, his ungracious words perpetuating the tone of opposition amongst the two camps, “but the currency given to them by the Hearst press means that we must not underestimate their soggy impact. The artists are warned not to be complacent in the face of these insults.”

The war of words continued, as portions of Davis’s caustic comments about Benton and Curry were reprinted in *Arts Digest*. The editors of *Art Front* invited Benton to reply to the charges; he declined, but instead agreed to answer any ten questions that the editors might ask him. The result was *Art Front’s* “Benton Answers Ten Questions,” published in April of 1935.
In this tense inquisition, the editors of *Art Front* attempted to delineate Benton’s work from the work associated with communist revolutionary artists. The questions focused on issues that the editors felt would produce the most transparent image of Benton *vis-à-vis* the aims of the Artists’ Union, and ultimately expose how Benton’s approach was anathema to the ideological basis for federal art patronage.

The questions aimed to vilify Benton’s rural and benighted subject matter, such as: “Is provincial isolation compatible with modern civilization?” and “Do you believe that the future of American art lies in the Middle West?” Benton answered the first query with a mix of clarifying statements, yet essentially answered “yes” to both challenges. The remainder of Benton’s reply seemed to support the Artists’ Union’s intended portrayal of Benton as a conservative artist.

Many on *Art Front*’s staff knew from their contact with Benton during his Greenwich Village days that underneath his straight-laced Americana lay a nucleus of Marxist identity. *Art Front*’s editors hoped question #7—“What is your political viewpoint?”—might elicit a compromising response. Benton’s answer delivered: “I believe in the collective control of essential productive means and resources,” Benton said with a measured reference to socialism, “but as a pragmatist I believe actual, not theoretical, interests do check and test the field of social change.” *Art Front* successfully portrayed Benton as an artist of ambiguous commitments; hardly the model the Artists’ Union would recommend for the well-defined intentions of a cultural worker.

*Art Front*’s editors confirmed their intentions behind the Benton interview in the essay on the next page of the April 1935 issue. Essentially an
editorial synthesis of Benton’s answers, Jacob Burck’s “Benton Sees Red” took
Benton’s “certain references to communism” to task, condemning the artist
for the shortcomings of his “pragmatism.” There is scarcely a sentence in
Burck’s article that does not bear quotation, since his dismantling of Benton is
so precise. In keeping with the intentions of the Artists’ Union, he paints
Benton a confused artist motivated neither by true originality or reasoned
credo: “Tom Benton came back to these shores a disillusioned youth—a
Parisian failure—‘Pure’ art did not agree with his organism,” Burck recounted
of Benton’s development. The polemic continues: “he licked his artistic
wounds and tried to find a new sweetheart to take the place of the one which
had just rebuffed him.” Burck includes Benton’s original ties to Marxist
thought to illustrate how he was led astray by aesthetic “pragmatism” and
the approval of art dealers:

“Benton read and theorized...about art. The talk and work of
his radical friends about revolution—strikes—workers—was
much closer to him than the blue smoke of the Left Bank. He
strapped a knapsack on his back and struck out in the direction
of his native home—Missouri—the Mid-West...only to return to
“smelt” the stuff down in New York for appraisal by art
dealers...A pragmatist takes as few chances as possible.”

Burck continued to muse on Benton’s vapidity by pointing to his
uninspired answer to Art Front’s question “[w]hat is the social function of
a mural?” Benton’s response: “that is for society, as it develops, to
determine,” provoked Burck to charge—

“It would endanger some unborn commission for Benton, were
he to have anything to say about what [his own] work should
say. What he really means is that it is for the men who hire him
to decide what function the murals are to have.”
Benton’s association with Craven’s criticism, with the fascist overtones implicit in their “dedication to a national art free from foreign aesthetic tyranny,” symbolized a major shortcoming of Benton’s method.130 “This country has given the world the picture-tabloid,” Burck noted disdainfully, “but Thomas Benton, it seems, prefers to do it by hand and call it art.”131

Burck’s essay was the perfect articulation of the Artists’ Union’s fears of the American Scene’s aesthetic dominance of the Federal Art Projects. According to Burck, Craven had thus far recruited Grant Wood, John Stuart Curry, and of course Benton “for the sake of gaining a common objective—the impending federal jobs.” Burck proclaimed: “an alliance has been consummated…the fat federal money bags are about to be surrounded.”132

Though to many it seemed inevitable that the pastoral and innocuous realism of the American Scene was to be the foremost aesthetic mode of New Deal’s mural programs, Stuart Davis pointed to the radical aesthetic roots behind the cultural worker identity to counter this assumption. In Stuart’s 1935 “Rejoinder to Benton” in Art Digest we find such maneuvers. Reinvigorated by the recent testimony from Benton, Davis assailed the incongruity of Benton’s positions, in particular, highlighting Benton’s murals as maladaptive to the New Deal visual mandate. “The subject matter of Benton’s murals is the American environment, and that environment is not characterized by its visual aspects alone,” Davis asserted. “Any artist who undertakes the portrayal of that environment automatically takes on the obligation of understanding its social meaning as well, as such social meaning is inseparable from its subject. Benton has recognized this obligation in his statement…but has not accepted it.”133 Therefore, from the ‘social content’
perspective of John Reed Club the inconsequential role that Benton assigns to “social understanding” in his murals simultaneously eroded his work’s validity as public art in the New Deal sense. Thus, in this moment of direct attack, the defunct proletarian “Art as a Weapon” of the John Reed Clubs combined with the rationality of the campaign for the public use of art to create a new aesthetic banner that brought the exemplars of the American Scene into disrepute.

In an effort to define its program, the Artists’ Union became subject to widespread criticism. Its once strictly political, non-aesthetic, campaign became embroiled with stylistic and iconographic considerations. Those who subscribed to an academic tradition in American Art, such as Art Digest’s Peyton Boswell, dismissed all manifestations of revolutionary art and vehemently disproved of the political activity of the Artist’s Union. Boswell’s Art Digest countered the assertions made by radical artists, whether they made verbally or in aesthetic statements. It was principally through Boswell’s protests that the Artists’ Union came to represent, as Art Digest observed, the “left wing” of American Artists.134

The Artists’ Union was ready for such a challenge. The Union’s direct lineage to the John Reed Clubs made it quite accustomed to aesthetic pedagogy. In March 1934, the Union decided to begin organizing exhibitions of its member’s work. Though exhibitions were part of the Artists’ Union’s original stated purpose, the Union held off with exhibitions in the early stages since it disrupted its identification with industrial labor unions—few of which mounted art exhibitions.135 The group’s retracted identification with organized labor—due in measure to its recent aesthetic debates with some of
American art’s leading voices—led them to reinstitute their exhibition policy. These Union shows were similar in structural intent (not similar aesthetic intent) to the John Reed Club’s shows in the early 1930s. Within a year the New York section of the Artists’ Union held its first group show at Union headquarters at 60 West 15th Street. Additional Union shows occurred until late 1935.  

The Union held a large juried membership show at the A.C.A. gallery in February 1936. Art Front’s editor Charles Humboldt claimed that of the work on display, it was “fair to assume the paintings reflect not only the creative tendencies but also definite critical approaches to art within the union as a whole.” These tendencies were influenced by the former exercises of the John Reed Club strategy; the show’s choice of subject matter displayed vestiges of ‘art as a weapon,’ yet the execution pointed to a withdrawal from the explicit proletarian characteristics and a move toward a visual popular front. For example in Joe Jones’ Roustabouts (1934) (fig. 19) the artist abandoned the agitational cartoon style of dogmatic proletarian art while referencing the underlying themes of class struggle and capitalist exploitation.

Humboldt’s comments—a criticism from the left—illustrated the noticeable shift in the Union show’s depictions: “The picket lines are too finished, the houses of the poor are a little too theatrical, the street scenes a little too orderly, the factory chimneys are gentle as poplar trees…” The 1936 Union show completed the John Reed Club retreat from their once revolutionary convictions. Though Humboldt’s comments cordially lamented the loss of some of the artist’s revolutionary character, the show provided
what was perhaps the pinnacle of the Artists’ Union’s achievement with regard to acceptable conventions of public art.

Still, Humboldt’s review referenced the ability of the Artists’ Union’s members to tackle the “problems that face the painter today,” which involved a certain degree of “probing” and “discovery.” Humboldt delineated this aim further, taking intentional aim at the disinterestedness of the American Scene method:

“You can’t paint a demonstration with the same brush strokes and the same color you use for a house on a hill...no matter how sensitive a painter may be to moods, plays of light and shade, intimacies, atmospheres, his very sensitivity may itself become a sort of tradition within his own life, a tradition limiting his imagination and his ability to handle the coarser and more violent events that strike us daily.”

Humboldt’s criticism outlined the Artists’ Union’s delicate admixture of the former convictions of revolutionary art and the mandate to engage the masses’ found in New Deal public art.

Harold Rosenberg’s review of William Gropper’s exhibition in the March 1936 Art Front charted a similar advancement of revolutionary style. Not so long ago the John Reed Club strategy consisted of, what Rosenberg termed, “crudely conceived ‘left-wing’ pictures of bread lines, pickets, mounted police.” Rosenberg found Gropper in an advanced stage where “the principle—art is propaganda—does not imply that each individual work of art must contain in itself a complete argument leading towards a revolutionary conclusion.” Gropper’s The Senate (1935) (fig. 20) is a typical example of the unresolved commentary that began to appear in Gropper’s art. The painting’s caricatured figures reference the trope of the lampooned
capitalist, yet offer no concrete or agitational message; Gropper had safely departed from the raw didacticism of his early John Reed Club images.

Rosenberg commended the manner in which Gropper and the John Reed Club strategy has shifted to “recognize the fact that the picture-world of the painter includes within it elements of many kinds…and that this picture-world, as an entirety, deflects the mentality of society in one direction or another.”143 The Artists’ Union embodied this description of Gropper’s approach; their member’s “picture worlds” were impelled to capture the “mentality of society.” As evident in Gropper’s images, this characterization relied upon the measured reference to the proletarian basis of the John Reed Club group’s former strategy. The development of the Artists’ Union aesthetic advanced in consistence with New Deal Art. Three years later, Gropper would execute his mural for the Department of the Interior, *Construction of the Dam* (fig. 21) in quite a similar manner. The undertones of class-conflict are subdued by a heightened sense of cooperative industrial progress. The same model used in Gropper’s heroic depiction of the Soviet worker (fig. 9)—once used to illustrate the virtue of proletarian struggle—was reemployed to extol New Deal construction. This juxtaposition of Gropper’s work illustrates the impact of the Communist’s popular front strategy on the Artists’ Union’s reevaluation of revolutionary art.

By 1935, the Communist Party in the United States was pursuing a policy of cooperation with the New Deal. Although as late as the summer of 1933 party secretary Earl Browder had called Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration “fascist” and a “capitalist attack on the living standards of the masses,” by early 1935, Browder, in submission to the Soviet’s popular front
strategy, had reversed the C.P.U.S.A.’s policy towards the New Deal. By October, he claimed in the *Daily Worker*: “we must end sectarian nonsense.” The United States Communist Party officially welcomed “all white collar workers—without any special requests required” to join “as part of the exploited working class.”

The John Reed Clubs became one of the first casualties of the Party’s new collaborative policy. During the winter of 1935-1936 all clubs closed down, with the art school ceasing operations in February 1936. In their last meetings, the members discussed the left’s cultural strategy under the new popular front policy. Their concern was that the artist’s ability to combat fascism and war, both at home and abroad, needed to be defined in some official manner. In a decision heavily influenced by the American Writers Congress, which organized radical writers on April 26 and 27, 1935, several John Reed Club members—principally Davis, Gellert, and Lozowick—drafted a call for an American Artist’s Congress in August 1935. The call was to those artists “who, conscious of the need of action, realize the necessity of collective discussion and planning, with the objective of the preservation of our cultural heritage.” The decision to hold the congress was in response to such undeniable discord. Acting as executive secretary of the congress, Stuart Davis stated: “the artist must face a constant attack against his freedom,...daily reminders of the fascist growth in the United States.”

The American Artist’s Congress featured 401 member representatives who gathered in New York on February 14, 1936. Leading figures in the radical arts community delivered speeches on topics ranging from “The
Repression of Art in America” by the John Reed muralist Joe Jones to Hugo Gellert’s “Fascism, the War and the Artist.”

The opening remarks by secretary Stuart Davis perhaps best summarize the spirit of the congress’s intentions:

“In order to withstand the sever shock of the crisis, artists have had to seek a new grip on reality. Around the pros and cons of ‘social content,’ a dominant issue in discussions of present day American art, we are witnessing determined efforts by artists to find a meaningful direction. Increasing expression of social problems of the day in the new American art makes it clear that in times such as these we are living in, few artists can honestly remain aloof, wrapped up in their studio problems. But the artist has not simply looked out of the window; he has had to step into the street.”

The popular front created a moment of heightened tension throughout the left. The papers presented during the American Artist’s Congress sessions were indicative of the John Reed Club and New Masses group’s priorities in the face of such challenges. While popular front strategy had tempered the New Masses’ revolutionary vitriol in the immediate political landscape, many of the opinions expressed at the congress operated upon tenets of Gold’s concept of the proletarian artist. The underlying assumptions of ‘Art as a Weapon’ strategy remained in spite of aesthetic redactions that had occurred since the John Reed Club’s early and most agitational shows.

Further, the main assumptions upon which the New Masses group constructed a rationale for New Deal Art were reiterated throughout the proceedings, mainly by the Congress’s continual urges for the artist to abandon their bohemian interactions with society and engage the ills of the nation.
Meyer Schapiro delivered the keynote address at the first closed session at the New School for Social Research. Schapiro’s “The Social Bases of Art” echoed the general policy of the Artist’s congress and the Artists’ Union so well that Art Front’s editors celebrated the text by reprinting it in the magazine’s next issue. Schapiro pointed to artists’ innate relationship to the society around them, or the “social necessity” with which art is bound to “the conditions of its own time and place.”\textsuperscript{150} Though this seemed obvious to many, Schapiro had a more nuanced point: the modern isolation of the artist, whether in one’s bohemian lifestyle or in the “context of their formal fantasy,” is no closer to an “artistic reality.”\textsuperscript{151} “There are artists and writers for whom the apparent anarchy of modern culture…. is historically progressive, since it makes possible for the first time the conception of the human individual with his own needs and goals,” Schapiro noted. However, this notion was “restricted to small groups who are able to achieve such freedom only because of the oppression and misery of the masses.”\textsuperscript{152}

Thus Schapiro, appearing to take a swipe at modernist’s obsession with formal achievements, also reiterated the underlying aesthetic values of the Artists’ Congress. The implicit message was to show artists that the most affective aesthetic strategy to fight fascism would be through the appeal “to the society of which they were part.”\textsuperscript{153} “The courage to change things,” Schapiro charged, came not from studio-borne “aesthetic moments.”\textsuperscript{154}

Such championing of the “social bases” of art strayed not far from the Soviet notion of the “Social Command,” which instructed artists to “smash to smithereens the idea of an apolitical art” at the height of the post-revolutionary imbroglio in proletarian culture.\textsuperscript{155} Through this perspective,
the New Deal art projects appeared to Artists’ Union members as a new forum to exercise the social command that the popular front called for.

The Artists’ Congress established a permanent organization, and, within a year, began mounting exhibitions and distributing prints. The Congress’s most ambitious exhibition was its “America Today” show, which traveled to thirty cities beginning in December 1936. A jury including Davis, Gropper, Gellert, and Lozowick, chose one hundred prints to travel with the exhibition. Elizabeth Old’s Bootleg Mining (fig. 22) was among the prints chosen, presumably for its engaging social content.

The text of the catalogue offered a straightforward though insipid appraisal of the images: “more and more artists are finding the world outside their studios increasingly interesting and exciting, and filling their picture with their reactions to humanity about them, rather than apples or flowers.” One can barely sense the anti-academic, class-based rancor of Michael Gold in the Artist’s Congress’s statements, though one need only to look at the members of the show’s jury (which included figures such as Gellert, Davis, and Lozowick) for links to the proletarian criticism of the early New Masses.

We can see how the arguments that buttressed the John Reed Club’s campaign for “art as weapon in the class struggle” carried over to the Artists’ Union’s and the American Artists Congresses’ campaign for public art under federal patronage. As Stuart Davis, Louis Lozowick, Hugo Gellert, William Gropper passed in and out of the various artists’ organizations of the early 1930s their rhetoric linked the ideas of Michael Gold with the rationale for the last and most audacious of the federal programs: Holger Cahill’s WPA Federal Art Project.
The new cultural worker role brandished by the left was commensurate with the ideas of WPA/FAP’s chief architect Holger Cahill. Cahill and Gold’s proletarian artists shared the belief that the artist was among the most valuable contributors to society, and could not afford to sit still during this time of crisis. A selection from a dialogue between Gold and Cahill illustrate their shared convictions: “in order to help form our American art,” Cahill said, we must recognize that the “critics are the spade and shovel laborers, the axmen and levelers who prepare the ground where the artists are to come in and build.” With Cahill’s administrative leadership, the radical artists of the Artists’ Union were most definitely ready to “come in and build.”
1 Gold, Michael. “Towards a Proletarian Art,” The Liberator (February, 1921) p. 21
2 Gold, Michael, “America Needs A Critic,” New Masses (October, 1926) p. 7
3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid. p. 32
7 Ibid. p. 13
8 Gold, Michael, “America Needs A Critic,” New Masses (October, 1926) p. 7
9 Trotsky, Leon. Literature and Revolution, p. 29
12 Ibid.
13 Gold spoke Yiddish with his Russian-Jewish family. It has not been confirmed whether he ever gained a reading knowledge of Russian according to the following biographical studies: Homberger, Eric. American Writers and Radical Politics, 1900-39; Equivocal Commitments (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1986); Folsom, Michael Brewster, “The education of Michael Gold,” in Proletarian Writers of the 1930s. ed Dave Madden (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968)
14 Hemingway, Andrew, Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956 p. 25
16 Homberger, Eric. American Writers and Radical Politics, 1900-39; Equivocal Commitments (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1986) p. 120
17 In Freeman’s “An American Testament” he mentions that he and Gold had read the Paul’s account in the spring of 1923, a formative year for both men’s skepticism of party literature and worker’s education. Freeman, Joseph, An American Testament (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936) p. 324
21 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Solomon, Maynard, Marxism and Art (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973) p. 188
25 Ibid.
125

27 Homberger, Eric, American Writers and Radical Politics, 1900-39; Equivocal Commitments, p. 122.
28 Brown, Edward J. p. 8
29 Murphy, James F. The Proletarian Moment; The Controversy over Leftism in Literature p. 23-24
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
36 Dobrenko, Evgeny, Aesthetics of Alienation; Reassessment of Early Soviet Cultural Theories (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005) p. 31
37 Brown, Edward J. The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature 1928-1932, p. 12
38 Ibid.
41 With notable exceptions such as Stuart Davis
42 “The Marxian Approach to Art,” (1932) and “Art Under the Proletarian Dictatorship,” (1934) in John Reed Club material. Papers of Louis Lozowick, 1898-1974. AAA. Smithsonian Institute
44 Minor, Robert, “Art As a Weapon in the Class Struggle,” Daily Worker (December, 1927) p. 25
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 The papers of Louis Lozowick include numerous lectures delivered to the John Reed Clubs under the section entitled ’John Reed Club materials,’ many are undated.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Review of “Voices of October” in New Masses, (May, 1930) p. 32
55 Whiting, Cecile, Antifascism in American Art (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1989) p. 20
56 Murphy, James F. The Proletarian Moment; The Controversy over Leftism in Literature (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) p. 36
57 Ibid.
58 The Journal was translated into English, German, French. Murphy, James F., The Proletarian Moment; The Controversy over Leftism in Literature (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) p. 38
59 Ibid.
60 Johnson, Oakley. On Karkhov at the John Reed Club Convention, in New Masses (July, 1932) p. 14
61 Ibid.
64 Letter to National Executive Secretary Oakley Johnson from Bela Uitz, General Secretary of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists. In Louis Lozowick Papers, 1898-1974. AAA. Smithsonian Institute.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Eastman, Max, Artists in Uniform: A Study of Literature and Bureaucratism (New York: Knopf, 1934) p. 9
74 Ibid. P. 14
75 Gold, Michael, “At the John Reed Club Convention,” reprinted in New Masses (July, 1932) p. 14-15
80. Ibid.
82. “History of the Artists’ Union,” Art Front Vol. 1, No. 1 (November, 1934) p. 4
84. in Art Front Vol. 1 No. 1 (November, 1934) p. 4
85. Ibid.
87. Ibid. p. 183
90. Rivera, Diego, “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art,” Modern Quarterly Vol. 6, No. 3 (Autumn, 1932) p. 51-57
94. Art Front Vol. 1 No. 1 (November, 1934) p. 2
95. Ibid.
98. Ibid.
Davies, Stuart, “The Artist Today: The Standpoint of the Artists' Union,”
David Shapiro (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973) p. 114

Art Front Vol. 1 No. 6 (July, 1935) p. 3

“History of the Artists’ Union,” in *Art Front* Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 1934)
p. 4

Ibid.

“Great Expectations,” in *Art Front* Vol. 1, No. 3 (February 1935) p. 3

Duroc, Margaret, “The Social Sterility of Painters,” *Art Front* Vol. 1 No. 6
2 (January, 1936) p. 9

Biddle, George, *An American Artist’s Story* (Boston: Little, Brown, and
Company, 1939) p. 270

Ibid.

Edward Bruce to William Zorach, February 21, 1936 in Marlene Park and
Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas; Post Offices and Public Art in the New

Ibid.

Gorelick, Boris. “Artists’ Union Report,” February 14, 1936 in Matthew
Baigell and Julia Williams, *Artists Against War and Fascism; Papers of the First
American Artist’s Congress* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986)
p. 183

A concept generally associated with the work of Art historian Matthew
29, No. 4. (Summer, 1970) p. 422-429

Craven, Thomas, “Art and Propaganda,” *Scribner’s* Vol. 95, No. 3 (March
1934), pp. 189-194

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

3 (February, 1935) p. 6

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Burck, Jacob, “Benton Sees Red” Ibid. p. 5

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.
132 Ibid.
133 Davis, Stuart, “Rejoinder to Thomas Benton,” Art Digest (April 1935) p. 12
137 Humboldt, Charles, “The Union Show,” Art Front Vol. 2 No. 3 (February 1936) p. 9
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
145 Earl Browder, Daily Worker, October 9, 1935 in Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, Ibid.
146 Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, Introduction, Artists Against War and Fascism; Papers of the First American Artist’s Congress (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986) p. 8
147 Davis, Stuart, “Call for an American Artist’s Congress,” in Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, Artists Against War and Fascism; Papers of the First American Artist’s Congress, Ibid. p. 47
148 Ibid.
149 Davis, Stuart, “Why an Artist’s Congress?” (1936) Artists Against War and Fascism; Papers of the First American Artist’s Congress, Ibid. p. 65
151 Ibid. 112
152 Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, Introduction, Artists Against War and Fascism; Papers of the First American Artist’s Congress, Ibid. p. 14
153 Ibid.
154 Ibid.
156 “American Today Exhibition,” December 1936, in Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, Introduction, Artists Against War and Fascism; Papers of the First

This quote is taken from an essay by Gold in the Liberator; “Two critics in a Bar-room,” (September, 1921) p. 28-29, in Wendy, Jeffers, “Holger Cahill and American Art,” Archives of American Art Journal, Vol. 31, No. 4. (1991) p. 2-11, in which Gold re-creates typical Greenwich Village dialogue between him and his friend Holger Cahill. Wendy Jeffers noted how she discovered a copy of this article in Holger Cahill’s personal papers, indicating that Cahill must have had some attachment to this particular article. Both Jeffers and I take these quotes to be indicative of Cahill’s outlook at that time, and in turn instructive to our understanding of Cahill’s general attitude towards art and society in light of his later achievements with the WPA/FAP.
Chapter Three

The Ideological Confluence of Holger Cahill and Michael Gold

The Artistic ‘Everyman’ in America

“Many American Artists, many American museum directors and teachers of art, people who would lay down their lives for political democracy, would scarcely raise a finger for democracy in the arts. They say that art, after all, is an aristocratic thing, that you cannot get away from aristocracy in matters of aesthetic selection. They have a feeling that art is a little too good, a little too rare and fine, to be shared with the masses.”

-Holger Cahill

When Stuart Davis learned his good friend Holger Cahill had been offered the job as director of the WPA Federal Arts Project (FAP), he immediately contacted him. A few days later the two men met over dinner at an Italian restaurant near 14th Street. “For God’s sake why don’t you take it?” urged Davis, who, as a modernist with unabashed communist sympathies feared the reprisals of any alternative choice for director. The stolid and academic landscape painter Jonas Lie was also being considered for the job—“Oh you know what the modernist artists would get if they handed that to Jonas Lie,” Davis exclaimed to Cahill, “They would get nothing!”

Cahill was an inspired choice for the WPA Federal Art Project’s national director according to the New Masses group’s criteria. Cahill had a working class background, maintained a steady, albeit equivocal relationship with socialism, and had been a constant champion of the concerns of the American artist. Within months Cahill took the job, and became head of the largest and most sprawling bureaucracy of all of the New Deal cultural
projects, not to mention the most controversial. Yet in Cahill’s actions on the project, he constructed and sustained an important rationale for the program, which he termed Cultural Democracy.

This chapter illustrates the confluence of the John Reed Club’s cultural worker with the self-sustaining rationale of the WPA Federal Art Project. Cahill’s ideology of Cultural Democracy shared several important characteristics with the John Reed Club’s view of the artist’s place in society. Both the petitions of the Artist’s Union and the agenda of the American Artist’s Congress stipulated the development of Cahill’s implementation of Cultural Democracy.

First, however, it will help to illustrate how the earliest two forms of federal art patronage arose, namely the Treasury Section of Fine Arts and the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). The generation of these two projects were distinct from Cahill’s FAP. The administrative goals differed considerably from Cahill’s FAP as well. The Treasury Section of Fine Arts and the PWAP were more narrowly conceived, and thus operated without a grand ideological underpinning such as WPA/FAP’s Cultural Democracy.

**George Biddle and the Genesis of Federal Art**

American artist George Biddle was born 1885 in Philadelphia, the scion of one of the nation’s oldest aristocratic American families. After Groton and Harvard—he was a classmate of Franklin Delano Roosevelt—Biddle abandoned the family tradition of public service (his bother Francis Biddle was a prominent New Dealer and would eventually be Roosevelt’s nominee for attorney General) to pursue art. Biddle studied painting in Europe—
Munich and Paris—and in America at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Yet, as he relates in his memoir, his most influential experience came during a one-month stay in Mexico with Diego Rivera:

“I watched him paint, and listened to his gargantuan exploits and his Münchhausenish tales. I had talked long hours while I painted his portrait, with the dry-hot, feverish and jealous-bitter intensity of José Clemente Orozco. I had known most the lesser Mexican satellites of that prodigious pair...and had lived with the brilliant young architect Juan O’Gorman, and Carlos Contreras, the driving force behind the National Planning Project for the Republic of Mexico.”

Biddle returned to the United States thoroughly impressed by the government sponsored mural program that facilitated the development of the Mexicans’ compelling style. He mused on those experiences and their place in an American context:

“I felt a certain sympathy and understanding of this ideology, the casual circumstances, the germination and the quick tropical flowering of the Mexican School. To recognize the same tropical seeds, and analogous chemical and physical conditions in our American soil and climate, might form the subject of a preliminary inquiry. How to translate the Mexican method into terms of the American though pattern and cultural meaning? Could we also have a worthy mural art, and how?”

On May 9, 1933 President Roosevelt received a letter from his old classmate concerning the practicalities of a new national mural art: “[T]he Mexicans have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because Obregon allowed Mexican artists to work at plumber’s wages in order to express on the walls of the governments buildings the social ideals of the Mexican Revolution.” His letter went on: “[T]he younger artists of America …would be eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form if they were given
the government’s co-operation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve.”

It was Biddle’s most basic estimation of a mural’s social significance that profoundly informed the nature of his solicitations to Roosevelt. He believed that all “vital schools of art” rose from a “common social faith or purpose.”7 A mural school was encouraged when the social institutions that operated under society’s “collective beliefs… provide[d] the wall space and the commission[s].”8 The “very essence of mural painting” hinged upon the artist’s “carrying some universal appeal,” usually in the form of an ideology.9

The genesis that Biddle describes in his dairies did not directly lead to Cahill’s WPA Federal Art Program that began in 1936. Rather, Edward Bruce’s Treasury Section of the Fine Arts grew directly out of Biddle’s correspondence with President Roosevelt. Roosevelt put Biddle in contact with Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence W. Robert, who also served as the custodian of public buildings. In the proceedings Biddle pleaded his case to several high level New Deal policy makers, including Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Rexford G. Tugwell, and Eleanor Roosevelt.10 Throughout his campaign in Washington D.C. he made it quite clear that his vision would be for the ideological benefit of the New Deal state. In a letter to Secretary Perkins he explains, “I particularly write you because I believe you are interested in ... the possibility of canalizing art to express the economic and social adjustments through which we are going.”11
When Secretary Robert consulted Edward Bruce as a collaborator for Biddle, they found a way to secure funds from Harold Ickes’ Public Works Administration that were originally earmarked for relief purposes. An international financier-turned-artist, Bruce had studied with Maurice Sterne and enthusiastically approved of Biddle’s idea for a federal relief project. Yet due to several administrative difficulties, Bruce slightly changed the program from Biddle’s original plan.

Nevertheless, both Biddle’s theoretical plan and the day-to-day operations of the Section of Fine Arts and PWAP used rhetorical rationales that were separate from Cahill’s sprawling WPA/FAP and far more narrow. From the Artist’s Union’s earliest protests, the New Masses’ group opposed the limited relief provided under the earlier Treasury projects (the Section and PWAP) and identified their cultural worker identity and proletarian conceptions of art with the advancement of Cahill’s WPA/FAP.

The rationale behind both the Section and PWAP was twofold. First, Bruce and PWAP’s technical director Forbes Watson advanced the notion that, in a time of economic downturn, the government ought to step in to support certain artists to help preserve their artistic skills. The administrators fear was that skills of the nation’s best artists would atrophy without consistent private or public patronage. Yet in reality the Section and PWAP did not aim to preserve the skills of artists on a large scale. Rather they held juried competitions for the coveted mural commissions, thus restricting them to a small number of hand-selected painters.

Secondly, as most clearly derived from Biddle’s early conceptions, the administration dictated the subject matter of the art produced on the Section
and PWAP—Bruce insisted that the subject be limited to “the American Scene.” A Treasury Department order of October 16, 1934 mandated this control. This document defined the department’s general objectives: “to secure suitable art available for the embellishment of public buildings…. [T]o carry out this art in such a way that will assist in stimulating…the development of art in this country.” Both the Section and PWAP’s use of competitions to determine commissions illustrates the priority given to the art’s quality—or, as they defined it, work which was “consistent with a high standard of art.” On the subject of relief, Bruce made blunt statements: “there are not enough artists on relief to do our job and maintain the quality for which we stand.” Neither of these rationales captured the imagination or satisfaction of the New Masses group.

In contrast, the Artist’s Union constructed its rationale for federal patronage almost entirely around the concept of providing relief to needy artists, independent of their skill. They were not concerned with impressing a bureaucracy of official judges and were absolutely opposed to following predetermined subject matter. As one placard at an Artist’s Union protest read: “WE PROTEST THE ‘MERIT’ SYSTEM!”

Much to the dismay of the radical artists of the Artist’s Union and the American Artist’s Congress, Bruce’s programs did not operate with such lofty intent to transform the definition of art from the outmoded and elitist conception. Bruce’s Treasury Programs were perfectly content with art’s occupation of a separate sphere from the rest of society. Bruce and the artists carried out a program with little reference to the Marxist idea of art as an essential human concern. Thus it was Cahill’s rhetoric of Cultural
Democracy—a lynchpin to the WPA/FAP’s success—which many of the radical artists could find semblances of their ‘art as a weapon’ aspirations. The story of this ideological confluence begins with the story of Cahill himself.

Holger Cahill was born Sveinn Kristjan Bjarnarson in Iceland, January 1877.17 His parents immigrated to Canada for a brief period in 1889 before moving to North Dakota and settling on a farm not far from the northern border. The next few decades of Cahill’s life are muddled by conflicting memories and Cahill’s own mythmaking. His father left the family, and soon after Cahill was sent to live on another family farm. He ran away from his new family, and after years of traveling that bordered on vagrancy, landed a job with the Northern Pacific railway in 1907. After this point in his life, Cahill claimed several fantastic adventures, including traveling across Canada on industrial trains as a hobo, jumping ship from a Great Lakes ore transport, and a trip to China.18

Cahill’s taste for adventure—fictional though it may be—took him to New York in 1913, which he traveled to by rail, again “as a hobo.”19 He took night classes in journalism at NYU with Irwin Granich—later Michael Gold—and shortly began writing for various publications, including the Bronxville Review, the Scarsdale Inquirer, and the Mount Vernon Argus.20 Gold was his superior at both the Bronxville Review and the Scarsdale Inquirer; after Gold left the publications, Cahill took his place as editor. Cahill was fond of Gold, as he knew him from journalism classes, Prof. Thorsten Veblen’s lectures in economics at NYU, and from the New York newspapers. In 1957 Cahill remembered Gold as “a nice Jewish boy” who first sparked his interest in socialism.21
Cahill lived in Greenwich Village from 1915 to 1920, at a time that many, especially Cahill, considered to have been the neighborhood’s intellectual “heyday.”\textsuperscript{22} Cahill befriended many artists and writers for the \textit{Masses} and the \textit{Liberator}. He had an apartment on Waverly Place and frequented the bohemian-intellectual hangouts in the village, such as the Columbia Gardens saloon, or, as it was know to the artist John Sloan and playwright Eugene O’Neill, “The Working Girls Home.”\textsuperscript{23}

In Greenwich Village, Cahill’s embryonic contact with aesthetics was infused with the dominant social ideologies of his circle of friends. He was strongly influenced by his exposure to artists of the early \textit{Masses} group, whose work for newspapers and magazines “gave them experience with depicting scenes form everyday life.”\textsuperscript{24} The \textit{Masses’} artists believed in “the relevance of art to life, the life of the man in the street”—

“They were interested in social and political ideas, in the writings of Edward Bellamy and Henry George, the optimistic Americanism of Walt Whitman, the humanitarianism of Tolstoy, the economic and historical theories of Karl Marx, in the Labor movement, in the whole complex of late nineteenth-century idealism which ranged from old-fashioned liberalism to socialism and communism.”\textsuperscript{25}

If the Bolshevik revolution augmented Gold’s faith in socialism, it served the opposite role for Cahill, who after 1919 “became very rapidly disillusioned with what was going on in Russia…it seemed too idealistic.”\textsuperscript{26} This marked the slow erosion of Cahill’s socialist identity. His friendship with Gold went on hiatus as well—“I saw less and less of Mike Gold, because, he, like many other Bolsheviks, became quite partisan.”\textsuperscript{27}

Yet Cahill’s temporary falling out with Gold, which was, according to Cahill, more of Gold’s engineering, ended once he began to work on the
Federal Art Project. Gold was able to reconcile his differences with Cahill precisely because those who continued to bear the mantle of proletarian culture—from the John Reed Clubs, the Artist’s Union, and finally the American Artist’s Congress—had lobbied so aggressively for a federal art program that operated, as Cahill’s did, upon the principles of relief and guaranteed 100% artistic freedom. Further, Cahill, who cut his teeth among the left-wing cultural scene in Greenwich Village, arrived on the project with a developed ideology and overwhelming historicism concerning the New Deal’s cultural goals.

Scholars have already shown the ways in which the ideologies of the New Deal and the Communist Party overlapped. Some have paid attention to, as have I, the way in which the cultural authorities on the left provided a “plausible view” of how the government projects were “truly progressive.” Yet the notion of a “plausible view” implies that the radical artists’ conceptions of the New Deal projects were not only externally constructed, but also subjectively applied. I dispute this conception by asserting that the views of the Communist artists were objectively derived and were in legitimate accordance with the ideological outlook of Holger Cahill. Those who doubt the Communist’s genuine endorsement of the project’s goals need look no farther than the series of cultural compromises the Party had already made in the name of popular front pressure: from the earliest influence of International Union of Revolutionary Writers on the John Reed Club convention of 1932 to Georgi Dimitrov’s outright declaration of a broad popular front with democratic governments at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in 1935.
After the Communist Party adopted the most mainstream aspects of Americanism, typified by the C.P.U.S.A.’s slogan: “Communism is the twentieth-century Americanism,” the artist’s of the defunct John Reed Clubs had cause to endorse Cahill’s plan for Cultural Democracy. Significant aspects of Cahill’s approach were derived from the radical artist’s core revolutionary principles, the same principles which first attracted them to the iconoclastic cultural polemics of Michael Gold.

Thus, it is not implausible to discuss the ideas of Michael Gold alongside the aesthetic philosophy of Holger Cahill. After all, it was Gold who gave Cahill his “first big break” at the Bronxville and Scarsdale papers. Cahill’s name consistently appeared in the radical *Liberator* and the *New Masses*. In other words, the early years of their friendship was based on an open and mutual intellectual respect.

A hallmark of Gold’s approach, like many critics in the Marxist tradition, was to arrive at conclusions with a deep sense of historical imperative. Gold’s historicism is most clearly illustrated by his earliest call, “Towards a Proletarian Art.” Gold assigns historical agency to the masses as a cultural group who must, through revolutionary means, brace for the cultural upheaval that was to erase the “competitive and unsocial” art of the previous decade. Gold reminded his readers that “in blood, tears, chaos and wild, the social revolution in the world today arises out of the deep need of the masses.”

Cahill, too, formed his conclusions about art in the same historically derived fashion. His essay for the “New Horizons in American Art” exhibition at the Museum of Modern art in 1936 is symptomatic of his
tendency to explain aesthetics through historical developments. The essay—which attempts to rationalize the WPA Federal Art Project to a museum audience—arrives upon the assumption that, in times of cultural deficiency, “art always somehow takes care of itself.”

Cahill offered a case study in the Colonial and early Republican portrait painters to disprove this notion:

“Looking at the work of men like Feke, Copley, Earl, and Stuart, one might assume that the excellence of early American portraiture is due simply to the fortunate fact that these talented men happened to be alive. What would become of these talents if the landed aristocracy and the rich merchants had not been equal to the event, if there had been no sound tradition of art patronage, no social interest in portraiture and no active demand for it? The answer is supplied by history.”

In this example, Cahill discloses the substantive importance he gives to historical developments when considering aesthetics. The causes he cites here are not only historical, but fundamentally social—that is, they step outside the contained art world and concern the conditions of everyday American society. Cahill continued to assert his socially grounded views of art, claiming that, in his estimation, it was the “social and economic changes early in the nineteenth century” which ended the “greatest portrait school this country has produced.”

Further, both men’s historical determinism left them with similar outlooks on the recent developments of their own time. Gold’s polemics were a response to the burgeoning corporate power—economic, though manifested through culture—that dominated the nineteen-twenties: what Gold referred to as the new form of “gentility,” based on money, which had “replaced the old standards.” During this period artists were forced to become “aristocrats of mankind.” Likewise, Cahill—in line with the New
Deal narrative established by intellectuals such as Rexford Tugwell and Henry Wallace—sought to bring balance to a decade in which artists worked in the free-market culture of bourgeois society.\textsuperscript{35}

In a statement on contemporary French art, Cahill reduces its content to essential material concerns with Marxist conviction—“modern French art, in its esoteric abstract character is the expression of a small group of individuals with a high degree of cultural sophistication, representing freedom from practical productive cares. This is the culmination of the individualistic cultural heritage of the rentier class.” Cahill added that in America this tendency was for a time gaining ground, yet ultimately became “superseded by a new interest in art forms which are a direct expression of contemporary life,” which for Cahill was symptomatic of artists returning to the general population.

Cahill’s quest for Cultural Democracy was an extension of the New Deal assertion that the era of pure market relations had come to an end. Ideas expressed by Secretary of Agriculture Rexford Tugwell in his seminal essay “Planning Must Replace Laissez Faire” pointed to the deleterious effects of monopoly capitalism on the country’s economic organization. In the historical estimations of Cahill and other New Dealers, such developments reach a sort of Hoovernian climax prior to the economic crash of 1929. The depression was a signal that the nation needed to shed the “deadweight of outworn ideas and obsolete institutions.”\textsuperscript{36} Of course, Cahill modified this pattern of thought into the arts. Cahill, again referencing the economic influence on the art world, spoke of the “growth of the museum and collector system which, with its almost exclusive emphasis upon cultural archaeology,
diverted by far the greatest part of the funds spent for art in this country to
the purchase of works of the past.”

The practices of museums often created what Cahill termed “dead
art,” and over time erected a certain sacred aura around art in America. Cahill’s WPA Federal Art Program set out to de-sanctify American art in
much the same manner as the John Reed Clubs before him. In the previous
decade, “doctors of aesthetics,” as Cahill referred to the museum and gallery
world, “have split art in two, calling the one part—which they admire—
ideological and expressive, and the other part, which is supposed to be very
inferior, indeed utilitarian.” Just as Gold and the John Reed Clubs, worked
to reverse the artist’s separation from the rest of society, Cahill stated his
project’s intent to overcome the boundaries between the so called
“expressive” and the “utilitarian” in art. The artist “has seen the prospect of
greatly increased audiences,” preached Cahill, and “has come to believe that
the age-old cleavage between the artist and the public is not dictated by the
very nature of our society;” therefore “an attempt to bridge the gap between
American Artist and American public has governed the entire program of the
Federal Art Project.”

Here, Cahill is directed by the belief that capitalism was inimical to
artistic creativity, or a stifling and vulgarizing agent of culture in general. This
idea had been continually advanced by the New Masses group during the
nineteen twenties. Cahill’s references to a “dead art” bear striking
resemblance to the most vitriolic polemics by Gold, wherein he blamed
“bourgeois sentiments” in art for the preponderance of the “art for art’s
sake” aesthetic. Cahill’s remarks about content in French contemporary art
resembled Gold’s chastisement of Gertrude Stein, which linked Stein’s erratic and esoteric style to the social freedoms of the Parisian bourgeoisie.

Cahill, while not outwardly opposed to “art for art’s sake,” recognized the condition in America that precipitated such a trend: “Since the human element had already been banished there was nowhere for the artists to turn to but art itself. In content and idea, as well as in style and technique, the source and center, the unifying element for art was henceforth to be art.”

Once art became its own “unifying element,” its relationship to society began to suffer. Cahill characterized the 1920s as period when “art had been feeding on itself.” The Marxist aesthetcian Georgi Plekhanov had made similar statements, claiming that the tendency of art for art’s sake arose when artists “are in hopeless disaccord with the social environment in which they live.”

Cahill’s accordance with such important Marxist theorists concerning art for art’s sake was another reason why Cahill’s ideas were embraced by the revolutionary artists, despite his outwardly liberal views.

Cahill described the 1920s as a “period when our American artists were struggling to be recognized by museums [and] few private patrons—[the artists went] ahead to produce many personal, often highly individualistic works, which might be brought out of the studios or might not.” The private patronage system in art, even before the economic depression, withheld art from its full societal potential—“many [works of art] never found their way into places of exhibitions, or if once exhibited...were never viewed again, except perhaps in their own remote studios and meeting places,” Cahill recounted. Such individualistic conditions in American art had been similar to the detached social practices of from which French modern art
emerged; in Cahill’s estimation, the bohemian artist eschewed “an interest in art forms which are a direct expression of contemporary life.”

Cahill tended disregard the formal achievement of art in exchange for its capacity to reflect the society from which it originated. For both Cahill and Gold, when art belonged solely to the bourgeois sophisticate, it was isolated from the masses, and lost its most essential quality. The show that Cahill directed at the Museum of Modern Art in 1933, “American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900,” was an exercise in the most basic elements of Cahill’s ideology. Despite Cahill’s open admission that “these works have many technical deficiencies from the academic and naturalistic point of view,” Cahill showed them because “their art mirrors the sense and sentiment of a community, and is an authentic expression of American experience.”

In the early issues of the *New Masses*, when many were uncertain about Gold’s call for proletarian art, his most basic demand, regardless of formal strategy, medium, or genre, was that proletarian art spring forth organically from the workers. Gold’s answer to the question ‘what is proletarian art?’ would simply be, ‘art that was created by a member of the proletariat.’ By the same principle, if pressed to define American art, Cahill would respond: ‘art created by an American.’

Cahill spoke of how, in cultures in which art had achieved the greatest traditions, art became carried on as a community or group activity. As mentioned before, Cahill lamented the current American artistic landscape, which he viewed as slowly moving away from this condition— recently “art has...depended far more upon individual talent than upon tradition or group
activity,” leading toward “extreme subjectivism and over-personal expression.”

Cahill provided the Middle Ages as an example when art was “devoted to a subject matter which was of the deepest concern to everyone, when its symbols and allegories had profound meaning for the whole community.” The artist’s choices in content, for Cahill, were to reflect these considerations if art were to flourish on a community-wide scale. Here one can compare such proscriptions for successful community-based art by Cahill to the tactics used in Gold’s calls for proletarian art. Gold encouraged the artistic expression of subjects that would resonate within the community of radical intellectuals in the 1920s—a literal imaging of the socio-economic ideology of the left. For Gold’s proletarian artist, the “symbols and allegories of profound meaning” were the revolutionary manifestations observed in “the strike, boycott, mass-meeting, imprisonment, sacrifice, agitation, martyrdom, organization,” and other representations of class-conflict.

If the Cultural Democracy of the WPA/FAP strove to bring art back towards a group mentality, then the project’s organizational similarities to the model provided by the John Reed Clubs is illustrative of the two organization’s shared ideology. The “worker’s art collective” that was the New York John Reed Club consisted of separate sections for visual arts, dance, theatre, writing, and film. The structure of the clubs themselves aimed for a seamless manifestation of the collective spirit of art under the Soviet Proletcult movement. In addition, the John Reed Club boasted an art school intended to teach artists of varying experience; this included their popular children’s art class, a practice carried over to into the WPA/FAP. Ultimately, the John Reed Clubs were more focused on teaching and bringing art to the
masses that suffered from a lack of cultural expression, rather than submitting to the bourgeois aesthetic standards of established artists.

Cahill’s vision for the artistic everyman shared this disregard for existing aesthetic standards. In fact, Cahill connected the concept of aesthetic standards to the “art collectors and pundits” who turn art into an “item of luxury product.” Cahill declared, “the emphasis on masterpieces is primarily a collector’s idea and is related to a whole series of commercial magnifications which have very little to do with the needs of society as a creator or as participant in the experience of art.”

In a seminal John Reed Club lecture on Soviet Arts education, we find still more similarities between Cahill’s Cultural Democracy and Marxist theory. “In the soviet union,” the lecture stated “the new revolutionary art schools finds the artist solving the basic problems around him and reflecting on the new conditions that exist for art—that is his responsibility to use it with society.” Cahill’s FAP educational initiatives were committed to moving art beyond the cultural centers in American cities and into the general population—he targeted the American ‘everyman’ in opposition to the elite connoisseurship that discouraged the spread of art. The Russian Schools, too, stressed the promulgation of art education over formal mastery. Soviet arts education were “not organized on the basis of individual talent, mediocre talent is sufficient to enable a person to learn some branch of the art profession—the WPA/FAP likewise opened other non-creative, supervisory, or teaching jobs to those who where not ready to paint murals or easel work, as an alternative. The American cultural workers in the John Reed Club
admired that education in the Soviet Union had such an orientation towards mass participation.

In America, Cultural Democracy strove to tie art to a collective national experience, usually achieved through historical references to a ‘usable past.’ The Russians worked to the same end—the Soviet arts school "concentrated its attention mainly upon fixating the heroic moments of history and reflecting the work of the construction throughout the country." This was brand of cultural worker model that impelled “the new Soviet artist [to] work under the motto: ART IN INDUSTRY.”

Whether it was by rethinking arts education, or elevating the artist to professional status, Holger Cahill’s plans to “broaden national art consciousness” mirrored the Soviet’s move towards arts education for the masses.

As the class-war aesthetic that emerged from the John Reed Club exhibitions faded under the popular front, the artists who remained committed cultural workers found familiar echoes of the John Reed Club proletarian pedagogy in Cahill’s ideas. The radical artists recognized that, beneath the specifics often demanded by rhetoric, Gold and Cahill directed their criticism towards the same general cultural agencies, and shared visions for American art that extended beyond their immediate political allegiances. Both men set out to reverse the trend of cultural power as held by society’s elites—Cahill did so in the name of Democracy, and Gold in the name of Socialism. Thus at points, the two men’s ideas are indistinguishable.

Perhaps, it was Gold’s own words in the radical magazine the *Liberator* which incidentally provided us with the most poignant summary of Cahill’s
vision of Cultural Democracy: “When there is singing and music rising in
every American street, when in every American factory there is a drama
group of the workers, when mechanics paint in their leisure and farmers
write sonnets, the greater art will grow and only then.”56
1 Francis V. O’Connor, the pioneering art historian on this topic, first applied the term “artistic everyman,” to Cahill’s ideas. The term appears in his introduction to the collection of essays by the WPA/FAP’s administrators and artists: Art for the Millions, written and compiled under Cahill’s direction on the project. O’Connor reassembled the essays in 1973 and helped publish it with its original title; Art For the Millions. Edited by Francis O’Connor (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973) p. 18

2 Cahill, Holger, “American Resources in the Arts,” Foreword, Art For the Millions, Ed. Francis V. O’Connor, Ibid. p.36


4 Biddle, George, “Art and its Social Significance,” An American Artist’s Story (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1939) p. 263

5 Ibid. p. 264


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.


11 Ibid.


14 Ibid.


16 McKinzie, Richard D., The New Deal for Artists. p. 16


18 Ibid. p. 4

19 Ibid.

20 Reminiscences of Holger Cahill. p. 54

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid. 58

23 Ibid. 56

24 Ibid. 55

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid. 90

27 Ibid.
28 Hemingway, Andrew, “Cultural Democracy by Default: The Politics of the
New Deal Arts Programmes,” Oxford Art Journal (June 2007) p. 282
29 Gold, Michael, “Towards a Proletarian Art,” The Liberator (February, 1921)
p. 30
30 Ibid.
31 Cahill, Holger, Introduction, New Horizons in American Art (New York: The
Museum of Modern Art, 1936) p. 10
32 Ibid.
33 Riese, Utz, “Neither High nor Low; Michael Gold’s Concept of a Proletarian
Literature” in The Thirties; Politics and Culture in a Time of Broken Dreams, Eds.
Heinz Ickstadt, Rob Kroes, and Brian Lee. (Amsterdam: Free University
34 Ibid.
35 Hemingway, Andrew, “Cultural Democracy by Default: The Politics of the
282
36 Tugwell, Rexford G. “Battle for Democracy” (1935) in Hemingway,
“Cultural Democracy by Default: The Politics of the New Deal Arts
Programmes,” Oxford Art Journal Vol. 30 No. 2 (June 2007) p. 273
37 Cahill, Holger. “New Horizons” speech, 1936, Chicago, in Holger Cahill
38 Saab, Joan A. “Future Citizens and a Usable Past,” in For the Millions;
American Art and Culture between the Wars (Philadelphia: University of
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Cahill, Holger, Introduction, New Horizons in American Art, p. 13
42 Ibid.
43 Plekhanov, Georgi, Art and Social Life, in Marxism and Art. Ed. Maynard
44 Cahill, Holger, “New Horizons” speech, 1936, Chicago, in Holger Cahill
papers, 1910-1993, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
45 Cahill, Holger, “Art for Whom? A Survey of Present Day Conditions in the
Arts,” 1935 in Holger Cahill papers, 1910-1993, Archives of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution.
46 Cahill, Holger, Introduction, American Folk Art; The Art of the Common Man
in America, 1750-1900. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936)
47 Cahill, Holger, Foreword, “American Resources in the Arts,” in Art For the
Millions, p. 36
48 Ibid. 37
21
50 Cahill, Holger, Foreword, “American Resources in the Arts,” in Art For the
Millions, p. 35
51 Ibid.
52 Kravchenko, A.I., “ Soviet Pictorial Art-The Artist, the Art School and the
Public,” Materials related to the John Reed Club. Louis Lozowick Papers,
1898-1974. AAA. Smithsonian Institute.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Holger Cahill quoted in “U.S. To Find Work for 3,500 Artists.” New York Times, October 4, 1935. Pg. 23
56 Gold, Michael, “Towards Proletarian Art,” p. 21
Conclusion

In conclusion I shall reassert several pivotal points that my research has elucidated. First, and most generally, the proximity among and significant overlap between the social circles of the New Masses staff, the John Reed Club, The Artists’ Union, The American Artists’ Congress, and finally the actual administrators of the project remains an intangible yet noteworthy aspect of the period immediately prior to the New Deal Federal Art Projects. The most central figures in this study, Gropper, Lozowick, Davis, and Gellert, are uninterrupted in their support for the cultural worker model. Whether through art or activism, these central figures were firmly entrenched in the cultural conflict that precipitated the New Deal Projects.

Somewhat less crucial, yet related to this point was George Biddle’s tendentious connection to the New Masses group. This artist/pioneer of federal art was both a contributor to the New Masses, and for at least a short time, a member of the John Reed Clubs.¹

But perhaps the most lasting element of this argument is Holger Cahill’s connection to this radical community, a point which previous scholarship has so eschewed. From what I have gathered in the previous pages, the WPA/FAP’s Cultural Democracy was particular to this period in American culture; the idea had ideological currency precisely due to the preponderance of a Marxist cultural identity that enveloped the collective consciousness of the American Artist. Regardless of the fact that Cahill was
certainly not a practicing Marxist at the time of his New Deal employment, it was no accident that the innermost aims of his Cultural Democracy were so congruent with the principles of American radical artists.

Secondly, the Marxist aesthetics of the New Masses and John Reed Club group presupposed the required shift in cultural attitude upon which the rationale of Cultural Democracy could be advanced. Scarcely a year after Gold outlined his theories, counter arguments began to circulate throughout the community. Most of them were concerned with the capacity for proletarian art to attract new converts i.e. fellow travelers, and the proletarian artist’s ability to appeal to a mainstream audience. The revolutionary art community pursued this dialogue in earnest. The international socialist community’s alarmed reaction to Fascist developments redirected these considerations. In response, fellow travelers became a sought-after commodity and revolutionary artists modified their subject matter. The fundamentals of ‘Art as weapon in the class struggle’—mainly concerned with the proletariat versus the bourgeoisie—was supplanted by the notion of art as an antifascist weapon. Thus, the campaign for fellow travelers was an early issue upon which compromising elements were introduced into the aesthetic program.

Last I would like to marshal the most recent and leading scholarship on this topic—the work of Andrew Hemingway—in an attempt to correct a misconception about this period. Consider Hemingway’s stance on the question at hand:

“Direct state patronage of the arts as an alternative to the market did not become a part of the model of a democratic polity in the United States in any of the normal variants, and so
far as state patronage is associated with communism, it is equated with the Stalinist model of authoritarian control of culture and has no democratic component.’’

Despite the superb research and analysis to be found in Hemingway’s work—my research agrees with his conceptions on many other points—this statement is typical of a shortcoming in rest of his arguments, specifically his underestimation of the cultural agency of the popular front. In contrast, my research found this to be an essential factor. Hemingway certainly accepts the popular front presence but misreads its most lasting after effects. In the quotation above, Hemingway not only discounts the Marxist elements in Cahill’s aesthetics, but also more blatantly misapplies the ends of the subtle cultural borrowing that took place. Neither traditional “democratic polity” nor “Stalinist authoritarian control” was at any particular moment a definitive factor in this delicate period. Rather it was the popular front’s ability to meld these two distinct camps into a uniquely American enterprise. Further, my argument is grounded by the assertion that the most fundamental changes in the artist’s cultural identity far preceded the popular front. Therefore, regardless of whether or not these artists were conscious of the popular front’s short term affects or the rhetorical nature of Cahill’s rationale, they encountered the New Deal state with their beliefs about the role of the artist in society wholly intact. Hemingway continues to go, as I believe, too far—

“The New Deal, which certainly had no program for social revolution, inadvertently provided a space for communist propagandizing in cultural guise…. [the Communist Party] infiltrated the cultural institutions it established and used them for their own political ends.”

A fundamental point of my research demands that we not conceptualize the Communist artists’ activity on any of the projects as “infiltration.” My
research has revealed that one might more accurately view their contributions as a “continuation” of the cultural approach that they had espoused throughout the previous decade. Regarding Hemingway’s assertion that Cultural Democracy “inadvertently” provided a means to advance communist aesthetics, I would again stress Cahill’s sincere ideological sympathy towards leftist cultural ideas. This foils the notion that Cahill’s ideas were the victims of a hostile misappropriation by Communist artists and intellectuals. Marxist artists and intellectuals were thinking along these lines long before the rise of the New Deal order. Many times this theorizing went on in the company of Holger Cahill himself.

Historians and art historians alike who subscribe to this “infiltration” hypothesis reveal the effects of a Cold War bias. McCarthyism took its political toll on historical memory, though this occurs in aesthetics as well: the emblematizing of the American post-war Avant-garde, a symbol of individual freedom in the cultural politics of the Cold War, overshadowed the highly ideological art produced in the 1930s, our nation’s ‘red decade.’

Many can attest to the pejorative use of the term “Social Realism.” The vagueness with which this term is applied to artists and their ideas not only indicates the disorderly cultural landscape of the 1930s, but more specifically, it exposes our reluctance to revisit this period in order to sort out its most crucial subtleties. Instead a patent dismissal of the Federal Art Project’s aestheticism sufficed, as the project’s largesse was easily stamped as the cultural brainchild of a fleeting fascination with New Deal statism. Thus, art historians are guided in glazing over this period’s legitimate appeal to Marxist thought.
While the narrative of the popular front serves to connect the Gold’s proletarian criticism and the rhetoric of Cahill, in order to trace this connection properly, one should not stray too far from the local histories of the men and women who were so instrumental in the campaign for New Deal patronage. The issue posed here—the reconciliation of American Democracy with Marxist ideology—will never be easily understood. However, those who return to this topic should recognize the paramount role of the radical community of the *New Masses* and the John Reed Clubs.
George Biddle was listed among the members present at the John Reed Club on February 1, 1930. “John Reed Club roll call,” February 1, 1930, in the Papers of Louis Lozowick, 1898-1974. Archives of American Art. Smithsonian Institute.


Ibid.

Bibliography

Books


---------. Art for the Millions; Essays from the 1930s by Artists and

Orozco, José Clemente, and Alma M. Reed. José Clemente Orozco. New York:
Delphic Studios, 1932

Park, Marlene, and Gerald E. Markowitz. New Deal for Art: The Government
Art Projects of the 1930s with Examples from New York City and State.

---------. Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New

Seltzer, 1921.

Pells, Richard H. Radical Visions and American Dreams; Culture and Thought In

Plekhanov, Georgi. “On Art for Art’s Sake,” in Marxism and Art. Edited by


Riese, Utz. “Neither High nor Low; Michael Gold’s Concept of Proletarian
Literature,” in The Thirties; Politics and Culture in a Time of Broken
Dreams. Edited by Heinz, Ikstad, Rob Kroes, and Brian Lee.

Saab, Joan A. For the Millions; American Art and Culture Between the Wars.

Shapiro, David. Social Realism; Art as a Weapon. New York: Frederick Ungar,


Taylor, Brandon. Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks. London: Pluto Press,

Trotzky, Leon. Literature and Revolution. Translated by Rose Strunsky. New
York: International Publishers, 1925.


Articles


Carmon, Walt. “John Reed Club.” New Masses (January, 1930) p. 10

Craven, Thomas. “Art and Propaganda.” Scribner’s Vol. 95, No. 3 (March, 1934), p. 189-194


Dos Passos, John. “Intellectuals in America; Whom Can We Appeal To?” New Masses (April, 1930) p. 14

Duroc, Margaret. “The Social Sterility of Painters.” Art Front Vol. 1 No. 6 (July, 1935) p. 8-10


----------, “John Reed Club Art Exhibition.” New Masses (February, 1933) p. 23

Burck, Jacob. “Sectarianism in Art.” New Masses (April, 1933) p. 26

-----------, “Two critics in a Bar-room.” *The Liberator* (September, 1921) p. 28-29

-----------, “Is this it?” *New Masses* (May, 1926) p. 3

-----------, “America Needs A Critic.” *New Masses* (October, 1926) pp. 7-8

-----------, “Three Schools of U.S. Writing.” *New Masses* (September, 1928) p. 13-14

-----------, “Go Left, Young Writers!” *New Masses.* (January, 1929) p. 3-4

-----------, “Floyd Dell Resigns.” *New Masses* (June, 1929) p. 10

-----------, “A Letter to Workers’ Art Groups.” *New Masses* (September ,1929) p. 16

-----------, “A New Program for Writers.” *New Masses* (January, 1930) p. 6

-----------, “Proletarian Literature.” *New Masses* (September, 1930) p. 4

Humboldt, Charles. “The Union Show.” *Art Front* Vol. 2 No. 3 (February, 1936) p. 9

Jessup, Harry. “Letter to the Editor.” *New Masses* (October, 1930) p. 27

Lozowick, Louis. “What Should Revolutionary Artists Do Now?” *New Masses* (December, 1930) p. 21


Minor, Robert. “Art As a Weapon in the Class Struggle.” *Daily Worker* (December, 1927) p. 25

Olenikov, Ethel. “In Answer to the *Art News.*” *Art Front* Vol. 1 No. 1 (November, 1934) p. 5


Pass, Joseph. “At a Worker’s Art Exhibit.” *New Masses* (May, 1930) p. 26


Schapiro, Meyer. “Public Use of Art.” Art Front Vol. 2 No. 10 (November, 1936) p. 4-6


Exhibition Catalogues


Archival Material


George Biddle papers, 1910-1969, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Holger Cahill papers, 1910-1993, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.


1 John Sloan. *During the Strike*, 1913. Crayon and Graphite on paper, 11 x 17 ½. Published in the *Masses* 4 (September, 1913), p 16
Hugo Gellert. [John Reed] Cover. *New Masses* (October, 1930)
William Siegel. [Soviet Industry and Agriculture] *New Masses* (November, 1930)
7  William Gropper. [Strike]. New Masses (June, 1927)
17 Hugo Gellert. *Gastonia*, 1929. *New Masses* (September, 1929)