



Ida Abelman, *My Father Reminisces* (detail), 1937. Lithograph. Allocated by the US Government, Commissioned through the New Deal art projects, 1943-44.

Pressing Issues

Printmaking as Social Justice in 1930s United States

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Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota

WAM

Pressing Issues

Printmaking as Social Justice in 1930s United States

Pressing Issues brings together works created during the 1930s by artists in the United States who, through their art, produced critical commentaries on the injustices plaguing the country at that time.

In the midst of the Great Depression, artists in the United States were put to work through the relief efforts of the New Deal not only to provide them a living wage but to make art that would bolster the spirits of the public. Many used this opportunity to portray scenes of everyday life in the United States through images of urban and rural landscapes, leisure activities, and industrial growth, while others directed viewers' attention to economic toil and issues of social justice. Featuring rarely displayed Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) prints from the collection of the Krannert Art Museum, this exhibition addresses themes of labor unrest (including exploitation, economic disparity, and gender inequalities) as well as racial violence and reactions to the rise of fascism.

Connections between the present day and the 1930s are evident, given the escalating social and economic upheaval in the United States during the past decade. Our current political climate—intensified and exacerbated by the global pandemic—is also fueling isolationism and nationalism, the rise of fascist ideologies, and brutal racism. These prints from the 1930s offer a visceral and much needed reminder of how visual artists call attention to and combat oppression in all its forms.

Sponsored in part by the IFPDA Foundation, the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, and the College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois

Curated by Kathryn Koca Polite, assistant curator, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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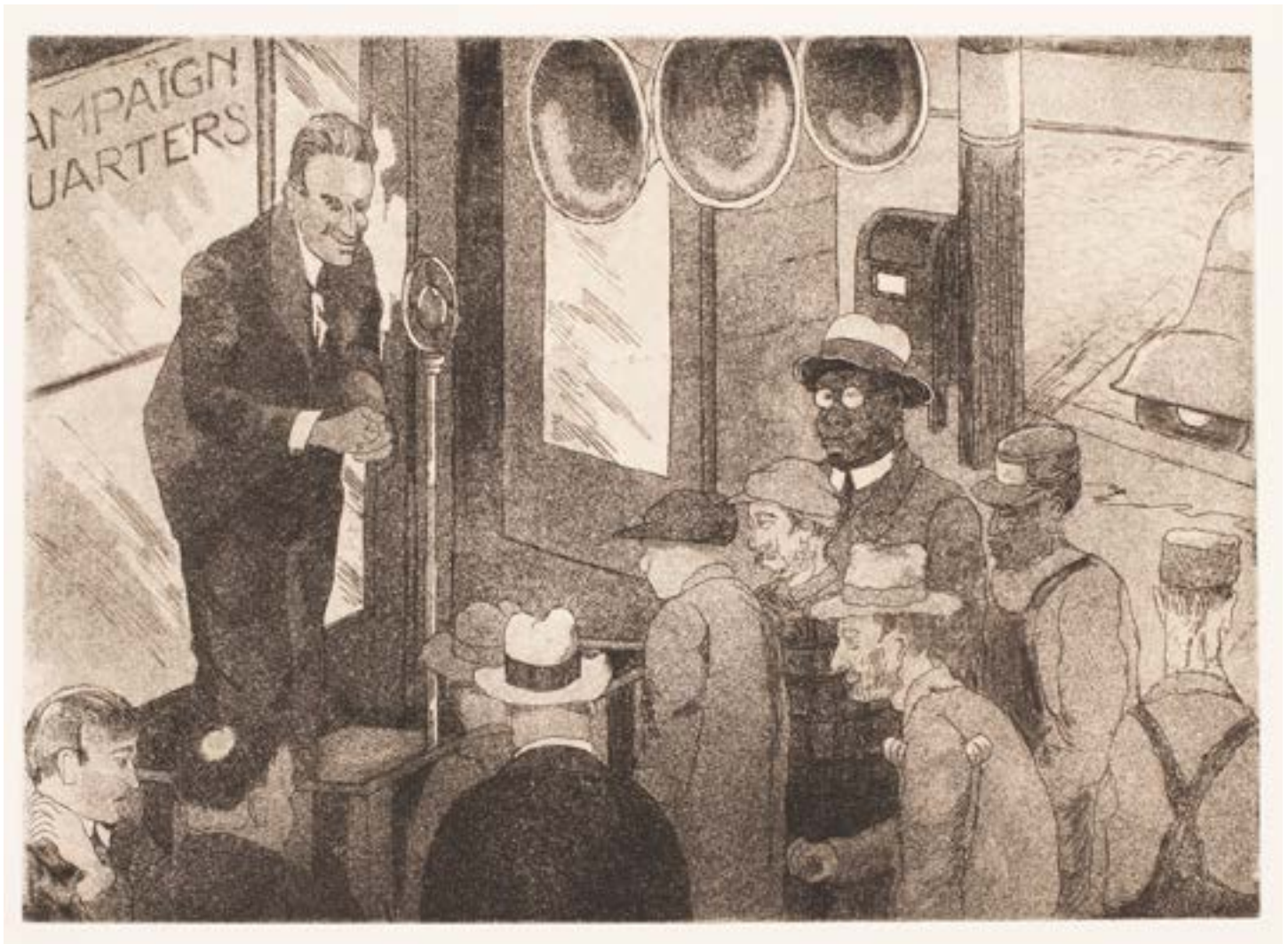
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***Content warning:** The works by Hale Woodruff in the section “Condemning Racial Terror” portray bodies of black persons who are victims of brutal lynchings. Images are blurred out due to the nature of this subject matter. Click the URL to proceed with viewing these images.



Allan Freelon (American, 1895-1960)
Campaign Headquarters, circa 1935
(printed 2008)

aquatint on paper
Gift of Joel S. Dryer
2020-I-23

Campaign Headquarters places a smiling, sycophantic politician behind a microphone, wringing his hands as he speaks to a group of men. The crowd appears to be economically and racially diverse yet all seem unconvinced by the politician's words. Several individuals convey a sense of uneasiness, tension caused by the economic devastation of the Depression. More than a decade after he made this print, in 1949, Allan Freelon ran unsuccessfully for the Pennsylvania state legislature on the Progressive Party ticket.

Fighting for Workers' Rights

One of the most prevalent themes in art during the Great Depression was labor. It was often politicized through imagery of a heroic male worker or expressed in sentimental terms that focused on the rewarding value of manual labor. Ida Abelman, Leroy Flint, Boris Gorelick, Harry Gottlieb, and many other artists, however, sought to raise awareness of harsh and exploitative labor conditions through their prints, often visiting coal mines and factories to document real-life circumstances if they were unable to draw from personal experiences. Printmakers depicted and commented critically on child labor, inadequate working conditions, and the economic hardships of those barely scraping by—with the sincere intention to effect real change.



Ida Abelman

(American, 1910-2002)

Child Labor, circa 1934-43

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New
Deal art projects

1943-4-4

Two industries that often relied on child labor-textile factories and agriculture-are highlighted in this print. In the top half of the image, three girls sew in a textile mill, while two boys pick vegetables and wheat below. The visual combination alludes to a dollar sign in the form of an **S**, critiquing how much money companies were making from child labor. Under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, regulation of employment was established for those younger than 16 years of age (18 years for hazardous conditions) oppressive working conditions were banned, the minimum hourly wage was set at 25 cents, and the maximum workweek was limited to 44 hours.



Ida Abelman (American, 1910-2002)

My Father Reminisces, 1937

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-44

In this print, Ida Abelman critiques gender and labor exploitation. Through montage, the lives of garment workers are presented in a complex historical narrative, beginning with the arrival of immigrants on the left and moving through a review of poor working conditions in sweatshops, the formation of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, one of the deadliest industrial disasters in U.S. history. In the far right corner, Abelman charges wealthy industrialists with complicity in perpetuating unsafe working conditions.



Ida Abelman (American, 1910-2002)

Wonders of Our Time, 1936

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

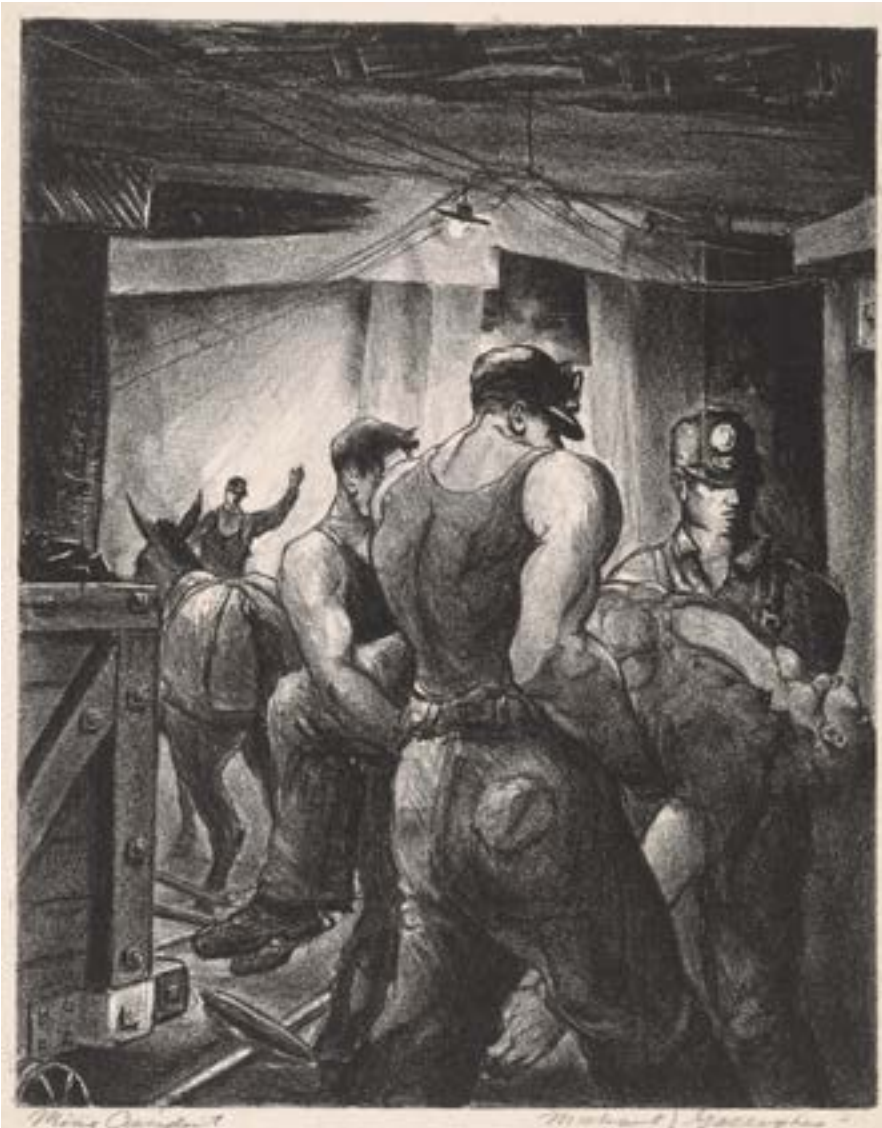
1943-4-6

Reflecting on the everyday world around her, Ida Abelman utilizes the New York landscape to expose the plight of the urban poor. Children and adults crowd under the Brooklyn Bridge, filled with despair and uncertainty as to what might happen next. The bridge appears askew, with shifting angles heightening an overall sense of anxiety.



Leroy Flint (American, 1909-1991)
Strikebreakers, twentieth century
etching with green tint
Bequest of George W Sanford
1963-4-17

Five gritty-looking union busters walk with purpose toward the foreground. In their massive hands they brandish wooden batons, and, with worn faces and intimidating expressions, they seem intent on inciting and engaging in hostile attacks against the striking workers. Leroy Flint places his social critique squarely on these individuals but also on industries and businesses that hired such men to obstruct the right to fight for fair and improved working conditions.



Michael J. Gallagher
(American, 1898-1965)
Mine Accident, circa 1935
lithograph on paper
Allocated by the U.S.
government,
commissioned through the
New Deal art projects
1943-4-126

In this unusual scene inside a mine, three men carry an injured miner, emphasizing that dangerous working conditions contribute to unnecessary accidents that affect everyone. By accentuating the figures' musculature, artist Michael Gallagher asserts the strength of the workers when faced with hardship. He often produced prints that depicted coal miners; he had been exposed to their experiences firsthand, as his father and brothers made their living in the anthracite mines in Scranton, Pennsylvania.



Boris Gorelick (Russian, 1912-1984)

Industrial Strife, 1938

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-138

In *Industrial Strife*, the artist uses the methods of surrealist montage to convey the psychological toll of labor inequities and to create an emotional cry for justice for industrial workers. Distorted figures of women and children appear at left, workers on the right, and capitalist bosses in white collars in the center foreground. Above the bosses, a silhouette of a worker explodes with a sense of and labor inequity perpetuated by industry. anguish. The shadow of a policeman holding a club appears above a prone victim in a factory setting, as wheels, scales, and other machinery create the surrounding scenery. Through the swirling faces and exaggerated gestures of the workers, Boris Gorelick rebukes the oppression and labor inequity perpetuated by industry.



Boris Gorelick (Russian, 1912-1984)

Mine Disaster, circa 1934-43

Lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-140

In this print, Boris Gorelick asserts a pointed critique of hazardous working conditions for miners. An elongated and enlarged figure, presumably a casualty of a tragic event at the mine, lies on the tracks of the coal mine while his wife and child stand atop his body, noticeably distraught. On the left, a line of distressed workers enters the mine, while mourners carry a coffin on the right. Gorelick utilizes surrealist montage techniques to convey the anxiety and fear that many miners endured in order to feed themselves and their families during the Depression.



Harry Gottlieb (American, born Romania, 1895-1992)

Bootleg Coal Mining, 1937

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-142

This print depicts a relatively common theme for the time: coal miners from Pennsylvania who had lost their jobs at company-owned mines as a result of attempting to organize labor unions. Fighting against the economic system, these bootleg miners dig illegally from surface seams using serviceable but potentially dangerous equipment. The artist documented the bootleg coal miners' activities only after he joined an independent miners' union in a nearby town.



Jacob Kainen

(American, 1909-2001)

Tenement Fire, circa 1934-43

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S.

government, commissioned

through the New Deal art

projects

1943-4-205

In the 1930s, Jacob Kainen produced expressive works in a social realist style that comment on various inequities, such as the slum conditions of tenement buildings. In this print, people gather in groups in the street and on the sidewalk, watching firefighters try to extinguish a catastrophic blaze. The building buckles with people stranded on its fire escapes, waiting to be rescued, which can be viewed as metaphor for the instability of the working class during the Great Depression.



Nan Lurie

(American, 1910-1985)

Technological Improvements,
circa 1934-43

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New
Deal art projects

1943-4-267

A line of African American men stands outside a brick building near a construction site, unaware that a sign around the corner states No Help Wanted. Nan Lurie's satirical title *Technological Improvements* refers to the new machinery that caused layoffs and reduced the need for new hires. The dynamic composition and the nightmarish scene of machines spitting out humans create psychological tension while condemning how industry has replaced the working class (here Black construction workers) with new technologies.



Charles Frederick Ramus (American, 1902-1979)

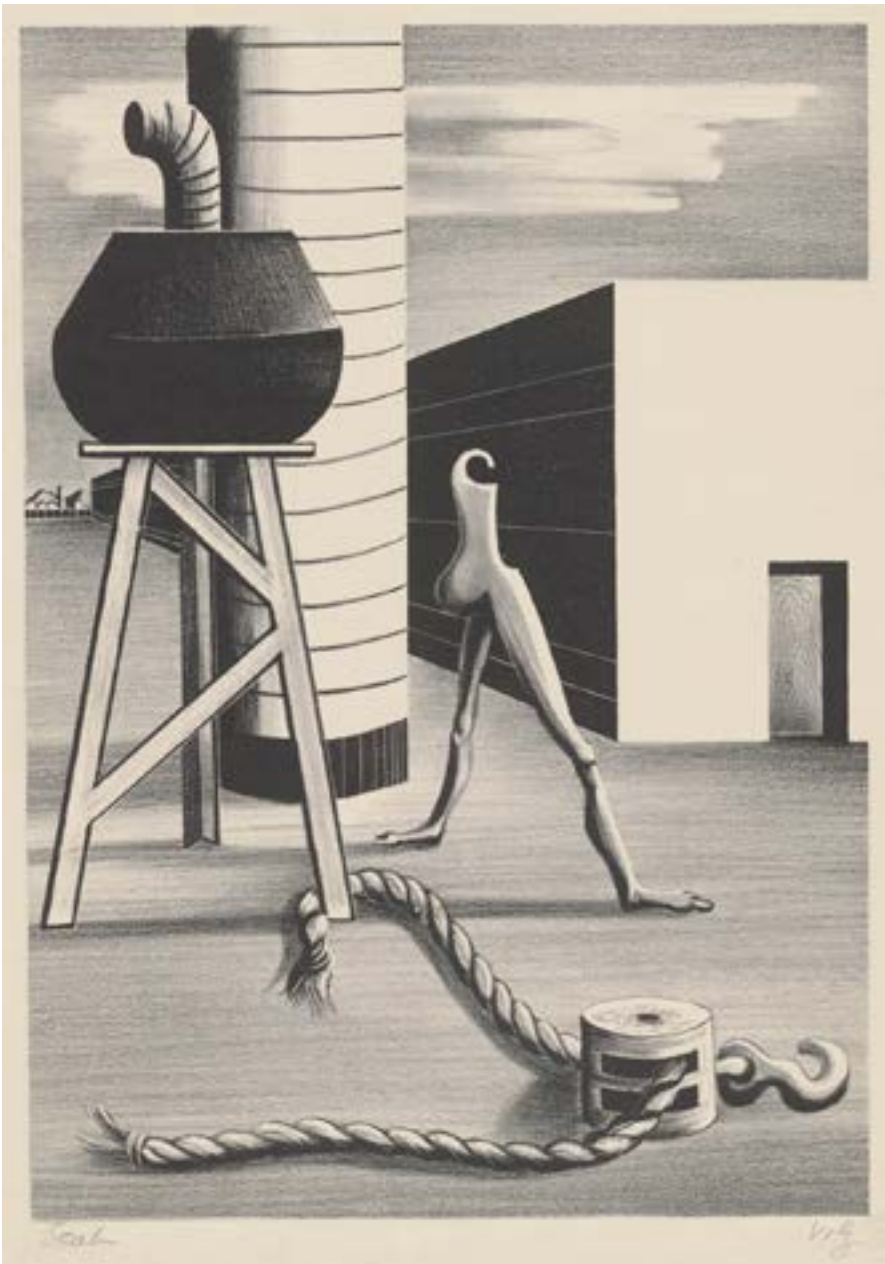
The Coal Pickers, 1939

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-356

This print references the living conditions of poor working families during the Depression. While factories stand tall in the background, children walk along the train tracks, picking up loose bits of coal that have fallen out of coal cars. The older girl playfully balances on a track as the two boys gather pieces of coal to bring home. Their clothes do not appear tattered, and the older girl is smiling. The younger girl stares back almost inquisitively at the viewer.



Herman Volz

(Swiss, 1904-1990)

Scab, circa 1934-43

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S.
government, commissioned
through the New Deal art
projects

1943-4-452

In this print, the artist depicts a scab (a derogatory name for a strikebreaker) as a deformed body with a hooked torso and two legs pointed in opposite directions. Scabs and strikebreakers undercut collective bargaining efforts by the union by taking the place of workers on strike, degrading not only the solidarity of the workers but also the dignity of their work. Herman Volz's absurd and dehumanizing portrayal of the strikebreaker reinforces his critique of those who here choose to undermine the union collective by making the pulley inoperable and the building inaccessible.



Albert James Webb
(American, 1891-1975)
Bronx Sharecroppers,
1939
lithograph
Allocated by the U.S.
government, commissioned
through the New Deal art
projects
1943-4-460

The artist draws attention to the exploitation of the working class in *Bronx Sharecroppers* specifically, the mistreatment of unemployed African American women. During the 1930s in New York City, especially in the Bronx, Black domestic workers gathered on street corners to offer their services to prospective employers who were most often white, middle-class women. Here a white woman stands with her son, looking down on the group as she negotiates the work for that day. Employers sought the lowest possible wage, sometimes as low as fifteen or twenty cents an hour.



Paul Weller (American, 1912-2000)

Harvest Hands, circa 1939

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects
1943-4-468

Carrying their belongings, five figures stand with their backs to the viewer, acting as universal symbols of the destitute and itinerant workers who were often searching for food, shelter, and employment during the Great Depression. They are at the back of the train, perhaps waiting to hop on illegally before the train leaves. As many farmhands did during the 1930s, this family or group of workers will most likely ride the rails until they can find employment.



Hale Woodruff

(American, 1900-1980)

Coming Home, 1931-46
(printed 1996)

linocut on mulberry paper
chine collé onto rag paper
Museum purchase with funds
provided by Krannert Art
Museum Council Acquired
Taste Celebration 2019
2019-14-1.3

In *Coming Home*, Hale Woodruff's weighted curves, angles, and stark contrasts convey the historic marginalization and poverty endured by many African American communities. The houses are supported by rickety wooden beams, and panels are missing from their roofs. Ominous clouds loom overhead. Yet Woodruff brings a sense of optimism to the scene: the woman gracefully climbs the stairs in her high-heeled shoes, dress, and hat, surrounded by thriving foliage, conveying hope and survival amid economic precarity and hardship.



Lloyd William Wulf
(American, 1913-1965)
Street Scene, circa 1934-43
lithograph
Allocated by the U.S.
government, commissioned
through the New Deal art
projects
1943-4-484

Many workers and their supporters engaged in strikes during the 1930s. In *Street Scene*, a diverse group of men and women peacefully strike for workers' rights in front of what looks to be a building for wealthy residents, complete with a gated entrance, classical architectural elements, and lush foliage. The hunched posture of some figures suggests the strike or protest has lasted a while. Two police officers stand to the side, conversing with each other, and a woman in the center looks straight at the viewer. Her gaze grabs the viewer's attention, emphasizing her determination to effect change by demanding action.

Women at Work

While the male laborer is frequently depicted in paintings, murals, prints, and illustrations from the 1930s, representations of women in the workforce are noticeably absent, reflecting the gender discrimination that occurred during this tumultuous era. The more than ten million women in the U.S. labor force in the 1930s faced many obstacles, especially the misperception that they were stealing jobs from eligible men. Prior to the 1940s and World War II, when women were given jobs that supported the war effort, they were confined to a small number of gendered positions: teachers, nurses, and manufacturing work in sewing, textile, and garment industries—jobs deemed appropriate for workers who were considered unskilled by those in power. Sewing rooms were the largest component of the WPA program for women; in 1936, fifty-six percent of all women employed by the WPA worked in sewing rooms.



Hugh Pearce Botts

(American, 1903-1964)

Nana, circa 1938

etching and aquatint, soft-ground

Allocated by the U.S.

government, commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-47

This print subtly alludes to the gendered dynamics of labor. *Nana*, as the title suggests, wears an apron smock in a domestic space as she irons what looks like a man's dress shirt. The electric iron she uses to press her husband's shirt was considered a luxury in the 1930s, further intimating that he worked while she stayed home. Married women were often discouraged or denied from applying for work relief under the New Deal's WPA programs, which stipulated that only one member of a family could receive work relief and that individual had to demonstrate their status as the principal breadwinner.



Minetta Good
(American, 1895-1946)
Artist at Work, circa 1935-
43
lithograph
Allocated by the U.S.
government, commissioned
through the New Deal art
projects

This lithograph celebrates that artists were viable workers during the Great Depression, thanks to the efforts of the Federal Art Project under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. Minetta Good's self-portrait in her Greenwich Village apartment-studio shows her engaged in valuable creative work. She portrays her own contributions while also standing in for other women artists at that time: forty percent of WPA/FAP artists were women.



William Gropper (American, 1897-1977)

Sweatshop, 1936

lithograph

Museum purchase, Richard M. and Rosann Gelvin Noel Acquisition Fund

2020-3-3

Sweatshops were often a combination of the worst conditions of the factory and the tenement. In this print's somber tone, William Gropper underscores the bitter life experienced by the working classes and calls for social and political change. The male workers' faces look bleak, with wrinkles and darkened eye sockets, as they sit bent over their machines, working on seemingly never-ending garments. In the foreground, the man's arm disappears into the machine, suggesting that the worker has merged with his machine.



Riva Helfond

(American, 1910-2002)

Custom Made, 1938

lithograph

Museum purchase, Richard
M. and Rosann Gelvin Noel
Acquisition Fund

2020-3-1

Custom Made explores the determination of women who endured tedious, constant labor in the garment industry, work that was often poorly paid. A seamstress slumps over a sewing machine, working late into the night on garments that she brought home to earn additional meager wages. Hair pulled back, she appears completely defeated and tired. Riva Helfond evokes a sense of anguish through the compressed space, the angular treatment of the figure's body, and the slightly distorted perspective. By not showing the specific characteristics of the woman's face, the artist creates a subject emblematic of the exhausted woman worker.



Kyra Markham

(American, 1891-1967)

Burlycue, circa 1934-43

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S.

government, commissioned

through the New Deal art

projects

1943-4-294

Burlycue presents an unusual image of burlesque women: instead of objectifying their bodies on stage as they perform, the artist portrays them as laborers with agency. Many women found employment in the entertainment industry during the Great Depression. The dancers here appear backstage behind the curtains, enjoying jovial conversation as they take a break from their work. A trained actress who had access to the theater, Kyra Markham engages the entertainment industry in her art to convey drama while also examining labor roles.



Jack Markow (British, 1905-1983)

Strip Girl, circa 1934-43

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-302

In contrast to Kyra Markham's *Burlycue*, this print is an example of how male artists typically portrayed women in the entertainment industry—as objects of male desire. A spotlight falls on a single burlesque dancer in a theater. Musicians play in the orchestra pit as an audience of men leans forward to watch the dancer perform a striptease. Many women worked in burlesque during the Great Depression, and frequently male artists chose to depict only this type of work when featuring women laborers.



Lillian Richter

(American, 1915-2000)

Coal Miners' Wives, 1937-39

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S.

government, commissioned

through the New Deal art

projects

1943-4-362

In this print, Lillian Richter portrays an uncommon scene. Two miners' wives work on the surface, collecting buckets of coal. With their hair covered by bonnets or dust caps, they sit with their backs to each other, silent and focused on their task. This is probably a smaller mine owned by an independent company, not a larger company-controlled mine; smaller mines were more likely to grant women employment as above-ground workers. The heavy application of black emphasizes the stress that coal miners' wives endured during the Depression through their constant labor as wives, caretakers, and legitimate wage earners.



Charlotte Rothstein
(American, born Poland, 1912)
Sleeve Pressers, 1939
lithograph
Museum purchase, Richard
M. and Rosann Gelvin Noel
Acquisition Fund
2020-3-2

African Americans entered the garment industry after World War I, as many moved from Southern farms to Northern cities as part of the Great Migration. By 1930, approximately 32,000 African Americans were employed in the clothing industries, which had an overall workforce of more than 400,000. As in other industries, they were often restricted to the poorer-paying occupations, though many were hired as pressers, one of the better-paid garment jobs.

Denouncing Fascism

The prints in this section emphasize the psychological stress of living in fear of the rise of fascism, particularly as experienced by Jewish refugees who were seeking exile in the United States. During the 1930s, fascist leaders rose to power in Spain, Italy, and Germany by forcibly and violently suppressing their opposition. After World War I, the United States positioned itself as noninterventionist, condemning the actions and ideologies of those authoritarian dictators while remaining isolationist. Leftist artists were among those concerned with the human suffering caused by these fascist uprisings—the rise of Nazi Germany (1933), the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935), and the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). They established the American Artists' Congress Against War and Fascism in 1935. These artists produced paintings, prints, and illustrations for journals and magazines that vehemently denounced such political movements and their oppression, often utilizing modernist visual strategies to heighten viewers' emotional response.



Carlos Anderson

(American, 1904-1978)

Aggression, 1939

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S.
government, commissioned
through the New Deal art
projects

1943-4-15

In *Aggression*, Carlos Anderson critiques the hostile and violent behavior of war (most likely referencing the Spanish Civil War) and how it destroys beauty and life. A man slouches over a piano with destruction surrounding him. His musical composition is unfinished, and a classical statue of a woman and child lies broken in the back right. An emaciated animal and figure walk through a desolate town in the far right background, and fighter planes fly in formation above the obliterated landscape.



Phil Bard (American, 1912-1966)

Aftermath, 1938

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-21

Aftermath uses abstracted surrealist elements to represent the suffering caused by the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). Four dismembered figures stand with stitches, hooks, and rivets fusing their bodies together, expressing the physical trauma and emotional distress experienced as a result of the war. The figures form a line in the foreground, reminiscent of the breadlines and unemployment lines during the Depression. In the upper right corner, a figure is tangled in barbed wire in a Christlike pose, with white fabric hanging from his limbs. The composition evokes a loss of faith in humanity.



Boris Gorelick (Russian, 1912-1984)

Bombing, circa 1937-38

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-137

In this print, Boris Gorelick expressed the horror and suffering of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) through modernist styles. Many artists sympathized with left-leaning Republican government officials in Spain who were fighting against the fascist Nationalists, who were under the direction of General Francisco Franco. Fragmented and distorted figures whirl amid a scene of destruction. A bomb looms above a teary eye while a face and hand appear in a fiery blaze. Gorelick heightens the trauma through *manière noire*, a subtractive printmaking technique that scrapes away ink on a black flat, leaving white areas that create the image.



Florence Kent (American, 1917-1989)

Jewish Refugees, circa 1934-43

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-210

Florence Kent uses an expressive modernist style that was unusual for prints during this time to convey the terror and anguish of Jewish refugees during their escape from Nazi Germany. Psychological tension is heightened through the compressed space that juxtaposes curvilinear sleeping figures with angular tents and trees that seem to sprout from the ground. On the left, a solemn woman holds a younger person in her arms, evocative of a pieta-like pose, perhaps to urge compassion for those seeking exile from horrific anti-Semitic violence in the 1930s.



Chet La More

(American, 1908-1980)

Children, circa 1934-43

lithograph on paper

Allocated by the U.S.

government, commissioned

through the New Deal art

projects

1943-4-238

One of the only color lithographs in this exhibition, this print features charged imagery of children in gas masks standing with their arms in the air. The scene is unnerving: expressive swaths of red, green, and blue ink create a frenzied atmosphere while sharp, black diagonals direct the viewer to the static figures and rectilinear structures. An empty noose hangs from a structure on the right, condemning the death of innocent children during military conflict (referring in particular to the Spanish Civil War), prompting us to be concerned for their welfare.



Chet La More (American, 1908-1980)

Civilians, circa 1934-43

lithograph on paper

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-23I

Civilians is a stark depiction of individuals wearing gas masks before venturing out for everyday activities, taking precautions against the fearful prospects of World War II. During the late 1930s into the 1940s, people in the United States—and more so in Britain and other countries—shared a concern for chemical warfare, resulting in a suggestion from the government that citizens wear gas masks when possible. While learning to live with these new protections, a woman looks at herself in a cosmetic pocket mirror.



Chet La More (American, 1908-1980)

Refugees, circa 1934-43

lithograph on paper

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-237

Refugees portrays a family of six: with their backs to the viewer, they are hunched over with bowed heads and carry their essential possessions in sacks. The group consists of two men, three women, and a child clinging to her doll. The refugees slowly walk toward the vast and ambiguous horizon, unsure of where they are heading, with no shelter or aid to be found. The figures almost appear as geometric shapes, abstracted to the point where they cease to have an identity.



Joseph Leboit (American, 1907-2002)

Refugees, circa 1934-43

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-254

Joseph Leboit depicts a harrowing scene of refugees struggling to find their way without any help or guidance. Located centrally in the print, two women and a child are hunched over and carry their possessions in bags while they traverse a treacherous and lifeless terrain of dying trees, shells of buildings, and ferocious wind. These forces work against them, as the roots of the felled tree in the foreground almost entrap the women with its sharp tendrils, reinforcing their feelings of being far from their homeland and disenfranchised in their new country.



Hugh Miller (American, 1911-1988)

Receding Waters, 1937

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-312

This print, at first unassuming, subtly condemns the dark history of the United States through imagery hidden in the stark landscape. In the aftermath of some type of destructive force, the waters recede, exposing overturned mine carts, felled trees and stumps, and the body of a pregnant woman with her head covered by white fabric. Multiple faces emerge in the stump in the foreground while, in the background, a figure kneels in a position similar to the veiled tree.



Lloyd William Wulf (American, 1913-1965)

Unfinished Argument, circa 1934-43

lithograph

Allocated by the U.S. government,
commissioned through the New Deal art projects

1943-4-485

Although ambiguous, *Unfinished Argument* is imbued with emotional empathy for those who lost their lives while engaged in conflict. On the far left, a man points to the undulating, chaotic sky while delivering a sermon to people in various positions of prayer and mourning—standing, kneeling, falling down, and reaching out in anguish. Two white flags, symbols of ceasefire and surrender, wave in the center of the print and might allude to the suffering during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). Three skeletons underground almost try to get out, as if they hear the words and wails of the people above.

CONTENT WARNING

The works by Hale Woodruff in the section “Condemning Racial Terror” portray bodies of black persons who are victims of brutal lynchings. Images are blurred out due to the nature of this subject matter. Click the URL on each page to proceed with viewing these images.

Condemning Racial Terror

The difficult and graphic imagery on view in this section asserts the complicity of white Americans in the racial terror that targeted African Americans in the 1930s. Mobs and the Ku Klux Klan instilled fear within the African American community with the powerful and terrifying act of lynching and endeavored to enforce white supremacy and social segregation. State officials and local law enforcement did little to prevent these tragic events, rarely attempting to arrest those responsible for these horrific actions and seek justice for the victims of lynching and their families.

In 1935, two significant exhibitions were organized to raise awareness of these crimes and to push for anti-lynching legislation. One of these, *An Art Commentary on Lynching*, was a collaboration between the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the College Art Association that featured works by thirty-nine racially and ethnically diverse artists, including Hale Woodruff, whose prints are shown in this exhibition. Advocating for social justice, these artists produced works that condemned heinous acts, invoked spirituality, and by protesting through these artworks demanded immediate and direct action.

As of November 2020, federal anti-lynching legislation condemning this brutality as a hate crime has yet to be passed.



CONTENT WARNING

This image portrays bodies of black persons who are victims of brutal lynchings. Images are blurred out due to the nature of this subject matter. Click the URL at the bottom of this page to proceed with viewing this image.

Hale Woodruff

(American, 1900-1980)

By Parties Unknown, 1931-46
(printed 1996)

linocut on mulberry paper chine
collé onto rag paper

Museum purchase with funds
provided by Krannert Art

Museum Council Acquired Taste
Celebration 2019

2019-14-1.5

This traumatic imagery pays witness to the reprehensible practice in the United States of targeting African Americans, particularly but not only those living in the South, for lynching. By portraying a victim left on the steps of the church, artist Hale Woodruff condemns the hypocrisy of the Southern whites who, even while committing such violent and horrific acts, considered themselves good Christians. This print and *Giddap* were included in the 1935 exhibition *An Art Commentary on Anti-Lynching*, organized by the NAACP to push for legislative policy to declare lynching a federal crime. As of November 2020, lynching is still not officially declared a federal hate crime.

View this image:

https://collection.kam.illinois.edu/Media/images/2010s/2019/2019-14-1_5_web.jpg



CONTENT WARNING

This image portrays bodies of black persons who are victims of brutal lynchings. Images are blurred out due to the nature of this subject matter. Click the URL at the bottom of this page to proceed with viewing this image.

Hale Woodruff

(American, 1900-1980)

Giddap, 1931-46 (printed 1996)
linocut on mulberry paper chine
collé onto rag paper
Museum purchase with funds
provided by Krannert Art
Museum Council Acquired Taste
Celebration 2019

2019-14-1.6

The explicit imagery in *Giddap* targets the “white terror” perpetuated in the segregated South by white mobs and militia by addressing the brutal lynchings inflicted on African Americans. Surrounded by threatening spectators, the central figure stands upright and fully dressed (which contrasts with photographs taken at these deplorable events of barely recognizable victims with tattered clothing). As stated by the American art history scholar Helen Langa, “Without denying the terrible impact of lynching violence, Hale Woodruff insisted on the power of black manhood to resist, rather than emphasize black powerlessness and defeat.”

View this image:

https://collection.kam.illinois.edu/Media/images/2010s/2019/2019-14-1_6_web.jpg

What does it mean to bear witness?



Pressing Issues addresses socially charged, historically fraught injustice in United States history. Using images to call out these inequities and promote action, the art not only documents particular events but also comments on the state of the nation.

“Bearing witness” is a phrase that refers to sharing our experiences, often traumatic, with others. In psychology, bearing witness is seen as a valuable way to process emotionally challenging experiences. But what does it mean with these historical artworks today? How do these artworks demonstrate the generative power and strength of witnessing? How does art like this bring to light what might otherwise go unseen? And how does seeing it help us to recognize and acknowledge the truth about harm and injury that has already happened, and then imagine a new future? Is there a point at which the act of sharing experiences might cause hurt or extend the original trauma? Is that risk of secondary trauma offset by the power of bearing witness to effect change?

A witness assures that our stories are heard and remembered. Tell us what you think it means to bear witness by **scanning the QR code above** and entering your response.

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