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The Daily Struggle: Philip Guston and American Art in the 1930s

by

Max Dunbar

A dissertation presented to
Washington University in St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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Max Dunbar, Washington University in St. Louis, May 2024

Introduction

American art in the 1930s was shaped by questions of social relevance and utility. The crisis of the Great Depression left millions destitute, and the contradictions of capitalism were exposed for all to see. Many artists and intellectuals, despite their marginal and specialized status in American social life, recognized that there was a need to connect their work to the mass mobilization of the working class, who were organizing in the face of unprecedented poverty and misery. The culture of working-class radicalism in this period, now commonly referred to as the “Red Decade,” was the result of the rapid development of class consciousness and the need to develop strategies of revolutionary praxis to fight oppression, exploitation, and racism. Organizations like the John Reed Club and publications like *New Masses* acted as sites for the growth of working-class culture, and engaged artists worked to contribute to the revolutionary emancipation of the working class. These social and historical conditions prompted a complex discourse around the responsibility of artists and their relationship with the labor movement, and these questions were made all the more complicated by the creation of the New Deal art programs.

The Federal Art Project, funded under the Works Progress Administration, and the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture, radically altered the economic structure of art production in the United States. Thousands of artists who were previously primarily sustained by private patronage, or a source of income outside of their artwork, were hired by the federal government on the basis of relief. These artists were given a salary, and could work, experiment, and develop artistically without the pressure to sell on speculation. Many of these artists were commissioned to make work for public buildings and participate in government sponsored exhibitions, which broadened the audience for their art and gave them unprecedented influence on public culture. This was especially true in the FAP-sponsored Community Art Centers, where

artists could act as teachers in free art classes and help others develop artistically. This system also gave artists a shared employer against whom they could collectively bargain, which engendered a trade union consciousness, with artists working collectively to advance their interests in this new system of patronage. The widespread desire to connect with the labor movement continued, but the benefits for artists brought by the New Deal art programs were not necessarily an advance for the working class; the question of social relevance was far from solved. Additionally, the power of the art programs to reshape American culture was inherently limited by budget restraints, attacks by reactionary politicians, and questions of aesthetic merit. This was a period of rapid change and profound uncertainty, and the social role of art in the United States was being interrogated from all sides.

Philip Goldstein (later Guston)¹ began his artistic career in this complicated and tense social environment. At the time of the stock market crash in 1929, Guston was only 17, the son of working-class immigrants from Ukraine. He was already a precocious artist, and the crisis of the Depression brought him in contact with the rapidly developing culture of the working class. He encountered a wide range of artistic and intellectual interlocutors at a very young age in Los Angeles. He participated in the John Reed Club, working collectively with other young artists to contribute to the labor movement. His personal interest in Quattrocento Renaissance fresco painting coincided with a broader interest in the possibilities of public mural painting, inspired by the example of Mexican public muralism. He spent the decade seeking opportunities to create public artwork while advancing through his own individual artistic and political development. In 1936, he moved to New York, and eventually secured employment through the New Deal art

¹ Philip Goldstein changed his name to Guston around 1936, seemingly out of anxiety about his fiancée's family rejecting him for his Jewish heritage. His name change was a sensitive subject for him, and he rarely discussed it, even with his close friends. For the sake of clarity, I am going to refer to him as Guston throughout the entire project.

programs. Through these programs, he completed public mural commissions in New York, Georgia, New Hampshire, and Washington D.C. His experiences as a government artist, which gave him the opportunity to maintain an artistic practice without having to get another job, were formative for Guston, and allowed him to establish an artistic career. He then went on to have a long career as a celebrated member of the New York School, cementing his place in American art history.

Interest in Guston has grown in recent years, and the massive travelling retrospective of his work allowed new audiences to see the long arc of his career for the first time. Despite this increased attention to Guston's work, his early career is still relatively understudied.² His early interest in Renaissance muralism and the painting of Giorgio de Chirico, his participation in the John Reed Club, and his time as government artist are acknowledged by scholars, but rarely analyzed in depth. When it is discussed, this early period is often invoked to explain his "return" to figurative painting and the political character of his late work in the 1960s and 1970s. By isolating and expanding on the first twelve years of his artistic career, my investigation of Guston's early work will act as a case study for important questions and discussions of the politicized art world of the 1930s on its own terms.

This is an important undertaking for two key reasons; the first is the creation of an extended and in-depth study of Guston's early career. Scholarship on Guston's work in the 1930s is sparse and disconnected, usually analyzing a specific mural project in isolation or repeating certain biographical information rather than considering his development in the period as a whole. In this project, I connect the existing scholarship on Guston with my own archival research to create a more comprehensive analysis of his early work, especially focused on his

² In the catalog for *Philip Guston Now* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2020) there is no extended analysis of his early work.

public mural painting, his collaborative relationship with Reuben Kadish, his participation in political and artistic organizations, and his own conception of the relationship between form and content in painting. In this capacity, I am clarifying and expanding our knowledge of the development of an important American painter.

The second is a broader consideration of the environment of politicized artistic production in the 1930s and its effect on our understanding of modernism in America. The political art of the 1930s is constantly, and usually negatively, compared to post-war American art, and the questions that artists asked themselves in this period are often dismissed as naïve, misguided, or aesthetically backwards.³ Arshile Gorky's condemnation of proletarian art as "poor art for poor people"⁴ still distorts our understanding of this period. The attitude of a figure like Harold Rosenberg, who later argued that the inclusion of social issues and the questions of social relevance and political efficacy common in the 1930s were counter to the metaphysical goals of the artist and delayed the development of American art, is representative of a tendency to denigrate "social art" in favor of a narrative focusing on the eventual triumph of the avant-garde.⁵

³ For more on this ongoing conversation, which manifests in American art historical scholarship as debates between social historians of art and theorists of the avant-garde, see Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems, "A Conversation Missed: Toward a Historical Understanding of the Americanist/Modernist Divide," in *A Companion to American Art*, ed. By John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LeFountain (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 17-33, as well as Jennifer Roberts' response to Shannon and Weems, "Response: Setting the Roundtable, or Prospects for Dialogue between Americanists and Modernists" in *A Companion to American Art*, 34-48.

⁴ Ethel Schwabacher, "Wanamaker Diary," Entry for March 11, 1936, Ethel Schwabacher Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., quoted in Hayden Herrera, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 258. Herrera follows this quotation with a direct statement: "Gorky had drawn the line: he was an elitist. His first loyalty would always be to art." This notion of loyalty to art, which places avant-garde advancement in opposition to social content, is precisely the sort of assumption that I am interrogating in this project.

⁵ In his essay "The Profession of Art: The WPA Art Project," in *Art on the Edge: Creators and Situations* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1975), 195-205, Harold Rosenberg excoriates the artists of the 1930s for distracting themselves with questions of the social relevance of art to the working-class. He argues that the end of the WPA and the 1930s in general allowed artists to rid themselves of the burden of social art in favor of aesthetic advancement: "Out of a job, American Art forgot its mirage of a respectable social status and dedicated itself to greatness." He concluded his essay by connecting his argument to developments in political art in the 1960s and '70s: "Today, an agitation in the manner of the thirties for career opportunities in art is growing more insistent, swelled by demands

The notions of modernist refinement and avant-garde advancement cloud our historical analysis by characterizing the politicized art of the period as essentially the result of individual choices made by artists more concerned with politics than the “higher” goals of aesthetic and cultural development. Instead, it is important to recognize that many of the forms, subjects, and strategies of political artists in the 1930s were developed in relation to historically specific social and economic forces that pushed artists to think of themselves collectively and organizationally; these artists were explicitly interrogating the relationship between advanced aesthetics and politics in order to connect their work to American social life. The work of Guston, as an artist who earnestly participated in Communist artistic circles, worked for the federal government on the New Deal art projects, and then went on to a long career as a critically lauded New York School painter, allows us to understand how art of the 1930s was driven by a qualitatively different set of questions and assumptions than those of the 1940s and 1950s. By putting aside the question of avant-garde advancement in favor of a careful consideration of an individual artist’s experiences in this social environment, I examine the historical and social energies that affected the development of young painter who wanted to act politically through artistic production. In other words, Guston’s art itself is not my central object of study, even as I analyze his paintings in depth. Instead, I am studying the social world of 1930s American art as it was shaped by massive historical change, using Guston’s life and work as a throughline in my examination of this complex period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project builds on the few studies of Guston’s early work as well as the rich body of social history of 1930s American art. The work of Dore Ashton is crucial to this project; her

for equality for blacks, Indians, women. The social issues are complicated by the fact that art does not exist as art without the mythical essence to which social issues are irrelevant.” Rosenberg, “The Profession of Art,” 205.

Critical Study of Philip Guston, written after extensive research, interviews with Guston's associates, and conversations with Guston himself, is still the primary source for Guston's biography. However, there are some significant discrepancies and issues with Ashton's account that contradict the historical record, and her book is frequently cited without independent verification of its contents. Thus, her research is a crucial resource that still requires extensive interrogation.

Her research files, now located at the Archives of American Art in Washington D.C., are a major archival source for my own project; careful examination of her papers reveal the issues and questions that she prioritized in her own account, which was also shaped by Guston's own notes, comments, and corrections. In this capacity, Guston had direct control of his own narrative, which affects our understanding of this early period of his career to this day. In a letter to Ashton while she was working on the book, Guston even made a comparison to Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*, with "everyone having his own image of what happened when."⁶ In order to verify, correct, and expand on Ashton's work, I looked at Ashton's papers in tandem with the archives of Guston's friends and associates, especially focused on the papers of Reuben Kadish, as well as those of David Alfaro Siqueiros, James Brooks, the Pollock family, Myer Shaffer, Burgoyne Diller and Anton Refregier. This archival work, in combination with extensive research into newspaper records and the publication history of left-wing cultural periodicals such as *New Masses* and *Art Front*, constitutes the fundamental base of primary material at the core of

⁶ In this same letter, there as an example of Guston's shaping of his own narrative. In an early draft of *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Ashton mentioned the reactionary actions of Guston's former art teacher Lorser Feitelson, who founded an artists' group to counter the American Artists' Congress and criticized the influence of Marxism in American art. Guston asked Ashton if she could remove this reference, writing: "The 'bitter' reference to Feitelson, I think, should be passed over – it was in a certain context of course – during the formation of the Artists' Congress – he did cause trouble, but he is an old man now – and at one time he was good to me, opening up vistas of the Renaissance masters that I was ready for then." See letter from Philip Guston to Dore Ashton, April 4th, 1974, in her research files for *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Series 4: Research Files, Box 8, Folder 27, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington. D.C.

the project. I also look to theoretical and critical writing from the period, especially focusing on the work of John Dewey, Meyer Schapiro, and Clement Greenberg as intellectuals taking part in a rich discourse on the social role of art in America. Their arguments and theories developed in relation to the crisis of the Depression and the organized actions of artists, considering the political and social implications of form, subject matter, artistic education, strategies of display, and the democratization of art.

The small body of secondary scholarship on Guston's early career is also crucial for this project; Ellen Landau, Shifra Goldman, Robert Slifkin, and Francis O'Connor act as important interlocutors for my own thinking. Guston's daughter Musa Meyer's memoir about her father, *Night Studio*, also provides crucial insight. Beyond scholarship on Guston, I look to the much more developed field of scholarship on American art and culture in the 1930s. Andrew Hemingway, Jody Patterson, Jonathan Harris, A. Joan Saab, Victoria Grieve, Anthony Lee, Isadora Helfgott, Angela Miller, Michael Denning, Leonard Folgarait, Robin D.G. Kelley, Laurence Hurlburt, Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, Warren Carter, and more have written extensively on the organized political actions of artists, the influence of Mexican Muralism in America, the American Communist movement, the Popular Front, the federal art programs, and other critical issues within American art of the period. In this project, I aim to add to this field and contribute to our understanding of these major historical questions.

STRUCTURE

Chapter one focuses on Guston's experiences as a young man in Los Angeles at the outset of the Depression. He was part of a network of young artists, including Reuben Kadish, Harold Lehman, Sande Pollock, Fletcher Martin, and others that coalesced around David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1932. The Mexican muralist arrived in Los Angeles after being forced to leave

Mexico due to his political activity, and his presence in the city sparked a flurry of artistic and political activity. He completed three mural projects in Los Angeles by bringing in local artists as assistants and collaborators, and Guston and his colleagues took part in this collective effort. Siqueiros began to work with the local chapter of the John Reed Club, and the group of younger artists joined the organization to further their artistic and political development. They formed a group known as the “Block of Painters,” and continued working in these politicized spaces after Siqueiros left Los Angeles. They were part of a national network of artists radicalized by the crisis of the Depression, and participated in organized political and artistic action throughout the city. Their experiences were a reflection of the rapid development of class consciousness and the culture of the working class, fostered through left-wing cultural and political organizations, and they worked collectively to create work that contributed to the American Communist movement. This period culminated in Guston, Kadish, and Pollock painting a mural in a Communist meeting hall at the “Workers’ Alliance Center”, of which there is almost no record today.

Chapter two analyzes two mural projects by Guston and Kadish created in 1934-36. After completing their “Workers’ Alliance Center” mural in Los Angeles, Siqueiros invited the pair to come to Mexico, where he would help them find another commission. They brought their friend Jules Langsner, a poet who also participated in the John Reed Club and the Block of Painters. Through the help of both Siqueiros and Diego Rivera, the trio was able to secure a large mural commission at the University of St. Nicholas de Hidalgo in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico. They worked for six months in Morelia to create *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, a massive and forceful mural depicting a long history of reactionary violence, persecution, and oppression. The group then returned to Los Angeles, where Guston and Kadish completed another mural at a tuberculosis sanitarium in the suburb of Duarte. Receiving funding from both the federal

government and the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, the mural in Duarte demonstrates the complexities of Guston and Kadish's continuing artistic and political development. I analyze the two murals in tandem, considering the relationship between the two commissions and the questions they raise about political propaganda, public art, and government sponsorship.

After painting this first government-commissioned mural in Duarte, CA, Guston decided to move to New York to secure more consistent employment. Chapter Three will explore the tense environment of New York in 1936-38 – Guston moved there in order to look for more work opportunities, but what he found was an unstable situation of intense poverty amid cuts to the New Deal art programs. He continued his relationships with his friends from Los Angeles, as well as with Siqueiros, participating in the final few months of Siqueiros' Taller Experimental (Experimental Workshop). He struggled to secure employment on one of the government art projects and participated in organized actions by the Artists' Union to protest firings and budget cuts. When he was finally able to receive a salary from the government, he spent months working on mural designs that were unlikely to ever be painted. However, he was also given a chance to work and experiment without the pressure to sell his work, and he was connected to a network of other government artists. For the first time in American history, there was widespread public sponsorship of the arts, which had profound ramifications for Guston and the artists of his generation. In this chapter, I will interrogate and analyze the class status of artists, the political implications of employment on the government art projects, and the relationship between organized artists and the labor movement.

The fourth chapter will focus on Guston's final few years of employment on the government art projects, considering his mural commissions from 1938-1942 and their

relationship with his developing studio-based easel practice. In his time as a government artist, Guston had to reckon with the contradictions of public art in capitalist America, and he grew frustrated with the administrative bureaucracy involved in the creation of any publicly funded mural. He began developing a more personal and internal painting style with more symbolic subject matter, moving away from the monumental political images that he made in the first half of the decade. As the federal art programs came to an end, Guston was one of thousands of artists who returned to the private sphere and were forced to consider new directions for their artistic practice. This work undergirds my consideration of the end of the New Deal art projects, the growing discourse around avant-garde “pure” painting, and competing conceptions of the social role of art in American culture.

In the epilogue, I look forward in Guston’s career, examining the relationship between his experiences as a young man during the Depression and his conception of painting in the decades following WWII. In this section, I connect the central themes of each individual chapter, which leads to an extended discussion of abstraction and figuration in Guston’s work. With my detailed analysis of his early work in mind, I consider the long arc of his career, focusing on the questions he raises about the social nature of figuration and imagery, his criticisms of pure abstraction, and the political role of the artist. This analysis is especially focused on the contradictions and tensions within Guston’s painting; this allows me to think dialectically about interrelated issues of the hierarchy of class, propaganda in art, the economic interests of artists, and debates about the critical nature of abstraction versus figuration. For this final section, I especially draw on the work of Robert Slifkin, whose analysis of Guston’s late career is particularly compelling in relation to my own conception of Guston’s early work.

Guston's status within the history of American art has grown in recent years; his work is increasingly seen as a unique and vital example within the canon of 20th century American painting. However, this characterization of Guston has emerged *in spite of* the lack of engagement with his early work. His explicitly political work has been explained away as simple juvenilia, a "product of the times" that is an exception to his otherwise important work as a high modernist. Ellen Landau, in her analysis of Guston and Kadish's mural in Mexico, points out this discrepancy in scholarship on Guston, arguing that the extent of the importance of left-wing politics in Guston's artistic education "has yet to be acknowledged."⁷ In this project, I take her claim as a call to action, and argue that Guston's development as a painter in the 1930s, shaped by the massive historical and social forces of period, is crucially important to our understanding of both his work as an individual and of the social role of art in twentieth century American culture.

⁷ Ellen Landau, "Envisioning History: Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish in Morelia," in *Mexico and American Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 48.

Chapter 1
Los Angeles

Frederick John Schwankovsky had an eye for precocious artistic talent. A teacher at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, California, Schwankovsky worked hard to foster a deep interest in art amongst his students. His open-minded and supportive attitude, in contrast to the “straight-laced” nature of the rest of faculty and administration at Manual Arts, provided a space for a small cadre of young and passionate artists to form.¹ He encouraged his students to read challenging art journals, took them to lectures by artists and spiritual figures, and engendered a spirit of insatiable curiosity about art in his charges. His students took to his simultaneous erudition and friendly nature; he was an inspiring figure for Philip Goldstein (later Guston), Jackson Pollock, Manuel Tolegian, and Harold Lehman.² For Guston, Schwankovsky’s dedication to a never-ending education was a model for his own aspirations as an artist – always learning, always striving for new ideas and new opportunities.³ This ambitious group of teenagers recognized the value of such a challenging environment, but they felt their ambitions were not matched by the environment of Manual Arts High School outside of Schwankovsky’s classroom.

With their favorite teacher in mind, Guston, Pollock, and Tolegian decided to use their artistic talents to revolt against their school’s dedication to athletics and junior ROTC training rather than culture and the arts. The group of dissidents printed a brochure, which included a drawing by Guston, and slipped it into their fellow students’ lockers. The young rebels expressed

¹ Harold Lehman, Oral history interview with Harold Lehman, March 27, 1997, interview by Stephen Polcari, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-harold-lehman-12894#transcript>).

² Lehman, Oral History Interview. For Schwankovsky’s own recollection of teaching this small group, see Frederic J. Schwankovsky, Oral history interview with Frederick Schwankovsky, March 1, 1965, interview by Betty Lochrie Hoag, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-frederick-schwankovsky-12611#transcript>).

³ For more on Guston’s recollections of the influence of Schwankovsky on the group at Manual Arts, see Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 13-14. For a more detailed account of Schwankovsky’s teaching and effect on his students, see Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (Aiken: Woodward/White Inc., 1989), 126-141.

their frustration with the school, saying “We deplore most heartily the elevation of athletic ability and the consequent degradation of scholarship.” The note finished with a direct address, in bold capital letters: “STUDENTS, MANUAL NEEDS REFORM. ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH TO GIVE IT?”⁴ As a result of their protest, Guston, Pollock, and Tolegian were asked to leave Manual Arts.⁵ Pollock would later return and graduate, but Guston instead took a one-year scholarship at the Otis Art Institute. There, he met his eventual wife, Musa McKim.⁶ He also learned of another Otis student, Reuben Kadish, after reading a story about his participation in political activities at his previous school.⁷ Kadish was immersed in left-wing politics from a young age; his father, Samuel Kadish, was a supporter of Socialist Party of America Presidential Candidate Eugene Debs as a young man and was a prominent figure in the local Jewish community. In this capacity, he was involved in the founding and running of a Jewish left-wing cultural center on Brooklyn Avenue in Boyle Heights, the largest Eastern European Jewish neighborhood in the city at the time.⁸ The Brooklyn Avenue Co-op was the site of organized

⁴ Naifeh and White Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, 134-35.

⁵ There is conflicting information here – Ashton and Schwankovsky himself claim all three boys were expelled, while Harold Lehman and Pollock biographers Naifeh and White Smith claim that only Pollock was expelled while Guston voluntarily left. They also suggest that Pollock was potentially expelled as a result of an accumulation of demerits rather than because of this protest specifically. Naifeh and White-Smith’s account is the most thorough and detailed.

⁶ Musa Meyer, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 14. At Otis, Guston also met the filmmaker Leonard Stark, who he maintained a friendship with for decades. Guston recalled making a short experimental film with Stark in the early 30s. See Guston’s notes for Ashton’s typescript of *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 38, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. Stark would go on to work as the cinematographer for *Salt of the Earth* (1954), a film about a miner’s strike led by women that was famously made by a blacklisted production team.

⁷ Lehman recounted this story in his Oral History interview, and it corresponds with Guston’s own recollection that he did not meet Kadish at Otis directly but instead contacted him independently, which he described to Ashton in his notes to her typescript. Naifeh and White Smith say that Kadish was involved in a protest against American military presence in Nicaragua, which lead to both Pollock and Guston reaching out to meet him. See Naifeh and White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, 202.

⁸ This information about Samuel Kadish comes from Frank Kadish, *In Search of Samuel Kadish* (Self-Published). Frank was Reuben Kadish’s brother; he self-published a memoir about their family, focused on their father. I obtained a copy of the memoir from Judd Tully, the chairman of the Reuben Kadish Art Foundation. In this memoir, Frank details his father’s history, including a photo of him as a young man with a flag supporting Debs, and discusses his political activities as a prominent member of the secular Jewish community of Los Angeles. Through

Communist political activity throughout the 1920s and 1930s.⁹ Guston tracked down his fellow student, and the two became friends and collaborators for years to come.

While Pollock and Tolegian left for New York City in 1930, Guston, Kadish, Lehman, and Jackson's older brother Sande remained in LA. The group of friends would regularly meet with a larger group of young writers and artists from Manual Arts and Otis to discuss literature, scholarship, and art criticism in what little free time they had.¹⁰ Their weekly meetings were a chance to continue their education and prepare themselves for careers in the arts. Lehman later described the general structure of these weekly meetings: "One person would undertake to write a report on [a] book and bring it in the following week to the group. This is how we educated ourselves."¹¹ This collaborative effort undertaken by the group from Manual Arts and Otis reflects the intellectually voracious nature of this precocious group. In the midst of a crisis and unemployment, these young artists took their education upon themselves.

Guston and his colleagues came of age in Los Angeles at a time of immense uncertainty, at the outset of the Great Depression. Los Angeles in the early 1930s was a tense and divided

archival research I was able to cross reference material on the Brooklyn Avenue Co-Op. See note 9. I will expand on Frank's account later in the chapter.

⁹ There are a number of reports in the *Los Angeles Times* about Communist meetings, rallies, and raids happening at 2708 Brooklyn Avenue – it was a constant target of police repression by the LAPD's anti-communist Red Squad, led by Lieutenant William F. Hynes. For an example, see "Injunction Decision to Come Later – Federal Court Action on Order Against Police to be Taken in September," *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 1932 which reports on an injunction filed by the Cooperative Consumers League and the Friends of the Soviet Union against the Red Squad to prevent a raid on a meeting at 2708 Brooklyn Avenue. The injunction was filed by Upton Sinclair, and led to a successful one night restraining order against Hynes and the Red Squad. Samuel Kadish was a member of the Cooperative Consumers League, a community collective buying organization that owned the buildings at Brooklyn Avenue. See also "Four Jailed in Red Quiz: Asserted Communists Held for Passing Handbills on War Protest Meeting." *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 1, 1929, which once again describes Hynes and the Red Squad monitoring a meeting at 2708 Brooklyn Avenue, leading to the arrest of four men for passing out Communist literature.

¹⁰ To my knowledge, other members of the group included: Sande Pollock (artist), Jules Langsner (poet), Herman Cherry (painter), Leonard Stark (photographer and film maker), Don Brown (poet), and others. Lehman specifically recalled writing a report on Plato's *Republic* for the group. See Lehman, Oral History interview.

¹¹ Lehman, Oral History interview. Naifeh and White Smith discuss Lehman's intellectual capacity and seemingly effortless artistic talent. They speculate that his burgeoning friendship with Guston, based on their shared intellectual curiosity and precocious talent, was a source of tension between Guston and the insecure and less intellectually inclined Pollock, despite their longer friendship. See *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, 150-55.

place; new opportunities for work and cultural production intermingled with the threat of violence for anyone on the political left. After finishing his time at Otis, the 17-year-old Guston worked a number of odd jobs while continuing to find his place in the local arts community. It was in these jobs that Guston heard stories from his coworkers about strikebreakers, the brutality of the Los Angeles Police Department, and the threat of Ku Klux Klan violence. While employed at a number-punching machine in a sheet metal factory, where he would often work fifteen-hour days, he eventually got involved in a unionization effort and saw some violence committed by strikebreakers. Additionally, he worked at a furrier/dry cleaners and as an extra in Hollywood.¹² As he moved throughout the city, Guston maintained close contact with his friends, continued to attend the weekly literature discussions, and made connections that allowed him to advance his artistic education in the relatively peripheral Los Angeles art world.

Guston's various odd jobs and his desire for more education simultaneously exposed him to the labor struggle and brought him into close contact with other artists throughout Los Angeles. He would frequently go to Stanley Rose's Bookshop, one of the few places in town with high-quality art books and periodicals. It was also a favorite spot for Hollywood directors. There, Guston met the director Josef von Sternberg, who owned works by all three of the major Mexican muralists, Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco. He developed an interest in Quattrocento Renaissance muralism; he was especially fascinated by the work of Piero della Francesca, Paolo Uccello, Andrea Mantegna, and Masaccio. This budding interest only grew once Guston started taking life drawing classes with Lorser Feitelson, on Kadish's recommendation.¹³ In these

¹² Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 16-17. Guston's recollection of the dry-cleaning job was that the owner, a Mr. Aronson, was interested in radical literature after losing much of his money in the 1929 stock market crash, and that they never had much business, so they would often read a book and discuss it together. See Guston's notes for Ashton's typescript, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 38, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

¹³ Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 19, and Musa Meyer, *Night Studio*, 15. Harold Lehman also mentions joining Guston and Kadish at Feitelson's classes. See Lehman, Oral History Interview.

classes, Feitelson showed his students reproductions of works by old masters, and Guston credited him with fostering his interest in Renaissance painting. Feitelson was also well connected throughout the city, and he brought his students to the house of Walter and Louise Arensberg, which was home to the largest collection of modern art on the West coast.¹⁴ Guston had a chance to see European modernism firsthand, including work by Marcel Duchamp, Marc Chagall, and most importantly for his own development, Giorgio de Chirico.¹⁵

Giorgio de Chirico and Piero della Francesca would prove to be life-long obsessions for Guston. Although he had seen some cubist work and admired Picasso and Braque, he was drawn to the open space and solidity of the figures in de Chirico's work (fig. 1.1). In a later public conversation, Guston reflected on his initial encounter with de Chirico, saying "right in the middle of cubism, flat painting, so-called shallow painting, exists a guy who throws things in deep perspective, and everybody's floored by it."¹⁶ De Chirico's paintings were full of mystery and ambiguity, and the deep recession of space in de Chirico's work created an eerie effect of monumental emptiness. Guston used similar settings and techniques in his paintings for years to come. He also recognized the influence of Piero and other Quattrocento painters on de Chirico's work. The highly detailed and open architectural spaces, overlapping figures that seemed to attract and repel each other, and the strong but not saturated colors of Piero's frescos and panel paintings were revelatory for Guston (fig. 1.2). In a lecture from 1971, Guston described his lifelong fascination with Piero, saying "I think my great attraction to Piero is a sense of pausing. That is, as if all these forms, these figures could have an existence beyond this momentary

¹⁴ For more on the Arensberg's collection and their presence in Los Angeles, see Mark Nelson, Ellen Hoobler, and William H. Sherman, *Hollywood Arensberg: Avant-Garde Collecting in Midcentury L.A.* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2020).

¹⁵ Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 20-21.

¹⁶ Philip Guston, "The Image" from a talk given in the drawing studio of the New York Studio School, January 15, 1969, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 125.



Figure 1.1, Giorgio de Chirico, *The Uncertainty of the Poet*, 1913



Figure 1.2, Piero della Francesca, *The Flagellation of Christ*, 1468-1470

pausing... that's why I say it's celestial."¹⁷ His experience with Piero was one of cosmic proportions – in Piero he saw infinity, stretching before and after this moment of pausing, always full of possibility and endless meaning.

As he moved throughout the city and attempted to satisfy his intellectual appetite, Guston completed a preparatory drawing and an oil painting titled *Conspirators* (fig. 1.3). In these pictures, Guston synthesized some of his burgeoning formal interests in his first real attempt at overtly political art. The final painting is now lost and the only record of it is a black-and-white photograph. Three hooded figures, presumably members of the KKK, stand huddled together. They gather in an empty outdoor space framed by remnants of architecture, displaying a clear influence from de Chirico's deep, receding perspectival paintings. The menacing figures' billowing robes contrast with the rigid geometry of the brick wall and tiled floor. They are seemingly massive, springing up from the ground at the same scale as the building fragments around them. Although we can only see the central figure's back, the club he holds seems to point toward the viewer, threatening anyone who might dare to stop their violence. Like Piero, Guston has paused his monumental figures, their gravitational pull bringing them together. The image is full of a charged potential of what will happen once these men break their huddle - the implication that these monstrous ghouls will go on to commit a lynching looms over the image.

One of Guston's preparatory drawings for the painting takes a more expansive view of the scene (fig. 1.4). Although the final painting is clearly depicting the KKK, any potential violence is happening outside of the image, before or after the moment of pausing. In the drawing, however, we see both a completed lynching, and preparations for more violence. A brick wall in an eerily empty space, sitting atop a gridded ground, once again displays Guston's

¹⁷ Guston, "On Piero della Francesca" from a talk given at the New York Studio School, August 1971, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, 141.



Figure 1.3, Philip Guston, *Conspirators*, 1932 (now lost)

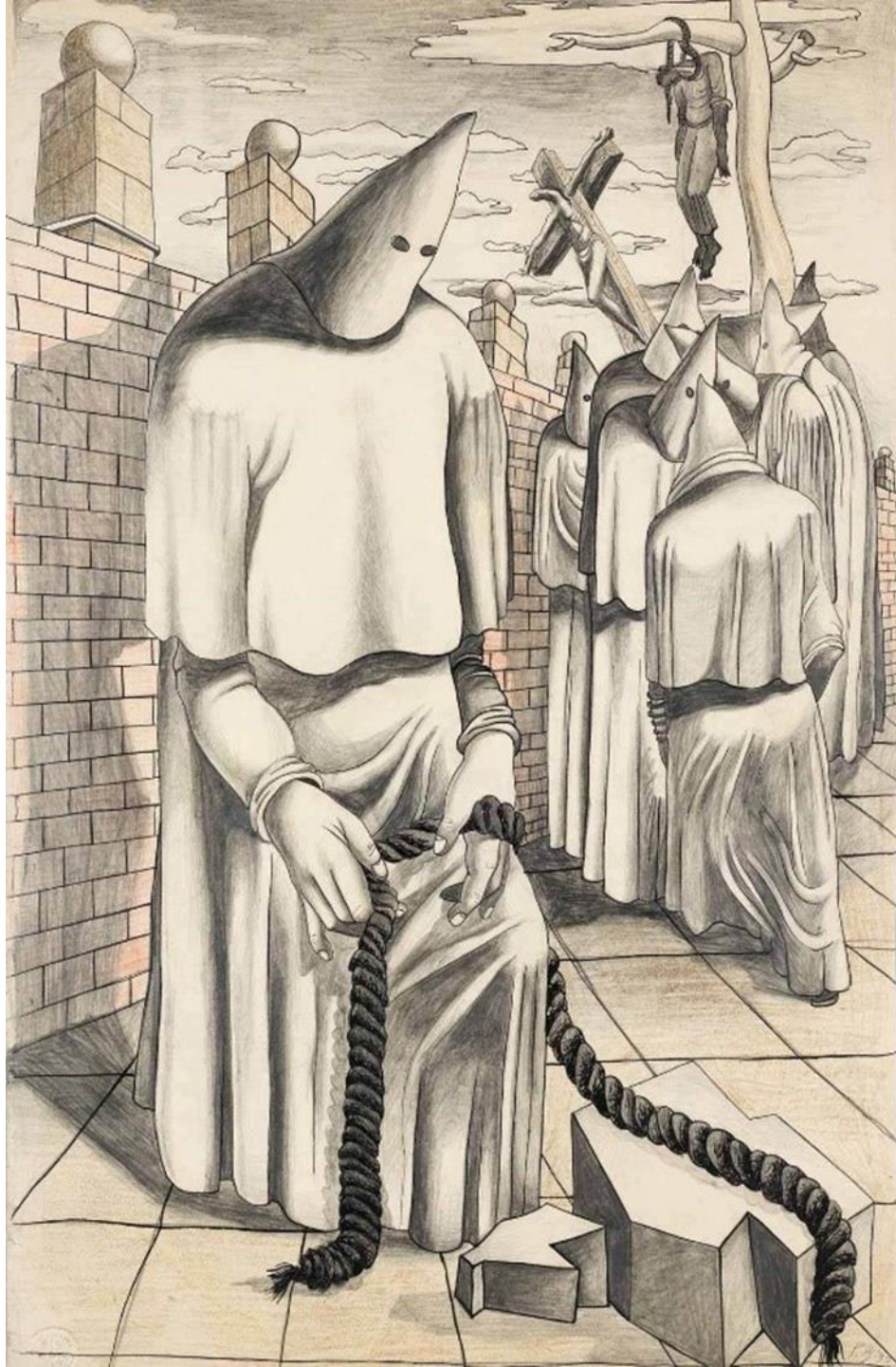


Figure 1.4, Philip Guston, drawing for *Conspirators*, 1930-32

interest in depth and an unsettling feeling of stillness in an open space, clearly derived from de Chirico. In the top right quarter of the image a large group of hooded conspirators gather under their most recent victim – a black man hanged from a tree, right next to a crucified figure. Guston draws a direct connection between the KKK and the Romans who crucified Christ. Like Judas, their conspiracy was a success, and now they huddle again. The folds of their robes and the points of their hoods intersect, creating waves of overlapping fabric that make the group almost look like a many-headed hydra, all part of the same body. The one exception is the figure in the foreground, who stands apart from the rest of the group. Rather than participating in plotting their next act of violence, he stares down at the rope in his hands. In this moment, he seems to be reflecting on his role in this act of murder. The other conspirators now appear to be looking over their shoulder, questioning the commitment of this potentially regretful colleague.

The horror of lynching was a major concern for those on the political left. It was one of the primary issues that drove W.E.B Dubois, Ida B. Wells, and others to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The organization published anti-lynching writing and art and advocated throughout the country for ending segregation and expanding civil rights for Black Americans. By the late 1920s, the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) was transitioning from an organization focused on labor struggles to a full-fledged political party with a more wide-ranging agenda. The Party also began doing anti-lynching work, especially focusing on pro-bono legal defense for black clients and public protests and statements against racist injustice. The CPUSA closely associated organized racial violence with the more generalized oppression of working-class people. They argued that racism and racial violence were superstructural issues exploited by a rich ruling class to maintain the status quo of exploitation of the poor; for the CPUSA, lynching was a problem that could be

fought through social uplift of the working class and a solidarity between poor blacks and poor whites.¹⁸ Although the NAACP and CPUSA were ostensibly fighting for the same cause, their differing methods and tactics brought them in to conflict. The public disagreements between these groups came to a head in 1931-32 during the case of the Scottsboro Boys.

On March 25, 1931, a group of homeless black teenagers were arrested and accused of beating a group of white boys and raping two white girls while illegally riding a freight train through Alabama on its way to Memphis. The case caused a media sensation that condemned the boys before their trial had even begun. Local whites were outraged by the accusations, and Governor Benjamin M. Miller had to call in the National Guard to prevent a lynching.¹⁹ Despite contradictory testimonies and a lack of evidence, including the fact that the two white girls only made the accusations after extensive pressuring by the police and an offer of immunity from their vagrancy charges, the 9 young men were sentenced to death by an all-white grand jury in Scottsboro only three days after their trial began.²⁰ The CPUSA quickly took action and released a statement describing the case as a legal lynching. They made the case an international media sensation, publishing statements in many languages and pressuring the state of Alabama through the legal wing of the party, the International Labor Defense (ILD).²¹

¹⁸ Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 49.

¹⁹ Marlene Park, "Lynching and Anti-Lynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s," in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 162.

²⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, 25th Anniversary Edition, (Baltimore: Project MUSE, 2015), 78.

²¹ At the time of the arrest of the Scottsboro boys, the CPUSA was already planning large rallies in multiple cities protesting the deportation of immigrants and lynching. On the day that the *Daily Worker* first covered Scottsboro, the lead headline read "Protest Tomorrow, Fight Deportation, Lynching! Workers to Answer Boss Attacks on Negroes and Foreign Born Saturday." At the top of the page there is a mention of Scottsboro: "Nine Negro Workers Menaced by Alabama Lynch Mob." See *Daily Worker*, March 27, 1931. This report was published before the case had even gone to trial. Within the week, they reported on Scottsboro several more times. For another example, see "Alabama Bosses Plan Mass Lynching of Nine on April 6 – Trial of Nine Negro Workers Set for Day of Fair as Press Whips Up Lynching Sentiment," *Daily Worker*, April 2, 1931.

The NAACP was taken aback by the bombastic and public nature of the CP's work in Scottsboro. At the time, the Birmingham branch of the NAACP only had six dues-paying members, and did not make any public statements about the Scottsboro case until after their conviction. This lack of action shifted public opinion among poor blacks in Alabama away from the NAACP, which was beginning to be seen as a "black elite" organization, and towards the party.²² Historian Robin D.G. Kelley described this shift by focusing on the CP's sheer willingness to take action, even if it would ultimately be futile, writing that "The black elite's ambivalence, timidity, and organizational weakness contrasted sharply with the Party's growing strength and quixotic approach to politics."²³ In the Scottsboro case, however, the Party did not simply tilt at windmills; through a long series of appeals by a combination of the ILD, local and national attorneys, the ACLU, and the NAACP (after an eventual compromise with the ILD) charges were dropped against four of the nine in 1937, and all nine were out of prison by 1946.²⁴ The case was a watershed moment for the party's national reputation. The CPUSA not only sought justice; they also used the case to gather national attention for the party itself and to recruit black members to the cause.²⁵ Beyond that, in Alabama, the CPUSA became a primarily black party, organized and run by black leadership.²⁶ Many on the U.S Left made Communist activity in Alabama a rallying point, because a multi-racial struggle against the brutal and violent

²² Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*. The CP's presence in the Alabama and their slow transformation into a black party in Alabama is discussed in detail by Kelley.

²³ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 81.

²⁴ For a summary of the appeals and their long-term outcomes, see Jay Bellamy, "The Scottsboro Boys: Injustice in Alabama," *Prologue* (Spring 2014), 26-34.

²⁵ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-56* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 65.

²⁶ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 80.

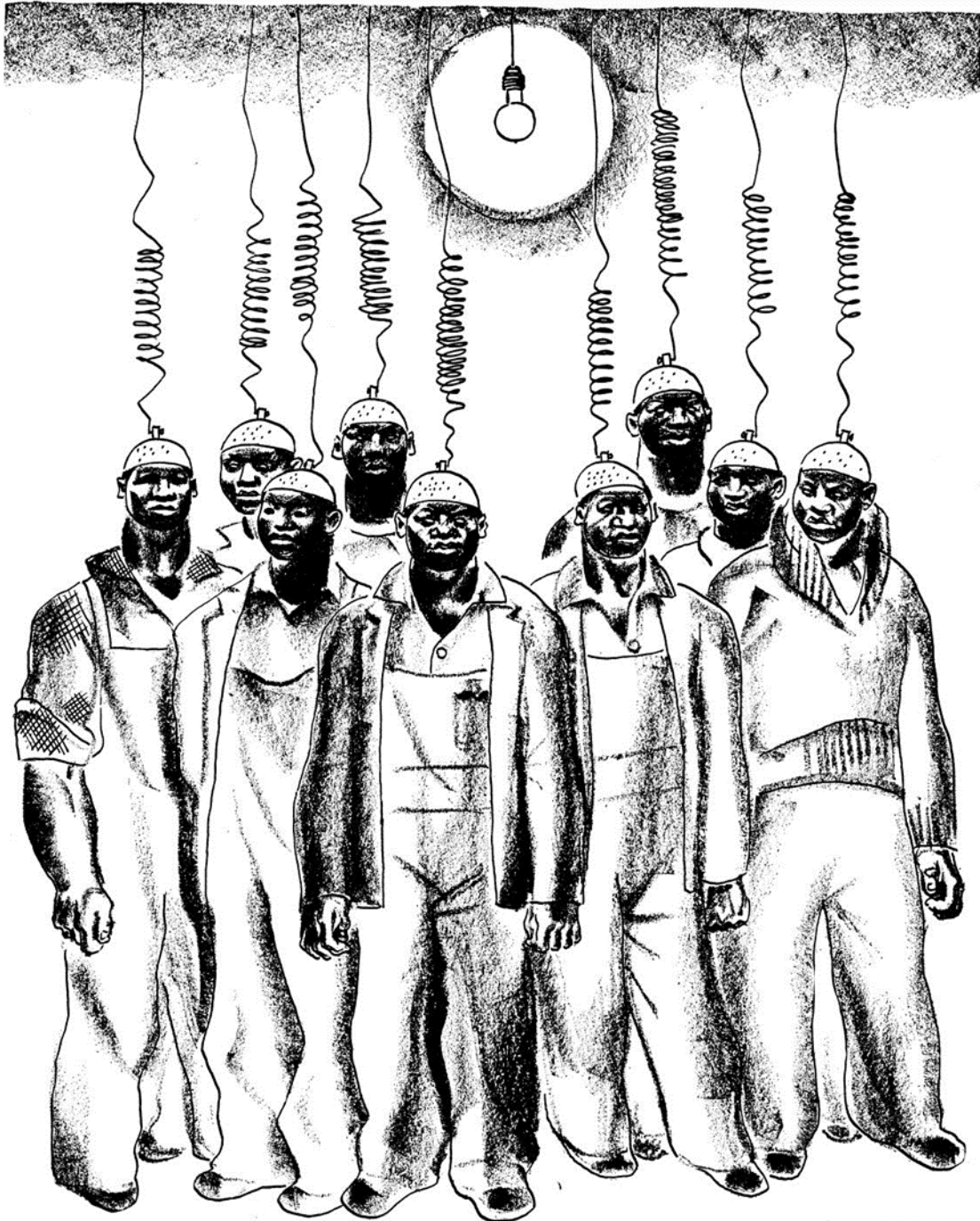
enforcement of racial and economic hierarchy in the Old South could act as an inspiration for revolutionary activity throughout the country.²⁷

Dedicated Communist artists also recognized their role in spreading solidarity and calling attention to racist injustice in Alabama. *New Masses*, founded in 1926, became the largest revolutionary Communist periodical in United States during the early 30s.²⁸ Although many editors and contributors were CPUSA members, *New Masses* was not officially affiliated with any particular organization, and instead took a broader approach, accepting a large variety of work as long as it emphasized class struggle.²⁹ Artists looked to *New Masses* as a venue for political struggle and the distribution of proletarian culture, and regular contributor Hugo Gellert decided to add to the campaign to help the Scottsboro boys with *Bourgeois Virtue in Scottsboro* (fig. 1.5), published in the June 1931 issue of *New Masses*. In his simple and direct print, Gellert conflates the noose and electric wire used in state executions, blending execution methods to make it clear that the court's decision after only three days was essentially an extension of mob violence. However, the condemned do not look resigned to their fate; instead, they stand in proud defiance of the violent system of American "justice". The print is paired with a striking caption.

²⁷ John Howard Lawson, who was later involved in the founding of the Writer's Guild of America, worked as a reporter for *New Masses* in the early 30s. In the May 1934 edition, he published a report on his time spent with Communist organizers in Alabama, and the prevalence of reactionary terror perpetrated by the KKK in response to the growing strength of the Communist movement. He connected the violence of Klansmen to the recent actions of Hitler's stormtroopers in Germany, urging readers to recognize the growing fascist movement within the United States. John Howard Lawson, "In Dixieland We Take Our Stand," *New Masses*, May 1934, 8-10.

²⁸ Although both their contemporaries and modern secondary scholarship often dismissed *New Masses* as a dogmatic wing of the Communist Party, in reality, they were founded with no specific affiliation and often conflicted with official views of the Comintern. For more on their publishing strategies and relationships to other left-wing organizations, see Rachel Sanders, "Experiment and Propaganda: Art in the Monthly *New Masses*," in *ReNew Marxist Art History*, eds. Warren Carter, Barnaby Haran, and Frederic J. Schwartz (London: Art Books Publishing, 2013), 296-315.

²⁹ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt and Helen Langa both have detailed accounts of the publishing strategies and internal political tensions of the *New Masses* as the magazine grew in size and scope during the 1930s. See Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, *Art and Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997) and Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).



BOURGEOIS VIRTUE IN SCOTTSBORO

HUGO
GELLERT

Figure 1.5, Hugo Gellert, *Bourgeois Virtue in Scottsboro*, in *New Masses*, June 1931

A direct quote from an editorial in an Alabama newspaper, the *Jackson County Sentinel*, reads: “The ugly threats from outsiders that Alabama reverse its jury decisions, and filthy insinuations that our people were murderers, when they were sincerely being as fair as ever in the history of our country, is rather straining on our idea of fair play. It allows room for the growth of the thought that maybe after all “the shortest way out” in cases like these would have been the best method of disposing of them.”³⁰ This horrific quote reveals exactly what Gellert asserts in his print – that the death sentences given to these young men was a legal lynching.

Gellert’s drawing was part of a concerted national effort to draw attention to the injustice in Scottsboro, which was coordinated by various left-wing cultural organizations. The editorial board of *New Masses* recognized the need for a more organized and explicitly Communist site for proletarian culture and revolutionary politics, which prompted them to found the John Reed Club in 1929. This was a national organization dedicated to in-person meetings for Communist artists and writers in order to develop a local cultural center that could be connected directly with the labor struggle. In a manifesto published in *New Masses* in 1932, the founders of the club laid out the core principles that all members must support:

- “1. Fight against imperialist war, defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression;
2. Fight against fascism, whether open or concealed, like social fascism;
3. Fight for the development and strengthening of the revolutionary labor movement;
4. Fight against white chauvinism (against all forms of Negro discrimination or persecution) and against the persecution of the foreign-born;

³⁰ *New Masses*, June 1931, 7.

5. Fight against the influence of middle-class ideas in the work of revolutionary writers and artists.
6. Fight against the imprisonment of revolutionary writers and artists, as well as other class-war prisoners throughout the world.”³¹

Although the John Reed Club was a cultural organization, the organizing principles of the club were entirely political. The activities of the club were wide ranging, and included lectures, discussions, art classes, reading groups, and exhibitions, all organized around political struggle rather than particular aesthetic or formal concerns. By the time this manifesto was published, there were thirteen John Reed club chapters spread throughout the country. Guston, Kadish and Lehman and some of their other colleagues joined the Hollywood chapter to work in a more overtly political and collaborative environment. The group was well prepared for this next political step due to their ongoing self-education and the mentorship of the Mexican muralist and printmaker, David Alfaro Siqueiros.

After being forced to leave Mexico due to his public criticisms of the Mexican government under Plutarco Calles, Siqueiros was invited to teach fresco painting at the Chouinard Institute, a small private art school in Los Angeles.³² He arrived in town in 1932, and quickly made connections throughout the Los Angeles Art World. While teaching, Siqueiros began an outdoor mural project at Chouinard, inviting students and local artists to assist him with his fresco. The group learned of Siqueiros’ work at Chouinard, and went to the school to meet him directly.³³ This was actually the second occasion that members of the group had watched

³¹ “Draft manifesto of the John Reed Clubs,” *New Masses*, June 1932, 3-4.

³² For a more detailed account of the commissioning process, see Sarah Schrank, “Public Art at the Global Crossroads: The Politics of Place in 1930s Los Angeles,” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (2010): 446.

³³ Lehman, Oral History interview. Lehman said that he lived close to Chouinard while he was still taking classes at Otis, and that Kadish had volunteered to act as an assistant to Siqueiros. Then, he claimed that Guston came to his house and let him know that Kadish was painting with Siqueiros, and invited him to join as an assistant. Kadish, Lehman, and Guston then went to meet Siqueiros as a group and learned from him directly. Kadish also recalled

one of the Mexican muralists at work – in 1929, before Jackson Pollock had left for New York, Guston joined him for a trip to Pomona College to see Jose Clemente Orozco paint his *Prometheus* fresco (fig. 1.6).³⁴ This time, however, they were learning directly from Siqueiros, rather than just watching from afar. It was here that Guston and his colleagues began to learn the technical skill of fresco painting, as well as a new level of political zeal that Siqueiros tended to instill in all of his charges.

The mural at Chouinard, *Street Meeting*, was explicitly Communist (fig. 1.7). At the bottom of the image, a revolutionary labor organizer is delivering a speech to a group of workers gathered on a scaffold. In his right hand, he holds Marx's *Capital*, gesticulating to the audience, who are listening with rapt attention. Their arms and legs dangle over the edge of the scaffold as they attempt to get closer to the speaker, displaying Siqueiros' interest in optical effects to create the illusion that his figures were projecting into the space of the viewer. Siqueiros used the monumental outdoor space to great effect – by painting the scaffold used to create the fresco into the image, he makes a connection between the collaborative labor of fresco painting undertaken by himself and his assistants and the manual labor of the proletariat. The wall itself becomes the backdrop for the image, as the workers have paused their labor to listen to the fiery speech being delivered below. This also creates a direct connection between the artist and the labor organizer – by painting this mural and working collectively with students, Siqueiros is hoping to build a revolutionary class consciousness in the viewer, just what the organizer is trying to do with the

volunteering as an assistant after learning of Siqueiros' arrival in town, and Siqueiros' sense of boundless energy that was inspiring to the young assistants. See Reuben Kadish, "Oral history interview with Reuben Kadish," April 15, 1992, interview by Stephen Polcari, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-reuben-kadish-12170#transcript>)

³⁴ Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 26. Naifeh and White Smith also mention that Jackson and Charles Pollock went to see the mural at Pomona College, but they do not mention Guston joining the brothers on this trip. See *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, 152-53.

workers on the scaffold. Therefore, the mural presents the artist as both a worker and an organizer – a member of the working class uniquely positioned to bring about class



Figure 1.6, Jose Clemente Orozco, *Prometheus*, 1929, at Pomona College in Claremont, CA

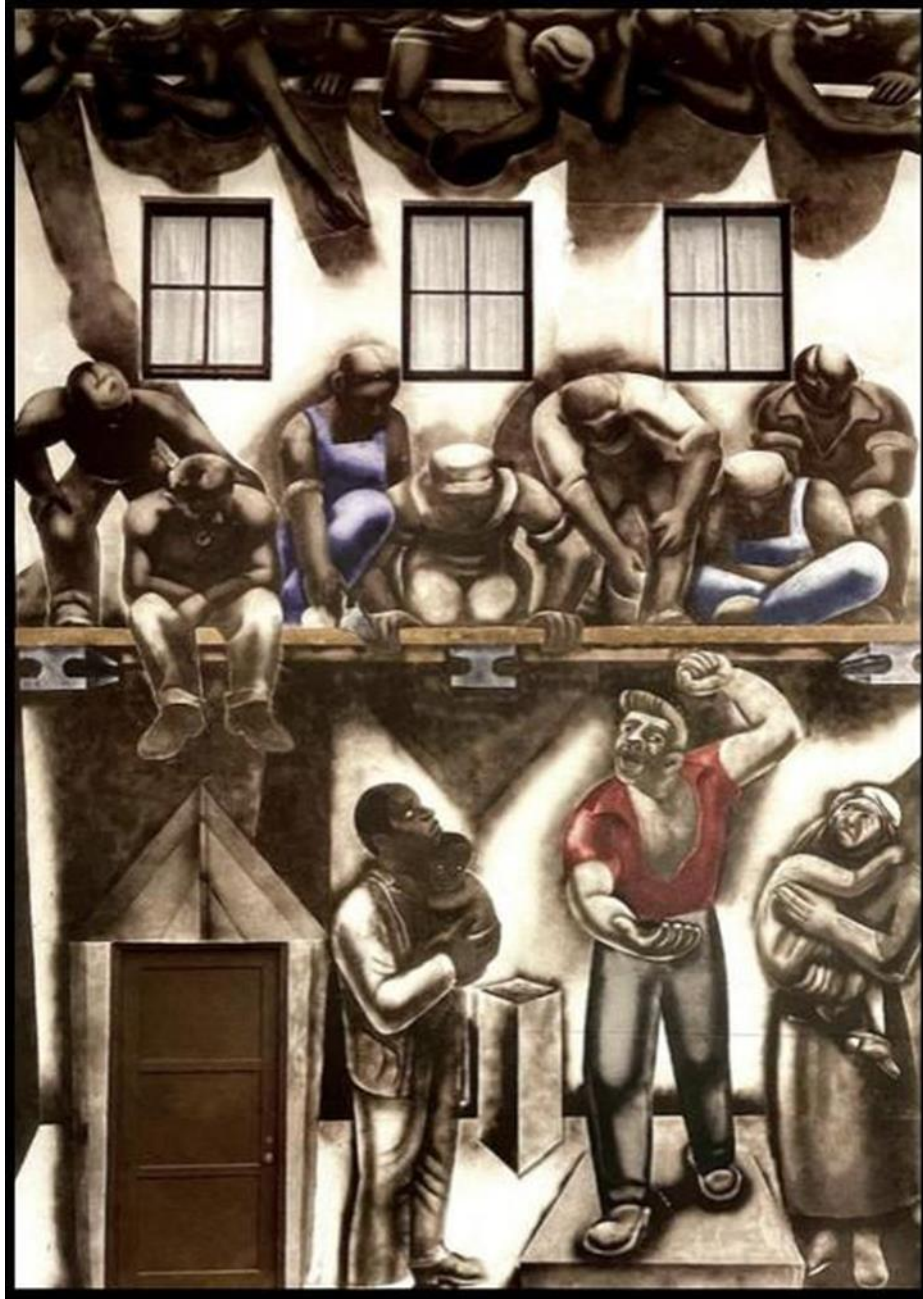


Figure 1.7, color recreation by Natily Gonzalez of Moby Arts, Los Angeles of David Alfaro Siqueiros and assistants, *Street Meeting*, 1932. Based on original photographs and conservation efforts at the site.

consciousness in others. Siqueiros was not one to avoid confrontation; his straightforward dedication to his political cause and his clever painterly techniques were an inspiration to the young group from Manual Arts. Through the collective labor of Siqueiros and his student assistants, this massive mural that spanned two stories on the exterior wall of the school was completed in only two weeks. While he taught traditional fresco, the group also used cement guns and spray paint in the process.³⁵ Despite the student's enthusiastic participation in this unique opportunity to paint at a large scale at such a young age, the Chouinard Institute was not pleased with the radical nature of the mural. As Lehman later recalled, "That was just too much for Chouinard – they covered up the picture."³⁶ The students, on the other hand, were energized by the experience, and decided to form a group under the guidance of Siqueiros known as the "Block of Painters," which would meet regularly at Luis Arenal's house.³⁷

In the summer of 1932, The Block of Painters continued to act as assistants to Siqueiros for his more famous mural project in Los Angeles, *America Tropical*. While he was teaching at

³⁵ For a primary account of the creation of the Chouinard mural, including the use of cement and spray guns, see Lillian C. Ford, "Modern Writing Breaks from Grip of Old Taboos: "Guns" Turned on Patio Wall." *Los Angeles Times*, Jul 03, 1932.

³⁶ Lehman, Oral History interview. The mural was only rediscovered in 2004: <http://www.chouinardfoundation.org/home/siqueiros-mural-discovery/>. It is badly damaged, and hardly visible on the wall.

³⁷ Lehman, Oral History interview. Arenal was a Mexican painter who came to Los Angeles with Siqueiros as his assistant and collaborator. It is important to note that Guston himself later denied that he was a member of the Block of Painters, saying directly in a note to Ashton on an early draft of her book: "I never worked with Siqueiros and was not ever a member of his 'Mural Block of Painters'." See Guston's notes to Ashton's typescript, in research files for *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Series 4: Research Files, Box 8, Folder 38, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. Lehman asserted the opposite. When asked by Stephen Polcari if Guston was a member of the Block of Painters, he simply said "Oh yes." See Harold Lehman, Oral History interview. Given that Guston was later displayed work in a show of the "Block of Painters," (see pages 36-38), that all of his friends were members, that he, Kadish, and Sande Pollock would go on to paint an explicitly Communist mural dedicated to Siqueiros (see pages 40-42), and that he would go on to maintain a relationship with Siqueiros for years to come (see chapters 2 and 3), it is safe to assume that Guston was either misremembering or directly lying about his participation in the Block. This has led to confusion in scholarship on Guston's early career; in the recent timeline published in the catalog for *Philip Guston Now*, the entry for 1932 describes Siqueiros' time in LA, writing that he was "assisted by members of the "Mural Bloc," a group of his students and other artists that included Lehman, Kadish, and possibly Guston." *Philip Guston Now*, 223. See note 43 for another example of the discrepancy between Guston's memory and others' recollections of the period.

Chouinard, the Stendahl Gallery organized a show of Siqueiros' work. This show eventually traveled to the newly opened Plaza Art Center on Olvera Street, which was part of an effort to preserve a historic area of Los Angeles. There, Siqueiros met the director of the center, who commissioned him to paint a mural on an exterior wall on the second floor of a building next to the center.³⁸

America Tropical is a forceful political statement (fig. 1.8). This second mural is a massive and dynamic image centered around the figure of a crucified indigenous man. His head slumps downward as he suffers on the cross. He is surrounded by the ruins of an Aztec temple, which is slowly being taken over by thick, twisting branches that seem to prevent the viewer from exiting the scene; instead, your eyes are always forced back to the middle, to confront the reality of this execution. Below his feet, broken and fractured stones speak to the destruction caused by Spanish imperialism, which has destroyed a once-thriving civilization through brutality and exploitation.³⁹ However, amidst this dark scene there is a glimmer of hope; to the right, a Peruvian and a Mexican revolutionary aim at the eagle that sits atop the cross, representing European and American imperialism, as they prepare to fight off their oppressors together. Although there is conflicting information about whether Guston worked as an assistant on the mural, at least 29 others certainly did, including Kadish, Lehman, Sande Pollock, and even their old teacher Frederic Schwankovsky, and it is clear that Guston at least frequently observed the team of painters as they worked.⁴⁰

³⁸ This commissioning process is described in detail by Arthur Millier in his article "Huge Fresco for El Paseo," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1932 and by Shifra Goldman in *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 92-93. Sarah Schrank also details this commission in "Public Art at the Global Crossroads: The Politics of Place in 1930s Los Angeles," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (2010).

³⁹ The fractured stones in this mural may have been a source for Guston; he used the same motif in multiple later works during the 1930s.

⁴⁰ The assistants for the mural are listed by in Arthur Millier, "Huge Fresco for El Paseo," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1932. Other names come from Shifra Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas*, note 26, 98. While Guston



Figure 1.8, David Alfaro Siqueiros and assistants, *America Tropical*, 1932.

Above: photo of digital rendering cover used to protect original mural during conservation

Below: my photo of the original mural from September 17, 2023



did later deny that he was a member of the Block, he recalled observing the painting of *America Tropical* in his notes to Dore Ashton. See notes to Ashton's typescript, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art.

The mural certainly had an impact on the group of painters, who would go on to incorporate certain motifs and techniques from the mural in their future work.

While teaching and working on the mural at Chouinard, Siqueiros also began to work with the local John Reed Club. Guston, Kadish, Lehman, Sande McCoy (Pollock), Luis Arenal, and other members of the Block of Painters participated in the club with Siqueiros' guidance. In the Fall of 1932, Siqueiros lectured at the club, speaking on the subject of "dialectic-subversive" art and the possibilities of using industrial technology in art making. In this lecture, Siqueiros recounted the experience of working collectively with the Block of Painters on the Chouinard mural, and considered the need for revolutionary artists to apply their political thinking to their materials and working methods. First, he emphasized the importance of the public mural, which can be seen by the masses and interacted with as part of life within the community because it is not owned privately. He contrasted the vital public life of the mural with studio-based easel painting, which is closed off from the public in private homes and elite museums, and says that "The Block of Painters are struggling in an organized way for the supremacy of monumental painting over the easel painting."⁴¹ This allows for direct interaction between artists and the masses, rather than through the mediating institution of the gallery or museum or private collection. The benefits of the public mural are multiplied by Siqueiros' emphasis on collaborative painting, which can channel the collective creative energy of multiple artists to work quickly and help each other improve technically and politically. And crucially, Siqueiros' emphasizes collective work and public muralism because he feels these are the forms that allow for agitation and mobilization of the people. Finally, he discusses the possibilities of using tools

⁴¹ "The Vehicles of Dialectic/Subversive Painting," English typescript of speech delivered at the Hollywood John Reed Club, Series 2: Los Angeles, 1932, Box 2, Folder 31-34, David Alfaro Siqueiros papers, Getty Archives, Los Angeles.

and materials used in industrial manufacturing, such as spray paint and cement guns in artmaking; this, he says, could allow artists to discover and develop new and exciting forms that could be employed on behalf of the working class. These industrial technologies would reflect the experiences and working methods of the proletariat, and artists could work closely with workers when implementing these technologies. Overall, Siqueiros characterizes the work of the Block of Painters as essentially a research program – the group is searching for the appropriate forms, materials, and working methods of art in the service of Communist revolution and the emancipation of the working class, and is doing so through collaborative experimentation in the creation of large-scale public artworks.

One direct result of Siqueiros' work in Los Angeles was the connection of artists from throughout the city. It was through Siqueiros that Guston met Fletcher Martin, a painter a few years older than Guston and his friends, who was also working as a set painter and printmaker in Hollywood.⁴² Martin heard about Siqueiros' mural projects and ventured to Olvera Street to meet him. Martin's first encounter with Guston and his friends was either at Siqueiros' speech at the John Reed Club, or at Olvera Street among the crowd assisting and observing the creation of *America Tropical*. This, he said, was essentially an incidental meeting. However, he encountered Guston, Kadish, and the poet Jules Langsner again a few weeks later:

“Siqueiros invited me to go with him to the house of a wealthy woman for dinner. He had just painted her portrait. Siq. said he had invited some other young painters. Soon, in stalked Phillip, Rube Kadish, and Jules Langsner, a poet. They were angry young men of the time and showed their scorn for this rich house and its fat mistress very clearly. After

⁴² Fletcher Martin, “Oral History Interview with Fletcher Martin,” November 19, 1964, interview by Joseph Travato, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-fletcher-martin-12666>)

that evening, where we really became acquainted to each other, I saw Phillip quite often.”⁴³

Martin would regularly host dinners at his house, where he introduced Guston to other Hollywood figures, including Nathanael West and John Huston.⁴⁴ Martin also connected Siqueiros with the director Dudley Murphy, known for *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), an experimental film made in collaboration with Fernand Léger, and for other films starring black actors, such as *St. Louis Blues* (1929) and *The Emperor Jones* (1933). They quickly became friends, and their relationship led to Siqueiros’ final mural project in Los Angeles.⁴⁵

Siqueiros painted *Portrait of Mexico Today* at Murphy’s home as a gift for letting him stay at his house after his visa expired.⁴⁶ The mural was painted on the interior walls of a covered patio building in Murphy’s garden (fig. 1.9). *Portrait of Mexico Today* is a picture of the contemporary political dynamics of Mexico, depicting former president Plutarco Calles as a bandit who has robbed the Mexican people, represented by two women and a child. He wears familiar peasant clothes and presents himself as one of the people, but he has used his position to enrich himself. To Calles’ left, two workers lay dead with their limbs contorted in anguish. The

⁴³ This quote comes from Martin’s retrospective thoughts on his friendship with Philip Guston, provided to Dore Ashton in her research for *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*. See Fletcher Martin Retrospective Thoughts, research files for *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, series 4: Research Files, Box 8, Folder 29, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. This is a revealing passage – it shows that Guston and Kadish were closely associating themselves with Siqueiros at the time, and backs up others’ recollections that Guston was part of the Block of Painters.

⁴⁴ In his retrospective thoughts provided to Dore Ashton, Martin recalls introducing Guston to West and Huston. See Martin’s Retrospective thoughts provided to Dore Ashton, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art. Ashton also mentions these meetings in *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*. Curiously, she does not recount the story that Martin provided about his initial meeting with Guston. Instead, she implies that they met on movie lots when Guston was working as an extra. See Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 17.

⁴⁵ In his oral history interview with the Archives of American Art, Martin recalled that he arranged a dinner on Olvera Street with Siqueiros, Dudley Murphy, and the young John Huston, who was working as a screenwriter at the time. He also repeated this story to Ashton in her research for her book on Guston. Kadish also recalled Martin’s role in fostering the connections that Siqueiros made with left-wing figures in Hollywood. See Kadish, Oral History Interview. He also repeated this story in a letter to Shifra Goldman. See Letter from Reuben Kadish to Shifra Goldman, Series 2: Letters, 1934-1995, undated, Box 2, Folder 8, Reuben Kadish papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

⁴⁶ Martin, Oral History Interview.



Figure 1.9, David Alfaro Siqueiros and assistants, *Portrait of Mexico Today*, 1932, photographed in its original location in Dudley Murphy's garden.

two dead men are watched over by a portrait of J.P. Morgan, whose full stern face displays contempt for the dead (fig. 1.10). Siqueiros frequently criticized post-revolutionary Mexican governments, and especially the Calles administration, for supporting and facilitating the expansion of American corporate interests in Mexico. Here, Siqueiros depicts Morgan as a someone who looms over Mexico, monitoring his domination of the Mexican people from afar. On the opposite wall, a revolutionary soldier is ready to take action, preparing to step in and defend the women and child from the designs of Calles and his American ally (fig. 1.11). Siqueiros worked with a smaller group of assistants for this mural, made up of Kadish, Martin, and Arenal.⁴⁷ Kadish recalled that Siqueiros always made a point of fostering an environment of collective effort in which everyone was equally important, which instilled a sense of shared confidence in his young and inexperienced assistants.⁴⁸

Although Siqueiros was only in Los Angeles for a brief time, his presence had a profound impact on the radical artists of the city, who looked to Siqueiros as a role model both politically and artistically. His ideas of collective artistic labor, large-scale public work, and the possibilities of industrial technology continued to be central topics of discussion for these artists even after their mentor left for Argentina. Although Siqueiros and the Block of Painters were operating within the specific context of Los Angeles, with their local connections to Hollywood and

⁴⁷ Sarah Schrank and Shifra Goldman list these three as assistants. Kadish recalled that Martin was frequently involved in the painting at Olvera Street, and that they would work together late into the night at Murphy's house. See letter to Shifra Goldman, Reuben Kadish papers. Interestingly, Martin recalled that Guston also contributed to the painting at Murphy's house, both in his oral history interview and in his retrospective thoughts provided to Ashton: "I write this paragraph without being certain how often Phillip came out there or how much he worked. I know of one time that he painted a small section. I've spoken to Phillip about this, and it is not one of his most vivid memories. It is vivid to me, however, because of the several months association with that extraordinary Mexican." See Fletcher Martin Retrospective thoughts, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art.

⁴⁸ Kadish, Oral History Interview, 1992. He also expressed this sentiment to Shifra Goldman in his letter to her, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art.



Figure 1.10, David Alfaro Siqueiros and assistants, detail of left wall of *Portrait of Mexico Today*, 1932



Figure 1.11, David Alfaro Siqueiros, detail of right wall of *Portrait of Mexico Today*, 1932

Mexico, they were also participating in a growing national culture of the revolutionary working class, which in turn was also connected to the international Communist movement.

Near the end of the year, Grace Clements, an art teacher at Chouinard and member of the Hollywood John Reed Club, delivered a lecture at the club that explained the founding of the Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors and Engravers in Mexico, founded by Siqueiros and others in 1923, its connection to the founding of the Block of Painters in Los Angeles, and the working methods and ideological goals of both groups. The influence of Siqueiros shines through in the speech, as she repeats common phrases and ideas of her mentor. She mentions that Siqueiros did not come from a working-class background, but was instead an intellectual radicalized by the crisis of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), and she also emphasizes his revolutionary nature in comparison to Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco. She also displays her education in socialist politics, as she makes a forceful case for the collective labor of the Block of Painters and the connection between their work in Los Angeles and the international Communist movement. She mentions the negative reaction to the Chouinard mural among some in the Los Angeles art world, who she claims dismissed the mural as simple propaganda that had more to do with the situation in Mexico than in the United States. Here, she connects these criticisms to the world-wide development of class consciousness: “In light of the present crisis of Capitalism, when not only in Mexico, but in England, Germany, America, and Japan – where temperaments and geographical locations are inclusive of extremes – the exploitation of the majority by the privileged minority becomes an immense unifying factor in which differences of race, creed, and nationality play little part, and what are seen to only be the “sorrows of Mexico” are in reality the life of the world proletariat.”⁴⁹ This focus on internationalism and class

⁴⁹ Grace Clements speech at the John Reed Club, Series 2: Los Angeles, 1932, undated, Box 3, Folder 22, David Alfaro Siqueiros papers, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

solidarity across racial lines was central to the culture of the early 30s – *New Masses* and *The Daily Worker* frequently published reports from international Communists in India, China, Mexico, and more, and each individual chapter of the John Reed Club was conceptualized as the local manifestation of an international culture of revolutionary emancipation.

Interestingly, Clements then mentions another Siqueiros mural project of which there is no record today: “Out of a lecture which Siqueiros gave at the John Reed Club of Hollywood, grew an interest to construct a mural in the auditorium of the club. Such a mural, which is now in progress, promises a more complete fulfillment of the production of a subversive art. In powerful perspective across the wall which faces the proscenium, march the ordered ranks of the international proletariat, led by the...”⁵⁰ The remaining pages of the speech no longer survive in the archives, but her account is confirmed by a report from Arthur Millier in the *Los Angeles Times*: “A third [unnamed] fresco by Siqueiros is now in process, this time in the auditorium of the John Reed Club of Hollywood. The four walls are to be covered with a mural symbolic of the cultural role of the club, it is announced. The work will be done, as at Chouinard and the Plaza Art Center, by a class of students working with the noted Mexican.”⁵¹ It seems that the mural project was never completed, as Siqueiros was forced to leave L.A. due to the expiration of his visa, and there is no photographic record of this mural today.⁵² Despite this gap in the historical

⁵⁰ Grace Clements Speech at the John Reed Club, David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers, The Getty Research Institute.

⁵¹ Arthur Millier, "Brush Strokes," *Los Angeles Times*, Sep 18, 1932.

⁵² This mural-in-progress was likely located at 1743 N New Hampshire Ave, Los Angeles, CA. This address comes from the advertisement for the Block of Painters show of portable frescoes at the John Reed Club (see note 56). 1743 N New Hampshire Ave is now a small private residence, and certainly was not the building that housed an auditorium. I believe that the original building was torn down to create a parking lot for the Hollywood Lutheran Church, located at 1733 N New Hampshire Ave. I was able to locate some building records for 1743 N New Hampshire Avenue, and request for a repair, filed on June 23, 1953, indicates that the property included a theater building, and had been occupied in that same capacity for 25 years. The repair request also includes a small drawing of the lot. This was likely the auditorium space mentioned by Clements and Millier. It seems that the property was sold in 1936, and the new owners turned the space into a small theater and acting school called the “Hollytown Theater.” This I found through building records and advertisements for the theater at that address that appear after 1936 in the *Los Angeles Times*. I speculate that the mural in progress was also defaced by the Red Squad during their raid on the show of portable frescoes by the Block of Painters (see pages 48-51).

record, Clements' speech and the potential mural project in the auditorium of the John Reed Club of Hollywood illustrates Siqueiros' profound impact on the Los Angeles arts community.

For Guston and his friends, this environment was energizing, and they continued their artistic and intellectual formation through participation in the organized efforts of the John Reed Club. The experience of watching and learning from Siqueiros was edifying both politically and technically for the Block of Painters, and with the older muralists' encouragement the group decided to take on an ambitious project to each paint a portable fresco panel. Although Siqueiros was soon after forced to leave the U.S. due to the expiration of his visa, the group continued with their project.⁵³ They decided beforehand that the panels would be focused on one of two subjects – the exploitation of labor by capital, or white supremacist violence against Black people in America.⁵⁴ While Lehman chose to make work on the former, Guston, Kadish, and Arenal each created a panel focusing on the latter subject. Spurred on by the national effort within the John Reed Club to draw attention to the ongoing injustice in Scottsboro, Guston continued his focus on racist violence in his panel by depicting a KKK member whipping a black man tied to a post.⁵⁵ Titled *Negro America* (fig. 1.12), Guston indicates a thematic connection between this work and Siqueiros' major LA mural – the scene can be read as a general statement about the racist history of the United States, just as Siqueiros' mural acted as a broad statement on the history of European imperialism in the Americas. The figure of the black man, who wears

⁵³ Harold Lehman recalled that the frescoes were painted in a shed at Luis Arenal's house. See Lehman, Oral History Interview.

⁵⁴ Lehman, Oral History Interview

⁵⁵ This effort to draw attention to Scottsboro was organized at the national level by the executive board of the John Reed Club. Many individual members had been making work on Scottsboro since March of 1931, and at the first conference of the John Reed Club in May of 1932, it was decided that "For effective action nationally, the National executive board will designate, from time to time, which issues should receive concerted action by all the John Reed Clubs." These issues included "The Scottsboro case, the Edith Berkman case, and imperialist war upon the Soviet Union." See minutes from First National Conference, May 29-30, 1932, Series 5: Organizations, 1930-1972, Box 4, Reel 589, Frame 614-15, Louis Lozowick papers, *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian, Washington D.C.



Figure 1.12, Philip Guston, *Negro America*, 1932-33. Destroyed

tattered clothing and desperately clings to the whipping post for support. If it were not for the hooded figure, one might mistake this for a plantation scene. The KKK member has replaced the slave owners of pre-emancipation America, but the brutal system of racialized violence remained. Like *Conspirators*, this horrible scene takes place in an eerily empty space, in front of a plain brick wall. However, unlike the earlier image, there is some indication of the function of the architectural backdrop – as the wall turns a corner on the far-left side of the painting, we can see a barred window. This indicates that the figures are outside of a jail, which brings to mind the recent events in Alabama, as well as implicating another group, the police, in the history of racist violence in America. By connecting his panel with Siqueiros' work and referencing the long history of brutal racism in America, Guston points to a history of exploitation and vicious racialized violence, passed from European settlers, to slave owners, and now taken up by KKK members and the police. Guston and his colleagues did not shy away from such visceral and controversial subject matter. Their education by Siqueiros and their dedication to furthering an explicit political message ensured that the John Reed Club was an ideal site to display their frescoes. The exhibition was scheduled to open on February 17th, 1933, and was meant to coincide with a symposium on the relationship between “art and society” (fig. 1.13).⁵⁶

However, before the public could see the work of the Block of Painters, the Los Angeles Police Department disrupted the show, ironically confirming Guston's conception of the role of police. In an off-the-books midnight raid on the John Reed Club by the so-called “Red Squad,” a group of LAPD members brandishing guns and pipes defaced the fresco panels.⁵⁷ The group's

⁵⁶ This advertisement for the show was a linoleum cut card designed by Luis Arenal, which Lehman had saved in his papers. Lehman mentions this card in his oral history interview. See Lehman, Oral History interview. I found the card on a website dedicated to Harold Lehman, maintained by Lehman's daughter, Lisa Lehman Trager: <https://www.haroldlehman.com/siqueiros-and-bloc-of-painters>

⁵⁷ For a primary account of the court trial, see "Council Views Reds in Clash: Police Quell Rioters in City Hall Battle Randall -- Pleas for Order Ignored by Crowd – Radical Squad Abolishing Had Been Demanded." *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 16, 1933. The red squad raid was later mentioned by the painter Joe Jones, in a speech on censorship of



Figure 1.13, Luis Arenal, linoleum cut card advertisement for Bloc of Painters Exhibit of Frescos, 1933.

art at the First American Artists' Congress meeting. He described the raid on the John Reed Club as "the most openly fascist act" among the many examples of censorship in his speech. See Joe Jones, "Repression of Art in America," in *Artists Against War and Fascism*, ed. Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 75-77. The brutal activities of the Red Squad were well known among radicals in Los Angeles, and many were aware that LAPD officers were also members of the American Legion and the Ku Klux Klan. For more on the history of Red Squads throughout the country, see Frank J. Donner, *Proctors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

panels were destroyed, and they quickly took action against this extrajudicial raid. The Block of Painters sued the Red Squad with the help of the John Reed Club and an older member who volunteered to be the group's spokesman on the stand. As Lehman later recalled, "he was mature, and he had a coat, a regular suit, so he could appear as a witness, and make a nice impression."⁵⁸ Their efforts to seek justice through the court was in vain, as the judge dismissed their case due to a lack of evidence of specific perpetrators, and also put forth the absurd notion that the artists might have defaced their own paintings in order to generate publicity for both themselves as artists and for their Communist politics.⁵⁹ Arthur Millier, the art critic for the Los Angeles Times, was equally dismissive of their efforts. Despite his positive response to *America Tropical* in 1932, by this point Millier was hostile towards the organized Communist activities among artists in the city.⁶⁰ In an article for the *Times* on the growing prevalence of Communist art in Los Angeles, he argued that "Communist propaganda" has no right to preservation as art, calling Communism a "poisoned and poisonous misconception of American life." He characterized Communist art as essentially dishonest, writing that "While the majority of workers have jobs, cars, happy homes, and contented families, art is thus perverted to create a false picture of a world in which only class hatred and class persecution exist." He then concluded his article by mentioning the raid on the John Reed Club:

"Peculiar to, and always prominently included in, American Communist pictures, is the figure of the negro worker. A series of Frescoes done by the "Syndicate" and raided at the John Reed Club some months ago, showed negroes being "oppressed" by the law.

There is room and need for legitimate art which shows, in their true proportion to the

⁵⁸ Lehman, Oral History Interview

⁵⁹ Lehman, Oral History interview

⁶⁰ For his positive response to the mural on Olvera Street, see Arthur Millier, "Power Unadorned Marks Olvera Street Fresco," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 1932.

whole, the imperfections of society. Communist propaganda, however, has no such reasonable aim. It purposely paints a false and exaggerated picture to accomplish one end – the destruction of existing institutions. No matter how brilliant such work may sometimes be, its merit as art is no justification for its preservation.”⁶¹

The coordinated behavior of the police and the judicial system made the political battle lines even clearer. Guston and his friends were developing politically and artistically in the radical circles of Los Angeles, and as their careers progressed, they continued to work closely together. In 1933, Lehman and Guston had a joint show at Stanley Rose’s bookshop, organized by their friend Herman Cherry, where Guston displayed *Conspirators* alongside some drawings, and Lehman showed two paintings, some drawings, and two small sculptures.⁶² The following year, Guston, Kadish, and Sande Pollock had the opportunity to work on a mural as a group in Los Angeles (fig. 14).⁶³ This mural, now referred to by the Reuben Kadish Art Foundation as the “Workers’ Alliance Center” mural, was painted in a Communist meeting hall. This was the group’s first chance to paint a public mural directly onto a wall. It is not exactly clear how the

⁶¹ Arthur Millier, “Communists Incited to Stir Up Trouble Through Artists’ Propaganda-Paintings,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 26, 1934.

⁶² This show reflects an interesting aspect of the historical record of this period. In his oral history interview, Lehman lamented that Dore Ashton described the exhibition at Stanley Rose’s bookshop as a solo show, Guston’s first. Lehman even said that he sent newspaper clippings to Ashton reviewing the show, and yet Ashton still wrote that it was Guston’s solo show. He also criticized Robert Storr for uncritically repeating biographical information from Ashton without corroboration. See Lehman, oral history interview. Arthur Millier did in fact review the show for the *Los Angeles Times* and praised the work of both young artists. See Arthur Millier, “Two Pairs of Painters and Some Singles Offer Shows: Borg and Ritschel, Lehman and Goldstein, Guy Rose, Feitelson Works Viewed; a Comedienne’s Lithographs,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept 17, 1933. Herman Cherry worked at Stanley Rose’s Bookshop and regularly organized small exhibitions throughout the early 1930s. As he recalled: “I suggested that he started a little art gallery on the second floor of the room we hardly ever used. And he went along with it, and I started a little gallery there. And I showed Fletcher Martin and Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish when they were doing the big murals on the Project at that time.” See Herman Cherry, Oral History interview with Herman Cherry, September 1965, interviewed by Harlan K. Phillips, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-herman-cherry-11793>) In his notes for Ashton’s typescript, Guston mentions that Cherry was the one who curated the shows at Stanley Rose’s Gallery.

⁶³ Kadish lists himself, Guston, and Sande Pollock as the team for this mural in his oral history interview. The mural certainly matches the stylistic tendencies of Guston and Kadish at this time. This can be cross-referenced with the newspaper record. See note 69.

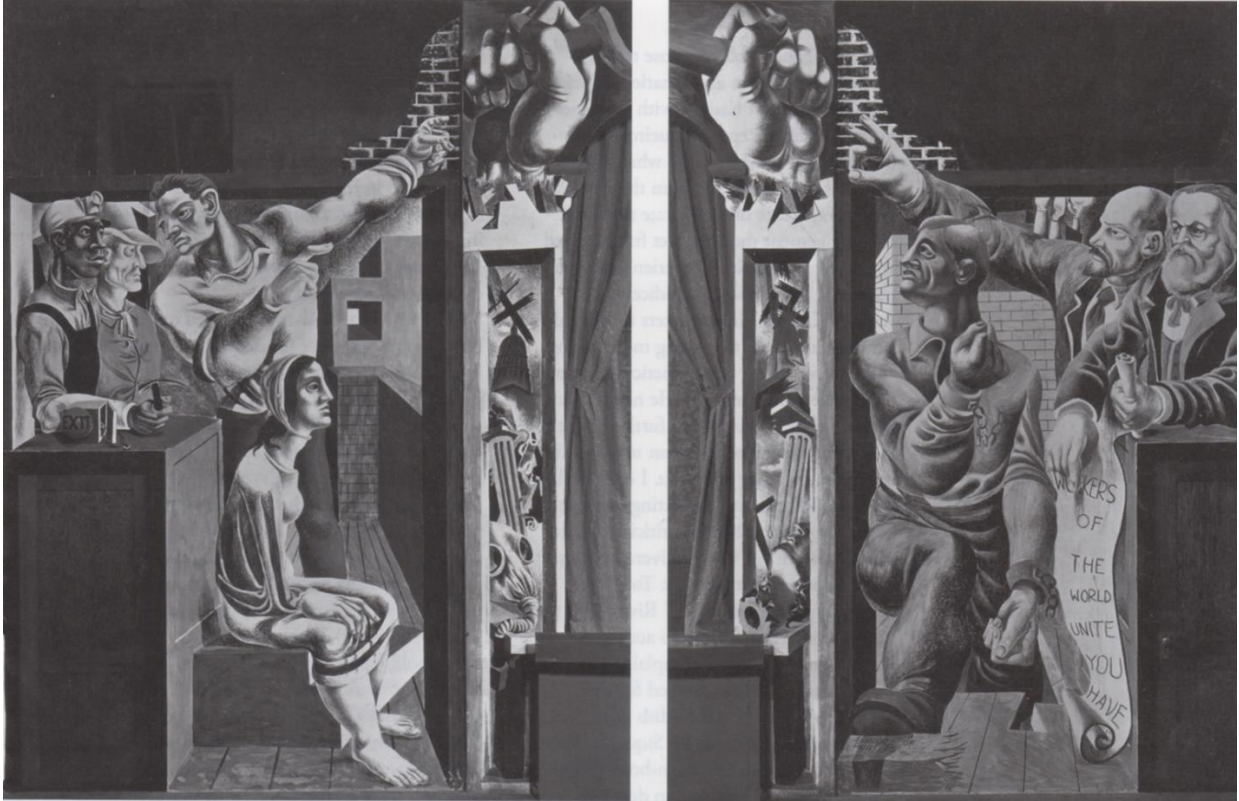


Figure 1.14, Reuben Kadish, Philip Guston, and Sande Pollock, details of the left and right side of the “Workers’ Alliance Center” mural, 1934.

group of three artists in their early 20s received this commission, but they were well prepared for the task after training with Siqueiros and advancing politically in the environment of the John Reed Club. Although it was photographed and documented in its day, there is almost no mention of this mural in the scholarship.⁶⁴ In fact, the mural is not even mentioned on the Guston Foundation's catalog raisonné; yet, a photo remains in Kadish's archives, and the painter Anton Refregier recalled seeing photos of the mural after meeting Guston in New York in the late '30s.⁶⁵ Ellen Landau is one of few scholars to discuss the painting, which she describes as the most overtly Communist mural painted in the United States at that point.⁶⁶ From the historical record and through subsequent scholarship by Landau, the specific location of this mural has been unclear. However, through conversations with local historians of mural painting and labor in Los Angeles, I was able to confirm that the mural was in the meeting hall of the Brooklyn Avenue Co-op at 2708 Brooklyn Avenue.⁶⁷ This would certainly make sense, given the direct

⁶⁴ It is not mentioned at all by Ashton or Musa Meyer in their biographies and studies of Guston's life.

⁶⁵ "I remember when I first met Philip Guston, who had just arrived from Los Angeles. We did not know his work, but when I saw Phil's photographs, especially the mural he did with Kadish for a worker's school in Los Angeles, I was excited." Anton Refregier, "Oral History interview with Anton Refregier," November 5 1964, interview by Joseph Travato, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁶⁶ Ellen Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 48.

⁶⁷ Frank Kadish, in his self-published memoir, when describing Reuben's artistic activities in the 1930s, wrote "There was a painting or fresco made around the proscenium in the Brooklyn Street Coop Hall." I then looked through Los Angeles Building records, and found an application for a building permit from 1924 (the year Frank claims that his father became involved with building the Co-op) for an addition to the property at 2708 Brooklyn Avenue. The owner is listed as a the "Cooperative Consumers League," and the permit is for the addition of a third floor to a building that housed "stores and assembly halls." For more on the history of radicalism at this site that continues to this day, see Nidia Bautista, "Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory: A Century of Arts and Radical Community-Building," *PBS SoCal*, August 14, 2019. This article does not mention the mural, but does describe the history of Jewish left-wing organizing at the site, the many organizations with offices in the building, and that there was a large lecture hall on the second floor of the building used for political meetings. This space on the second floor is now a music venue known as the Paramount. I recently contacted the Paramount and the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory, located on the 3rd floor of the building, asking about the history of the building and potential knowledge of the mural. The representative from the Paramount informed me that they were aware of a mural in this space. She also sent me photographs of the space in the 1990s before it was renovated, describing the location of the proscenium arch above the old stage. However, the representative also said the mural was destroyed in a raid by the Red Squad in 1935; I have not been able to verify this story, as there has been some confusion between the fate of the mural in the auditorium of the John Reed Club, the raid on the show of portable frescoes in the JRC auditorium in February of 1933, and creation and fate of the "Workers' Alliance Center" mural. Ellen Landau references this confusion in her own work – see note 27 in *Mexico and American Modernism*, 176. The representative from the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory let me know that they had done some research on the mural in 2012, after the

connection with Samuel Kadish, and the history of Communist activity at the site. However, Kadish himself never mentioned this personal family connection, later saying that they were invited to paint the mural by Siqueiros.⁶⁸

The Worker's Alliance Center mural was located in the auditorium of the building, on the stage's proscenium arch (fig. 15). It is divided into two symmetrical sections; on the left, a diverse group of workers, made up of a black man, two white men, and a woman, gather to listen to a speech. On the right, Karl Marx unfurls a famous line from the *Communist Manifesto* ("workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains") on a scroll, while Vladimir Lenin delivers a speech. A worker who stands in front of them breaks the shackles around his wrists. Above him, Lenin's arm extends upwards and to the left, as he points to the center of the composition. His gesture is reflected by a worker on the left side, who also points upwards and toward the center as he looks to his comrades. They both gesture to the two monumental clenched fists on the proscenium archway. The left hand holds a sickle and the right a hammer as they forcefully burst through the architectural frame of the scene – their power seems to have caused the scenes of destruction below, flanking each side of the stage. There, we

owner of the building was shown scanned photographs of a mural that was supposedly at 2708 Brooklyn Avenue. Through their research, which involved contacting locals whose family members had participated in Communist activities at the site, they confirmed that the photographed mural was in fact Guston, Kadish, and Pollock's mural, which they verified through the photographs in Kadish's archives, republished in Landau's article and book. This research originated from the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory itself, with the help of a historian of labor in Los Angeles at UCLA, Caroline Luce. This information never made it back to the Reuben Kadish Arts Foundation or to Landau herself. I discussed this with Judd Tully, and he was excited to learn of this local knowledge of the mural. Landau does not make the connection to the specific address at 2708 Brooklyn Avenue and the consistent organized Communist activities at the site by the Cooperative Consumers League and the Friends of the Soviet Union. My speculation is that she was not able to track down this address due to lack of access to Frank Kadish's memoir, and so she was never able to draw the connection to this local knowledge of the mural's existence. This speaks to a certain amount of understandable academic siloing – the very limited amount of research on the mural was done through labor history, rather than art history, and this information was never published publicly by the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory, so it never made its way into art historical scholarship. However, through this research, I was able to have a long conversation with Omar G. Ramirez, the head of the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory's Mural Advocacy Program. In this conversation, we exchanged information from our research on the mural, and we discussed the possibility of collaborating to create some teaching materials for his students on the mural and history of political muralism in Los Angeles.

⁶⁸ Reuben Kadish, Oral History interview, 1992.



Figure 1.15, Photo of Reuben Kadish, Philip Guston, and Sande Pollock's mural, 1934, published in the Los Angeles Times, clipped by Reuben Kadish and saved in his papers

see neo-classical architecture and sculpture topped with a cross on the left and a swastika on the right. These symbols of western culture, bourgeois racism, exploitation, and control are destroyed by the revolutionary fervor of the workers in the foreground of the scene; they have united in solidarity, and their collective strength has caused these oppressive institutions to literally crumble at their feet. The only primary account of the mural is from Arthur Millier, from the same article as his dismissal of all “Communist propaganda.” After describing the imagery of the mural, he writes “This fresco, forcefully painted by three young members of the John Reed Club, signing themselves the ‘Syndicate of Painters,’ is dedicated to David Alfaro Siqueiros, the Mexican Communist painter. A significant bit of news is that the three artists are now in Mexico City studying fresco painting.”⁶⁹ The direct connection between Guston, Kadish, and Siqueiros was embodied in this mural, and the mere fact of the mural’s existence reflects the whirlwind of activity inspired by Siqueiros’ brief time in Los Angeles.

Guston and his friends were able to work collectively and develop intellectually in the explicitly politicized cultural spaces of the early 1930s. Stylistically, Guston was able to continue his interest in the empty perspectival spaces and eerie stillness of Giorgio de Chirico, and all three young artists were able to explore their interest in large scale mural painting inspired by Quattrocento frescoes. They were able to work collectively, furthering their development under Siqueiros and applying his ideas to a public mural explicitly meant to agitate and mobilize the viewer. The signature, describing themselves as the “Syndicate of Painters,”⁷⁰ tells the audience

⁶⁹ Arthur Millier, “Communists Incited to Stir Up Trouble Through Artists’ Propaganda-Paintings,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 26, 1934. Millier describes the painting as a “true fresco” and generally praises the talent of the painters, but is entirely critical of their politics. Millier was slightly misinformed; while Guston and Kadish did go to Mexico City, and the mural they painted in Mexico is well-documented, they were joined by Jules Langsner, not Sande Pollock. Their time in Mexico is the subject of much of Chapter 2. Kadish saved a clipping of this article along with the photo of the complete mural around the stage in his papers. See Clippings, Series 8: Printed Material, 1934-1993, undated, Box 5, Folder 44, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

⁷⁰ Although the group in Los Angeles referred to themselves as the Block of Painters, artists around Siqueiros also often used the Spanish term for trade union, Sindicato. In 1923, he was involved in the founding of the Syndicate of

that the painting was a collective effort, akin to the work of a trade union rather than an individual. This mural was the culmination of this period of youthful political fervor for Guston and his friends – the crisis of the Depression prompted the development of class consciousness across the entire world, and these young artists were forced to reckon with the contradictions and antagonisms of capitalist society for the first time in their lives. This political development was fostered through national organizations such as the John Reed Club and publications like *New Masses*, which connected newly radicalized artists across the country, and gave their work a set of shared concerns and a collective goal. This group of burgeoning artists were being shaped by a rapidly developing culture of the revolutionary working class, and their efforts as a group speak to the relationship between class consciousness and an active process of revolutionary change. Newly radicalized artists sought new forms and subjects that could act both as art objects and contribute to revolutionary praxis. Guston, Kadish, and their friends were sparked into political and artistic activity by the crisis of the Depression, and the arrival of Siqueiros undergirded the development of a working-class culture that brought together people from all around Los Angeles.⁷¹

Revolutionary Mexican Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers. For more on the founding of the Syndicate, see Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 50-52.

⁷¹ My conception of class consciousness is derived from György Lukács and his essays in *History and Class Consciousness*. Central to his thinking is the idea of historical self-awareness brought about by crisis, which leads to the development of revolutionary praxis by the working-class, guided by the ideological framework of Marxism. Crucially, he describes the need for the proletariat to understand their place within the totality of Capitalist social relations, so that they may devise strategies to destroy class hierarchy and further their own emancipation. See György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Dialectical Materialism*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971). The activities of the John Reed Club and the Block of Painters are complex examples of the revolutionary strategies that were developed to address the specific historical, economic, and social conditions of Los Angeles in the early 1930s.

The world-wide crisis of the Great Depression was the culmination of the contradictions and antagonisms of capitalism in the early twentieth century. Widespread poverty and deprivation, paired with the massive transfer of wealth upwards to the rich, who continued to live lavish and comfortable lifestyles, made the political battle lines in the United States clearer than ever before. The founders of the John Reed club recognized the clarity provided by the historical moment in the opening of their manifesto, saying “the present crisis has stripped capitalism naked. It stands more revealed than ever as a system of robbery and fraud, unemployment and terror, starvation and war.”⁷² For Communist artists in this moment of clear and obvious social breakdown, the dedication to their political cause and solidarity with oppressed people took precedence over their career prospects. The rhetoric among left-wing artists of the early 1930s was one of obligation; because of the crisis of the moment, artists could no longer isolate themselves in their studios. The development of class consciousness forced artists to reckon with their place within society and their potential role in history. The manifesto of the John Reed Club concludes with a call to action:

“We call upon all honest intellectuals, all honest writers and artists, to abandon the treacherous illusion that art can exist for art’s sake or that the artist can remain remote from the historic conflicts in which all men must take sides. We call upon them to break with bourgeois ideals which seek to conceal the violence and fraud, the corruption and decay of capitalist society. We call upon them to align themselves with the working-class in its struggle against capitalist oppression and exploitation, against unemployment and terror, against fascism and war. We urge them to join with the literary and artistic

⁷² “Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Club,” *New Masses*, June 1932

movement of the working-class in forging a new art that shall be a weapon in the battle for a new and superior world.”⁷³

The JRC’s call to action was part of a developing culture of the revolutionary working class, which connected individual trade unions, social organizations, and labor struggles to a national struggle against capitalism in America.⁷⁴ For American artists, this struggle was fostered in the radical spaces of the John Reed Club and *New Masses*, which acted as sites for the development and advancement of class consciousness, and emphasized political discipline.

Hugo Gellert and other Communist artists guided their actions based on revolutionary practices that never shied away from confrontation. In an article for the June 1932 edition of *New Masses*, Gellert described the sequence of events after the Museum of Modern Art invited artists to submit work for an open exhibition of mural decorations. The goal of the exhibition was for artists to display their work to potentially win mural contracts for the blank walls inside the Rockefeller Center. A group of artists including Gellert, William Gropper, and Ben Shahn submitted overtly political works. Museum trustees were given a preview of the exhibition two weeks before its opening; the political works sparked outrage among various industrialists and bankers on the board, who demanded their removal from the show.⁷⁵ This led to a moment of solidarity between all the artists in the exhibition, who agreed to withdraw their pictures if the controversial murals were barred from the show.⁷⁶ The show went forward with the Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn’s murals included, and received widespread condemnation from bourgeois

⁷³ “Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Club,” *New Masses*, June 1932

⁷⁴ For more examples of the rhetoric of responsibility and organization among artists from this period, see Michael Gold “Toward an American Revolutionary Culture,” *New Masses*, July 1931

⁷⁵ The rejected works were Gellert’s “*Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together*” – *Al Capone*, Gropper’s *The Writing on the Wall*, and one of Shahn’s *Sacco and Vanzetti* series.

⁷⁶ For a more detailed account of this exhibition, which was curated by a young Lincoln Kerstein, and the reaction by the members of the Board of Trustees and the press, see Jody Patterson, “We Capture the Walls!”, in *Modernism for the Masses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 23-57.

critics who praised the “serious artists” looking to secure a contract but derided the political murals as childish or “prankish fun” targeting the wealthy hosts. Gellert finished his article with a succinct, sarcastic statement: “Yes, snaring contracts is a *serious* business. To observe your times, and to boldly state your findings, regardless of contracts, is *sticking out your tongue!*”⁷⁷

Members of the John Reed Club also recognized that cultural production and artistic education could be a site for building solidarity and creating class consciousness through organized political action. With the six founding principles always at the forefront, the Club worked to provide a venue for proletarian artistic and intellectual production as it related to revolutionary class struggle. At the first national convention of the John Reed Club in 1932, Harry Carlisle of the Hollywood chapter (of which Guston and his colleagues were members) emphasized the need for the club to be organized along political rather than aesthetic lines.⁷⁸ He pointed out the importance of political discipline in order to always prioritize class struggle over aesthetic debate. Speaking of middle-class intellectuals who were going through a historical process of proletarianization in the midst of economic crisis, he said “we must teach them that the first thing is to approach an organization on an organizational basis. We must not be short-sighted.”⁷⁹ Carlisle and Gellert saw the potential for debates about aesthetic quality and autonomy to overshadow the political goals of revolution and the abolition of class hierarchy. Most directly, they recognized the ways in which the isolated existence of the studio artist supported by elite patronage could lead one away from political struggle. Jacob Burck described the difficulties of maintaining political discipline, writing that “It is not uncommon to find battles

⁷⁷ Hugo Gellert, “We Capture the Walls!” *New Masses*, June 1932 – this was in the same issue as the John Reed Club’s manifesto. In this same issue, Gellert also published another drawing on Scottsboro, titled *The Fight of the Scottsboro Boys for Life and Freedom is Your Fight!*

⁷⁸ At the time of the conference in Chicago, the Hollywood John Reed Club had 60 members. See minutes from the First National Conference, May 29-30, 1932, Louis Lozowick papers, Archives of American Art.

⁷⁹ “John Reed Club Convention notes,” *New Masses*, July 1932

raging on the floor of the John Reed Club between the more politically developed artists who had solved their bourgeois psychosis, and the new ones still clinging to familiar and comfortable conceptions acquired by years of studio life.”⁸⁰ What the John Reed Club never intended to do was conceptualize some specific style of artistic production that could contribute to revolution in lieu of other styles deemed reactionary – they were not in the business of censoring the artistic production of their members. As long as one prioritized the organization and advancement of Communism through the six founding principles of the club over their own career, they could create work in whatever style they chose.

Guston and his colleagues were young members of the working class going through the radicalizing experiences of economic crisis, and were some of the millions of Americans developing class consciousness during the early 30s. Between his odd jobs the young Guston sought out every opportunity to challenge himself and move forward through aesthetic problems. He was primarily painting in the venerated tradition of fresco, and he was using the medium to synthesize his various interests and tackle controversial political subjects. Much later in life, when delivering a lecture to a group of young art students, Guston reflected on his approach to learning and engaging with new forms and new techniques. He likened this engagement to feeling a sense of momentum while moving forward, saying “Each time new. It propels you somewhere else... You’re searching. And finding. And leaving. And searching and finding and leaving.”⁸¹ As young artists in Los Angeles, Guston and his friends spent their time searching for

⁸⁰ Jacob Burke, “Revolution in the Art World: [Part] A. for Proletarian Art,” *American Mercury* 34, March 135, 335, quoted in Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, “New Masses and John Reed Club Artists, 1926-1936: Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter, and Style,” *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, no. 12 (Spring 1989): 69, and Isadora Anderson Helfgott, *Framing the Audience: Art and the Politics of Culture in the United States, 1929-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 32-33.

⁸¹ Guston “The Image” 1969, *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, 115.

new forms, new subjects, and new solutions in their aesthetic and political formation. Guston was advancing through artistic problems as part of a mass struggle to change reality.⁸²

His political formation was also continuing apace, although there are signs that Guston was looking to his artmaking as a means of escape from his status as a worker. In a letter to his family in 1932, Sande Pollock pokes fun at the 19 year old “Phil” for feeling that he was too good an artist to have to do anything else to support himself, saying “It is rather humorous; however, he is good and will eventually make a painter I believe.”⁸³ Sande’s gentle ribbing of his friend displays a level head in the midst of the early years of the Depression. Guston’s working-class background, intellectual curiosity, and the crisis of the Depression brought him to the Communist cause, but he was already seeing himself as above manual labor at such a young age. He was clearly a painter of talent, but this desire to escape his working-class status partially confirms the fears of figures like Gellert and Carlisle, who recognized the ways in which bourgeois intellectualism could lead people away from the labor struggle. This is not to say that Guston did not believe in the Communist struggle – he was still making overtly Communist work, became the target of reactionary violence by the Red Squad, and looked to work in organized and explicitly political environments. As an individual, feeling that he deserved better than manual labor is an understandable desire to escape exploitation, but as part of a collective political movement with explicit long-term goals of the abolition of class itself, it shows the difficulty of balancing the advancement of one’s own artistic career with substantive political resistance to capital. Raymond Williams, in his analysis of working-class cultural formation, ruminated on the critical nature of revolutionary culture:

⁸² This is a paraphrase of Bertold Brecht, from *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso Books, 1977), 81.

⁸³ Sande Pollock to his brothers, April 6, 1932, in *American Letters: Jackson Pollock and Family*, ed. Sylvia Winter Pollock (Malden: Polity Press, 2011), 29.

“There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light. This is usually the difference between individual and small group solutions to social crisis and those solutions which properly belong to political and ultimately revolutionary practice. But it is often a very narrow line, in reality, between alternative and oppositional. A meaning or a practice may be tolerated as a deviation, and yet still be seen only as another particular way to live. But as the necessary area of effective dominance extends, the same meanings and practices can be seen by the dominant culture, not merely as disregarding or despising it, but as challenging it.”⁸⁴

This distinction, to my mind, is crucial for our analysis of Guston’s cultural practices as an individual in relation to the collective cultural practices of the John Reed Club. It is clear that the John Reed Club, with its direct connection to the class struggle and its dedication to specific political goals, presented a potential threat to the capitalist state. Artists barely out of high school were the target of reactionary violence. Attempts at censorship by capitalist art sponsors were resisted by organized blocks of artists. Talented artists were prioritizing their political beliefs over their career prospects, potentially missing out on commissions in favor of solidarity in the face of capitalist exploitation. Guston, through his individual circumstances and his education, encountered this emergent cultural form and engaged with it, and was often pulled in different directions by his personal ambitions and the necessities of mass politics. He undoubtedly desired to escape exploitation and put his own safety on the line through his participation in this genuinely oppositional cultural formation that was actively persecuted by the police and local

⁸⁴ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism*, (London: Verso Books, 2006): 42.

government. However, he was already planting the seeds of a specialized career as an artist, and his contemporaries took notice of his bourgeois aspirations.⁸⁵

The founders of the John Reed Club recognized the need for clear ideological goals, but their function as a club was essentially to provide a site for an open-ended aesthetic formation, driven by the clear ideological goals of the working class. This form of aesthetic advancement shows just how thin the line is between “alternative” and oppositional; for some individual members of the club, the explicitly political site of their chapter was a place to practice their own alternative cultural formation, but the clear political battle lines and organizational goals meant that there was potential for genuinely oppositional cultural work on a large scale. Guston and his colleagues began their artistic development in this environment. Their practices as a collective were connected not only to the mobilization of the arts community, but also to the broader revolutionary strategies of the working-class in Los Angeles and around the rest of the country.

⁸⁵ In an interview conducted during Musa Meyer’s research on her father’s career, Herman Cherry said to Meyer: “Your dad always had a little of the bourgeois in him.” Meyer, *Night Studio*, 17-18. He also says that Guston dressed better, consistently made more money than his friends, made a name for himself early.

Chapter 2

Morelia and Duarte

After completing the Worker's Alliance Center mural in Los Angeles, Guston and Kadish sent photos of the finished painting to David Alfaro Siqueiros, who had recently returned to Mexico. Clearly proud of their accomplishment, the young artists once again looked to their mentor for guidance on what to do next. Siqueiros was impressed with his students' work, and he offered to help them secure a commission in Mexico if they wanted to make the long trek to the south.¹ While Guston and Kadish had already received mentorship from the Mexican muralist, a chance to see Mexico in person was an exciting proposition. As a post-revolutionary society in close proximity, Mexico was an fascinating counterpart to the United States in both political and artistic terms. Post-revolutionary Mexican mural painting and public art were discussed extensively by American radicals, and in general the movement garnered far more interest than Soviet art.² Young artists on the left looked to public art in Mexico as an example of the kind of public reach, cultural influence, and political import that they lacked in the United States. Already trained in fresco, with a completed large-scale mural under their belt, Guston and Kadish accepted Siqueiros's offer and set off to Mexico in the summer of 1934 with their friend, the poet Jules Langsner, without having a commission secured beforehand.³

After a treacherous journey by car that included an accident when Langsner fell asleep at the wheel, the trio finally arrived in Mexico City. In the Mexican capital, Guston, Kadish, and

¹ Ellen G. Landau, "Envisioning History: Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish in Morelia" in *Mexico and American Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 34-59. – Landau's work is the most fully-fleshed analysis of one of Guston's early works, and this chapter is both an expansion on and in conversation with Landau's research – especially her point that the importance of left-wing politics in Guston's work is understudied.

² For more on the general American interest in Mexican art, see James Oles and Marta Ferragut, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), Barbara Haskell et al., eds., *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945* (New York: New Haven: Whitney Museum of American Art; Yale University Press, 2020), Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, 1st ed (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), and Anna Indyk-López, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

³ Sande Pollock decided not to accompany his friends to Mexico, and instead chose to join his brothers Charles and Jackson in New York City. For more on Sande's move to New York, see Naifeh and White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, 259-267.

Langsner had an opportunity to see the work of Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and other younger muralists first-hand. Despite their initial excitement, Guston was left disappointed by this experience. He explained his frustration in a letter to Harold Lehman, who was still in Los Angeles: “The much-heralded Mexican renaissance is very much a bag of hot air. I can’t explain to you my disappointment in most of these frescoes. Especially Rivera’s. His work is absolutely a horrible mess.”⁴ While he praised Orozco and Siqueiros’ work for its “plastic” quality, he derides Rivera for making lifeless work, taking commissions from capitalists, and selling watercolors to tourists, calling him “an opportunist bastard of the first order.” In contrast, he lavished praise on his mentor Siqueiros, saying “we have spent many enjoyable nights with Siqueiros, who is not painting, but is devoting all his time to political activities. And listen! He brought with him huge photos of his Argentine fresco, and Harold, there is something!” Siqueiros’ dedication to experimentation, revolutionary technique, and a distinct set of political goals clearly inspired Guston despite his disappointment with the “Mexican Renaissance” itself.

As Guston and Kadish advanced in their aesthetic formation, they gravitated towards the bold experimentation and political fervor of Siqueiros, who encouraged them to constantly evolve and move forward as artists. Guston’s excited account (fig. 2.1) of Siqueiros’ recently completed experimental mural in Argentina, *Plastic Exercise*, (fig. 2.2) makes this clear:

“It is all done with an airbrush and the painting may be shitty, but he is experimenting with Kinetics! The shape of the room is half-cylinder shape. Huge and he painted the floor also, not a single bit left unpainted. Not being a flat plane on the wall, he had the problem of distortion. So he painted his nudes very distorted so that they would appear

⁴ Letter from Philip Guston to Harold Lehman, July 14th, 1934, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 32, Dore Ashton papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

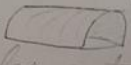
② selling lousy watercolor at 500 pesos piece.
He is a opportunist bastard of the first order.
We have spent many enjoyable nights with
Siqueiros, who is not painting, but is devoting
all his time to political activities. And listen!
He brought with him huge photos of his
Argentine fresco, and Harold, there is something.
It is all done in airbrush, and the painting
may be shitty, but he is experimenting with
Kinetics! The shape of the room is half-cylinder
shape —  Huge and he painted
the floor also, not a bit of space unpainted.
Not being a ~~flat~~ flat plane on the wall he
had the problem of distortion. So he painted his
nudes very distorted so that they would appear
not distorted, because of the peculiar shape of
the wall. Understand? And tremendous movement.
He composed it so that ~~as~~ as the spectator
moves, the figures move and rotate with
him. I can't explain it. It must be seen!
It is really an innovation. And he waves
his hand, and calls it merely a 'plastic'
exercise!

Figure 2.1, Letter from Philip Guston to Harold Lehman, July 14, 1934, showing his drawing of the barrel-vaulted room and his enthusiasm about Siqueiros' mural



Figure 2.2, David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Plastic Exercise*, 1933, Buenos Aires, Argentina

not distorted, because of the peculiar shape of the wall. Understand? And tremendous movement – he composed it so, as the spectator moves, the figures move and rotate with him. I can't explain it. It must be seen! It is really an innovation. And he waves his hand, and calls it merely a plastic exercise!"⁵

Guston was not bothered by the quality of the painted surface itself – admitting that it is “shitty,” likely due to Siqueiros’ use of industrial paint, but he was enthralled by his mentor’s innovative optical effects. He did not even mention subject matter in his description – instead he focused on how Siqueiros solved artistic problems, used new materials, and considered the viewer’s experience with the piece. He saw potential in this kind of innovative and dynamic painting to immerse the viewer in their viewing experience, with perspectival distortions giving the viewer a feeling that they are sharing a space with painted figures who appear to move around them. In contrast, he dismissed Rivera’s monumental work because of its lack of movement and excitement. Rivera’s murals invoking the grand scale of Mexican history and his paintings of key individuals to create a sense of national culture were done in what Guston and other devotees of Siqueiros saw as an outdated, uninspiring, and static fashion.

Despite Guston’s brash dismissal of his mentor’s rival, Rivera was involved in helping Guston and Kadish secure a commission in Mexico.⁶ Rivera’s “opportunism” meant he was aware of many available walls throughout the country, and in this case he helped the young

⁵ Letter from Guston to Lehman, July 14th, 1934, Archives of American Art, Dore Ashton Papers. While he was disappointed in the poor state of Orozco and Siqueiros’s murals, Guston’s use of this phrase certainly reflects the intimate conversations between the group and their mentor – the muralist had recently been expounding on the idea of the “plastic exercise” during his time in the United States and Argentina in the early 1930s. For a discussion by Siqueiros on the mural in Argentina, see “What ‘Plastic Exercise’ is and How it was Done,” printed in David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Art and Revolution*, trans. Sylvia Calles (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 38-44.

⁶ Letter from Guston to Lehman, July 14th, 1934, Archives of American Art, Dore Ashton Papers. This letter indicates that Siqueiros offered to help if they came to Mexico, but Guston writes that it was actually Rivera who let them know about the opportunity in Morelia: “To make a long story short, Rivera told us about some available walls in a smaller city called Morelia, in the state of Michoacan (look it up you dope!).” He then explains that he took a train to Morelia and was able to secure the commission.

Americans find work in the smaller town of Morelia, in the state of Michoacán. Morelia was an energizing location for radical artists – while it was not a particularly cosmopolitan place compared to Mexico City, the town’s connection to local and national politics provided an dynamic space for art making. Morelia was centered around the University of St. Nicholas de Hidalgo, and the rector of the University, Gustavo Corona, was a committed patron of the arts. He commissioned a variety of artists to cover the walls of his campus with politically charged murals. Guston characterized Corona in grandiose terms to Lehman, saying he was “the image of Lenin, and he wants to make his city a modern Florence!”⁷ Guston was not the only one to connect Corona to the patrons of the Renaissance. Grace Greenwood, another American painter who was commissioned to paint a mural on the campus the year before Guston and Kadish, described Corona as “like Sforza.”⁸ His dedication to fostering a radical artistic environment put foreigners like Guston and Kadish in contact with Mexican artists and culture outside of the massive hub of Mexico City, and allowed his university and city to connect with national political currents. He commissioned the trio to fill a set of walls in the Museo Michoacáno, a regional museum that was part of a set of buildings run by the University’s rectory at the time.⁹

Corona was also a supporter and friend of Lázaro Cárdenas, who had just won the presidential election in a massive landslide victory. Before the national election in 1934, Cárdenas was the governor of Michoacán, and Morelia was an important headquarters for Cárdenista politics. Cárdenas was a general in the revolution from 1910-1920, and had consolidated a base of support in his home state especially among agrarian workers through a

⁷ Guston to Lehman, July 14th, 1934, Dore Ashton papers, Archives of American Art.

⁸ Guston to Lehman, July 14th, 1934, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art. For Greenwood quote, see Laura Felleman Fattal and Carol Salus, ed., *Out of Context: American Artists Abroad* (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 2004), 117.

⁹ Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism*, 49.

platform of wealth redistribution and a strong centralized bureaucracy dedicated to transforming Michoacán's economy in service of the working class. He also began an anti-clerical campaign against officials in the Catholic church, focusing on corruption and exploitation of the indigenous population within the church.¹⁰ However, Cárdenas was careful to avoid direct associations with the Communist movement and favored an approach based on broad consent rather than ideologically directed class struggle. This included a public declaration of support for the right of labor unions to strike, a reversal of policy from Plutarco Calles' presidency which won him the support among trade unionists throughout the country.¹¹ This created a complicated dynamic wherein supporters of Cárdenas could express overt Socialist/Communist political sympathies and the Cárdenas government could enact left-leaning redistributionist policies, but there was always a rhetorical and ideological gap between his most radical supporters and the practical needs of his government. His platform was the most "revolutionary" of any president since 1920, with a particular focus on improving the quality of life for the working class, but he faced scrutiny from both the left for his reluctance to tie his programs to a Communist ideological framework, and from the right for his anti-corporate and anti-foreign investment politics.¹² What this meant in practice was that Cárdenas would appease the right when he needed to, rather than confront them directly, even while enacting left-leaning reforms.

¹⁰ For more on Cárdenista anticlerical policy and widespread support of Cárdenas among the peasantry, see Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán, Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹¹ For more on Cárdenas' labor policies, see Joe C. Ashby, *Organized Labor and the Mexican Revolution under Lázaro Cárdenas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963) and Christopher R. Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹² See Adrian A. Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1998) for more on how Cárdenas differentiated himself from previous Mexican presidents, especially Plutarco Calles.

The ongoing debates between Siqueiros and Rivera reflected this political gray area of post-revolutionary Mexico. The two were in the midst of a public conflict over the direction of Mexican art and its connection to Communist politics. Throughout the early 30s, Siqueiros lamented the stagnation of revolutionary ideas in Mexico – he felt that many leaders of the revolution had failed to free Mexican society and politics from American corporate influence, and instead were more concerned with consolidating their power and placating capitalists. His ire was particularly directed towards Plutarco Calles, President of Mexico from 1924-28, who maintained a strong influence over Mexican politics into the 1930s. By this period, Siqueiros had stopped taking commissions from the Mexican government and instead regularly released scathing critiques of Mexican governmental figures. In his final mural in Los Angeles, *Portrait of Mexico Today*, for which Kadish acted as an assistant, he depicted Calles as a masked bandit alongside a portrait of J.P. Morgan, who callously watches over the slaughter of Mexican workers and revolutionaries. His antagonistic relationship with the Mexican government was what led him to Los Angeles in the first place, as he spent the early ‘30s looking for more sites to spread his revolutionary fervor.

Siqueiros regularly denounced Rivera as the representative of the failures of the “Mexican Renaissance” in advancing working-class revolution. In the May 29th, 1934, issue of *New Masses* – just a few months before Guston, Kadish, and Langsner left for Mexico – Siqueiros published an article titled “Rivera’s Counter Revolutionary Road,” in which he enumerated a wide range of criticisms of Rivera as a painter and political actor.¹³ He emphasized that this was not a purely negative critique, writing “the criticism must be complete in order to draw from it useful lessons for the making of a true revolutionary art.” At each step of Rivera’s

¹³ David Alfaro Siqueiros, “Rivera’s Counter Revolutionary Road,” *New Masses*, May 29, 1934, 16-19. All quotations in this paragraph come from this article.

development as an artist, Siqueiros presents his actions and artwork as politically misguided and without genuine revolutionary character. His modernist education in Paris, away from the revolution, exemplified his “detachment from the social problem.” In his time as a member of the Syndicate of Revolutionary Mexican Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers, Rivera’s desires to collaborate with the government made the Syndicate “something stuck to the belly of the Public Treasury.” While Siqueiros and Xavier Guerrero had their official government work contracts rescinded for publishing drawings and prints critical of the government’s collaboration with American capitalists in the Syndicate’s official publication, *El Machete*, Rivera never contributed to the publication. Instead, he “surrendered to the government” leading to a split in the Syndicate. His continued cooperation with the government led to Rivera establishing a “dictatorship” at the Mexican School of Fine Arts. Finally, Siqueiros condemned Rivera’s split from the Mexican Communist Party, taking commissions from American industrialists in Detroit and New York, and catering to tourists – familiar charges that later reappeared in Guston’s private correspondence. He concluded by urging the reader to learn from these mistakes by using revolutionary and experimental techniques in conjunction with a distinctly Communist political program, as part of a “team of international revolutionary painters.”¹⁴ Overall, he characterized Rivera as a reformist and a revisionist who connected himself professionally to the bourgeois Mexican government, rather than a revolutionary dedicated to the emancipation of exploited people.

Rivera, on the other hand, argued that the creation of a public Mexican culture had inculcated pride in the revolution and allowed the public to feel connected to history, united as a Mexican people. He felt that the expansion of the Mexican state, education reforms, and

¹⁴ The “team” of revolutionary painters refers to the Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors and Engravers, as well as the Block of Painters in Los Angeles and the painters who assisted him in Argentina.

redistributionist policies had advanced the revolutionary spirit of the Mexican people and created a distinctly proletarian culture, emerging from the masses. While Siqueiros focused on advancing a Communist ideological line and a sense of technical innovation outside the bureaucracy of the state, Rivera emphasized institutionalized educational uplift. In a 1932 essay “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art,” Rivera takes a broad approach to the effect of the official mural art of the Mexican state, writing that “we formed a painter’s union and began to cover the walls of building in Mexico with revolutionary art. At the same time we revolutionized the methods of teaching drawing and art to children, with the result that the children of Mexico began producing artistic work in the course of their elementary school development.”¹⁵ He even connected these educational reforms to developments in the United States, praising the work of the newly created John Reed Club, despite the club’s connection to *New Masses*, a publication in which he was regularly criticized.¹⁶ Guston and Kadish arrived in Mexico just after Cárdenas was elected, and their experience living and working in Morelia was shaped by this sense of contradiction and political uncertainty that the Mexican muralists themselves were attempting to work through in their public and increasingly personal battles.¹⁷

The mural in Morelia was a massive undertaking – three young Americans were to complete a fresco that would cover both a 40ft central wall and a second wall that was divided by a balcony, to the left of the main wall. This was undoubtedly an intimidating task, but one filled with possibilities for aesthetic and political advancement. As they had learned from Siqueiros,

¹⁵ Diego Rivera, “Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art,” *The Modern Quarterly*, vol. 6 no. 3, Autumn 1932, reprinted in *Mexican Muralism*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, and Robin Adele Greeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 328.

¹⁶ “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art,” 328. For more on the criticisms of Rivera in *New Masses*, including their factual errors which were later publicly corrected by Rivera, see David Craven, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist* (New York: G.K. Hall & co., 1997), 137-38.

¹⁷ This ongoing debate came to a head in a public confrontation at a conference on education in Mexico City in August of 1935. For an account of the debate from the period, see Emanuel Eisenberg, “The Battle of the Century” in the *New Masses*, December 10, 1935.

fresco painting is an arduous process, and completing their work in a small town in a foreign country with limited language skills complicated matters further. Despite the immensity of the task ahead, Guston and Kadish approached the project with a bevy of ideas and inspirations. The pair, with their friend Langsner as their intellectual interlocutor and assistant, began working in earnest after reaching an agreement with Corona, who offered to pay for all materials and provide free room and board if the trio could complete their work in about four months.¹⁸ Each section of the fresco had to be planned out and the wall prepared for each day of painstaking, detailed work on the largest scale any of these young painters had ever attempted before. Even in perfect conditions, this was a major commitment, but Guston and Kadish were well prepared after their experience in L.A. and with the support of such accomplished artists as Siqueiros and Rivera in their corner.

Although the work was slow, it was immensely gratifying for the two young artists. Guston once again wrote to Lehman on October 4th, 1934, to update his friend in Los Angeles about their progress. At this point, they had completed about half of the mural, and Guston was feeling satisfied with the work: “We are trying many new things, and although much of it is more or less unsuccessful (as far as a finished and refined style is concerned), I feel it to be a great experience and have profited greatly.”¹⁹ In his letters to Lehman, Guston demonstrated his commitment to his own education as an artist by consistently emphasizing his long term development. The individual product of his work was almost always secondary, and he instead focused on what he learned from the process of painting. In this way, his partnership with Kadish is key – beyond being a professional collaboration in the execution of specific paintings, the two

¹⁸ Guston provides the details of this agreement in his letter to Lehman, July 14th, 1934, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art. In the end, the fresco took closer to six months to complete.

¹⁹ Letter from Philip Guston to Harold Lehman, October 4th, 1934, Box 8, Folder 32, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

friends were continuing the process they had started in their education in Los Angeles. For years, they read the same books, shared an admiration of the same artists, and learned the technical skill of fresco painting together. Now, they were at each other's side in a foreign country, working through new aesthetic problems with the help of another intellectual interlocutor in Langsner.²⁰ By reporting their progress to Lehman back home, their work in Mexico became an extension of their formative years together in Los Angeles in the Manual Arts Group and as members of the Block of Painters. Although each had individual goals, it is clear that they saw their relationship as one of collective progress and development.²¹ It was certainly rare for artists so young to undertake fresco paintings of this scale, and their connection with 'Los Tres' only added to their boldness. During their six months of painting, Jose Clemente Orozco visited Morelia, and Guston recounted this experience to Lehman with enthusiasm: "Orozco liked our fresco. Damn! It's a tough medium. So much to learn about, before you know what you can do and not do!" He ends his letter by suggesting to Lehman that it was "probable" that he and Kadish could find more mural commissions in Mexico City after completing their work in Morelia.²²

While not working on the mural, Guston and Kadish also spent their time completing smaller canvases for locals in Morelia, which brought them in close contact with the town's political and artistic community. This work was doubly "profitable" as it allowed the pair to

²⁰ Langsner assisted with mixing paint but also contributed to the planning of subject matter. He also played an important role in publicizing the mural. See Al Boime, "Breaking Open the Wall: The Morelia Mural of Guston, Kadish and Langsner," *The Burlington Magazine* 150, no. 1264 (2008): 452–59.

²¹ Oddly, Landau claims that Guston "was probably primarily responsible for devising the fresco's key imagery and dictating its rhetorical tone" – a tenuous assertion, given the closeness of Guston and Kadish's collaborative relationship during this period. It is also contrary to the claims of the painters themselves, who went out of their way to credit Langsner's contributions to the mural, even though he did not do any actual painting, let alone differentiate or provide primary credit to either Guston or Kadish. See Boime, "Breaking Open the Wall," for more on Langsner's role. Kadish discussed the equal nature of their collaborative partnership in oral history interviews, and Guston always emphasized that they worked side by side, to the point that it would be impossible to differentiate their contributions to the mural. Robert Storr also succumbs to this desire to provide Guston with primary credit, writing that the mural program in Morelia was "led by Guston," without any evidence to support his claim. See Robert Storr, *Philip Guston: A Life Spent Painting* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2020), 15.

²² Guston to Lehman, October 4th, 1934, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art.

approach new aesthetic problems while also earning some extra cash on the side. One canvas from this period, now lost, reveals how Guston used these side projects to work through certain forms and ideas for the larger mural. *Woman and Reclining Figure* (fig. 2.3) features a number of forms and ideas that would reappear later in grand scale, including brick wall backdrops, precisely rendered rectangular windows, a shrouded figure in repose, a disorienting sense of scale, and a massive ladder that connects foreground to midground. Guston also mentioned to Lehman that he completed a portrait of a local judge, while Kadish was working on a canvas that Guston described as his “nicest thing yet!”²³ Through this process, these young men instilled a sense of confidence in each other that bordered on cockiness. Although this is certainly due to some amount of youthful overexuberance, the group had reason to be satisfied with their accomplishments. At this midway point of the fresco process, the pair were advancing their technical skills, working through aesthetic problems, and making professional connections that would benefit them in both the long and short term.

However, this long process of fresco painting was not without its hiccups. Corona occasionally had issues with obtaining colors and paints in Morelia, and the trio would regularly have to go long stretches without working on the wall at all. Although this meant they could work on their canvases on the side, it also kept them in Morelia and limited their opportunities to find more work in Mexico City. This also meant dealing with boredom. Near the end of the year, they were unable to work on the fresco for a month due to a lack of materials; this long stretch of inactivity was broken only when they were given free train tickets to Mexico City in order to attend Cárdenas’ inauguration.²⁴ This was a welcome distraction and a chance to spend some

²³ Guston to Lehman, October 4th, 1934, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art.

²⁴ Guston discusses this trip to Mexico City in a letter to Harold Lehman, December 1934, Box 8, Folder 32, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 2.3, Philip Guston, *Woman and Reclining Figure*, 1934, now lost.

time in a larger and more cosmopolitan city. During this trip, Guston and Kadish had a chance to see newly completed frescos by Rivera and Orozco in the Palacio de Bellas Artes, including the repainted version of *Man at the Crossroads*, originally destined for the walls of Rockefeller Center. Once again, Guston was dismissive of the work of his mentor's rival, and quick to report to Lehman the large commission fees the older muralists received for their work. In contrast, he had recently sold a portrait to the "local president of the PNR (Partido Nacional Revolucionario)" for very little money.²⁵ At this point, they were nearing the end of their work, but clearly growing frustrated with their time in Mexico.

The American trio finished their work in Mexico in January 1935.²⁶ Their massive and dynamic mural, *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, displays the development of the group's thinking and working practices in the first half of the decade (fig. 2.4). The mural depicts interconnected scenes of reactionary and fascist violence, personified in the form of ghastly hooded figures. These hooded figures are either committing brutal acts of oppression, or being fought off by their potential victims. The scenes span history, connecting the Spanish Inquisition to the contemporary development of the KKK and Nazi Germany. The complex scenes on the main wall are complemented by two individual panels on the left wall, one above the balcony and one below (figs. 2.5 and 2.6).

The central wall of the mural is divided into separate sections in the form of eerily barren rooms, rendered with sharp lines and receding away from the viewer at disorienting angles. In the bottom right a figure with no facial features, resembling one of de Chirico's mannequin-like

²⁵ Guston to Lehman, undated letter, Series 4: Research Files, Box 8, Folder 32, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art. This letter was likely written sometime in December of 1934, after Cardenas' inauguration on December 1st, but before the mural was completed on January 21st, 1935.

²⁶ Landau cites this date due to Guston and Kadish signing the museum's guestbook on January 21st.



Figure 2.4, Philip Guston, Reuben Kadish, and Jules Langsner, main wall of *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, 1934-35, Morelia, Mexico.



Figure 2.5, Philip Guston, Reuben Kadish, and Jules Langsner, Lamentation panel of *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, 1934-35, Morelia, Mexico

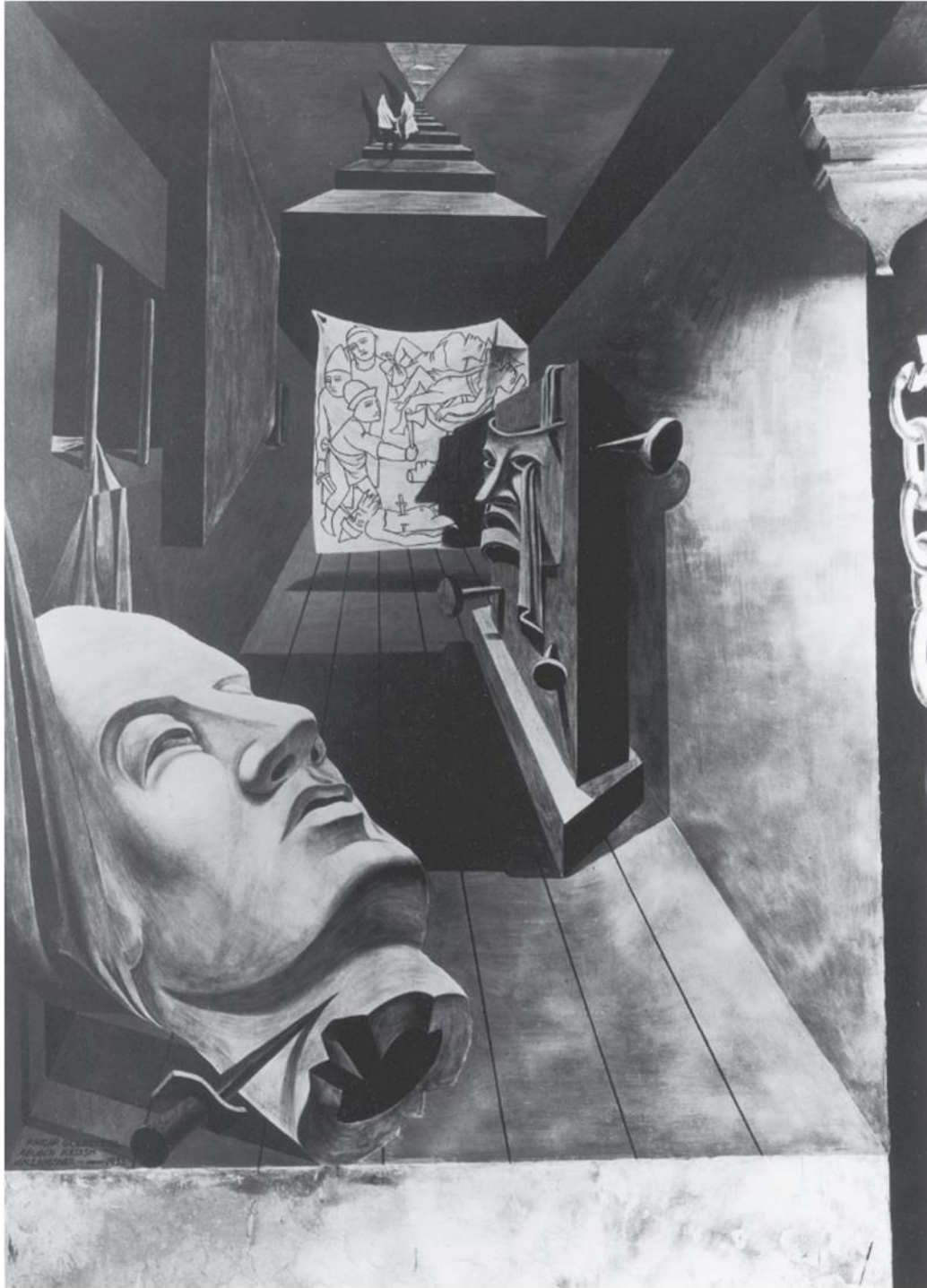


Figure 2.6, Philip Guston, Reuben Kadish, and Jules Langsner, Post-surrealist panel of *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, 1934-35, Morelia, Mexico.

creatures, is wrapped in undulating waves of cloth and is seemingly strapped to a board or table. His body is stiff; the cat-o-nine tails to his left indicates the cause of death. Another corpse wrapped in cloth hangs nearby, with her feet tightly bound by rope. Her hair dangles over her face, obscuring any potential emotion she displayed in her final moments. To the left, a club with long, sharp spikes rests in an empty window frame. It seems to have been placed there by the colossal figure climbing a ladder, who has abandoned his weapon to ascend to the top level of the composition. This figure is an avatar of organized violence and oppression, specifically representing the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico. After completing his gruesome task on the lower levels, he is attempting to continue his terror in the upper level of the mural. His mission is thwarted by three figures at the top of the ladder wielding crude instruments that they use to knock him back down. The Inquisitor falls back into the space of the viewer, foreshortened and distorted to take account of the viewer's position from the floor. This scene displays a clear influence of Siqueiros' recent work in Argentina. After discussing the *Plastic Exercise* amongst themselves and with Siqueiros, Guston and Kadish incorporated his idea of the mobile spectator who would view the mural from multiple positions, continuing their mentor's experimentation with "kinetics."²⁷ To the right of this scene, two hooded Klansmen, one in black and one in white, cower from another source of resistance. Hands bearing hammer and sickle are rushing in to fight back against the specter of fascist violence. By their side, a cross and swastika tumble to the floor. A third hooded figure ascends a ladder from the scene below, unaware of the fact that he is about to be foiled by Communist revolutionaries.

In the scene at the upper left, the three figures seem to anchor themselves on another ladder, simultaneously using it to defend themselves and brace themselves for another swing at

²⁷ Guston and Kadish's interest in Siqueiros' kinetic theories and perspectival distortions is discussed in detail by both Landau and Boime, so I am focusing on some different aspects of the mural program.

the massive figure encroaching on their space from below. The ladder as a central motif in this mural has escaped scholarly attention – it is only mentioned in purely descriptive terms.²⁸ There are three massive ladders featured on the central wall, with a potential fourth ladder under the corpse wrapped in cloth on the bottom right. The body seems to be tied to an *escalero* or *potro* – a ladder-like rack often used in Inquisition torture, especially when waterboarding victims to extract confessions. The ladders are also used by various figures to traverse their individual scenes. The massive Inquisitor figure has propped his ladder against the frame of the barren room in order to reach the space above him. Although his progress is stopped by the three figures of resistance, the ladder itself seems to pop back out of the other side of the board that the lowest of the three figures is using to defend himself, stretching upwards and becoming a focal point of the upper left scene. On the right side of the painting, a hooded figure is using a ladder that extends through a hole in the ceiling of his space to the above, where his fellow Inquisitors/Klansmen are cowering from Communist rebels. This creates a literal connection between the scene of colonial torture below and the contemporary moment of socialist resistance above.

Guston and Kadish clearly thought deeply about the artistic tradition of fresco painting that they were continuing with their mural in Mexico, resulting in a composition that Ellen Landau describes as “simultaneously conservative and innovative in narrative and form.”²⁹ The pair shared an interest in the work of Masaccio, Giotto, Uccello, and of course Piero della Francesca. Many of their favorite renaissance painters are famous for their mural cycles, where scenes are divided by framing devices or by architectural features of the wall itself, allowing for

²⁸ Both Landau and Boime mention the ladders in their descriptions without analyzing their meaning and function within the mural.

²⁹ Landau, “Envisioning History: Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish in Morelia,” in *Mexico and American Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 51.

the creation of separate but related scenes, and thus a progression of a narrative across time and space. Here, Guston and Kadish play with the notion of the mural cycle, separating parts of the mural with architectural frames that their figures are then able to move between. The ladder then becomes a means by which the figures in the mural not only ascend or descend into different scenes, but also traverse time and space. The rooms that separate the scenes seem to simultaneously encircle and recede behind the figures; they are both prisons and backdrops. This creates a sense of simultaneity of the history being depicted; colonial Mexico and the contemporary United States are connected through a shared experience of reactionary violence and persecution. This association is furthered by the blurring of the lines between Inquisitor and Klansmen, who become essentially interchangeable. By allowing their figures to literally cross temporal and spatial boundaries, Guston and Kadish draw together the struggles against colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism into a shared fight against violent oppression.

This expression of the historical continuity of reactionary violence is furthered by the two panels on the left wall. While the figures in these panels do not move into the main wall, each of these additional scenes acts as another historical allegory of violent injustice to reinforce the main composition. Above the balcony is a Lamentation scene, showing an older man cradling the limp body of a younger man, while a woman cries at the young man's death (fig. 2.5). The scene immediately evokes the Bible, and in this sense acts as traditional "lamentation" scene within a cycle of biblical images like that of Giotto at Scrovegni Chapel. However, the dead young man is not Christ; instead, his dark features and the inclusion of a noose in the background indicate that he is the victim of a racist lynching, bringing to mind Guston and Kadish's recent work on the Scottsboro boys. Additionally, Guston and Kadish blend their biblical references, as it appears that the young man has been pulled out of his open coffin. This, of course, connects the image to

traditional Resurrection scenes, furthering the characterization of the central figure as Christ-like. The historical scenes of violence can then be considered at a spiritual level; each victim in the mural becomes Christ-like, and their struggle against their oppressors can be seen as part of a greater spiritual struggle between good and evil.

Below the balcony is a disorienting scene in another barren room (fig. 2.6). Unlike every other scene in the mural, no figures occupy this space. Instead, a collection of objects, including the severed head of a monumental sculpture and a large block of wood with nails hammered into it and a theater mask hanging from it, seem to sit abandoned in this strange hallway. The mask's horrified face casts a deep shadow onto the backdrop of the scene: a woodcut print that seems to be hanging from the ceiling. Landau has identified this print as a 15th century woodcut by a German artist, printed in Italy, depicting Jews being killed during a pogrom.³⁰ This, of course, connects to the scenes of inquisitors on the main wall, who continued the violent persecution of Jews under the auspices of the Catholic church. Landau argues that this scene provides a glimpse into the two young artists' conception of their own Jewish heritage, adding a layer of personal meaning to these images of historical persecution.³¹

Additionally, in several pictures of the mural in progress, the viewer can see ladders used by the painters to climb scaffolding and execute their work (fig. 2.7). The ladder as a crucial tool of fresco painting gives the mural a self-referential quality, wherein Guston and Kadish depict the very object they are using to execute a fresco painting, connecting their own labor to the content and form of the mural. This sort of self-reference in mural painting had a recent history

³⁰ Landau, "Envisioning History," 53-54. Landau was unable to determine where Guston, Kadish, and Langsner might have first encountered this print.

³¹ Landau argues that the inclusion of this print displays Guston and Kadish's simultaneous attention to local histories of the Inquisition and the particular history of their own Jewish upbringing in immigrant families. This is a reflection of their identity as American outsiders, living with a sense of foreign identity in Anglo America. The inclusion of the print allows for a consideration of their own ethnicity in terms of contemporary racial politics in both the U.S. and Mexico.



Figure 2.7, from left to right: Jules Langsner, Reuben Kadish, Philip Guston, and an unidentified man on a scaffold, in front of the Lamentation panel of *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, 1934-35, Morelia, Mexico

among the Mexican muralists. There was, of course, Siqueiros' *Street Meeting* at the Chouinard Institute, for which the Manual Arts group acted as witnesses and assistants.³² There was also Rivera's *The Making of a Fresco, Showing the Building of A City* (fig. 8), painted in 1931 at the San Francisco Institute of Fine Art.³³ Rivera's mural is an exercise in the self-reflexive possibilities within mural painting – he depicts workers on a scaffold who are painting various scenes of industry, science, and construction, all grouped around a massive central laborer whose hands are pulling the levers and turning the dials of industrial machinery. This central laborer seems to be controlling all of the scenes around him – it is as if he is directing all of the work in the city through his mastery of his equipment. The inclusion of three visibly wealthy patrons, holding a plan of the mural, further emphasizes who is driving progress in the city. They are closed off from the rest of the composition by the (painted) scaffold, boxed in by the instruments of artistic labor, while the workers creating the mural go about their work without any input or supervision by the patrons. The fact that the mural seems to be mostly complete while the well-dressed men fiddle with the plan characterizes them as reacting after the fact; they are only there to express their opinion about work that was completed despite their presence.³⁴ The artistic labor of mural painting, requiring refined technical skill and coordination among many workers, is connected to the larger process of building an intricate industrial society. The representation of

³² See my extended analysis of this mural in Chapter 1. Siqueiros' depiction of workers on a scaffold working on the wall that he is ostensibly meant to be "decorating," listening to a labor organizer, connects the work of the painter to both the manual labor of the proletariat and to the role of labor organizer, building class consciousness. Painters are characterized as both workers and organizers/mobilizers.

³³ Although I have not found any evidence that Guston and Kadish saw this mural in person, given its location in California, their deep interest in Mexican muralism, their personal relationship with the muralists themselves, and consistent press coverage of Mexican muralists in American publications, it is likely that they were at least aware of this recently completed mural.

³⁴ Anthony W. Lee emphasizes the antagonistic relationship between painter and patron, as well as the contested reception of the mural as an important part of the development of mural painting in San Francisco. See *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and his article on the mural, "Diego Rivera's 'The Making of a Fresco' and Its San Francisco Public," *Oxford Art Journal* 19, no. 2 (1996): 72–82.



Figure 2.8, Diego Rivera, *The Making of a Fresco, Showing the Building of a City*, 1931, San Francisco, CA

the scaffold is especially important in achieving this effect. The painted scaffold reaches all the way down to the floor, beyond the painted scenes. The bare wood of the scaffold branches out in triangular forms that echo the wooden rafters of the ceiling above, becoming an integral part of the structure, as if the mural is now responsible for holding up the building itself. In this way, the workers painting a mural are quite literally building a society, but one that has not yet been created in reality – a society where the working class of San Francisco is acknowledged as the central driving force of history, rather than their wealthy patrons.

Guston and Kadish continue this sort of self-reference, using it to explore connections between their own artistic labor, their subject matter, and the nominal goals of social revolution. Their depiction of and focus on the ladder adds a layer of meaning about the role of the mural painter in political struggle, social change, and the building of class consciousness. The fact that the ladder is used by the figures to cross temporal and spatial boundaries indicates the capability of the mural painter to draw together wide-ranging social and political ideas into a single, monumental image to be seen by the public. In Morelia, Guston and Kadish used references to the form and history of mural painting in order to make a statement about the long and continuing history of oppression by reactionary forces of the Inquisition, KKK, the Nazis, and capital, while also commenting on the mural painter's role in making that statement in the first place. In the course of a socialist struggle against capital, the mural painter can play an important role in building solidarity across national and racial lines, connecting new members of the public to a collective fight. The title of the mural, *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, places their artistic labor in this broader context – this mural is both a representation of, and a contribution to, this ongoing struggle.

Despite Guston and Kadish's overt socialist politics, their mural received a glowing write-up in *Time* magazine.³⁵ This article is a fascinating document of the contradictions inherent in politicized mural art by American artists during this period. The anonymous author of the piece began with a brief description of the history of Morelia before transitioning to a description of the two young muralists and their mural, which *Time* described as "one of the biggest and most effective murals in all of Mexico." After describing their relationship with Siqueiros, the author then called Guston and Kadish "parlor Pinks" and mentioned their time spent learning from Lorser Feitelson in Los Angeles. Curiously, the author then spent an inordinate amount of the article on Feitelson. First, he described the eminent art teacher's concept of "post-surrealism" or "new classicism," quoting him at length. Then, he immediately disparaged Feitelson, saying "Fortunately Reuben Kadish and Philip Goldstein took nothing but their technique from New Classicist Feitelson." Finally, the article finished with a quote from their "patron-discoverer David Alfaro Siqueiros: 'It is my honest belief that Goldstein & Kadish are the most promising young painters in either the U. S. or Mexico.'"

This passage points to one of the most complex moments of Guston and Kadish navigating the social world of painting in the 1930s as young ambitious artists. The article sets up a dichotomy between Feitelson and Siqueiros as two opposed mentors for Guston and Kadish: Feitelson's influence as purely technical, Siqueiros' as more fundamental. However, the relationship between the young artists and Feitelson was far more complicated. Near the end of their long process of fresco painting in Morelia, Kadish reached out to Feitelson for any materials he had on composition and surrealism. Before asking for this favor, Kadish lavishes Feitelson with praise: "After having seen the works of the so-called masters of the 'Mexican

³⁵ "On a Mexican Wall," *Time*, April 1, 1935. All the following quotes in this paragraph come from the article.

Renaissance’, and met and spoken to the very masters themselves, we can evaluate your value to painting even with clearer heads than ever before. With true earnestness we say, that you are the master over them all.”³⁶ Feitelson sent them back some of his notes on surrealist painting, and also informed his students that he arranged for someone to send a reproduction of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*.³⁷

Guston and Kadish certainly integrated some of his surrealist techniques into the mural. In fact, they later issued a correction to the *Time* article in the *Los Angeles Times*, where they disavowed the *Time* criticism of Feitelson and asserted that the panel to the left side of the main wall was an explicitly post-surrealist composition influenced by his theories (fig. 2.6).³⁸ This is made all the more complicated by the fact that Langsner provided much of the information about the mural to *Time*, and the writers of the magazine certainly had no opportunity to see the work in person. Al Boime claims that it is part of Langsner family knowledge that Langsner wrote the article himself.³⁹ However, given the fact that Langsner and Feitelson would maintain a professional relationship for decades to come, and Guston, Kadish, and Langsner would go out of their way to issue a correction to *Time*, it seems more likely that the anonymous author editorialized based on information provided by Langsner.⁴⁰

³⁶ Reuben Kadish to Lorser Feitelson, December 11th, 1934, Series 2: Correspondence, Box 3, Folder 28, Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundberg Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

³⁷ Lorser Feitelson to Reuben Kadish, December 18th, 1934, Series 2: Letters, Box 1 Folder 50, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

³⁸ For the correction issued by Guston, Kadish, and Langsner to the *Time Magazine* article, see Arthur Millier, “Time Magazine Errs,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 1935.

³⁹ Al Boime, “Breaking Open the Wall.” Boime interviewed members of the Langsner family, who made this claim about the *Time* article.

⁴⁰ Harold Lehman also characterizes the author of the *Time* piece as someone who clearly never saw the mural in person, and suggests that the author editorialized. See Harold Lehman, oral history interview. However, there is also some evidence of Langsner’s distaste for Feitelson at this time. In a letter from Langsner to Kadish, after Kadish left for San Francisco, Langsner criticized a recently completed mural by Feitelson, writing that Feitelson had recently completed “the shittiest mural for the Hall of Records. His other work continues along same quality & tendency.” Jules Langsner to Reuben Kadish, undated letter (likely Fall of 1936), Series 2: Letters, Box 2, Folder 21, Reuben Kadish papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

Feitelson's paintings from this period clearly display the formal qualities and narrative tendencies that influenced Guston and Kadish. *Genesis #2* is an example of the sort of associative imagery and symbolism that interested the two younger painters (fig. 2.9). In this image, Feitelson gathers a collection of objects and signs that all have a loose connection to birth and motherhood, which are meant to spark the viewer to consider the relationship between the multivalent meanings of each individual object. On the left side of the painting, he includes two objects that visibly resemble the vulva – a conch shell and a split-open melon, which also have long-standing associations with birth and fertility. The open egg below the conch shell furthers these associations, and points the viewer toward a stack of masks. Near the center of the painting, a mask of a baby's face is placed in front of a series of larger masks that seem to develop into an adult skull, which is itself supported by two books. A spyglass runs through the right eye of each mask and the skull, indicating intellectual advancement through education and study. Another baby mask nurses from a line drawing of a breast, which itself emanates in waves from the wispy and ethereal drawing of a woman. Above this ghostly woman, there is a simplified Annunciation scene pasted to the wall of the room, connecting the other symbols in the room to biblical motherhood. Finally, in the background, shrouded in darkness, we see a mother bird roosting in her nest, protecting her eggs from the cold of night.

In the early 30s, Feitelson was developing his own aesthetic theory, which he dubbed both "New Classicism" and "Post-Surrealism." In order to understand his conception of painting, let us turn to the same quote cited by the author of the *Time* article:

"The New Classicism is the antithesis of the esthetically irrelevant psychological illustration of the popular Expressionist-Surrealists and should in no way be identified with their dadaistic denial of the universality of the esthetic. The graphic objectification



Figure 2.9, Lorser Feitelson, *Genesis #2*, 1934

of the conscious and subconscious psychic meanderings in itself does not create art. . . . Thus in Genesis, the contemplation of the direction and sequence of the introspectively associated objects dictates the rhythms, which are ‘thought-unity’ rhythms rather than graphic lines.’⁴¹

Feitelson distinguished his painting from European Surrealism by rejecting any emphasis on irrationality and the unconscious in favor of the symbolic and intellectual meanings contained in objects. In this sense, he wanted to use the surrealist painting techniques of Dali or Magritte in a distinctly conscious and directed manner, allowing the viewer to contemplate a given subject through the consideration of the connection between various symbols and objects. This, he said, is in support of “universality of the esthetic” which transcends the psychology of the individual and instead moves to the level of shared values and ideas. While Feitelson read the work of “Expressionist-Surrealists” as directionless and even self-obsessed, he saw his own painting as directing thought and leading the viewer to contemplate fundamental aspects of the human condition. Feitelson’s theories can certainly be seen in the early work of Guston and Kadish, as they would frequently include detailed depictions of symbolic objects meant to spark new associations and connections within their large compositions.

The unabashed praise of Feitelson by Kadish may have been partially strategic, in an attempt to get the teacher’s materials on surrealism. But the group in Morelia did make a sincere attempt at a post-surrealist composition in the panel on the left wall, and Kadish’s praise of Feitelson echoes Guston’s earlier complaints to Lehman about the “Mexican Renaissance.” However, their engagement with Siqueiros’ ideas, praise of his work, and close working relationship with the Mexican muralist over the course of the early ‘30s was undoubtedly

⁴¹ Lorser Feitelson, quoted in “On a Mexican Wall,” *Time*, April 1, 1935.

formative. They also clearly favored Siqueiros' conception of the relationship between artistic production and politics. In fact, Kadish would later claim that Feitelson disavowed any association with their work due to their socialist politics, saying "Feitelson anticipated McCarthy by years."⁴² Lehman also recalled this growing conflict, claiming Feitelson began to "pick fights" with the group due to their waning interest in his theories and their increasingly politicized artistic practice.⁴³ Guston and Kadish, in their earnest attempt to develop aesthetically and politically, seemed to be stuck somewhere in the middle, and they blended the ideas and forms of their two mentors in the creation of their massive mural in Morelia.

Their simultaneous admiration for and antagonism with the conservative Feitelson continued once the group returned to Los Angeles. Guston's prediction that they could receive more work in Mexico did not come to fruition, but they were able to get a commission for a mural in the Jewish Tuberculosis Sanitarium in Duarte, CA, now called the City of Hope Hospital. The record for the commissioning of this mural is muddled – it is unclear whether the mural was part of the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture or the newly created Federal Art Project. A report from the *Los Angeles Times* while the mural was in progress seems to indicate that it was an FAP commission,⁴⁴ but Kadish remembered it as a Section mural.

⁴² In Musa Meyer, *Night Studio*, 16. Kadish's characterization of Feitelson is echoed by an undated letter (likely from August 13, 1936), from Guston to Kadish when Guston was still in LA and Kadish had left for San Francisco. He writes that "Feitelson is creating a big stink in town and making an ass of himself. He gave an interview to the *L.A. Herald*, saying in effect 'that the Artists' Congress is a Communist organization and that he is organizing a new group to fight the spread of Marxism and propaganda in art as a criterion, that is undermining the Social Structure, and that he in his new group will present the real problems of the American Artist!'" Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. Underlines and capitalizations are Guston's. I expand on this letter in Chapter 3.

⁴³ Oral History interview with Harold Lehman, March 28, 1997, interviewed by Stephen Polcari, Archives of American Art.

⁴⁴ The *Los Angeles Times* mentioned the mural by Guston and Kadish in an account of recently started mural projects under the auspices of the FAP in "Relief, Project Art Goes to Schools and Institutions," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1936.

Secondary sources are also at odds – Ashton, whose writing on Guston was based on a series of interviews and gathering a vast body of materials on his life, referred to it as a Treasury commission,⁴⁵ while New Deal art scholar Francis V. O’Connor again claimed it for the FAP. In any case, Kadish called the mural a “quasi-public” commission, saying in an interview that they received the job through a connection with his cousin and the backing of the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union, who were involved in running the Sanitarium and the funding of the mural itself.⁴⁶ In fact, he goes so far as to say the Union’s power protected them from potential objections by Feitelson, Stanton MacDonald-Wright, and Merle Armitage who he said sat on the administrative board.⁴⁷ This may be a result of the foginess of memory over time – Feitelson and MacDonald-Wright were both involved in the administration of the California FAP, while Merle Armitage was an administrator for an earlier program, the Public Works of Arts Project (PWAP), before becoming the chairman of the regional committee of the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture.⁴⁸ It seems that Kadish may have been mixed up, although his confusion speaks to the circumstances of transition at the moment of the creation and dissolution of a number of federal art programs from 1934-35. It also suggests that Kadish was correct to call the

⁴⁵ Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 32. This also speaks to some confusion about dates – Ashton claims that Guston moved to New York in the winter of 1935, but their mural in Duarte was not completed until the summer of 1936. I think this confusion around this mural is the result of a more general neglect of publicly commissioned murals in scholarship. Ashton only mentions the mural in a single sentence, before saying “but it was not long before Guston yielded to the urging of Sande McCoy and Jackson himself, to set out for New York.” The Guston Foundation indicates he moved to New York in the Fall of 1936, which would make sense given the completion of the Duarte mural in July.

⁴⁶ Oral history interview with Reuben Kadish, April 15, 1992, interview by Stephen Polcari, Archives of American Art.

⁴⁷ There is added irony to this statement – in Kadish’s letter to Feitelson from Mexico, he makes a joke about the problems of running low on paints and about his issues with bureaucratic supervision, writing “You already know what happens when art is supervised by politicians.”

⁴⁸ Arthur Millier, “Brush strokes,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 27, 1935. Here Millier mentions Armitage’s new role for the Treasury Section.

mural “quasi-public”; the commission likely had multiple sources of funding, both public and private.⁴⁹

Whatever the circumstances of the commission, the mural in Duarte, which the pair worked on from August 1935 to July 1936, displays how Guston and Kadish adapted their established aesthetic interests and consistent motifs to new settings, new audiences, and new administrative contexts. The mural depicts the cycle of human life, from birth to death, with a particular emphasis on the role of education, scholarship, and science in the life of man. The T-shaped mural spans an arched doorway, with two symmetrical spaces on either side of the door, connected by figures who rest on top of the archway (fig. 2.10). The figures seem to progress from the left side, where they undergo personal and intellectual development, to the right, where they reach full maturity. On the left is *The Physical Growth of Man* (fig. 2.11). Alongside the doorframe a mother figure, holding a bird in her left hand, stands above a large seashell, out of which a child emerges (fig. 2.12). A grey architectural frame separates them from a larger scene above, where we see a multitude of possibilities for this child as it matures. Mothers tend to their children, bathing, clothing, and nursing them. Adolescent figures pursue an education; a young woman is reading next to a young man practicing drawing. Two figures in the background experiment with scientific devices in front of a mountain landscape. A man on the right side of the scene ascends a ladder, climbing to join the procession of figures who sit atop an illusionistic painting of a relief sculpture (fig. 2.13). These figures all have their attention turned to the right panel, *The History of Medicine* (fig. 2.14). A man at the very end of the enraptured crowd in the

⁴⁹ According to Sarah Schrank, another mural completed at the same time in the same building by Myer Shaffer (who was also part of the Block of Painters/John Reed Club of Hollywood), was funded by the “American Artists’ Congress, the Federal Art Project, and the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union.” Sarah Schrank, “Public Art at the Global Crossroads: The Politics of Place in 1930s Los Angeles,” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (2010): 446. I will discuss Shaffer’s mural later in the chapter.



Figure 2.10, Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, full mural at the City of Hope Hospital in Duarte, CA, 1935-36



Figure 2.11, Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, *The Physical Growth of Man*, 1935-36, Duarte, CA



Figure 2.12, Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, detail of the left side of the door frame, 1935-36, Duarte, CA.



Figure 2.13, Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, detail of figures above central archway, 1935-36, Duarte, CA.



Figure 2.14, Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, *The History of Medicine*, 1935-36, Duarte, CA

center communicates to the figures below. There, a crowded group of figures seems to struggle against the ravages of disease and age. They appear to be engaged in research, looking for scientific solutions to the signs of suffering around them. Multiple figures hold enigmatic devices made of chains and geometric shapes. Another pulls on a piece of cloth wrapped around the leg of man who is wearing a shroud over his face. This figure appears to have succumbed to some disease, his skin having turned to a sickly green. The man above him then seems to be propping him up by pulling tightly on the cloth around his leg, which is taut with the dead weight of the human body. To their left, a woman holds her head in her hands, wailing in horror at the scene below, where a man with saturated green skin hangs by his feet (fig. 15). His face is also covered with a cloth, preventing the viewer from witnessing his suffering.

The contrast between the two sides of the mural allows the viewer to consider a general arc of a human life, with the potential for personal development always shaped by the inevitability of death. While *The Physical Growth of Man* shows an open world of possibilities for a maturing child, *The History of Medicine* is closed, claustrophobic, and frightening. On the left, Guston and Kadish's characteristic brick-walled backdrop recedes into an opening that shows a landscape topped with a blue sky. One of the two figures in front of this backdrop seems to emerge from behind the central wall, showing that he entered this scene freely, and has a route from which to make his exit. The empty passage in the left wall and the ladder on the right side again suggest the possibility of movement – the figures can leave this scene and enter adulthood after receiving their education. On the other hand, the panel on the right shows no possibility of escape. Instead of an open landscape, this space is enclosed by the brick wall, preventing the figures from avoiding their common fate, death. The only opening is from above, where a figure offers a gyroscope-like instrument that also resembles a model of a star and its orbiting celestial



Figure 2.15, Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, detail of figure on the right side of the door frame, 1935-36, Duarte, CA.

bodies. This suggests the possibility of some kind of cosmic intervention – potentially a glimpse into the afterlife. While progress in medicine can and has been made, death is still inevitable. The figures at the top of the archway draw the viewer to the *History of Medicine* panel through their fixation on this overwhelming sense of finality. Overall, the mural explores the cycle of life, but the emphasis is certainly on the reality of death.

Guston and Kadish once again synthesized their myriad aesthetic and social interests into a complex work. The pair's interest in Renaissance muralism is clear, with a focus on hard-edged architectural frames, dense groups of figures, and undulating waves of fabric. They explicitly connect this mural to the tradition of Renaissance fresco through a series of portrait medallions that top the entire composition, including depictions of Piero, Masaccio and Uccello. They also employ clever techniques that break the plane of the wall and enter the space of the viewer, continuing their experimentation with Siqueiros-esque “kinesthetic” techniques. The figures dangle their legs over the edge of the architectural frames, some leaning forwards or backwards to hang over the viewer at ground level. They also experiment with illusionistic texture to differentiate between the different material surfaces within the image (fig. 16). There is a clear formal continuity with their mural in Morelia, adapted to the peculiar T-shape around the door frame. What does not carry over from Mexico is the subject matter – Guston and Kadish avoid any overtly ideological political statement. Instead, they create an image that is seemingly symbolic and focused on a non-historicized sense of general human development.

The universal nature of the subject is the focus of one of the only other published scholarly analyses of this mural, by one of the most eminent historians of the New Deal art programs, Francis V. O'Connor.⁵⁰ In his essay “Philip Guston and Political Humanism,”

⁵⁰ Francis V. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1973). This book is a crucially important work



Figure 2.16, Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, detail of mural showing multiple surface textures and a figure breaking the plane of the wall, 1935-36, Duarte, CA

in any study of the New Deal art projects; O'Connor gathered together a massive body of primary sources from the period, and provided crucial context and analysis of the rhetoric of WPA artists and administrators.

O'Connor sees the mural in Duarte as deeply influenced by Feitelson's post-surrealism.⁵¹ To this end he quotes Grace Clements, a fellow student of Feitelson's and contemporary of Guston and Kadish at the Hollywood John Reed Club. In an article for *Art Front* in 1936, Clements explained the tenets of post-surrealism, describing Feitelson's idea of composition as a means to bring about a series of loosely connected thoughts in the viewer, rather than for any purely formal interest. This, she writes, will allow the viewer to consider an object's "psychological importance," so that one may "enjoy a sequence of optically apprehended thoughts which total up to a universal idea."⁵² O'Connor sees Guston's depiction of ambiguous and symbolic objects, dense groups of figures, and seemingly disparate scenes as examples of the importance of post-surrealism to his formation as an artist.⁵³ He then moves on to say that Guston's use of post-surrealist composition gives the mural a "universal and timeless" quality: "fundamental human experiences are dealt with and there is no overt attempt to relate man's journey through life to specific social or economic impediments." This leads him to a striking claim: "The artists' conception of a humanist ideal is shown – an eloquent rebuke to the political and social circumstances of the times."

O'Connor uses the mural in Duarte to create a clear distinction between themes that are "universal and timeless" and "overt social content," which he argues "reduces art to the function of propaganda." He is primarily bothered by the prevalence of "depictions of misery and injustice" produced during the Depression, which he sees as less mature than art that attempts to

⁵¹ All the following quotations are from Francis V. O'Connor, "Philip Guston and Political Humanism," in *Art and Architecture in Service of Politics*, ed. Henry A. Millon and Linda Nochlin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 342-355.

⁵² Grace Clements, "New Content – New Form" *Art Front*, March 1936. For an analysis of the American reception of Surrealism, including the development of Feitelson and Helen Lundberg's pacific surrealism, see Angela Miller, "'With Eyes Wide Open': The American Reception of Surrealism," in *Caught by Politics: Hitler Exiles and American Visual Culture*, ed. Sabine Eckmann and Lutz Koepnick (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 61-94.

⁵³ Although O'Connor mentions that the mural was a collaboration with Kadish, he analyzes the mural as though it was entirely driven and shaped by Guston, despite the fact that Kadish was the one who introduced Guston to Feitelson in the first place – information that was available at the time of the publication of his article.

transcend its historical moment to address the human condition. He argues that a focus on universality is characteristic of the best art of the 1930s, writing that Guston and others would go on to express “positive concern for humanity’s social situation,” which he calls “political humanism.” This line of analysis underlies another remarkable claim about public art of the period – that the bulk of the murals created under the New Deal art programs “were not created to serve overt propagandistic purposes,” because they either dealt with “apolitical regional or historical subject matter” or the universal and timeless. Public murals created under the auspices of the federal government needed to create a sort of eternal and neutral story of human progress embodied in the spirit of the American people – more “overt” political claims or a depiction of social barriers to this imagined positive vision were outside the purview of public muralism in the United States.

Although he was writing in the late 1970s, O’Connor’s notion of a public social art elevated above the ideological conflicts of the 1930s was also favored by bourgeois critics at the outset of the New Deal art programs. Arthur Millier, art critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, made a similar argument while responding to recent controversies about the censorship of politically charged murals throughout the country. In his article, he mentioned a variety of examples both local and national, including a mural by Leo Katz that was rejected by the Los Angeles Board of Education due to its depiction of war caused by greed, as well as the more famous examples of the whitewashing of Siqueiros’ *Tropical America* and the jackhammering of Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads* in Rockefeller Center. Millier saw these controversies as the result of a historical split between individual creative artists and the public. He argued that because most artists have been supported by elite patrons who were not necessarily interested in creative innovation, the most creative artists have been “perpetual revolutionists” who express personal and often

iconoclastic viewpoints. The growth of publicly funded mural painting then led to a new responsibility of artists to a public audience, who might not share their “personal convictions.” The public mural painter must not paint “sermons,” – instead, “his task is to search the inarticulate soul of a people for those universal characteristics which make and sustain its greatness. His job is to give faith-inspiring form to these qualities, whether through historical, contemporary, or symbolic figures.”⁵⁴ A mural that does not inspire faith, then, is a failure on the part of the artist.

This conception of a set of universal values, shared by the public, that federally supported mural artists must somehow capture in visual form, speaks to a fundamental contradiction in the creation of politicized public mural art in this period. Who is the audience for a federally commissioned mural? Do the administrators of the WPA or the Treasury Section of Fine Arts share a set of values with the public? Does a depiction of social conflict undermine the purpose of public mural art? The uncertainty inherent in the relationships between public mural artists, their patrons, and the public audience is exemplified by another mural completed at the sanitarium in Duarte by Myer Shaffer. Shaffer was a fellow member of the Block of Painters, a member of the John Reed Club of Hollywood, and student of Siqueiros. Like Guston and Kadish, he was educated in this overtly politicized artistic environment before receiving commissions from the Federal government. His mural, *The Social Aspects of Tuberculosis*, was initially completed in 1936 alongside Guston and Kadish’s work (figs. 17 and 18). In his mural, Shaffer emphasized the economics of health care that exacerbated the suffering of the poor, suggesting that public health issues were not a simple matter of the ravages of nature, but a result of the callousness of the upper and middle classes. Shaffer developed the composition after spending

⁵⁴ Arthur Millier, “Mural Rows Due to Artists’ Failure to Understand Job: Public Walls Held No Place for Personal Beliefs; Noble Forms which Inspire Faith will not be Destroyed,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 1935.

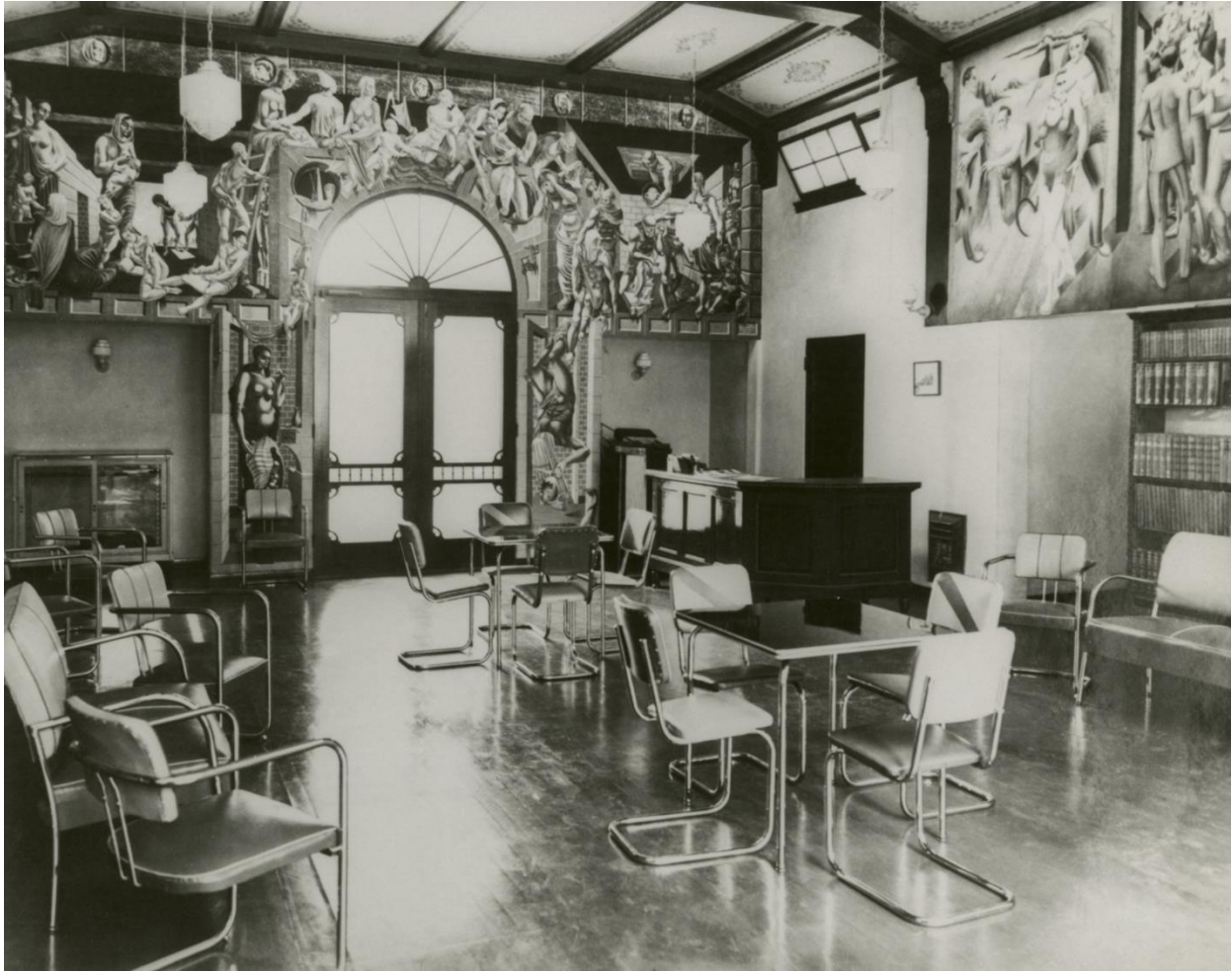


Figure 2.17, Interior of building at the Jewish Tuberculosis Sanitarium, showing Guston and Kadish's mural next to Myer Shaffer's, 1936.

day, October 19, 1936

THE SIGNAL HUNTINGTON PARK, CALIF.

Mural Attracts Widespread Attention Here



"The Social Aspect of Tuberculosis" is the title of this mural recently completed at the Los Angeles Tuberculosis Sanitarium

at Duarte, California, by Myer Shaffer, Southern California muralist of note. The mural is 7 by 18 feet in size.

Young Artist's Work Accorded High Praise

Heralded as one of the most outstanding young painters in Southern California, Myer Shaffer, 23, of 2746 Winter street, Los Angeles, has just completed a mural on the subject "The Social Aspect of Tuberculosis" in the

Figure 2.18, review and reproduction of panels from Myer Shaffer's mural in the *Huntington Park Signal*, October 19, 1936

time with patients in the sanitarium and wanted to call attention to the reality that they faced. The mural was initially well received in the local *Jewish Community Press* – after all, the sanitarium was founded as an attempt to treat all tuberculosis sufferers regardless of their ability to pay for their treatment, and the mural was partially sponsored by the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. A depiction of class structures and their effects on the treatment of the poor was fitting for its setting.⁵⁵ However, Shaffer returned to the sanitarium in 1938 to add additional panels to the mural, and included a depiction of a clenched fist. This was too overt, to use O’Connor’s term, for the administration’s liking, who asked him to paint it out. The entire mural was then whitewashed and removed by the end of the year.⁵⁶

Did the simple inclusion of a clenched fist suddenly “reduce” the mural to the status of propaganda? If Guston and Kadish included a more direct reference to revolutionary politics, would their mural have met the same fate as Shaffer’s? The administrators certainly made their preference clear – Guston and Kadish’s mural survives to this day.⁵⁷ The patients of the sanitarium, suffering the ravages of a terrible disease, were aware that social circumstances contributed to their suffering. Would those patients have been better served by a timeless and positive message? Assessments of the role of mural painting by O’Connor and Millier, and their favoring of the “universal,” suggests a clear distinction between an elevated, aspirational art and a negative, historically contingent art. In the case of Guston and Kadish’s mural in Duarte this

⁵⁵ For more on the treatment of Tuberculosis in Los Angeles and the relationship to race and class in the city, see Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁵⁶ For more on this mural and Shaffer’s relationship with Siqueiros, see Sarah Schrank, “Public Art at the Global Crossroads,” 446-448.

⁵⁷ Although the mural was never censored, the building that the mural was in fell into disrepair and was out of use before both the mural and building were restored in 1998. The building is now a visitor’s center and event space for City of Hope Hospital. For coverage of the restoration and reopening of the mural, see Suzanne Muchnic, “The Shock of the Old,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1998.

means ignoring any reading of the mural as potentially critical of contemporary social circumstances. Although Guston and Kadish depict the possibilities of progress and development, the reality of death still hangs over the image. As the architects of the New Deal were creating social programs to ameliorate economic collapse, a mural that shows attempts at education and development as ultimately subordinate to death could be read as counter to the government's goals. The lack of any explicit socialist content and the allegorical nature of the subject matter certainly allows the image to be read as timeless and universal, unlike the direct reference to class struggle that Shaffer added to his mural. But to see their murals as representative of two distinct tendencies leads to a profound misunderstanding of art of the period, and suggests that the best art of the period is not only apolitical, but anti-ideological – actively opposed to the expression of a particular social viewpoint.

This also requires ignoring Guston and Kadish's political education and their recently completed mural in Morelia. Both murals are complex engagements with the nature of mural painting and the possibility of social statements in public art, the result of young artists synthesizing their aesthetic influences, technical training, and politics in monumental images. In the case of Morelia, Guston and Kadish even used the supposedly universalizing style and forms of their teacher Feitelson to further their explicitly political and historically critical message. To prefer one mural over the other is understandable, but to read the mural in Duarte as a "rebuke" to more overtly political art, it is also necessary to see these two murals as opposed to each other, rather than deeply interrelated. The mural in Morelia and the mural in Duarte, and their respective emphases on the ideological and the "universal," should be seen in continuity, as part of an unfolding historical process of education and development by artists working for different patrons and in different social contexts. To characterize critical artistic statements on history,

class, and social responsibility as merely expressions of personal convictions made by individual artists, rather than a reflection of heightened class struggle in a period of social crisis, is not only counter-productive for our understanding of art in this period, but ultimately reactionary, dismissive of the condition of the working class.⁵⁸

A more comprehensive interpretation of public mural painting at the outset of the federal art programs requires an understanding of the relationship between “overt social content” and the “universal” – these are not two mutually exclusive tendencies, embodied by certain artists, but a central dialectic in the creation of any public art. This relationship is the subject of a rarely discussed late essay by the distinguished social historian of art, Arnold Hauser.⁵⁹ In “Propaganda, Ideology, and Art,” Hauser, like O’Connor, analyzes the notion of “overt propaganda,” through which an artist attempts to agitate by openly and explicitly stating their political goals. However, he does not distinguish this explicitness from the universal. Instead, he contrasts propaganda with a subtler “hidden ideology,” the result of an artist’s social viewpoint being both consciously and unconsciously integrated into the aesthetic structure of the work, which often takes the form of the universal or seemingly apolitical. The artist enters social relations just like any other person, and artmaking is bound up in social and economic life – it cannot be removed from those conditions, and as a result “[art] never just expresses something, but always addresses someone; its very nature is rhetorical.” Both overt propaganda and the seemingly universal, or “unadmitted, veiled propaganda,” as Hauser calls it, are staking a claim

⁵⁸ This myopia also characterizes Robert Storr’s writing on Guston – his exclusive interest in tracking Guston’s development into an accomplished painter obstructs his analysis of Guston’s earlier work, leading to dismissive comments about Guston’s use of overtly political themes. For example, in his discussion of the Morelia mural, he says the figures in the image “all bear down on the viewer as insistently as the comparably histrionic scenarios of Siqueiros or Orozco.” He uses similar language when discussing Siqueiros’ experimental workshop, saying that they produced a “laughable propagandistic float for a CPUSA parade.” See Robert Storr, *Philip Guston: A Life Spent Painting*, 16.

⁵⁹ Arnold Hauser, “Propaganda, Ideology, and Art,” in *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness*, ed. István Mészáros (London: Routledge, 1971), 128-151.

and seeking to persuade their viewer. In the case of public mural art, the source and result of this “unadmitted” politics is even more complex – not only is the artist seeking to communicate with the public, but the state is presenting a particular vision of itself and American society more broadly through the act of commissioning the mural in the first place. Guston and Kadish’s mural can be employed to speak in support of the federal government even if the artists did not intend to make some direct endorsement of American social relations. Shaffer’s mural, on the other hand, ran counter to those goals, and was whitewashed due to its rejection of “apolitical” universality. As Hauser writes, “The artist, whose existence and success depend on the welfare and benevolence of that class, whose prospects and hopes are entirely in its hands, unknowingly and unconsciously becomes its mouthpiece, an instrument of the promotion of its aims and buttress of the system which guarantees its dominance.”⁶⁰ However, this does not mean that the intentions of the artist are irrelevant; instead, the goals of the patron are inextricable from any comprehensive reading of a public mural. In turn, the mural in Duarte cannot simply be reduced to support for the federal government’s efforts. We must understand that these aspects of conscious and unconscious support are another layer of meaning among many. This is made all the more complicated by the private funding from the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union for the mural in Duarte; multiple patrons had competing visions for the mural and its role in class struggle.

Before the creation of the federal art programs, artists like Guston, Kadish, and Shaffer spent the first half of the decade developing class consciousness, brought about by profound historical crisis. At the outset of the art programs, there was a constantly evolving and unstable alliance between radical artists and New Deal liberalism – mutually beneficial, but often

⁶⁰ Hauser, “Propaganda, Ideology, and Art,” 133.

antagonistic. Guston and Kadish's mural in Duarte is not some sea change in their practice, rejecting their earlier radicalism in favor of the aspirational liberalism of the New Deal. It is also not a matter of an art that supports socialist ideological line as simple propaganda as opposed to a non-propaganda backed by more mature and complex universal themes. Guston and Kadish were two of many artists who would act somewhere in the middle within individual paintings, let alone across their entire body of work. This is part of a broader tendency to see commitment to a particular ideology as somehow contrary to the production of "fine art." Christopher Fulton argues that this is common in scholarship on Siqueiros – starting in the 1940s and continuing into the present, many have tried to separate his aesthetic refinement from his Communist politics, characterizing him as "not one but two artists - a modernist Dr. Jekyll and a Marxist Mr. Hyde."⁶¹ In the case of Guston and Kadish, the desire to make a clear choice between either Siqueiros or Feitelson as the more important influence, as seen in both the *Time* article and in O'Connor's essay, is representative of the flaw in this way of thinking. Instead of suggesting that one of these two competing influences won out, it is important to recognize that these seemingly opposed figures, with their respective desires for ideologically-driven class struggle and a universal aesthetic autonomous from history, both underlaid the artistic and political development of these two young artists during the Depression. The potential ideological and formal contradictions between Siqueiros and Feitelson never reach a point of complete synthesis and resolution; instead, the questions that they ask and the forms that they produce are qualitatively different, and exist alongside each other in the work of Guston and Kadish. Ultimately, the creation of a work of public art is beset on all sides by contradiction.

⁶¹ Christopher Fulton, "Siqueiros's Experimental Landscapes," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 75, no. 1 (2012): 93.

The notion of a universal set of values, untainted by ideology, is itself deeply ideological – an example of bourgeois thinking that naturalizes and eternalizes capitalism as an inevitable result of historical progress.⁶² Overt social content, or Communist propaganda, on the other hand, is seen as biased, blinded by its particular viewpoint. In aesthetic terms, this overtness then “reduces” the artwork, rather than elevating it to the level of the universal. Universal or timeless values that are seen as transcending their historical moment then become a sort of objective fact of the human condition, valid for the entirety of society. This underlies the resistance to overt social content and revolutionary politics within art making. In the eyes of the capitalist state, or the bourgeois thinker, the notion of a social viewpoint derived from class position is counter to the universal and shared values of society; values that are often invoked to argue for the maintenance of the status quo. This also underlies the notion of propaganda as dishonest or biased, misleading viewers into a distorted view of the world, tainted by personal ideology. But the universal is not free from ideology. As Hauser argues, “all thought is ideological; but ideological thought is not necessarily erroneous thought, and correct thought is not necessarily free of ideology.”⁶³ In fact, the “overtness” of Communist art is part of its honesty, compared to the “unadmitted, veiled propaganda” of the supposedly universal. For socially committed Communist artists, a frank and open statement of their political beliefs is an attempt to communicate to agitate and mobilize a viewer and advance ideological goals *because* it reflects the truth of the proletariat’s position within society. As György Lukács wrote, “‘Ideology’ for the

⁶² This tendency to “naturalize” social relations is the basis of the concept of reification, whereby material social relations between people are seen as the result of relations between things and external forces, giving agency to objects or ideas rather than human subjects. This is most famously found in Karl Marx’s *Capital* and the example of commodity fetishism, then expanded on by György Lukács in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness*. For more on the naturalization of capitalism as an inevitable or natural form of human society, rather than a historically specific form of human social relations, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View* (New York: Verso Books, 1999).

⁶³ Hauser, “Propaganda, Ideology, and Art,” 137.

proletariat is no banner to follow into battle, nor is it a cover for its true objectives: it is the objective and the weapon itself.”⁶⁴ The goal is to remake society through social revolution, and a statement to that end in the form of an artwork is then a reflection of and contribution to that goal.

To see public art, sponsored by the federal government, as autonomous from class struggle, is illustrative of the one of the functions of these programs in the first place. These publicly funded murals could only exist due to the specific historical circumstances of widespread crisis that prompted the creation of the federal art programs. By filling public buildings with images of historical achievement or “universal” themes of the human condition, the art programs were using public art to characterize the crises of poverty, racism, and exploitation as an historical aberration – an interruption in an otherwise positive vision of harmonious social development. The American government, as the steward of American industrial capitalism, is then the guardian of this development, using New Deal programs to make corrections and repairs to the normally functioning machinery of modern life. The daily problems of the working class during the Depression are in turn seen as an unfortunate accident, rather than the result of fundamental structural exploitation required for the functioning of capitalism.

Guston and Kadish’s mural in Duarte was not a “rebuke” to historically grounded class struggle, transcending the propagandistic fervor of the mural in Morelia in favor of anti-ideological universality. The vision of progress and development that it presents is complicated and challenging, and yet, their efforts were read in contrast to artwork that presented an overt ideological viewpoint. The two murals in Morelia and Duarte exist in relation to each other, and

⁶⁴ György Lukács, “Class Consciousness,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 70.

both reflect the individual interests and efforts of Guston and Kadish as artists, the ideological assumptions of their patrons, and the historical conditions of their creation. Both murals have multiple layers of political meaning among many others, but due to their different administrative contexts, themes, and formal qualities they can be read and instrumentalized in very different ways. This instrumentalization and appropriation does not empty out all political intention on the part of Guston and Kadish, but the mural in Duarte does speak to the complications facing any left-wing artist making public art in this period.

Chapter 3

New York

The founding of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in May 1935 and its Federal Art Project (FAP) in August 1935 immediately transformed the structures of patronage and artistic production in the United States. Although preceding programs such as the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) created new opportunities for American artists through public commissions and federally sponsored art shows, the FAP was the largest scale attempt to address the crisis of unemployment and poverty through a relief-based program for artists. Audrey McMahan, the director of the FAP's New York region, summarized the wide-ranging goals of project in an article written for the arts journal *Parnassus*:

“The Federal Art Project is a relief project primarily. It is concerned chiefly with giving employment to approximately five thousand artists who are in need. Its secondary objective, however, follows closely upon the heels of the primary one – it has for its field the decoration of Federal, State, County, and Municipal buildings, public parks and other public places susceptible to decoration, by murals, sculptures, easel paintings, or the graphic-arts, the teaching of art to underprivileged groups, the recording of certain WPA programs through the use of competent photographers, the creation and execution of posters for public departments, the teaching and execution of applied arts and arts and crafts, the re-employment of modelers, wood carvers and scenic artists, and the making of frames, models, stage designs and sets.”¹

Although McMahan listed the myriad activities to be funded under the auspices of the FAP, it is important that she foregrounded the goal of providing relief. Before the creation of any particular works of art, the FAP was designed to employ those in need. If an artist successfully applied for relief, which required a long and arduous process of submitting completed work and evidence of

¹ Audrey McMahan, “The Trend of the Government in Art,” *Parnassus* 8, no. 1 (1936): 3–6.

past professional artistic production, they could receive a maximum salary of \$94 a month. From the outset of the project this figure was seen as a pay cut, as artists on the PWAP were receiving \$24 per week for 30-39 hours of work per week – a figure that was itself a reduction from the initial wage offered by the PWAP of \$42 per week.² So, while the FAP promised to employ a much greater number of artists, each individual artist would be receiving a smaller salary than under the previous projects. This salary would then usually involve working on one of the many projects described by McMahon. The largest employer for fine artists was the easel division, where artists were expected to make paintings to fill a quota – usually one canvas every 4 to 6 weeks.³ If an artist did receive a mural commission, which involved submitting cartoons and making small alterations until the designs were accepted and the project went forward, they would be paid a lump sum for the commission and receive an increased salary.

Despite the fact that the FAP was a nationwide program, nearly half of the budget was dedicated to the New York region, especially concentrated in the city.⁴ The primary goal of providing relief to unemployed artists only added to the already high concentration of artists in the city; there was simply more money to go around in New York, and many artists moved there looking for opportunities. The distribution of funds was made all the more complicated by a rule that 90% of artists employed by the project had to be employed on a relief-basis. This was a measure meant to prevent artists who were already receiving a private income from taking FAP jobs. Despite the ostensible goal of helping those most in need, in effect this rule created a situation where artists who had found some meager and inconsistent employment, usually

² For a report from the period on FAP wages, a comparison to PWAP wages, and the struggle for higher pay, see “\$19-\$94 or Fight,” *Art Front*, July 1935, 3.

³ For more on the Easel division, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 178-182.

⁴ For more on the FAP’s budget and its concentration in New York, see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 79.

unrelated to their artistic production, would be barred from relief rolls, even if they were still struggling to make ends meet. This double bind became known among artists as the “pauper’s oath” – to receive relief funds, one had to prove their fully unemployed status and take the FAP’s wages, which were designed to be lower than what could be received from private employers.⁵

For two young artists like Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, the creation of the FAP and other federal art programs, like the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture, opened up many possibilities, but the process of finding employment on the project was often stressful, discouraging, and uncertain. Over the course of 1936-1938, Guston lived and worked among a network of artists dealing with the same problems, participating in a community that spanned the country, connected by a shared employer and a sense of collective interest, made official through organizations such as the Artists’ Union and the American Artists’ Congress. American artists during this period were not disconnected individuals, working separately in their studios and producing isolated acts of personal expression. Instead, the FAP created a system in which being a painter became something of a “normal” job, with a salary, a production quota, deadlines, and bosses who expected certain results. This chapter will focus on Guston’s day-to-day life as an artist on the project – applying for relief, constantly worrying about budget cuts, participating in organized efforts by artists to improve their working conditions, starting projects without knowing if they would ever come to fruition, submitting designs for mural contests, dealing with administrative oversight, and more. Guston experienced both the poverty of unemployment and the benefits of relief in the artistic center of the country, and his life during this period calls for a

⁵ *Art Front*, the official publication of the Artists’ Union, published a series of articles on WPA wages in the late Spring/Summer of 1935, at the outset of the New Deal Art programs. The fight for higher wages and the problems of the pauper’s oath are of central concern throughout the entire publication history.

detailed analysis of the political and economic structures that allowed artists to maintain a living in the midst of the Depression.

There are two key reasons why this sort of granular analysis of Guston's life in these years is important. The first is a simple correction of the record. Dore Ashton's *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* is still the primary resource for Guston's biography, and many scholars cite it without verifying its contents. This has led to a misunderstanding and oversimplification of Guston's life and work in this period. Ashton summarizes Guston's struggle with unemployment in a single sentence: "The first step was to get on the mural project, which did not prove difficult for Guston."⁶ When looking at the written record from this period, it is clear that this is a misunderstanding that has had a compounding effect on scholarship on Guston, which tends to underemphasize his participation in organized political action and especially his level of commitment to the labor movement, his ongoing friendships with schoolmates from Los Angeles, and his close working relationship with David Alfaro Siqueiros. Guston himself is likely responsible for this distortion of the record – Ashton sent Guston early drafts of the book and he provided notes and corrections, many of which contradict the contents of his correspondence and newspaper records from the period.⁷

⁶ Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 34. The discrepancies in Guston's biography have only been partially addressed in the recent catalog of *Philip Guston Now*, which includes a timeline with more detailed information than Ashton's book contains but does not analyze the implications of this information for our understanding of Guston's early career. It also does not include any analysis of Guston's early work.

⁷ For example, in an early draft, Ashton focused on Guston's relationships with school friends such as Kadish, Lehman, and Sandy McCoy and his ongoing engagement with Mexican muralism after moving to New York. In a correction, Guston claims that he had mainly moved on from these relationships and was forming new friendships with artists in New York, and that he was no longer interested in Mexican painting. However, the written record shows that he continued to correspond with Kadish frequently, collaborated with Lehman and McCoy and reported on their work to Kadish, and spent far more time talking and working with Siqueiros than he admitted. See Guston's corrections to Ashton's typescript, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 38, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

The second reason is more general – by looking at an individual painter’s experience with the ins-and-outs of employment by federal art programs, we can get a better sense of how an artist’s relationships with their audience, patrons, other artists, and their own work were transformed. They worked for a wage and had a common employer, which freed them from the constraints of needing to sell work on the free market. This system created the conditions for artists to think of themselves as part of a collective of cultural workers, rather than isolated and individualized artists in their studios. More than ever before, there was a direct and prescribed path for becoming a *professional* artist, which allowed artists to form trade unions and advocacy organizations, meet and work in close proximity to each other, and experiment without the pressure to sell.⁸ This new professionalization also transformed the relationship between artists and the broader labor movement of the 1930s. This unique moment in American art history had profound ramifications for a generation of artists.

In the summer of 1936, Guston and Kadish were at a crossroads. After completing their mural in Duarte, they struggled to find more consistent work. The art world of Los Angeles was relatively small, and although the creation of the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture and the WPA did bring some opportunities, it was not enough to change the city’s peripheral status. The pair had a decision to make – should they continue to work in LA, where they had fewer competitors for commissions but also fewer opportunities, or should they try their luck in a new city? Some of their friends had already made this decision. Jackson Pollock and Manuel Tolegian had moved to New York at the beginning of the decade. Harold Lehman, who spent his

⁸ Harold Rosenberg later argued that the primary effect of the government art programs was not the democratizing of the arts, but instead the establishment of the category of “professional artist” – a category which just as quickly evaporated after the end of the projects. See Harold Rosenberg, “The Profession of Art: The W.P.A. Art Project,” in *Art on the Edge* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1971), 195-205.

childhood in New York and had only moved to Los Angeles with his family in 1930, returned to New York in 1935. Sande McCoy had also left Los Angeles to live with his brother Jackson in an apartment on Houston Street in Lower Manhattan.⁹ Just before Guston and Kadish began their work on the Duarte mural, McCoy wrote to Kadish and encouraged the pair to join the Pollocks in New York, saying that it would be easier to find more work.¹⁰

Despite the recent exodus of their friends and the concentration of WPA activities in New York, Guston and Kadish did not immediately commit to moving east after finishing the Duarte mural. While Guston looked for more federally funded commissions in Los Angeles, Kadish went to San Francisco, where there were more open mural competitions.¹¹ After years of close collaborations, the two friends finally had to set off on their own. Although he was not officially on the project yet, Kadish quickly left for northern California – so quickly, in fact, that Guston was not able to say goodbye. In a letter from the late summer of 1936, Guston wrote to Kadish that he misheard when he would be leaving, and regretted not being able to send him off. He then updated his friend about developments in Los Angeles, including the fact that he had received “something definite for the project,” writing that he would be doing a series of six full-length figure paintings on Masonite panels to be hung in the library of “some high school.” In fact, the specific high school was unknown – Guston wrote that Stanton MacDonald-Wright, who was

⁹ Sande Pollock started going by “McCoy” as a result of WPA regulations, which stated that two people with the same last name living in the same house, as he and Jackson were, could not both receive WPA checks. McCoy was their father LeRoy’s birth last name – LeRoy McCoy’s name was changed to Roy Pollock after he was adopted at a young age by his neighbors, who took him in after his parents died. Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, 1st ed (Aiken, S.C: Woodard/White, 1989), 274. Sande also mentions this briefly in a letter to Kadish: “I have changed my name so as not to be known as Jack’s brother – political reasons.” Sande McCoy to Reuben Kadish, July 7th, 1935, Series 2: Letters, Box 2, Folder 45, Reuben Kadish papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. Guston and Kadish would usually spell their friend’s name “Sandy,” while the Pollock family themselves would spell it “Sande.”

¹⁰ Sande McCoy to Reuben Kadish, July 7th, 1935, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art.

¹¹ Kadish explains his reasoning for moving to SF in interviews. See Reuben Kadish, Oral History Interview, October 22, 1964, interviewed by Harlan P. Phillips, Archives of American Art and Reuben Kadish, Oral History Interview, April 15, 1992, interviewed by Stephen Polcari, Archives of American Art.

working as an administrator for the California branch of the WPA, had to wait for the schools to open up for the Fall semester before determining where the panels could be hung. Three would be on great figures of philosophy, and three on great figures of science. He told Kadish that he already completed a cartoon for the first figure in the series, Socrates. Remarkably, he then said the series was his idea, writing that “it was my suggestion to [Stanton MacDonald] Wright, since I didn’t want a wall at the time, and I was very uncomfortable just doing an easel painting – not knowing if it was going to be hung any place or not.”¹²

Guston’s account of the administrative process behind his proposed series reveals the often-convoluted nature of work under the auspices of the New Deal art programs. Most artists were applying on the basis of relief, to receive a weekly salary, and then they would wait to receive specific commissions. But because of the relatively small artistic circles in any given city, many artists would have pre-existing relationships with WPA administrators. These administrators – in charge of a bureaucratized system with a tight budget, constantly under scrutiny from conservative politicians who saw the government art programs as wasteful boondoggles – had to balance their relationships with the needs of the administration itself. In this case, it seems that the older MacDonald-Wright wanted to give Guston work, but was making promises he could not keep – the project never went forward. Still, the possibilities inherent in government patronage were exciting to these young painters with grand ambitions. Guston mentioned to Kadish that he and Fletcher Martin had recently met with Joseph Danysh, another California WPA administrator. After this meeting, Guston fantasized to Kadish about the

¹² Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, undated letter, Series 2: Letters, Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. There is an envelope from Guston to Kadish in this same folder post-dated August 13th, 1936 from Santa Monica. Based on the content of the letter, and the fact that the other letters from Guston to Kadish from Los Angeles have dates, it is safe to assume that this letter was sent on August 13th, 1936.

possibility of painting on the walls of the towers of the Bay Bridge in San Francisco, which was still under construction at the time but set to open to traffic in the Fall.¹³ At the beginning of the New Deal art programs, such a massive project seemed tangibly within reach.

While Guston and MacDonald-Wright were looking to cooperate on a new project, Guston and Kadish's pre-existing relationship with their teacher and eventual WPA administrator, Lorser Feitelson, was becoming increasingly strained. Despite their stylistic and technical debts to Feitelson as a teacher, Guston and his colleagues grew tired of Feitelson's public declarations of his reactionary politics, both in print and later in his weekly radio program.¹⁴ With a simultaneous sense of amusement and frustration, Guston reported on Feitelson's recent actions to Kadish:

“Feitelson [sp] is creating a big stink around town and making an ass of himself. He gave an interview to the L.A. Herald, saying in effect ‘that the Artists’ Congress is a Communist organization and that he is organizing a new group to fight the spread of Marxism and propaganda in art as a criterion, that is undermining the Social Structure, and that he in his new group will present the real problems of the American Artist!’ You know the Hearst Papers eat that up!”¹⁵

The Hearst corporation routinely targeted both left-leaning artists and the New Deal art programs, characterizing the former as subversive and the latter as wasteful. The growth of artist organizations only intensified these attacks, and the American Artists' Congress became a regular subject of criticism after its founding.

¹³ Guston to Kadish, likely August 13th, 1936, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

¹⁴ Kadish mentioned this radio program to Musa Mayer when recounting this period, saying “Feitelson anticipated McCarthy by years.” In Musa Mayer, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 16.

¹⁵ The LA Herald-Express was owned by the Hearst Corporation

The American Artist's Congress was founded in February of 1936 as an effort to organize artists against the growing threat of European fascism and war.¹⁶ The Congress grew out of discussions at the New York John Reed Club, where it was decided that there was a need for an organization that could avoid the sectarianism of the John Reed Club and rally artists to be part of the Popular Front. In light of the rising power of fascist parties in Italy and Germany, where Hitler swiftly moved to crush the power of the German Communist Party after his election in 1933, the Communist International advocated for their various national parties to form broad coalitions, including socialists outside of the Comintern and liberal non-socialists, that could rally together to fight fascism. Although the Popular Front grew out of this directive from the Comintern, the Party itself was only one organization among many in the Popular Front, which was primarily made up of alliances between trade unions, ethnic fraternal organizations, and women's organizations.¹⁷ The John Reed Club, with its commitment to specific revolutionary goals and overt Communist messaging, was proving to be too divisive for the new Popular Front strategy. A group of John Reed Club artists, led by Stuart Davis, drafted a plan for a new organization that could more readily participate in Popular Front actions. All John Reed Club chapters were folded into the Congress after its founding.¹⁸

Feitelson's act of red-baiting was a curious one. Unlike many other reactionary artists, alarmed by the influence of Communism in the art world, he was not repeating the canard that modernist art itself was Communist – his concerns were not formal. As seen in previous

¹⁶ See Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 123-130, for a more detailed account of the founding of the Congress and its relationship to the John Reed Club.

¹⁷ Michael Denning writes that non-party members greatly outnumbered those in the party within the Popular Front, and that this reflected the simultaneous influence and marginality of the CPUSA in the creation of a working-class culture. For more on the make-up of the Popular Front and the notion of the Fellow Traveler, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Verso, 1997), 3-49.

¹⁸ For detailed minutes of the first meeting of the American Artists' Congress, see Matthew Baigell and Julie Williams, *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

chapters, he was open to modernism and abstraction, both as an artist and a teacher. Instead, he focused on the organized actions of socialist artists. Indeed, his condemnation of the Congress as Communist was undoubtedly more accurate than those who decried the subversive nature of abstraction, yet he directed his ire at an organization founded specifically to avoid sectarianism and work in tandem with non-Communists. By reacting so vehemently against the organization, he was, perhaps unwittingly, putting himself in league with the Congress' stated enemies. Guston recognized the battle lines being drawn, and finished his report to Kadish by writing that "He is playing into dangerous hands. A number of admitted Fascists and German-Nazi sympathizers are rallying around him."¹⁹

The Congress consistently struggled with this sort of public perception. Despite the change in strategy, the fact that the Congress emerged from the more radical John Reed Club was public knowledge, and they used the existing infrastructure of the club to advertise and put on Congress activities. Many well-known members were still openly and publicly Communist, and art world figures who advocated for the separation of political and artistic activity remained suspicious of the potentially subversive and overtly propagandistic work of the Congress. Arthur Millier recognized this issue when reviewing early Congress activity. In the April 5th, 1936 edition of his regular "Brush Strokes" column for the *Los Angeles Times*, Millier mentioned that the Congress boasts an impressive roster with many accomplished artists, but feels that the prestigious members simply provide cover for the Communist politics of the organization, writing that "when we know that Stuart Davis, Hugo Gellert, Louis Lozowick, committed to the Red program, occupy key positions in the executive committee... we scarcely need the published

¹⁹ An analysis of the American Fascist movement is outside the scope of this paper. For more see Michael Joseph Roberto, *The Coming of the American Behemoth: The Genesis of Fascism in the United States, 1920-1940* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018).

aims of the congress – to fight war and fascism, and to support the demand of the negro people for political, social and economical equality – to know where the movement is heading.”²⁰ The Congress may have been an attempt to pivot organized artists toward the broader Popular Front strategy, but outsiders were well aware of the political loyalties of many Congress members. Many of these artists were also founders or high-ranking members of the Artists’ Union, which functioned as a trade union to advance the interests of artists in America. The Congress and the Union worked closely together, and both grew rapidly in 1936.²¹

Despite his suspicion towards the Congress, Millier would still review their shows positively. However, his praise was usually reserved for work that avoided overt political messages. In a review of the first Congress show in Los Angeles, Millier writes “aside from one small woodcut urging Workers to Arise, and another showing brutal cops sneering at free speech, the first show of paintings, sculptures, and prints by local members of the American Artists Congress, at the Stanley Rose Galleries, wears no political color and includes many good things by good artists. In fact there is a high proportion of pieces suggesting that very “individualistic ‘ivory tower’ idea” which the preamble of the Congress insists is no longer tenable.”²² Clearly, for Millier, political agitation and ambiguous, individually driven artistic expression were diametrically opposed. He was impressed by the quality of work in the show, but only insofar as it avoided explicit political statements – in fact, he sees the presence of contemporary social issues as *undermining* the quality of the artwork. At the same time, he sees more ambiguous and

²⁰ Arthur Millier, “Brush Strokes,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1936. In other articles, Millier described artists such as Gellert and William Gropper as “radical propagandists firsts and artists second,” even though he would also praise their technical skills. He especially heaped praise on Gropper, calling him the “best left-wing political painter in America,” in a positive review of the first show of Gropper’s work in Los Angeles, September 4, 1938, *Los Angeles Times*.

²¹ For more on the founding of the union, see Gerald M. Monroe, “Artists As Militant Trade Union Workers during the Great Depression,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1974): 7–10.

²² Arthur Millier, “Local Chapter of Artists Congress in First Show,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1936

abstract art as aesthetically superior, yet potentially alienating to the “broader audience” that the club was seeking to cultivate.²³ For established art-world figures such as Millier or Feitelson, the Congress was a contradiction.²⁴ If Congress members attempted to tone down their Communist politics, it was seen as a cover for their true intentions. If they avoided overt politics altogether in favor of bourgeois standards of aesthetic refinement, they were betraying their mission statement by alienating the masses.

Guston, who displayed work at this first Congress show in Los Angeles, also felt the pull of competing influences, political goals, and personal aspirations.²⁵ By September, he had made up his mind to move to New York. Before he was set to head east, he wrote to Kadish once more. At this point, the Great Philosophers project with MacDonald-Wright had seemingly fallen through – he did not even mention it to Kadish. Instead, he informed his friend of his decision to move, and asked for updates on Kadish’s work. At this point, Kadish had some work opportunities in San Francisco but was still not officially on the project. According to their correspondence, Kadish was doing some work for the CPUSA in San Francisco, painting a mural for some sort of political center. However, this endeavor was proving difficult, as Kadish’s vision as an individual artist was at odds with the demands of the party. Presumably, Kadish had reported these difficulties to his friend, and Guston responded:

“Really sorry to hear about the wall at the center and the attitude of the C.P. officials. I don’t know what the answer is – I suppose they must be educated up to fine artistic standards. But if you have proven your integrity as a Rev. artist doing these odd jobs for

²³ Millier, “Local Chapter of Artists Congress in First Show,” September 20, 1936

²⁴ In another *Brush Strokes* column, Millier mentions Feitelson’s actions and statements against the Congress and Communist artists, saying that Feitelson had called a meeting at the Stendahl Gallery “to establish an American Art Action against the use of Marxism and other propaganda as art criteria.” Arthur Millier, “Brush Strokes,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1936. This article was published within the same week as Guston’s report to Kadish on Feitelson’s increasingly reactionary rhetoric.

²⁵ Guston’s name is listed in Millier’s review of the show from September 20, 1936.

them, why don't they leave the mural up to you? Anyway I hope it works out O.K. to your satisfaction."²⁶

It seems this potential mural for the CPUSA was never painted – there is no record of it today, unlike Guston, Kadish, and McCoy's mural at the Workers' Alliance Center in Los Angeles. However, more important than any specific artistic product is the conflict between the “revolutionary artist” and the party. Guston and Kadish had spent the last few years working in explicitly political environments, operating in the social world of left-wing artists through participation in the JRC, and felt that their work proved their revolutionary bonafides. Kadish wanted to work for the party, but was unwilling to give up his individual artistic control over a potential project. This would prove to be a recurring problem for Guston and his friends, who objected to any potential dictation from party officials in later attempts to make work for the party.

While Kadish was working through these problems in San Francisco, Guston was finally ready to move east. After saving up enough money and shipping his belongings ahead of him in a trunk, he arrived in New York in October of 1936. He moved in with the Pollock brothers, living in what Sande McCoy described as a “dinky room at the end of the hall.”²⁷ Although he moved to the center of American artistic activity, it was difficult for him to find work. While the bulk of the WPA's funding was focused in New York, this also meant that he had more competition for commissions and a larger number of other artists already on the relief rolls. Applying for relief was no easy; he had to prove his artistic competency, sending in drawings

²⁶ Letter from Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, September 1936, Series 2: Letters, Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

²⁷ Sande McCoy to his mother Stella Pollock, November 7th, 1936, in Sylvia Winter Pollock, ed., *American Letters, 1927-1947: Jackson Pollock & Family* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2011), 104. Sande also described their attempts to comply with WPA regulations and his frustrations with the invasive process of applying for relief.

and paintings in color, showing press clippings mentioning his work in galleries, and submit recommendation letters from art world figures, while also demonstrating that he needed the relief salary in the first place by proving that he was not receiving a private income. Even after submitting all of this information, it was far from guaranteed that he would be accepted. For many artists in need, this process felt like an interrogation, in which administrators were constantly looking to poke holes in their stories and catch them in a lie in order to prevent them from receiving relief. This process became the subject of widespread criticism and ridicule, and a primary target of organized struggle by the Artists' Union. Ben Yomen parodied the process in a cartoon published in the December 22nd, 1936 issue of *New Masses* (fig. 3.1). The drawing shows a confused artist, surrounded by angry administrators. The rotund authority figures badger the artist, lobbing accusations of deception, and answering questions for him in order to deny him relief: "Do you need the job? Answer No! Have you any dependents? Answer No!" Guston described this lengthy and discouraging ordeal as "the blood-sweating process of getting on relief."²⁸ It did not come fast for him – it would take several months for him to make it on the project.

In the meantime, he continued his relationship with David Alfaro Siqueiros, who had recently set up his Taller Experimental (Experimental Workshop) at 5 East 14th Street.²⁹ Siqueiros came to New York in February of 1936 in order to participate in the first meeting of

²⁸ Letter Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, undated (likely August 1937), Series 2: Letters, Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

²⁹ For a longer account of the workshop and its activities, see Laurance P. Hurlburt, "The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: New York, 1936," *Art Journal* 35, no. 3 (1976): 237–46.



Ben Yomen

THE THIRD DEGREE

"Do you need the job? Answer No!"
"Have you any dependents? Answer No!"
"You carry insurance! Say Yes!"
"Your wife is working. Don't lie!"

Figure 3.1, Ben Yomen, *The Third Degree*, published in *New Masses*, December 22, 1936

the American Artists' Congress as part of an official delegation from Mexico, which also included his wife Angelica Arenal de Siqueiros, his brother-in-law Luis Arenal, Rufino and Olga Tamayo, Roberto Berdecio, and Jose Clemente Orozco. In April 1936, he set up a workshop as a space where artists could experiment with new materials and techniques while primarily producing work for the CPUSA.³⁰ Siqueiros funded the shop by selling easel paintings to private patrons, including George Gershwin, who became a friend of Siqueiros and supported the workshop in what would end up being the last year of his life.³¹ These easel paintings became the most celebrated and lasting legacy of the workshop. One of Siqueiros' most famous paintings, *Collective Suicide*, now given a place of privilege at the Museum of Modern Art, was a product of the shop (fig. 3.2). The creation of the painting involved members of the shop pouring and mixing industrial paint directly on the canvas, cutting and applying oddly-shaped wood panels, using spray guns, stencils, and more. The resulting image depicts masses of indigenous people committing suicide to avoid enslavement by the Spanish, leaping from cliffs into the pools of paint. In the midst of the rising threat of fascism, Siqueiros felt that this act was a powerful rejection of violent oppression, and was another example of Siqueiros drawing connections between the history of Spanish Imperialism and contemporary political struggle.³² Although the painting now bears only Siqueiros' name, it was the result of a collaborative, experimental effort among the members of the workshop.

³⁰ Harold Lehman wrote an article published in the October 1937 issue *Art Front* detailing the activities of the workshop in 1936. He called for the establishment of a permanent Artists' Union workshop, modeled on the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop and using some of the Workshop's equipment. After Siqueiros left for Spain, workshop members still used the space and equipment, but were looking for another chance to tie the work of the shop to a particular organization. See Harold Lehman, "For an Artists' Union Workshop," *Art Front*, October 1937, 20-22. The article ends with an editorial note, which says that the topic of an Artists' Union workshop would be discussed at the next Union meeting.

³¹ Hurlburt, "The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop," 246, note 13.

³² For a more detailed analysis of the painting and other workshop images, see Christopher Fulton, "Siqueiros's Experimental Landscapes," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 75, no. 1 (2012): 93-130.



Figure 3.2, David Alfaro Siqueiros and the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop, *Collective Suicide*, 1936

The team at the workshop was made up of Guston's friends from Los Angeles that were part of the Block of Mural Painters, including Harold Lehman, Sande McCoy, Jackson Pollock, and Luis Arenal, alongside other young artists from New York and Mexico.³³ In fact, the lease for the workshop space was in Lehman's name, as Siqueiros could not legally rent property in the U.S.³⁴ Before Guston arrived in New York, his friends had spent the summer with Siqueiros making floats, posters, and stage designs for various CPUSA events while experimenting with industrial paint, spray guns, sand blasters, and more.³⁵ He joined a busy workshop in full swing, and immediately tried to catch up with his colleagues. His first undertaking was working on stage designs in ducco paint for the CPUSA national election rally on November 2nd, 1936 at Madison Square Garden alongside Siqueiros, Lehman, McCoy, and Arenal. Guston enjoyed the textural qualities of ducco but felt it was too capricious to use for executing a pre-determined form. Siqueiros, on the other hand, was fascinated by the element of chance, which he felt gave that and other difficult materials an "archaic and mystic" quality. Guston told Kadish that he attempted to get Siqueiros to elaborate on this idea, but found his explanations lacking. Still, he was happy to have the chance to experiment with the material, which he described as "very interesting and unlike any other."³⁶

³³ Hurlburt lists the names of workshop members, but does not include Guston. Again, this is likely due to the fact that Guston arrived so late in the Workshop's existence.

³⁴ Harold Lehman, Oral History Interview, March 28th, 1997, interviewed by Stephen Polcari, Archives of American Art.

³⁵ Although most of the public work was for the CP, many workshop members were not party members. Hurlburt argues that this is a reflection of the Popular Front strategy, wherein fellow travelers were encouraged to participate, but this supportive relationship of non-affiliated artists toward the party stretched back to the JRC days. Sande McCoy described this work in a letter to his mother from June of 1936 - he expressed his joy in participating the workshop and attending a CPUSA convention on June 28, 1936: "There is no possible way for me to describe the impressiveness, inspiring beauty, discipline and solid unity of the convention. It was, by far, the most tremendous moment of my life." He also mentions that the League Against War and Fascism had an anti-Hearst campaign that the workshop was contributing to by building a parade float. Generally, it seems that McCoy was far more enthusiastic about the party than Guston ever was. See Sande McCoy to Stella Pollock, June 29, 1936, in *American Letters: Jackson Pollock and Family*, ed. Sylvia Winter Pollock (Malden: Polity Press, 2011), 87.

³⁶ Letter from Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, December 2nd, 1936, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

Guston's participation in the Experimental Workshop has been entirely overlooked in scholarship.³⁷ This could potentially be explained by the fact that Guston arrived late in the workshop's short lifespan, after the most famous work of the shop was already completed. However, he was a first-hand witness to Siqueiros leaving the workshop, and he described the growing tension between Siqueiros' desire for artistic freedom and the bureaucratic control of the Party in a letter to Kadish:

“About Siqueiros and the C.P., it is a whole involved affair that merits a book. But very briefly, the disbanding of the shop and the controversy with the C.P. was purely on artistic grounds. The taste and art values of the party officials here, is very conservative and not unlike those of the Republican party or etc. And they were not very reticent about dictating to the shop. For instance, they wanted on several occasions, that a negro worker is painted, they want him to be handsome and good looking etc – and smiling! I mean things like that, is more than any painter can stand. The climax to the whole affair took place last Nov. in Madison Sq. Garden at the C.P. election rally. David and a few of us, designed the whole stage platform, consisting of large figures, cutout on heavy cardboard. Well, it was a crappy thing, a hurry up job, but that's not the point. The idea was, that these figures were so painted as to be placed in certain positions, in such a relation to each other and the stage, as to form a unity of design. But no, some little dictators from the party insisted they wanted them another way, for no damn good reason! So they had their way, and discouraged the whole original idea, and made a chaotic mess of the platform. They treated David like a sign painter, not giving him any

³⁷ Guston's time at the workshop is not mentioned by Ashton at all – it is also not mentioned by Hurlburt or in the recent timeline in *Philip Guston Now*.

credit for a creative intelligence. He tells me, that this affair was only one of many like it.

You really can't blame him for chucking the whole thing."³⁸

This fascinating passage reveals the complications of harmonizing artistic and political goals. When making work for the party, many artists bristled at the idea of accepting the dictations of party leaders. As non-experts, party functionaries lacked the years of artistic education and development that artists like Siqueiros, Guston, Kadish, and Lehman had. Without "fine artistic standards," their ideas were seen as not just insufficient, but fundamentally conservative, unwilling to take the aesthetic risks that interested artists. Guston invoked a dichotomy between being a "sign painter," who executes the vision of the patron with little to no alteration, and an artist with a "creative intelligence," who is dedicated to expressing their intellectual subjectivity. While it is reasonable for an artist to want some amount of creative freedom, it becomes far more complicated when creating work for a party that is dedicated to the abolition of a class-based society. While Guston was defending his friend and mentor, he simultaneously denigrated the work of a sign painter, creating a clear distinction between the "higher" intellectual pursuit of artmaking and the manual labor of a sign painter. In providing a service, the sign painter is executing someone else's creative vision. The artist wants full intellectual control of the product of their labor, or in other words, rejects any potential alienation from the product of their labor. This distinction may seem obvious, but has profound implications for the economic and social interests of artists and their relationship with the labor movement.

³⁸ Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, undated letter, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. Underlines are Guston's. Although it is undated, the contents of the letter suggest that it was written after the December 2nd, 1936 letter, but before Musa McKim moved to New York at the beginning of February 1937.

Although Guston supported Siqueiros' artistic integrity and his decision to leave for Spain, he was then left without any source of income.³⁹ The winter of 1936 was a charged and emotional time for artists in the city. Although the Federal Art Project had only been operating for less than a year, there were already whispers of widespread budget cuts and layoffs. Daunting rumors of firings were also going around in the Public Works of Art administration and the Treasury Section. Near the end of the year, these rumors became reality when the WPA announced a series of budget cuts. In a letter to his mother, Sande McCoy described these threats as "the administration's attempt to dump WPA workers in the river."⁴⁰ Guston, who was searching for employment with any of these organizations, took part in organized actions to fight these cutbacks. On December 1st, 1936, the Artists Union organized a protest to prevent massive layoffs; artists occupied FAP administration offices, which led to administrators calling the police. A violent police crackdown ensued, during which 219 artists were arrested (fig. 3.3). Many were hospitalized with concussions and other injuries. Among those beaten were the painter Philip Evergood and Artists' Union spokesman Paul Block. The police also knocked 60-year-old printmaker and muralist Helen West Heller unconscious with batons.⁴¹ The tension between artists and the administration was growing rapidly, and it was clear that this antagonism was going to continue for the foreseeable future. Guston reported the events to Kadish the day after the protest, describing the "bloody riot" caused by "a Mrs. McMahon" calling the cops on artists: "The daily struggle in N.Y. is very intense, and the next few weeks are going to be decisive ones."⁴²

³⁹ Members of the workshop did continue to use the space/equipment, but without Siqueiros, the activities of the shop slowed down significantly, and it seems that Guston's participation in the shop ended with Siqueiros leaving.

⁴⁰ Sande McCoy to his mother Stella Pollock, November 7th, 1936, Pollock, *American Letters, 1927-1947*, 104.

⁴¹ For an account of the protest and its aftermath see Morris Neuwirth, "219" in *Art Front*, January 1937, 4-5.

⁴² Guston to Kadish, December 2nd, 1936, Reuben Kadish papers, AAA.

ART FRONT

10c.
JANUARY, 1937



"WE HAVE JUST BEGUN TO FIGHT"

19 ARAGON • IRWIN EDMAN • VON WIEGAND • LYND WARD • GORELICK • LA MORE
Art by WEBER • EVERGOOD • MORLEY • ROSENBORG • LA MORE • KLEE • ERNST

Figure 3.3, Front cover of *Art Front*, January 1937.

Guston's prediction proved to be accurate. The administration's show of force quickly backfired; many project supervisors sided with the artists, and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia personally traveled to Washington D.C. to ask Congress to stop any cuts to the city's projects.⁴³ The violent crackdown galvanized artists, and ultimately bolstered a trade union consciousness that undergirded their fight against their shared employer to advance their interests as employees. Guston himself was surprised by the administration's callousness. He had already had no luck joining the projects, despite his history of well-reviewed shows and successfully completed mural projects at such a young age. At this point, his only chance to display work in the City was through Siqueiros – in a show he organized at the ACA gallery before leaving for Spain, Siqueiros displayed images of the mural in Morelia, and Guston let Kadish know that their mural was seen by a new audience.⁴⁴ However, he was not discouraged by his inability to make it on to the project; instead, the forcefulness of the Union's organized actions and their solidarity toward all artists on the project gave him a sense of purpose: "Although I came here armed to the teeth with letters from Partridge and Wright to the heads of the project here, I was coldly received... There is nothing to do now except mark time and join the struggle for the expansion of projects."⁴⁵

⁴³ "Mayor Seeks End of Lay-Offs on WPA: Goes to Washington to Plead -- Somervell Also There After Riot in Art Office. Workers Demand Inquiry, Plan Assault Charges Against Police -- 219 Accused to be Arraigned Today." *New York Times*, December 3, 1936. Guston also mentions project supervisors siding with artists in his letter to Kadish from December 2, 1936.

⁴⁴ Guston described the purpose of this show to Kadish, writing: "His idea was to contrast the meek, stilted American stuff, with the plastic vigour of the Mexicans." See Guston to Kadish, undated letter (likely January 1937), Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. The ACA has little record of this show, but I was able to find it listed in a recap of current exhibitions in the January 1937 issue of *Art Front*: "ACA 52 W 8th St. Mexican Exhibit -- Dec. 27 – Jan 9." See *Art Front*, January 1937, 19. For more on the ACA Gallery and its shows in the late 30s, see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 136-144.

⁴⁵ Guston to Kadish, December 2nd, 1936, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art.

After the turn of the new year, Guston's fortunes finally began to change, although not without significant hiccups. While "marking time," he attended Artists' Union meetings, and later recalled attending a lecture by Frederick Kiesler organized by the Union.⁴⁶ He also finally received a promise of a job from the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, but the recent attempted budget cuts left him wary. Beyond his doubt that any particular job would come to fruition, he was not even sure if the Treasury Section itself would exist in six months' time.⁴⁷ Although Union protests had managed to delay certain cutbacks, there was still talk of major budget cuts. However, the promise of a job still meant Guston could receive an income from the Treasury Section.

While Guston was finally receiving a salary from the Treasury Section, some of his friends were also finally employed on the projects. In his first few months in NY, he met James Brooks, who was a student of Thomas Hart Benton's alongside Jackson Pollock.⁴⁸ Guston and Brooks quickly became friends, bonding over their shared aesthetic interests, which started a life-long friendship. At the time, Brooks was working on a FAP mural for Woodside Library in Queens (fig. 4). Harold Lehman had recently completed his design for a massive FAP mural in the mess hall of Riker's Island. The commission was originally meant for Ben Shahn, but his design was rejected because it included depictions of guards torturing prisoners.⁴⁹ The younger Lehman was then given a chance to submit his design, which focused on prisoners being successfully rehabilitated and re-entering society (fig. 3.5). Guston was excited by the

⁴⁶ See Guston's corrections to Ashton's typescript, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 38, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

⁴⁷ In his undated letter to Kadish (likely December 1936 - January 1937, see note 38), Guston told Kadish that the project was likely to close up in June.

⁴⁸ In the letter to Kadish from December 2nd, 1936, Guston says that although Brooks is a student of Benton's, Brooks is "10x the painter and designer" that Benton is. For more on Jackson Pollock's relationship with Benton, see Naifeh and White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*.

⁴⁹ For a report on the rejection of Shahn's mural, see Stuart Davis, "'We Reject' - The Art Commission," *Art Front*, July 1935, 4-5.



Figure 3.4, James Brooks with his mural in Woodside Public Library, Queens, New York. circa 1940. James Brooks and Charlotte Park Papers



Figure 3.5, Harold Lehman, *Man's Daily Bread*, 1937-38, Riker's Island Penitentiary Mess Hall, New York, now destroyed.

design, writing to Kadish that the mural would be the “best thing in NY, if they let him do it.”⁵⁰ Sande McCoy was set to be Lehman’s lead assistant, acting as the plasterer for his friend’s fresco. Back in California, Fletcher Martin was working on a mural for North Hollywood High School in Los Angeles, and had recently become the co-chair of the local chapter of the American Artists’ Congress.⁵¹ Martin maintained correspondence with both Guston and Kadish, keeping them updated about developments in the Los Angeles art scene.⁵² Kadish himself had also recently gotten on the project on a non-relief basis, completing a series of lithographs for the San Francisco FAP under the direction of Joseph Danysh, while also submitting designs for proposed mural in San Francisco State University’s chemistry building (fig. 3.6).⁵³

While many of his friends were finally employed and at work on their own large-scale projects, Guston’s promised job with the Treasury Section was not what he had hoped. Rather than his own mural commission, the Section offered Guston a job as an assistant to Reginald Marsh, who was working on a mural for the Alexander Hamilton Customs House.⁵⁴ For Guston, this opportunity summed up his difficult first few months living in New York. He had come to the city with an impressive body of work for such a young artist, and expected to get on the project quickly. Instead, he spent months with little-to-no income, living in his friend’s apartment over the cold winter months. Now, he was finally employed and receiving a salary

⁵⁰ Guston to Kadish, undated letter, likely January 1937, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art.

⁵¹ Fletcher Martin is listed as Chairman of the Los Angeles Branch of the American Artists’ Congress on their official letterhead. For an example, see Invitation to Congress print show, Series 2: Correspondence, Box 1, Folder 38, Anton Refregier papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

⁵² Martin wrote to Kadish in San Francisco multiple times in 1936-37. See Series 2: Letters, Box 2, Folder 41, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. Martin began his FAP-sponsored mural not long after Guston and Kadish finished their mural in Duarte.

⁵³ This meant that Kadish was hired as an FAP employee, but as part of the 10% not requiring relief – essentially, he was one of receiving a salary from the project without having to take the “Pauper’s Oath.” Kadish did ultimately receive this commission and completed *Dissertation on Alchemy* in August 1937. See his Oral History interviews for more.

⁵⁴ For more on the Customs House mural, including images of each individual panel, see Lloyd Goodrich, *Reginald Marsh* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1972), 137-157.

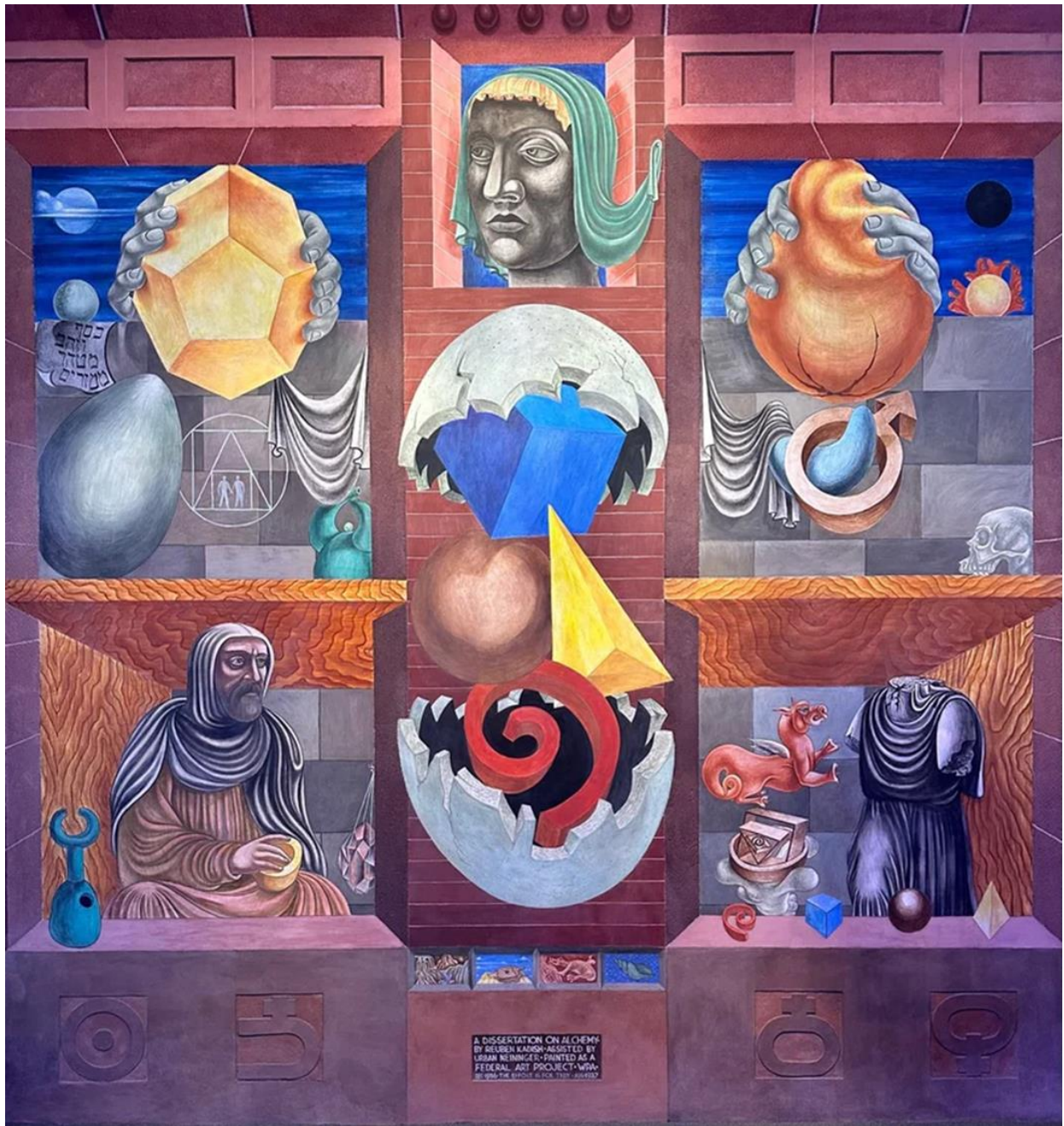


Figure 3.6, Reuben Kadish, *A Dissertation on Alchemy*, 1937, San Francisco, CA

from one of the art projects, but as an assistant to another artist – and one he did not hold in high regard. Guston relayed his woes to Kadish in another letter, writing “Isn’t that ironical? A man whose work I particularly despise – but it was the only way to get on the project and Musa was coming in two weeks and I didn’t have enough to get my suit pressed.”⁵⁵ Musa McKim joined Guston in New York in February of 1937. The couple were married with Sandy McCoy as a witness, and soon after moved into their own apartment. The money from the Treasury Section was crucial for establishing their new household, but Guston’s position was still unsatisfactory. According to Guston’s correspondence, Marsh was impressed by Guston’s work, but did not feel that their styles meshed well, and said he would not be the right fit as an assistant. However, this brief working relationship was still important for Guston: “he turned out to be a decent enough fellow in other respects: he boosted my stock a lot to the heads of the project.”⁵⁶ With his foot in the door, he was finally able to begin designs for large-scale public work.

Although he was officially employed by the Treasury Section, his first opportunity for government work in New York was with the WPA.⁵⁷ Burgoyne Diller, head of the New York FAP mural division, was forming a plan to decorate subway stations with FAP murals. The Subway Commission was interested in the idea, so Diller tasked artists with making designs for subway stations that he could present to the city council of New York and other municipal government figures.⁵⁸ He asked Guston to submit a design for a mural in Penn Station – Guston’s direct connection with Diller, which continued for the rest of his time as an FAP

⁵⁵ Letter from Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, April 4th, 1937, Series 2: Letters, Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

⁵⁶ Guston to Kadish April 4th, 1937, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art.

⁵⁷ The Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture operated under the umbrella of the Treasury Department, while the WPA was its own agency with its own budget.

⁵⁸ For more on the plan for murals in the subway, see Anita Brenner, “Does New York Want Art in Its Subways?,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 1939 and Helen A. Harrison, “Subway Art and the Public Use of Arts Committee,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (1981): 3–12.

employee, may have been the result of Marsh's "boosting." For this assignment, his employment was temporarily transferred over to the FAP, and he set to work. The opportunity to design a mural for the subway sent Guston's imagination racing, and Guston recounted his design process to Kadish with enthusiasm:

"You can see what unique possibilities this presented to me – at last a popular mural, based on new forms, compositions, materials, etc.... I had plans of doing it in glazed tile, mosaic, terrazzo, and glass or ducco. I mean a combination of all these mediums. I even began to write a sort of paper on the new approach to popular murals of this sort, so unique were its possibilities, and so much did it interest and enthuse me."⁵⁹

The setting of the subway meant that viewers would be in a hurry, so Guston wanted to combine these materials into a monumental composition that could grab the attention of commuters with a "bang." His composition was centered on two large figures, one a worker and one an engineer, that would fill the full height of the 18ft wall. Despite his grand ambitions, the subway mural project was repeatedly delayed. Guston chalked this up to the fact that the supervisors were themselves artists inclined to think traditionally, calling them "statically minded." He speculated to Kadish that WPA supervisors wanted a traditional fresco and did not like his idea of such large central figures. However, his ire was directed at the wrong target – Guston was one of many artists who wanted to use new materials and forms for their subway designs, and the project ultimately had the backing of FAP supervisors and the approval of the City Council. Burgoyne Diller was personally invested in the project, and wrote to the group submitting mural designs:

⁵⁹ Letter from Guston to Kadish, April 4th, 1937, Reuben Kadish Papers. Underlines are Guston's.

“This is an extraordinary opportunity for us to carry our work to places where they can be seen by a large number of people. It is for this reason and also for the reason that if approved, it will open to us a larger outlet for our work and an opportunity for experimental techniques, that it is doubly important that we present the finest work we can do. I am confident that you have this same attitude.”⁶⁰

The stumbling block was in fact the New York City Board of Transportation. The chairman, John H. Delaney, disapproved of many of the designs and felt that the project was a waste of money. Despite a well-received show of subway art designs at MoMA in 1938 and a public campaign by the Artists Union’s Public Use of Art Committee (PUAC), Delaney’s intervention delayed the project, until it was scrapped entirely after budget cuts to the WPA in 1939.⁶¹

While Guston was working on this mural design, Siqueiros left to fight in Spain, which meant Guston was left without his primary artistic interlocutor in New York. Guston lamented his absence, writing to Kadish that “we had quite a lot of discussion when he was here, and believe me Rube, he was the only guy in NY you could talk to about painting.”⁶² Siqueiros’ influence on Guston during this period is clear – he took the experimental mindset of the workshop to his government work, constantly considering how new spaces and new relationships to the viewer require new materials and forms. He felt that traditional fresco was totally unfit for the subway, a piece of modern, industrialized infrastructure, moving hundreds of thousands of people every day. Guston relished the opportunity to design a “popular” mural, using figures at a

⁶⁰ Letter from Burgoyne Diller to artists on sketches for subway, May 27th, 1938, Series 2: Correspondence, Box 1, Folder 34, Anton Refregier Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

⁶¹ The PUAC was lead by Paul Block, the union spokesman who was beaten and arrested during the December 1, 1936 protest. For more see on Block’s role and the scrapping of the Subway project see Harrison, “Subway Art and the Public Use of Art Committee.”

⁶² Guston to Kadish, April 4th, 1937. It is important to note again that Guston downplayed his association with Siqueiros during this period later in life, correcting Ashton in his notes on her draft – his correspondence and work from this period shows otherwise.

heroic scale to connect with people in an instant. Even though his friend and supporter was off in Spain, the young Guston was clearly thinking deeply about Siqueiros' bold techniques. Though the subway project never moved forward, Guston profited from the chance to apply this ambitious way of thinking to his own work.

Guston's first few months of employment on the art projects show the benefits and drawbacks of these federally-funded endeavors for artists. In the most immediate and practical sense, they achieved their stated goal by providing artists with a relief salary. However, getting this salary often required months of questioning and waiting, and the threat of firings always loomed. Once on the project, artists were provided studio space, materials to work with, and a chance to meet other artists, allowing for an open exchange of ideas and forms. For example, Stuart Davis' studio was just down the hall from Guston's. This gave the young Guston a chance to see the celebrated abstract painter work in person – Davis' free use of thick, textured paint, slathered on with a palette knife, was something Guston remembered for the rest of his life.⁶³ Although Guston could no longer talk with Siqueiros directly, by the summer of 1937 he had worked with old friends like Lehman and Sandy McCoy, while also meeting new friends like Brooks.

The grand scale of public commissions allowed Guston to work experimentally, dedicating months at a time to researching and working out specific themes, forms, subjects without the pressure to sell on the market. However, the competition involved in mural commissions, combined with intense administrative scrutiny, meant that nearly all of these

⁶³ Guston relayed this story to Ashton after reading an early draft that mentioned Davis' influence in the New York art world. See Guston's notes to Ashton's typescript, Dore Ashton papers, archives of American Art. For more on Davis' influence on the New York art scene both artistically and politically, see Jody Patterson, *Modernism for the Masses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020) and "The Art of Swinging Left in the 1930s: Modernism, Realism, and the Politics of the Left in the Murals of Stuart Davis," *Art History* 33.1 (February 2010): 98-123. See also Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, inc., 1996).

potential murals were scrapped before actually seeing the light of day. In any case, a steady salary meant that project artists could live and work more freely than ever before; artists could hone their skills when working for the easel division, or try to find create a harmony of form and content when creating designs for mural competitions. For these mural commissions, the subject matter was usually predetermined, often by non-artists (fig. 3.7). Post office commissions usually involved discussions with the postmasters themselves, who had a vision of what subject would best reflect local or regional history. This led to a form of creative problem solving that was quite different than individually driven easel painting, wherein the muralist was balancing the desires of local officials and project administrators with their own aesthetic interests. Guston was well aware before beginning a design that his chances to win a competition were slim, but he enjoyed this process of creating a design that would be fitting for a given subject matter. He also knew that even if he did not secure a commission, administrators would recognize quality designs and offer other work opportunities – something that had already happened for his friend James Brooks, who secured a commission for a post office mural in Little Falls, New Jersey on the basis of his quality designs for a different mural in a post office in Hempstead, New York.⁶⁴ This possibility of receiving more work was built into the application process after protests by artists, who felt that submitting quality designs required intense effort and time that was unlikely to be rewarded. Administrators had recognized this problem, and amended the application process. Edward Bruce, director of the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture, announced in the Treasury Department Art Project's March-June 1937 bulletin that selection juries were to make

⁶⁴ The James Brooks papers at the Archives of American Art show the long back and forth between Brooks and the Treasury Department, who asked him to revise his designs multiple times before ultimately rejecting him for the Hempstead job. They then reach out to him later about the Little Falls job, citing his work for the Hempstead commission as the reason they were offering him the wall. See Series 2, Box 1, Folder 28-33, James Brooks and Charlotte Parks papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF TWO IMPORTANT NATIONAL COMPETITIONSTHREE MURALS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
BUILDING, WASHINGTON, D. C. (CONT'D.)SUBJECT-MATTER

THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THESE MURALS SHOULD DEAL WITH SOME PHASE OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LIFE. THE FOLLOWING SCHEME OF SUBJECT-MATTER IS OFFERED AS A TENTATIVE SUGGESTION FOR THE DESIGNING OF THE PANELS ON THE THREE FLOORS SO THAT THEY MAY BE UNIFIED WITH THE REST OF THE DECORATION IN THE BUILDING. THE ARTIST IS FREE TO MAKE THE WIDEST POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION OF THESE IDEAS, HOWEVER, KEEPING IN MIND THE SUITABILITY OF THE INTERPRETATION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE BUILDING.

1. MAN
 - A. JUSTICE TOWARD LABOR.
2. WOMAN
 - A. EMANCIPATION OF WOMAN THROUGH SUFFRAGE.
3. CHILD
 - A. PROTECTION OF THE CHILD BY CHILD LABOR LAWS.
 - B. OLD VS. CONTEMPORARY JUVENILE COURTS.

AN ARTIST SHOULD SIGNIFY HIS INTENTION OF SUBMITTING A SKETCH IN THE COMPETITION AND AT THE SAME TIME INFORM THE SECTION WHICH SUBJECT-MATTER HE INTENDS TO USE. HOWEVER, IF THE ARTIST HAS A PLAN OF SUBJECT-MATTER WHICH HE PREFERS TO WORK OUT HIMSELF, HE SHOULD STATE THE NATURE OF THIS SUBJECT-MATTER WHEN HE SIGNIFIES HIS INTENTION TO SUBMIT A DESIGN IN THE COMPETITION. THE SECTION WISHES TO GRANT THE ARTIST FREEDOM OF SUBJECT-MATTER, SUITABLE TO THIS BUILDING, WHICH HE HIMSELF MIGHT PROPOSE. IT IS ADVISABLE THAT SUCH SUGGESTIONS SHOULD BE SUBMITTED, BEFORE ACTING ON THEM, FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF THE SECTION AND THE MEMBERS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE.

A LIST OF PAINTERS, WITH THE SUBJECT MATTER OF THEIR DESIGNS, WHICH ARE NOW BEING EXECUTED AND INSTALLED IN THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE BUILDING, FOLLOWS:

GEORGE BIDDLE: - "TENEMENT AND SWEAT SHOP CONDITIONS VERSUS SOCIETY PLANNED WITH JUSTICE."

JOHN STUART CURRY: - "THE MOVEMENT OF THE POPULATION WESTWARD ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND THE FREEDING OF THE SLAVES."

LEON KROLL: - "THE DEFEAT OF JUSTICE AND THE VICTORY OF JUSTICE."

Figure 3.7, Page 5 of the January-February 1936 Treasury Section of Fine Arts Bulletin, showing the announcement of a mural competition with pre-determined subject matter.

lists of quality designs that were ultimately rejected, so that those artists could be asked to complete other jobs in order to “have good designs rewarded with an appointment.”⁶⁵ After this declaration, in competition announcements for larger jobs, there would usually be a list of smaller jobs that would potentially be offered to artists who submitted quality designs (fig. 3.8). When working for the government, there was also the threat of political censorship – federal murals were the subject of intense scrutiny, with reactionary officials looking to root out any potentially subversive political messaging done under the auspices of the government.

Despite this complicated working environment, Guston was one of many government artists who also continued to participate in the Popular Front and created work on the threat of European fascism. While working on various designs for mural competitions, Guston spent the summer and fall of 1937 working on one of his most well-known studio paintings from this period, *Bombardment* (fig. 3.9). The tondo painting, in oil on Masonite, is centered around an explosion; fascist forces are conducting a bombing raid on a village. The force of the bomb sends figures flying in every direction, scattering them into the ruins of the town. Guston uses the tondo form to great effect, combining the Renaissance format with the sense of formal experimentation fostered at the Experimental Workshop. The figures and the walls of the city curve around the center point, as if the devastating power of the explosion has distorted time and space. Rays of color project out from the explosion, bursting and blending together. This shimmering mass of color gives the blast an otherworldly feeling, like the bombs from sky are coming from outside of the natural world. The warped perspective emphasizes the ferocity and violence of the moment. The figures, including a mother and child and a man in a gas mask, are caught in mid-air. Their clothing ripples in Guston’s characteristic style, blown back by the

⁶⁵ Treasury Department Art Projects bulletin, March-June 1937, Series 3.11: Other New Deal Art Projects, 1935-1942, Reel 5290, Frames 815-816, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

COMPETITION OPEN TO NEW YORK STATE, NEW JERSEY, PENNSYLVANIA
AND CONNECTICUT ARTISTS

The Section of Painting and Sculpture invites competition for thirteen mural paintings to be installed in the lobby of the New York City, Bronx, Central Postal Station. The sum of \$7,000, covering complete cost of execution and installation, is to be paid for this work.

Mr. Henry Varnum Poor, painter, has kindly consented to serve as Chairman of the Advisory Jury to the Section of Painting and Sculpture. The other members of the Committee are: Mr. Thomas Harlan Ellett of New York City, the architect of the building and Mr. George Harding, painter, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Artists intending to enter this competition must signify their intention by applying to the Procurement Division, Section of Painting and Sculpture, 7th and D Streets, S. W., Washington, D. C. for a form announcement giving full particulars of the competition.

Designs must be submitted, with carrying charges prepaid, or delivered in person, to the Section of Painting and Sculpture, Procurement Division, Treasury Department, Washington, D. C., on or before May 14, 1938.

The marbles used in the lobby are a Gray Missouri and a White Tennessee, the floor being terrazzo of the same gray marble chips, bordered with white marble. In addition to the telephone shelves indicated on the blueprints, it will be noted that flanking telephone booths have been installed, although these are not to be considered permanent fixtures in designing the mural spaces behind them. The frames of the vestibules, metal trim of the counter windows and of the light fixtures are polished brass. The artist should constantly keep in mind the relation between his designs and the architecture of the building in composition, color, scale and subject matter.

All the designs, with the recommendation of the committee, will be forwarded to the Section of Painting and Sculpture which will make the final award. After the award has been made to the artist submitting the winning design for the decoration of the New York City, Bronx, Central Postal Station, the Section of Painting and Sculpture will re-examine the remaining designs in order to discover which of the artists creating them is eligible to be invited to submit preliminary studies for a mural in the Post Office of one of the following cities:

Greenwich, Connecticut	St. Johnsville, New York
Thomaston, Connecticut	Tianderoga, New York
Baldwinsville, New York	Waverly, New York
Boonville, New York	Farrell, Pennsylvania
Canaoharie, New York	Vandergrift, Pennsylvania
Canton, New York	South Orange, New Jersey
Huntington, New York	Westfield, New Jersey
	West New York, N. J.

If no designs are submitted which are of sufficient merit to justify a recommendation by the Section of Painting and Sculpture, no award will be rendered for the Bronx Central Postal Station and no appointments will be made as a result of this competition for the other cities.

Figure 3.8, An example of a mural competition announcement that includes smaller projects that may be awarded to losing designs of high merit. From the July 1937-1938 Treasury Department Art Projects Bulletin



Figure 3.9, Philip Guston, *Bombardment*, 1937

violence of the bomb's detonation. Their twisted posture, frozen in time, can be read as both flying outward and being pulled inward, as if the explosion is also a black hole, rending the space around it with its gravitational pull. Overall, the scene is forceful and direct, showing the devastation wrought by fascist forces on Spanish civilians during the Spanish Civil War.

The organized left in New York, with the Popular Front strategy guiding their thinking, focused their attention on Spain, which was seen as a microcosm of the broader existential conflict between fascism and democracy.⁶⁶ The Spanish fascists, led by Francisco Franco and backed by Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, were waging consistent bombing campaigns on civilian targets, and reports of mass death and destruction made their way across the Atlantic every day. The war was an ever-present topic of discussion among leftist artists, with constant coverage in *New Masses* and *Art Front*. Even in dire economic times, there were many fundraisers and protests meant to help the cause of the Spanish republic. While some artists like Siqueiros took direct action, *Bombardment* was Guston's artistic contribution to the cause. Guston was clearly thinking about his friend and mentor when painting this picture – the mass of colors that make up the center of the image are reminiscent of the swirling pools of paint in *Collective Suicide* and other workshop paintings. The warped perspective, which twists and distorts the figures, recalls Siqueiros' *Plastic Exercise* and his interest in a dynamic relationship between figures and the space of the viewer. For *Bombardment*, Guston was continuing his interest in these perspectival innovations that began with his and Kadish's murals in Morelia and Duarte. The painting was first shown in December of 1937, as part of a Congress show of anti-

⁶⁶ For more on support for the Spanish Republic in New York see Peter N. Carroll and James D. Fernández, eds., *Facing Fascism: New York and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Museum of the City of New York : NYU Press, 2007).

war paintings dedicated to the people of Spain and China.⁶⁷ Other than photographs of the mural in Morelia shown by Siqueiros, it was Guston's first painting shown in New York, and it received quite a bit of positive critical attention, including a full-page reproduction in *Look* magazine.⁶⁸ In the following year, it was shown at the Whitney, in their annual show on contemporary American painting. Guston personally rolled the painting to the museum, taking advantage of its Tondo format.⁶⁹

Guston was finally finding his feet as an artist in New York, and his reputation was beginning to grow. But increased exposure was not enough to maintain a living in New York, and he wanted a chance to paint more murals. Guston encouraged Kadish, who had finally secured the commission in the chemistry building at San Francisco State University, to also apply for more post office murals so that the pair could save up enough money to travel to Italy and see their favorite frescos in person.⁷⁰ When beginning *Bombardment*, Guston was also working on a design for a post office mural in San Antonio, Texas. The design consisted of twelve scenes on two walls, each shaped around large half-circle archways, depicting the history of San Antonio. The scenes are connected by figures and landscape stretching across the tops of the arches, and the composition is bookended by two scenes of violence, with each scene labeled for context. A closer look at the North Wall, the section of the study completed in color, provides insight into Guston's compositional techniques for these large-scale government commissions (figs. 10.1-10.3). On the far left we see "The Spanish Invasion," which features Spanish colonial

⁶⁷ Edward Alden Jewell mentioned *Bombardment* as a highlight of the show in his review for the *New York Times*. See Edward Alden Jewell, "Artists' Congress Ready With Show: Preview Tonight Will Launch 'Exhibition in Defense of World Democracy'," *New York Times*, December 14, 1937.

⁶⁸ In the December 1937 issue of *Look*.

⁶⁹ Guston recounted this story throughout his life, and it is mentioned again on the Guston Foundation's website.

⁷⁰ At the end of the long letter to Kadish from April 4, 1937, after encouraging his friend to apply for post office commissions to raise funds for travel, Guston mentions that there was a Giotto celebration happening in Florence and expressed his wish to see the celebration with Kadish.



Figure 3.10, Philip Guston, study for the North Wall of the San Antonio Post Office, 1937

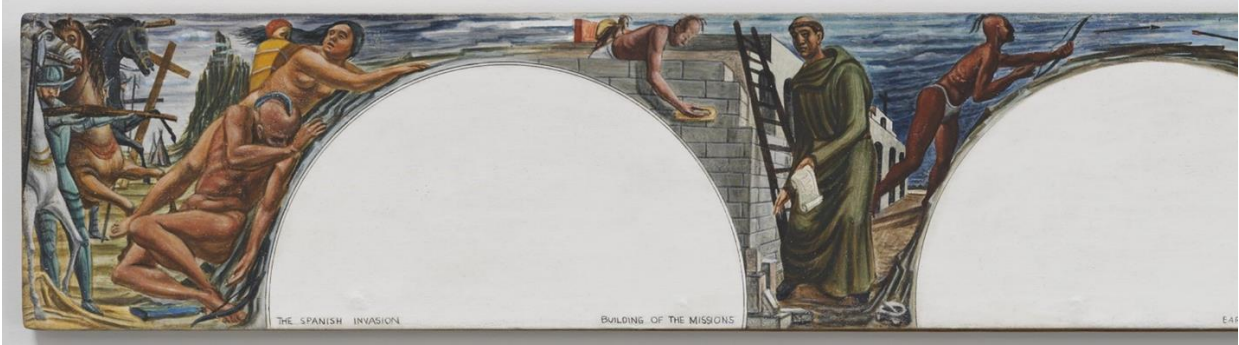


Figure 3.10.1, Philip Guston, study for San Antonio Post Office Mural, 1937, detail 1

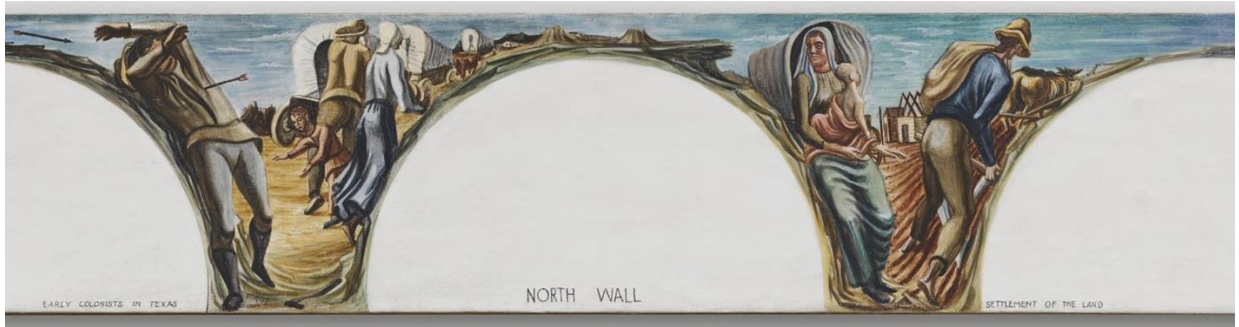


Figure 3.10.2, Philip Guston, study for San Antonio Post Office Mural, 1937, detail 2



Figure 3.10.3, Philip Guston, study for San Antonio Post Office Mural, 1937, detail 3

soldiers committing a massacre of indigenous people, who splay themselves on the rounded archway. The hands of the top figure point towards another indigenous man in the next scene, “Building of the Missions.” This native man is helping, or more likely being forced, to lay bricks for one of San Antonio’s historic missions. To the right of the mission building, another native man lobbs arrows at white settlers, labeled as “Early Colonists in Texas.” Their wagon train disappears into the distance, which stretches around an archway to “Settlement of the Land,” where those settlers build a homestead and farm. The farmer’s plow points to the next scene, “Fall of the Alamo.” There, two wounded soldiers fill niches between brick archways in the fort, while a third soldier fires shots from his rifle. Finally, the scene stretches over the last archway to the “Battle of San Jacinto,” showing American soldiers knocking Mexican cavalymen off their horses. All six scenes are primarily executed in light red, white, and sandy brown, colors that Guston returned to throughout his career, under a blue sky that spans the entire composition. The complex design once again displays Guston’s interest in warped perspectives and the narrative possibilities inherent in interconnected mural cycles, as well as his critical attitude toward mass violence and imperialism. He repeats some of his common motifs in the design, including a mother and child, a prone body with its head in the foreground and its feet stretching into the background, and figures with their faces partially obscured by their dynamic poses. Guston enjoyed working on this study, calling it a “very interesting problem of design,” but he also knew that competition for this large commission was fierce. He knew that he was unlikely to actually get a chance to paint the mural, but was buoyed by the example of Brooks and others, writing to Kadish that “perhaps I can get a smaller commission on the merits of my design. A number of painters here have done that.”⁷¹

⁷¹ Guston to Kadish April 4th, 1937, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art.

Guston's confidence was warranted; even though he was rejected for the job in San Antonio, his quality designs continued to bolster his reputation with the administrators of the projects, and he was able to secure two smaller mural commissions. The first was a conveniently located FAP commission in New York, at the Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn. Guston went through a multi-stage study process, creating small drawings of individual sections of the design, then enlarged versions, and finally a composite design of the entire mural, which was set to be painted around the arch-shaped doorway of the nurse's room in the hospital (fig. 3.11).

Recreation and Athletics, like the mural in Duarte, is centered around an archway. The left scene focuses on recreation; a group of figures is playing music, singing, dancing, studying, and cavorting with their loved ones. The scene on the right side focuses on athletics, with figures playing a variety of sports, including basketball, diving, archery, horse riding, and gymnastics. Once again, Guston adapts his favorite motifs to this new subject matter. The mother and child play in a landscape, a figure on the ground with his head perpendicular to the viewer plays with his dog, and various figures twist their bodies in poses that partially obscure their faces, all set in eerily empty and simplified architectural settings. A Punchinello figure in checkered pants, which Guston had featured in drawings since 1933 (fig. 3.12), plays a lute. Like the mural in Duarte and his study for San Antonio, the separate scenes are connected across the top of the archway that divides them. In this case, the brick wall of the recreation scene fades into the wood grain of the athletics side, creating a blend of two textures that fascinated Guston throughout his entire career. Administrators may have dictated subject matter to Guston, but that did not stop him from pursuing his aesthetic and narrative interests in his mural studies. For this mural, he also experimented with silhouettes. Under each scene with fully modeled figures in space, there is a separate scene populated by silhouettes that recall the work of Guston's contemporary,



Figure 3.11, Philip Guston, complete study for *Recreation and Athletics*, 1937-38



Figure 3.12, Philip Guston, untitled Punchinello drawing, 1933

Aaron Douglas, as well as Ancient Greek black-figure vase painting. On the left, they play music, and on the right, they practice archery; they are arranged facing the central archway, inviting viewers to read the image from the edges to the center. The silhouettes are grouped together on a single plane, and each picture acts as frieze-like companion to its corresponding image above. To extend the metaphor, the upper images can then be seen as the sculptural scene in a pediment, carved in deep relief. These visual connection to Greek relief sculpture and ancient vase painting make the design distinctly neo-classical, giving the light-hearted subject matter a sense of monumentality.

In contrast to his efforts in earlier projects, Guston had made it past the initial competition phase, and had the approval of FAP administrators, including Burgoyne Diller. However, the board of the hospital itself never approved the design, and the project was eventually scrapped. Before the project was officially canceled, one of the enlarged studies was shown at the Federal Art Gallery in a show of FAP murals alongside a smaller drawing of the complete composition (fig. 3.13).⁷² Even though this commission was eventually cancelled, he was simultaneously working on a design for a post office mural in Commerce, Georgia, a small town outside of Atlanta. It seems as though Guston was offered this project on the merit of other designs; there was no announcement for a competition for the Commerce post office in the Treasury Section's bulletin. Guston indicated as much, writing to Kadish that he was "offered a small job through the Section of P & S."⁷³ Nearly two years after moving to New York, Guston was finally able to paint another mural.

⁷² Edward Alden Jewell's positive review of the show included photographs of Guston's mural study. See Edward Alden Jewell, "Commentary on Murals: Exhibition at the Federal Art Gallery Presents WPA New York Region Survey," *New York Times*, May 29, 1938. For more on the Federal Art Gallery, see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 177-182.

⁷³ Letter from Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, undated Series 2: Letters, Box 8, Folder 59, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art. Although the letter is undated, it was written after Kadish completed *A Dissertation on Alchemy* in San Francisco (early August 1937), but before Kadish arrived in New York in the fall of 1937.



Figure 3.13, Enlarged study of left panel of *Recreation and Athletics*, hung above the small complete study, on display in the Federal Art Gallery, 1938

Unlike his recent designs that were shaped around archways, *Early Mail Service and the Construction of Railroads* is a single panel installed on a flat wall (fig. 3.14). Painted in casein tempera on gesso, the image shows a group of figures receiving mail from a postman while a group of laborers build a railroad. On the left, a woman sits on a porch and reads a letter. Two men next to her have a discussion over a newspaper. In the center of the image, the postman stands with his horse. His sack of mail, now empty after having delivered the letter and newspaper, projects outward towards the viewer in another perspectival trick. To his right, there is a pair of muscle-bound workers, tightening fish bolts into newly laid rails. These laborers are posed over the tracks, with one facing away from the viewer and the other facing the viewer head-on. They are the most dynamic part of the image, and Treasury Section administrators recognized the discrepancy between these laborers and the other figures. When he submitted his initial studies, the administrators felt that the laborers were the strongest part of the design, and wrote to Guston that “the strength of drawing reflected in the two workmen laying the rails ... is the quality of draftsmanship we would like you to characterize in the entire design.”⁷⁴ Compared to the initial study (fig. 3.15), the other figures in the completed mural are more fully modeled, giving each figure some of the solidity that was already present in the workmen. However, the railroad workers are still the most interesting aspect of the image, as their dynamic poses and rippling clothing draws the eye more than the comparatively flat postman and mail recipients.

Although Guston just saw this as a small job, and may have been motivated more by his desire to go to Italy with Kadish than any particular creative impulse, he had finally completed his first solo mural project.⁷⁵ It was the result of two years of frustration, which he spent

⁷⁴ Edward B. Rowan to Philip Guston, January 4, 1938, SAAM curatorial file, *Early Mail Service and Construction of Railroads* (mural study, Commerce, Georgia Post Office)

⁷⁵ Guston was paid \$510 for the mural. See “Pay for Mural,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 10, 1938, 5.



Figure 3.14, Philip Guston, *Early Mail Service and the Construction of Railroads*, 1938, Commerce, GA

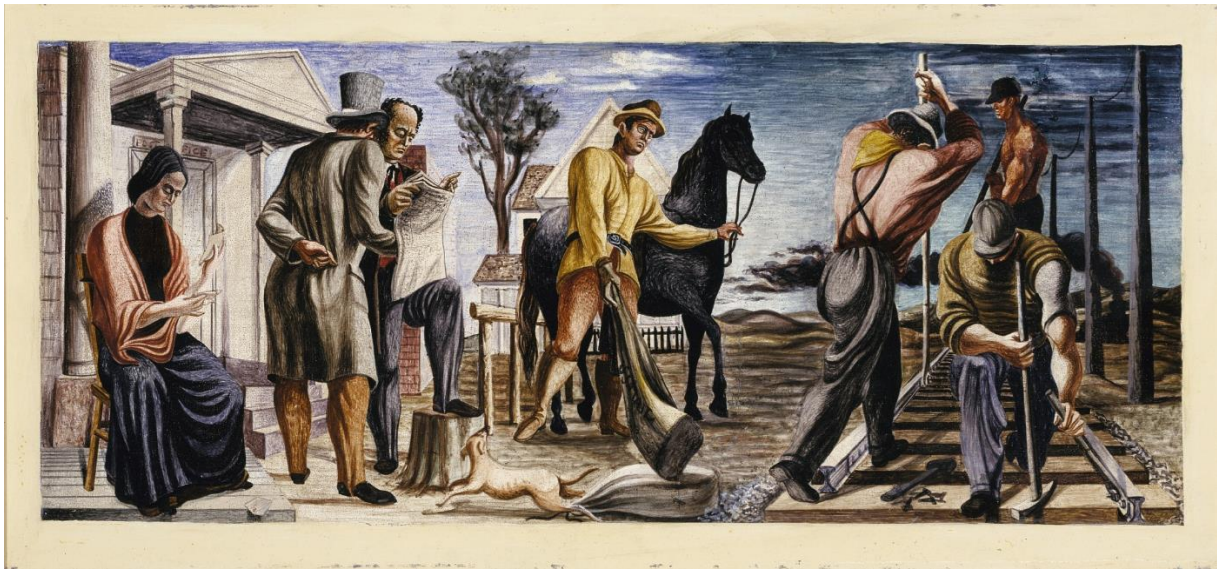


Figure 3.15, Philip Guston, study for *Early Mail Service and the Construction of Railroads*, 1938

desperately poor and fighting to get on relief rolls. He was one of thousands of artists in New York who participated in a trade union struggle, working collectively to raise wages, bring about stability, and prevent their colleagues from being “tossed in the river.” Once employed, he was subject to the whims of administrators, and would dedicate months at a time to projects that never came to be. But, he received a steady salary that gave him the chance to work freely without selling. This allowed him to establish a reputation in the city, making connections with administrators and fellow artists. Although he had been creating work for years, his experiences from 1936-38 laid the foundation for a successful career. For Guston, this period was the difference between making art, and making a living as an artist.

Conclusion

In the November 1936 issue of *Art Front*, the art historian and theorist Meyer Schapiro published an essay titled “The Public Use of Art.”⁷⁶ Schapiro, who had spent the previous few years participating in the John Reed Club, the Artists’ Union, and the newly founded Artists’ Congress, wrote of the benefits for artists brought by the New Deal art programs, but also warned his readers against losing their focus. While the projects were undeniably an advance for the status of the artist in America, it was still necessary for artists to build connections with the working class in order to advance their interests. This solidarity with the broader labor movement was doubly important because artists and laborers do *not* have the same class interests because of their vastly different relationship with the product of their labor, despite the growing trend of calling artists “cultural workers.” This new terminology did not change the fact that artists were still, for the most part, individualized, specialized creators who produced unique cultural objects. As the muralist Peppino Mangravite wrote, “I have become a creative worker by

⁷⁶ Meyer Schapiro, “The Public Use of Art,” *Art Front*, November 1936, 4-6.

day but still a dreamer by night and Sunday.”⁷⁷ As individualized intellectuals, artists were buoyed by the projects because they were a consistent source of income, while manual laborers on the projects were receiving a lower wage than they were in more stable times. In order to get the support of the working class, who were the truly exploited class of capitalist society, it was necessary for artists to make their demands relevant to the masses. If the only result of their struggle as a collective was security for the artist, creating images for a government that is oppressing the working class, why should workers support those efforts? Schapiro makes a comparison to the establishment of public education, which he says succeeded because it was presented as a boon for the people. This happened in spite of the elevation of specialized teachers above workers, because teachers fought for the interests of the people to expand and democratize education through a struggle against school boards and local and state legislators. Then, when the teachers demanded better pay and security, they had the support of the masses. In their own struggle, artists should “present a program for a public art that will reach the masses of people.”⁷⁸ This would mean presenting government support for public art as benefitting people broadly, and not only the artist and the government itself. Then, the artists and the masses could take part in a shared struggle for better support for the arts. Importantly, this meant always operating antagonistically against the state on behalf of the people.

The temporary emergency nature of the projects meant that artists would soon be returning to their previously atomized status, and would once again be subject to the uncertainties of selling on speculation. Schapiro warned that finding comfort in the stability of the projects would be short-sighted: “They may provide a temporary ease and opportunity for

⁷⁷ Peppino Mangravite, “Aesthetic Freedom and the Artists’ Congress,” *The American Magazine of Art* 29, no. 4 (1936): 234–73.

⁷⁸ Schapiro, “The Public Use of Art,” 4.

work, but the unresolved economic crisis will soon grip the painter again.”⁷⁹ So, political action should not focus solely on expanding the corrective measures of the capitalist state, but instead attempt to seize power and alter the exploitative and hierarchical social relations that led to crisis in the first place. The core of Marxism, the self-emancipation of the working class, was still the primary goal for Schapiro.⁸⁰ By painting positive, aspirational images for the government, the artist was securing short-term stability at the risk of a long-term separation of the artist from the labor movement: “A regime that must hold the support of the people today provides conventional images of peace, justice, social harmony, productive labor, the idylls of the farms and the factories, while it proposes at the same time an unprecedented military and naval budget, leaves 10 million unemployed, and winks at the most brutal violations of civil liberty.”⁸¹ For Schapiro, bridging this gap meant presenting public art as essentially communal property that gives all people access to culture and brings about social equality, in contrast to the privately hoarded luxury objects valued by the wealthy, and that the creation of public art was in the interest of people and against the interests of the ruling class.

His analysis was both diagnostic and prescriptive, and ultimately “The Public Use of Art” is a call to action:

“Should the artist therefore abandon his demand for government support of art? Not at all. On the contrary, he must redouble his efforts to win this demand, since the government project is a real advance. But he must develop in the course of his work the means of creating a real public art, through his solidarity with the workers and his active

⁷⁹ Schapiro, “The Public Use of Art,” 6.

⁸⁰ For more on Schapiro’s theorization of Marxism and his relation to other Marxist cultural writers, see Andrew Hemingway, “Meyer Schapiro: Marxism, Science, and Art,” in *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, ed. Andrew Hemingway (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 123-142 and David Craven, “Meyer Schapiro, Karl Korsch, and the Emergence of Critical Theory,” *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994): 42–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360474>.

⁸¹ Schapiro, “The Public Use of Art,” 6.

support of their real interests. Above all he must combat the illusion that his own insecurity and the wretched state of our culture can be overcome within the framework of our present society.”⁸²

Schapiro’s call was complicated at the time of the Popular Front. He was opposed to the class collaborationist line of the CPUSA, which had recently voted to support Roosevelt’s New Deal programs and urged members to vote for him in the 1936 presidential election.⁸³ He was worried that this kind of short-term thinking would allow the bourgeoisie to secure their power and jettison socialists once it was convenient. Many artists attempted to answer Schapiro’s call. The founding of the previously mentioned Public Use of Art Committee was prompted by an earlier version of this article that Schapiro presented at an Artists’ Union meeting, and their push for murals in the Subway was seen as a chance to create dynamic images that could connect with the people directly. But, as we have already seen in the case of the New York Board of Transportation blocking the Subway murals, the PUAC was limited by practical concerns, and could only make radical public work insofar as it was approved by capitalist government officials. Ultimately, they were still operating in the “framework of our present society.”

Schapiro was criticized by others on the left, who said that his radicalism was a convenient position for an employed intellectual who was not doing any militant organizing of the working class.⁸⁴ Calls to action, without any real path to changing the underlying social relations of capitalism, were appealing in theory but seemingly impossible in practice. By urging artists to connect their own struggle for security to the interests of the working class, Schapiro

⁸² Schapiro, “The Public Use of Art,” 6.

⁸³ In the 1936 Presidential election, Schapiro voted for Norman Thomas, who was the nominee of the Socialist party, a sectarian rival of the CPUSA that rejected the class collaborationist strategy of the Popular Front. For more, see Patricia Hills, “1936: Meyer Schapiro, Art Front, and the Popular Front,” *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 1994).

⁸⁴ Hills quotes Michael Gold’s criticisms of middle-class intellectuals and Schapiro in particular.

himself was calling for more radicalism while also passing that responsibility to others. His political action was still focused on artists themselves, even as he recognized that artists had different class interests than laborers. This was an unresolvable contradiction for the intellectual in this period, which speaks to the differing class interests of the masses of labor, who sold their labor-power to stay alive, and the individual academic, artist, or writer, who was unalienated from the product of their labor and generally patronized by the wealthy and powerful to create a unique intellectual or cultural object. Patricia Hills summarizes this problem:

“The contradiction thus emerges... the CP were calling for 'class struggle' in practice (out in the fields organizing workers to fight bosses), but were committed to the CP's Popular Front strategy that deliberately suppressed revolutionary rhetoric when advancing theories of art, culture, and society. Party members, even if they privately disagreed with the line - and the Popular Front strategy still is justifiably controversial - would not sabotage it. Hence, the Party sacrificed a sharp cultural critique of capitalism to political expediency. At the same time, independent intellectuals like Schapiro in their writings called for 'revolution' for artists and cultural workers, but remained aloof from collective action and the struggles in the streets.”⁸⁵

Artists were only beginning to advocate for their own interests through support of the New Deal programs, and Schapiro was now asking them to go against the directives of mass organizations in order to further antagonize newly won allies in the Popular Front. In the most practical sense, an artist openly presenting themselves as a revolutionary fighting on behalf of the people ran the risk of jeopardizing the already tenuous government art projects as a whole, because reactionary politicians were constantly pointing towards potentially subversive Communist activity as a

⁸⁵ Hills, “1936: Meyer Schapiro, Art Front, and the Popular Front,” 38.

reason to slash budgets and end the federal art programs. However, this also revealed the problem of the Popular Front strategy, which asked members of the working class to strategically support capitalist politicians, directly stifling the revolutionary energy of the first half of the decade.

Hills points out that Schapiro himself later admitted this contradiction, telling a friend that he prioritized his intellectual work over submitting to the collective discipline of class struggle, and that he eventually abandoned union activities altogether in order to maintain his intellectual freedom.⁸⁶ He remained an interested outsider rather than an active participant in organized class struggle. This allowed Schapiro to maintain a long and successful career as an academic at a prestigious university though the intellectual ravages of McCarthyism and the Cold War, but he ultimately severed his ties with the labor movement. Ironically, intellectuals had a greater freedom to be radical, as their relative security as educated specialists allowed them to ignore some of the practical concerns of organized political action.

Artists and intellectuals in the 1930s, in their organized political action, were constantly forced to confront this contradiction.⁸⁷ Maintaining a career as an artist, with the individualized freedom that it entailed, often meant that their interests were counter to that of the laborer, who was still being exploited for the extraction of surplus value even if work conditions were improved. Once artists were in the employ of the government, they adopted labor movement tactics and developed a trade union consciousness, but these unions worked to advance the collective interests of artists rather than the working class as a whole. What this ultimately meant was that artists secured their careers through *collaboration* with the bourgeois state, creating

⁸⁶ Hills, "1936: Meyer Schapiro, Art Front, and the Popular Front," 38.

⁸⁷ For a wide variety of primary accounts from artists and administrators from this period see Francis V. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973).

images on behalf of the government in order to maintain their specialization. Of course, this calls to mind the common Marxist dialectic of reform versus revolution, which is made doubly complicated by the individualized and specialized status of artists. Reform on behalf of the working class may improve working conditions, but still they remain the exploited masses, alienated from the product of their labor to allow the capitalist to extract surplus value. Reform on behalf of the artist had the opposite effect – it allowed them to maintain a living as an individualized artist through the support of bourgeois institutions that also saw the artist as an isolated creative intelligence. When an artist is paid for their work, they are not being exploited to extract surplus value. Their labor-power is not employed to create a commodity to be exchanged on the market; rather, they are creating a unique cultural object and being rewarded and supported for their ability to do so, which effectively allows the artist to remain aloof from the concerns of the laborer. When setting up the projects, the federal government was not attempting to make a profit off the backs of artists – and making permanent art projects would do nothing to solve the problem of exploitation of the average laborer. Instead of making the artist or intellectual a part of the masses, in effect it placed them *above* the masses. This was not a matter of a conscious abandonment of principles, but the structural position of the professional painter in the division of labor. In fact, for Philip Guston, this disjunction was in spite of the social content of his paintings – even while he attempted to create work from a distinctly politicized working-class standpoint, his burgeoning career as a professional artist pulled him away from social relevance to the working class.

Guston recognized this contradiction and tried to reckon with it. In the summer of 1937, he once again wrote to Kadish, and ruminated on the possibilities of artists participating in class struggle:

“Rube I’ve been thinking for a long time now – our only hope in the labor movement, we must ally ourselves with a group and express their ideals – our painting must be alive and have a function – if I design any more for post offices, I’ll go mad! What value, what good our teachings, our plastic knowledge, if it isn’t used to say something important? The way I see it, we will certainly be doing labor murals in the near future.”⁸⁸

While Guston enjoyed using his “plastic knowledge” to solve problems in government mural designs and was looking for the opportunity to create public work, he recognized that the working class had no real reason to care about post office murals. Public murals by WPA artists were essentially imposed on the public from above without any organic connection to daily class struggle. By executing a commission for the decoration of a government building, Guston’s art would be more publicly visible and “socially relevant,” but that did not mean it was advancing the liberation of the proletariat. Unlike the direct expression of class struggle in a “labor mural,” images of local history or depictions of harmonious social uplift, stripped of political urgency, did not necessarily “express their ideals.”⁸⁹ The New Deal art programs were an advance for artists and made them more publicly prominent than ever before, but they also created a distance between artists and the working class. In comparison to the more overtly revolutionary milieu of the first half of the 1930s, when artists like Guston and Kadish were creating explicitly political images of class struggle, the structures of government art widened this gap. And an artist aligning with a group on the left was no simple matter either – Guston had already seen firsthand the difficulties faced by Kadish and Siqueiros in their attempts to make art for the Party.

⁸⁸ Letter from Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, summer 1937, Box 1, Folder 58, Reuben Kadish papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

⁸⁹ Patricia Hills quotes Clarence Weinstock, a columnist for *Art Front* who wrote of the activities of the Public Use of Art Committee, as someone who criticized the idea that artists needed to educate the masses: “The artist's mission is not to 'teach' the workers but to educate himself. He is not there to lead the workers gently away from their concrete demands to sympathy for the "higher" forms of art.”

Socially motivated painters were in a bind. Stuart Davis, in his roles as president of the Artists' Congress and executive member of the Artists' Union, constantly worried about the relationship between the artist and the people, writing in his diary that it was his task to "sell the role of the artist to society" and educate the "aesthetically uneducated masses."⁹⁰ Or, in Guston's words, the people needed to be "educated up to fine artistic standards." Although they were looking for a way to make their art relevant to the people, they did not want to be sign painters either. Artists like Guston and Davis wanted to convince people of their importance without necessarily challenging their own conception of the role of the artist – they wanted to use their plastic knowledge and aesthetic refinement to educate the people from above, rather than restructure their work to serve the people.⁹¹ Many artists wanted both social relevance *and* authority over the working class, to be seen as both a "normal" worker and as a cultural superior.⁹² Rather than fostering solidarity with the sign painter, making a living as an artist under the New Deal art programs seemingly placed their interests in opposition.

By 1938, Guston had received some measure of success and stability as an artist. After completing his mural in San Francisco, Kadish came to New York, and lived in Guston's studio while attempting to get on the project.⁹³ While Guston was finally succeeding, Kadish was going

⁹⁰ Davis Diary, August 27th, 1937. Stuart Davis papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, quoted in A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions: American Art and Culture between the Wars*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 24.

⁹¹ A. Joan Saab points out the conflict between this simultaneous desire for social relevance and artists' unwillingness to give up their "artistic integrity," saying that Davis wanted to present painters as "workers but special." See A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions*, 194.

⁹² Harold Rosenberg, in his criticisms of the organized actions of artists in this period, argued that the notion of the "professional artist" receiving a government salary was in essence a delusion among American artists, because it characterized artists as akin to teachers, mailmen, or other public service workers, when in reality the question of their social relevance and the public's interest in their work remained unsolved. This, he writes, created "an atmosphere of giddiness in which dreamlike demands, such as the right to remake the world and be paid for doing so, were tiresomely reiterated." See "The Profession of Art: The W.P.A. Art Project," 195.

⁹³ Kadish was in New York from September of 1937 to August of 1938. He later claimed that he went to New York to be with a girlfriend, and that he left when the relationship didn't work out. See Oral History Interviews for more detail.

through the same painful poverty and long process of getting on relief that his friend had experienced the year before. Like Guston, Kadish came with recommendation letters from California WPA administrators, but he too struggled to get on relief.⁹⁴ While he was in New York, Kadish continued to correspond with their old friend Jules Langsner. At the time, Langsner was attempting to found a new group for intellectuals on the left in Los Angeles in order “to invigorate & clarify our own work & to synthesize it with the life of the community.” After updating his friend on his efforts, he asked Kadish a series of questions: “Do you ever discuss “direction” etc with any of the boys? What is the response to such ideas as we are discussing? Or are they all careering? I’m glad that Phil is prospering but it is bit early to be getting soft. How come?”⁹⁵ Guston was establishing his career, and he undoubtedly benefitted from the ability to experiment, work, and develop on a relief salary. However, he and his friends also recognized that the advances of the art projects complicated their relationship with the labor movement. American artists on the left were entering unknown territory, and their role in the struggle for working-class emancipation was increasingly unclear.

⁹⁴ Kadish’s recommendation letter from Joseph Danysh survives in his archives. See Joseph Danysh recommendation letter for Reuben Kadish, August 15, 1937, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 44, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. Ultimately, Kadish was unable to get on relief in New York. After about a year in the City, he moved back to San Francisco, where he secured a job as a WPA administrator. See his Oral History Interviews for his account of moving back to San Francisco and the particularities of working in WPA administration.

⁹⁵ Jules Langsner to Reuben Kadish, March 1938, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 21, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

Chapter 4

Transition

After years of widespread economic crisis and sweeping governmental reforms in the depths of the Great Depression, a group of New York businessmen wanted to reassert corporate control of the U.S. economy. They began planning a major public event, wherein a wide variety of corporations could display cutting-edge technology in order to encourage consumption and project a sense of confidence in the future of American industry. Led by former New York City Police Commissioner Grover Whalen, the New York World's Fair Corporation spent the second half of the 1930s organizing the largest World's Fair in the United States since the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. The Fair opened in the spring of 1939, and millions of visitors from around the world witnessed the innovations brought by American business. "The World of Tomorrow" was divided into various zones dedicated to specific industries. The Transportation Zone featured a racetrack built by Ford and an air-conditioned theater built by Chrysler showing the step-by-step manufacturing of a Plymouth automobile. The Food Zone displayed achievements in industrial milk and bread production. The Production Zone featured new products available for the American consumer, including color film produced by Kodak, rayon clothing made by DuPont, and some of the first commercially available air-conditioners produced by Carrier. Westinghouse created a 7-foot-tall robot named "Electro," who wowed visitors by explaining the importance of electricity to America's future. The Communication Zone was similarly bursting with new products, including electric typewriters, radios, cameras, telephones and more. RCA demonstrated FM radio transmission to the public for the first time, and AT&T allowed visitors to make free long-distance calls.¹

The Community Interests Zone featured smaller pavilions organized thematically rather than dedicated to individual private corporations. This included displays on medicine, scientific

¹ For a complete account of the many zones of the fair and the individual displays within them, see Bill Cotter, *The 1939-1940 New York Worlds' Fair* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009).

education, fashion, religion, art, home building, gardening, and farming. Within this zone, the federal government sponsored a pavilion displaying the achievements of the Works Progress Administration.² In the middle of this grand spectacle of corporate capital, the WPA had a small building to fill with examples of the work completed by all five federal cultural projects as well as the various construction and infrastructure projects completed by the administration from 1935-1939. A number of murals were commissioned for the building, including one large exterior mural, which was on the curved wall above the pavilion's front entrance (fig. 4.1). The mural, titled *Maintaining America's Skills*, depicts four monumental laborers: a construction worker, a scientific researcher, a surveyor, and a cement paver all work diligently. Although they work separately, their workspaces are intertwined – flattened planes of color intersect and connect between the figures, creating an abstracted and generalized space of concurrent labor. Each of their jobs is focused on constructing a better future – new buildings, new territories, and new discoveries. Below the image, the words WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION project a sense of pride. These four workers, representative of the millions supported by the WPA, were able to maintain a living and contribute to the rehabilitation and growth of a country devastated by economic crisis.

Philip Guston painted *Maintaining America's Skills* after years of preparation – he began working on the design in 1937. The mural was the culmination of a difficult but formative time in Guston's life. After years of struggle as a young artist, filled with poverty and uncertainty, he painted a mural that was seen by millions of visitors, on the façade of the building celebrating the accomplishments of a massive governmental undertaking. He received critical acclaim for the

² The buildings dedicated to the arts at the Worlds' Fair were only included after public pressure against the Worlds' Fair Corporation in the press by the American Artists' Congress and supporters of the arts. For more, see A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 135-137.



Figure 4.1, Philip Guston, *Maintaining America's Skills*, 1937-39, at the New York Worlds' Fair in Queens, New York.

mural, and his career as a professional painter was finally established. The mural represented validation for Guston's work as an individual and for the efforts of the WPA as a whole. It was a statement of pride in the New Deal relief programs as the country was trying to return to "business as usual." The presence of the WPA building at the New York Worlds' Fair reflects a simultaneous return of the production of art to the private sphere and a qualitative transformation of the arts under Federal patronage. Guston's mural expressed pride while also recognizing the temporary nature of these programs, and the mural itself was temporary. The building that celebrated the achievements of government-sponsored artistic production would soon be demolished.

This chapter follows Guston's life and work during the final years of New Deal art programs. Guston spent the end of this period transforming his practice from public muralist to studio-based easel painter. While the previous chapter primarily focused on the structures of employment and organization for artists under these programs, this chapter will focus on the social role of art itself under the New Deal programs. The WPA was a relief organization above all, but certain strategies of display, publicity, and patronage also had a profound impact on the ways in which "fine art" was viewed, consumed, and discussed in the United States. As American industry was attempting to present its vision of America's economic future, the social role of the artist was irrevocably transformed.

While working on *Bombardment* and finishing his design for his Treasury Section mural in Commerce, GA, Philip Guston was told that there were plans for a building dedicated to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) at the upcoming New York World's Fair, and that he would have the opportunity to submit designs for a mural on the façade. He enthusiastically

reported on the possibility for work on this building to Reuben Kadish, who was getting ready to come to New York and stay in Guston's studio while attempting to get on relief with the New York FAP. Guston was thrilled by the opportunity, writing that "The CIO is having a building at the World's Fair. There is a wall, and what a wall! 100 ft high by 300 ft long (outdoor). It is a competition and I think the artists' union here will form a group to work collectively on it. Harold [Lehman] and I and a few other good guys might form a cooperative and submit one strong design – and with you coming, you'll be in on it of course."³ Guston's notion that the building was dedicated to the CIO was potentially a misunderstanding – the CIO constructed the WPA building at the World's Fair, but were not the subject of the pavilion. The purpose and contents of the building changed multiple times throughout the planning process, and Guston was likely told about the building by Burgoyne Diller directly, before any official competition announcement.⁴ At this early planning stage, Guston may have misunderstood Diller's description of the building and its role at the fair. In any case, what is clear is that for Guston, the massive scale and public setting for the mural meant that it required collaboration with other artists – what better way to decorate a building dedicated to the "one big union" than working collectively? For Guston and his friends, this was an opportunity to work together on their largest

³ Letter from Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, undated Series 2: Letters, Box 8, Folder 59, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art. Although the letter is undated, it was written after Kadish completed *A Dissertation on Alchemy* in San Francisco (early August 1937), but before Kadish arrived in New York in the fall of 1937. Kadish was preparing to come to New York from San Francisco – he stayed in New York from September of 1937 to August 1938, spending some amount of that time living in Guston's studio. In this same letter, Guston said he talked to a mural supervisor, who said he would like to hire Kadish but it would be "practically impossible – unless you go through the blood sweating business of getting on relief." He was likely referring to Burgoyne Diller. Kadish was coming to New York after having worked as a non-relief employee in San Francisco, and it seems the non-relief rolls in New York were full, so he would have had to prove his need for relief funds to be hired by the New York FAP.

⁴ Diller and Guston had a close relationship in this period, and Guston recalled they lived close to each other in the city and would frequently have long conversations about painting. See Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 39-41. Burgoyne Diller personally directed and oversaw this project, an extension of his responsibilities as the head of the New York FAP mural division. Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 109.

project yet – a continuation of their intellectual formation as high school friends in the Manual Arts group, on a national scale.

The combination of large scale, national importance, fierce competition, and the need for collaboration made the mural a massive undertaking. In Guston’s final letter to Kadish before the latter joined his friends in New York, Guston described the difficulties in the early stages of the design process for the mural, writing:

“It’s the toughest thing a guy ever came across – since nothing like it has been done before – but we are trying – a group, Lehman, I, Noguchi, and another sculptor are working on it... Other painters are designing conventional murals for it, but we are convinced that it demands an entirely new approach. I have come to such strange conclusions on this wall – artists whose work I never thought much of, seem to be just right for this mural, men like Leger for instance. Noguchi is also a good man for this thing – he is fine with his semi-abstract forms.”⁵

Isamu Noguchi, who had also recently completed a mural in Mexico, moved to New York in 1937, and worked both as a designer for private industry and as an artist on the New Deal projects.⁶ He and Guston met through the projects, and Guston’s interest in Noguchi’s work reflects Guston’s changing tastes and interests in the last years of the 1930s. Their burgeoning friendship was based on a confluence of biographical circumstance, professional development, and aesthetic formation. Guston’s growing interest in Léger and Picasso led him away from his fixation on Renaissance muralism and Siqueiros-esque perspectival experimentation.⁷ Instead, he

⁵ Guston to Kadish, undated letter, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art. Underlines are Guston’s.

⁶ For more on Noguchi’s work in Mexico, see “Body Si(gh)ting: Noguchi, Mexico, and Martha Graham,” in *Mexico and American Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 2-33.

⁷ Guston later recounted to Dore Ashton that his growing interest in Picasso and Léger began after seeing Picasso’s *Three Musicians* and Leger’s *The City* at the A.E. Gallatin Collection at New York University in 1939. See Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 40.

began to incorporate more modernist formal techniques, with simplified forms and flat planes of color intersecting and overlapping in an abstracted space. This was not a flip of the switch, but a gradual process of aesthetic synthesis. The fractured geometries of cubist painting and the brighter colors of Léger were pulling Guston in a new direction, and Noguchi was an ideal collaborator when working through these new ideas.

Noguchi's history of design work for private industry is also interesting when considering the social, political, and economic meaning of the relationship between the Works Progress Administration and the upcoming World's Fair. After moving to New York in 1937, Noguchi was commissioned to design the Zenith Radio Nurse, the world's first commercially sold electronic baby monitor (fig. 2), now widely lauded as an important example of the streamlined art deco design style of the 1930s. His success in commercial product design, where he applied his curvilinear and organic forms to household commodities, made sense in the visual space of the fair, which was filled with a wide array of streamlined and futuristic technology available to the American consumer. Many industrial designers were hired both by the organizers of the fair itself and private corporations to design their pavilions. As A. Joan Saab writes, "these designers forged a strong aesthetic connection between the official fair and the corporate fair, thereby blurring the line between public and private and presenting a model of democracy firmly grounded in consumer capitalism."⁸ The WPA building, filled with examples of large-scale public works completed under the auspices of the government, stood in contrast to the dominant and distinctly consumerist vision of private industry. And for the visitor at the fair, the presence of the WPA building may have seemed like the last gasp of breath of an era at its end – the

⁸ A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions*, 135.



Figure 4.2, Isamu Noguchi, Zenith Radio Nurse, 1937

ramping up of the American economy and a national shift in focus towards the war in Europe signaled that the culture of the 1930s was soon to be replaced with a newer, shinier model.⁹

The architects of the New Deal art programs and of the World's Fair both recognized that the Fair was a physical manifestation of the changes in the American economy in the final years of the Depression. After years of relief efforts, focused on stabilizing and protecting the American way of life, both producers and consumers were ready to look forward to the "World of Tomorrow" – a world of rapidly changing technology, massive infrastructural projects, and material abundance. The leaders of the New Deal programs were not naïve; Holger Cahill insisted that the WPA and its programs were represented at the fair, but he also knew that the justifications for government patronage were coming under increased scrutiny. Like any businessman at the Fair, Cahill felt the need to "sell" the WPA program and its benefits. However, by the time the fair opened, the future of federally funded arts patronage was looking increasingly grim. So, instead of selling a future Federal Art Project, Cahill and the other arts administrators celebrated the achievements of the WPA while also attempting to present the broader social role of art in American society. Even though the projects were coming to an end, the New Deal art programs at the Fair wanted to display the benefits of art as part of the daily experience of the average American.

⁹ The dominance of corporate interests at the Worlds' Fair was the subject of vociferous criticism by artists. In the July-August 1936 issue of *Art Front*, the printmaker Ralph M. Pearson published a long article on the coming Worlds' Fair, criticizing the Worlds' Fair Corporation for promoting profit-making private business rather than the life of the community: "We know the business mind. We know its hardboiled, shortsightedly practical, dehumanized policies, its suppression of spirit and starvation of the senses, its aesthetic ignorance and fears, its utter lack of *unprofitable* leadership, its callousness to the general *unprofitable* good – all in the name of its one and only deity. Profit. To allow that type of mind to control a Worlds' Fair is not only unsavory; it insures that what should be a great community project featuring supreme human achievements (whether commercially profitable or not) will be, instead, primarily be a "business proposition" featuring such advanced and other achievements *as fall in line with business policy*." Italics are Pearson's. See Ralph M. Pearson, "What Kind of a Worlds' Fair," *Art Front*, July-August 1936, 8-11.

This attempt to fashion art not as an elevated and autonomous realm of human culture, but instead a diffuse and quotidian aspect of human experience, was an underlying motivation in the creation of the New Deal art programs in the first place. Since the founding of the projects, Cahill and other administrators drew from the philosophy and pedagogy of John Dewey.¹⁰ Dewey's *Art as Experience*, published in 1934, was a foundational text for the architects of the Federal Art Project. For the artists working under the auspices of the federal government, the projects were primarily an economic endeavor, but for the American public, the projects were primarily educational. Many of the 5000 artists employed on the projects also acted as teachers and instructors at the FAP sponsored Community Art Centers, where people could take free classes on drawing, sculpting, painting, and art history. In fact, the WPA building at the World's Fair was originally conceived as a Community Art Center rather than a site of display: a place where visitors could stop in for classes and workshops and create art themselves while also viewing the achievements of professional artists.¹¹

Dewey insisted that the goal of any democratic arts education should be to foster conditions that allow for people to create, discuss, and interact with art as part of their daily experiences. For Dewey, aesthetic experience was a fundamental way that people understand the world and orient themselves within it. Aesthetic experience was not exclusive to the educated and refined, but instead so elemental to life that all people seek it out as a means to make sense of their relationship to their environment: "The live being recurrently loses and reestablishes equilibrium his surroundings. The moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of

¹⁰ For an extended analysis of John Dewey's aesthetic philosophy, see Scott R. Stroud, *John Dewey and the Artful Life: Pragmatism, Aesthetics, and Morality* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 109.

intensest life.”¹² All people, through their sensory apparatus and intellectual capacity, are capable of deriving social and cultural meaning from their daily lives through form. Creating a work of art, as a human tradition within its own history and shared meaning, is a means for the individual to externalize an aesthetic experience in the form of an art object. The act of viewing and interacting with an artwork brings about its own aesthetic response in the viewer, who recognizes something of their own experiences, emotions, and ideas in someone else’s work. By focusing on developing a widespread capacity for both the interpretation and creation of artwork, Dewey argued that the arts could be a fundamentally important part of community life.

The contemporary museum system, on the other hand, did not allow for this form of direct and active community connection. Dewey attributed the development of elite museum spaces, located in major urban centers and catering to a wealthy and educated upper class, to the domination of industrial capitalism; the hierarchies of economic and social life are reflected in the museum space, which holds the average viewer at a distance and treats them as passive visitors to the heightened and autonomous realm of the aesthetic.¹³ Rather than feeling like an important part of the community, where a wide range of people can participate in an active and vital conversation about art, museums instead present themselves as above the masses— a place for the exceptional. These institutions create a gap between creator and viewer, which generally makes it impossible for the average museum goer to interact with work that emerged out of their local community, instead focusing on the achievements of the past or the support of elite

¹² John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1934, republished 2005), 16. Meyer Schapiro acted as an assistant for Dewey during the writing of *Art as Experience*. In an interview with David Craven, Schapiro recounted this experience: “I was a student of John Dewey, whose classes I very much enjoyed. Dewey asked me to do a critical reading of *Art as Experience* in manuscript form. The book is important, of course, but it is marked by a tendency to treat humanity and art as extensions of nature, as products of nature, without dealing with how humanity reshapes and remakes nature, hence also itself.” Meyer Schapiro, interviewed by David Craven, July 15th, 1992, from “A Series of Interviews (July 15, 1992 to January 22, 1995),” in *Res* 31 (Spring 1997): 159.

¹³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 4-10.

contemporary artists. The creation of the work on display and the discussions surrounding these works are taking place outside of the community itself, making museums operate as enclaves of “high culture” within a local community. The erudite curators and educators of the museum then dictate bodies of information to the viewer, who passively receives knowledge developed by their social and intellectual superiors. Elite museums, which seemed to claim exclusive domain over the heightened realm of “fine art,” contained exceptional artworks, and they were presented to the people as just that – products of genius and refinement beyond the capacity of “normal” people. A visit to such a museum was a chance to witness this genius before returning to the banality of reality.

Rather than encouraging this hierarchical divide between artist and viewer, the architects of the FAP looked to Dewey’s work when considering the goals of the project, and they explicitly cited his work during the development of the FAP’s community art center program.¹⁴ Unlike museums, Community Art Centers could be places for the broad expansion of the arts throughout the country, including rural areas, allowing visitors to both see art from their community and make it themselves. Cahill celebrated the Community Art Centers as the concrete manifestation of Dewey’s ideals: “The core of the community art center idea is active participation, doing and sharing, and not merely passive seeing. If genuine learning in any field can be achieved only by doing then this is certainly true of the visual arts, whose techniques demand a coordination of brain and hand and eye. The WPA Community Art Centers emphasize learning through doing.”¹⁵ Dewey’s writing on arts education was part of his broader

¹⁴ In his foreword for *Art for the Millions*, Holger Cahill mentions the influence of John Dewey on the Federal Art Project in his very first sentence. See Holger Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts,” in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O’Connor (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 33.

¹⁵ Holger Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts,” 43.

conceptualization of the importance of an education centered on experiential rather than informational learning. For Dewey, education was not about receiving a body of knowledge delivered from above; instead, educators should provide opportunities for students to experiment, develop critical thinking, learn practical skills, and socialize with their peers. This experiential approach was meant to create more well-rounded democratic citizens whose intellectual capacity and technical skill would be used to steadily improve themselves as individuals and society as a whole over time. Victoria Grieve refers to this pedagogical philosophy focused on the development of skills and daily experience as a “mode of thought” guiding the organization of the WPA art programs.¹⁶ This is also reflected in the words of WPA artists, especially in the collective statements of the Artists’ Union, which frequently emphasized the need for incorporating the arts into the everyday lives of the people, contributing to higher goals of democratic freedom.¹⁷ For the organizers of the WPA, this was a matter of both quantity and quality – Cahill argued that the art programs brought about a huge increase in artistic activity in general, and that this created the social conditions to produce great art and great artists.¹⁸

The Deweyian pedagogical approach that undergirded the WPA art programs was out of place in the middle of a massive celebration of consumption and industrial capital. Cahill’s initial

¹⁶ Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 83.

¹⁷ “We are able today to project our program for the establishment of a Federal Bureau of Fine Arts as the agency for perpetuating and carrying on permanent Government support for the arts in America. We bring forward this program 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. Behind this program lies the logic of our national historical development as a democracy, which resulted in the establishment of our free and public system of education over one hundred years ago.” Chet la More, “The Artists’ Union of America,” in *Art For the Millions*, 238.

¹⁸ “The creative activity of American art today is enormous. What of the public as appreciator and participant? The history of art seems to indicate that where the general level of art production is high the artist is reaching publics whose standards of taste are equal to his performance... The American public as participant in the experience of art has developed a wide tolerance and a deep interest. I believe that we have today greater resources of popular interest in the visual arts than at any other time in our history.” Cahill then mentions the huge growth in the circulation of art books and publications, and the community art center program’s role in expanding access to the arts. Holger Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts,” 35.

desire for the WPA building at the fair to be a community art center would have doubled this dissonance. Major American corporations at the fair, such as IBM, 3M, and Ford, wanted the viewer to enter a world filled with innovative products and technology beyond what they considered possible. A Community Art Center, where the visitor could engage their creative faculty without any relationship to the free market, would run counter to the core message of the fair. However, the fact that the WPA had just one building among many also reinforced the Deweyian educational goals of the projects – rather than getting a place of privilege, the arts were placed at the same level as any other niche of American life. Jonathan Harris described the wide range of cultural and technological pursuits on display at the fair as having a flattening effect – the simultaneity of display seemingly eliminated hierarchies of social/cultural importance while still maintaining the separation between active producer and passive consumer.¹⁹ This flattening also reflected the importance of the WPA in the development of the “middlebrow.” In the interwar years, there was a growth in the notion of the “public intellectual,” who influenced tastes and explained complex cultural formations to a wider public. Access to culture for the middle class was mediated through the growth of book of the month clubs, art and literature criticism in daily newspapers, and the publication of books meant to introduce readers to the basics of academic fields like philosophy and art history.²⁰ The WPA model, which encouraged a sort of “meeting in the middle” of quotidian popular culture and advanced, aesthetically refined “fine art,” also played an important role in this mediated expansion of

¹⁹ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 104-108.

²⁰ For more on this industry of mediated access to culture, see Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

culture, especially through public exhibitions, learning from professional artists at community arts centers, and the publication of widely available art books.²¹

The artists working on the WPA building recognized that their place at the Worlds' Fair presented a unique opportunity for connecting with a mass public. While Guston climbed the scaffolding each day to work on the exterior mural, Anton Refregier, Seymour Fogel, Ryah Ludens, Eric Mose, and Lou Ross painted interior murals. The location and scope of the Worlds' Fair created an interesting collective identity for these artists; as they were all New York based and working for a common employer, they could see their work as an expression of a local artistic community that would be seen by an international audience. Refregier, who was assigned a mural celebrating the cultural achievements of the WPA, recognized that he and his fellow muralists were part of a relatively unprecedented undertaking in the modern period. Like Guston, Refregier was a member of the Artists' Union, a former member of the John Reed Club, and a muralist interested in Renaissance fresco painting. For Refregier, his work being seen by this mass audience was a thrilling possibility. He was willing to forego acknowledgment within the art world in favor of public recognition, and hoped that artists could achieve a "less exalted but more relevant" social position.²² The team of muralists at the WPA building worked in close proximity to each other for months; their collective effort for a civic program, which was ultimately meant for a mass public, instilled an inherent sense of social and cultural relevance. Refregier compared their work to the great muralists of the Renaissance; in his diary from his

²¹ Victoria Grieve argues that the FAP, especially through the Community Art Centers, played an important role in establishing systems of mediated cultural access, wherein locals could sustain their arts communities after getting their start through federal funding. Specifically, she points out that a number of Community Art Centers in cities such as Minneapolis, Sioux City, Oklahoma City, and St. Louis, established by the FAP, remained in operation for decades after the end of the WPA, sustained by local funding. For more on her analysis of the role of the Community Art Centers, see Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, 83-162.

²² Isadora Anderson Helfgott, *Framing the Audience: Art and the Politics of Culture in the United States, 1929-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 31.

time working on his World's Fair mural, he would regularly describe his joy at seeing so many talented artists working together for a common cause. In an entry from January, 1939, he wrote:

“The work is going full swing. The workshop is the closest to the Renaissance of anything, I'm sure, to have ever happened in the States. My assistants and I have the central part of the studio. To the left, Philip Guston is working on the full-size drawings for the mural he is going to do for the outdoor wall of the building. In front of us, Sy Vogel is working on a large canvas. In back, Eric Mose with his assistants. Other artists are working elsewhere. Every person here is dedicated to the Project. Everyone feels and knows that we must do our utmost. We know that there are a bunch of commercial mural painters preparing murals for the different buildings of the fair. Hildreth Miere and others. They are making at least ten times more money than we are. But they can have it. Theirs will be the usual commercial crap. They are not moved as we are by our content – by our search for creative and contemporary design – by our concern for people. WE are the mural painters. We hope we are catching up with our great fellow artists of Mexico. We will show what mural painting can be!!”²³

Refregier was one of many artists and arts administrators of the period who drew connections between the public muralism of the federal art programs and the history of Renaissance muralism. Many muralists were fascinated by their anachronistic understanding of the social role of the Renaissance muralist. In Giotto, Masaccio, and Uccello, they saw artists whose social relevance and connection to their community was unquestionable – their work, adorning places of worship, seen by a community that looked at these images with deep spiritual

²³ Anton Refregier, “Notes on Mural – WPA Building – New York Worlds’ Fair,” 1938-39, Series 4: Diaries and Journals, Box 15, Folder 5, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.. For more on the other murals at the fair, see Jody Patterson, “The World of Tomorrow,” in *Modernism for the Masses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 177-202.

and social meaning, was an active and vital part of the life of the people. For these 20th-century artists, Renaissance muralists did not have to justify their own work – instead, those in power sought out and supported their work because they recognized that public art was a fundamental part of social and cultural life. California WPA administrator Joe Danysh made this comparison directly, saying “I’m sure that the conditions of the Renaissance channeled the energy and the interest of men of genius, talent, into art because art was a respected and sought-after cultural thing. Artists were men of importance.”²⁴ Even though he quickly mentioned that an artist like Benvenuto Cellini was often treated like a “bum,” he still returned to the idea that powerful people deferred to artists who recognized the quality of their work and its importance to the community. For Refregier, Danysh, and others in the period, the Renaissance artist had a fundamentally different social role than the modern artist – in their eyes, the Great Masters of the past and their work were *inherently* socially relevant due to their direct connection to public religious life.

The contradiction that these artists and administrators never fully solved, however, was the analogous ideological grounding for their work under modern industrial capitalism. They aspired to achieve the social relevance of Giotto or Masaccio, but there was no equivalent public communal setting for their art like the cathedral, nor an equivalent communal spiritual practice like Catholicism. Instead, the federal art programs placed art in essentially incidental locations – post offices, government buildings, public schools – where members of the community might glimpse at a painting while going about their daily business, rather than interact with an art object as part of an explicitly spiritual experience. Here, at the Fair, their work was quite literally surrounded and overwhelmed by corporate advertising. And, perhaps most importantly, the

²⁴ Joe Danysh, oral history interview with Joe Danysh, December 3rd, 1964, interview by Lewis Ferbraché, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

artists working on these murals were aware that budgets were being slashed and the long-term future of the WPA was bleak. In many ways, their social role was spelled out explicitly by their position at the Fair. Rather than projecting a sense of social relevance, the WPA building at the fair seemed to do the opposite; their work, funded by government, was just a temporary necessity. They were a curio, a holdover from a past civilization that valued their craft but was now ready to move on in favor of consumer comforts.

When designing the mural for the WPA building, Guston had to consider the past achievements of the New Deal art program, the ongoing educational goals of the FAP, and the future role of art in post-Depression America. Although the design was planned as a collaboration, by 1939 Guston was the sole credited artist for the façade mural. Between the strong design and his already close relationship with Burgoyne Diller, Guston won the commission for a building that was going to be seen by millions. *Maintaining America's Skills* was unlike anything Guston had done before. For the complex outdoor mural, on a curved wall, Guston worked with new material – industrial rubber paint. Although he had spent much of the decade looking to the Renaissance, for this mural Guston incorporated certain modernist techniques for the first time in his public work. Unlike Refregier, it seems that Guston recognized that he could not look to the past for this project. The resulting mural is a synthesis of Guston's pre-existing figural style and cubist techniques of fragmentation, geometric forms, and flat planes of color. Compared to his work earlier in the decade, *Maintaining America's Skills* is strikingly contemporary.

In all of his previous murals, Guston and his collaborators depicted depth in space, usually with Guston's signature brick/stone block walls enclosing an empty architectural space

for figures to inhabit. In other murals, such as the Treasury Section mural in Commerce, GA or his design for the San Antonio post office, Guston moved his figures outdoors, but still used lines converging at various vanishing points to depict figures with spatial depth. In the World's Fair mural, however, the four monumental laborers sit on top of flattened abstractions; in fact, they do not seem to occupy the same space at all. Considering each figure from left to right will illustrate the major formal changes Guston experimented with for this mural.

On the far left, the paver's massive form is framed by a flat background made to look like a generic engineer's blueprint. He stands tall, with his chest perpendicular to the viewer. In his right hand, he holds a trowel, but does not seem to grip it – instead, it rests on top of his palm, defying gravity as it sits perfectly balanced. Compared to his figures at Morelia, Duarte, and Commerce, where each figure is modeled with characteristic Quattrocento-inspired shadow, twisting and turning in space, this figure stands stiff and confronts the viewer directly. Where his earlier figures have individually modeled muscles and wrinkles in their skin, the paver appears totally smooth, as if he is constructed out of polished metal. His clothing also appears perfectly flat – his left knee is bent, but this is articulated by four converging flat planes, rather than the folds of drapery and detailed anatomy seen in his earlier work. This is also true of the female scientist figure looking through a microscope to the right, whose dress stretches around her knees in simple horizontal bands rather than deep curving folds. Behind her, there is some indication of an outdoor space. Two lines from the blueprint coalesce into a pipe, which stretches into the distance. However, the landscape is so stylized and devoid of shadow that it also appears perfectly flat, more akin to the abstractions of Fernand Leger or Stuart Davis than Quattrocento muralism. The top of the landscape is also abruptly cut off by a precisely rendered piece of construction in progress. Guston simply articulates the building's skeleton through three

horizontal planes intersected by a single vertical line, creating a geometric rhythm that also serves to disrupt any sense of spatial depth in the landscape below. Behind the scientist, a male surveyor seems to spring out from her shoulders, totally unmoored from any sense of place. His upper body sits directly on the neutral ground of the building's wall, without any painted background. Below his theodolite, the fourth and final figure is breaking up stone with a jackhammer. The pieces of fractured stone, a motif Guston had used before (figs. 4.3 and 4.4), are separated by thick black voids with no shading or modeling, creating a purely abstracted surface pattern. Behind the jackhammer, we see another glimpse of one of Guston's old motifs, the brick wall. But here, the wall does not enclose the space of the figures; instead, it is a partially obscured piece of background detail. Finally, the entire composition is unframed – while all of his previous murals were framed by the limits of their architectural space, *Maintaining America's Skills* seems to float unbounded on the curved wall. With Guston working through new ideas for the first time at such a large scale, the result is somewhat awkward. However, his mural did capture a sense of labor in action around the country, facilitated by the Works Progress Administration.

The mural was the beginning of some major formal changes that Guston would continue to explore in the coming years. His mural was well received by critics, including a glowing review in the *New York Times*. The FAP organized a popular vote on the best murals at the fair, and Guston's mural was declared the winner, with Refregier's mural receiving second place.²⁵ In many ways, Guston's mural was the culminating work for the WPA period. He married his

²⁵ Ruth Green Harris, "The Public Taste in Murals: Underlying Ideas vs Pictorial Quality in Favorite examples at World's Fair," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1940. Guston also kept the announcement the results of the vote in his papers. "For Immediate Release: Federal Art Project Murals Win First and Second Place in Worlds' Fair Competition," August 9th, 1939, Philip Guston Foundation Archives, Woodstock, NY. Refregier also mentions the results of this vote in his notes from the Worlds' Fair, Anton Refregier Papers, Archives of American Art.



Figure 4.3, Philip Guston, detail of fractured stone from drawing for *Conspirators*, 1930-32.

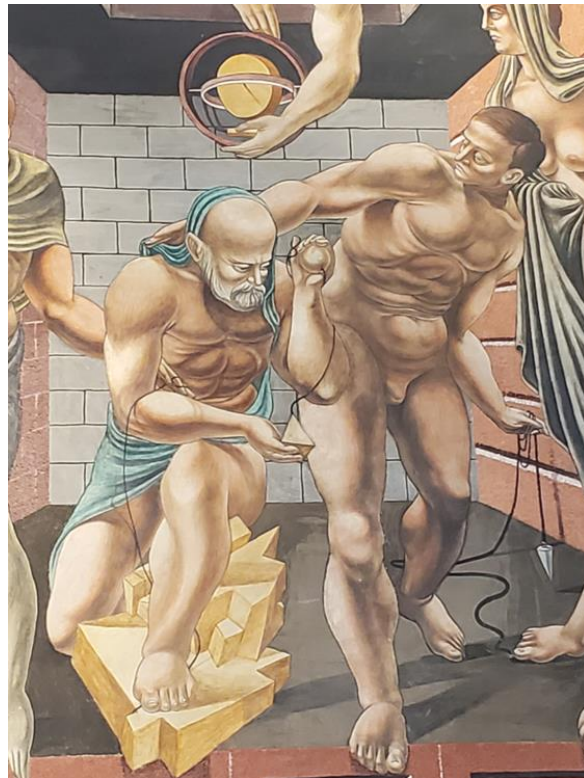


Figure 4.4, Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish, detail of fracture stone from *The History of Medicine*, 1935-36, Duarte, CA.

monumental figural mural style, inspired by Mexican muralism and Renaissance fresco painting, to new modernist formal developments, connecting two of the major styles of WPA artists. A young artist, able to maintain a career because of the relief programs of the New Deal, created an image to represent the entire federal relief program, and it was displayed to a mass public. But it came with a recognition that government-funded art was an anomaly in American history – the title itself says that these programs were a temporary necessity, an exception to the norm that would soon be rectified, despite calls for a permanent project. The mural’s life at the fair also reflected the sweeping changes occurring in the New Deal programs as the government prepared for the possibility of war. Within a few months of the fair’s opening, the WPA was rolled into the Federal Works Agency, which was a combination of various federal relief and public works agencies.²⁶ This limited the budget of the art programs, as much of their funding was redirected to other public works programs under the FWA.²⁷ This reorganization was an obvious sign of the end of the New Deal art programs; years of accusations of money wasted on irrelevant art, which continued at the World’s Fair itself, took on a new significance after the outbreak of war in Europe. Although the FAP and the Treasury Section would continue to fund public art for the next few years, the Reorganization Act of 1939 was the first major step in the termination of the art projects, as well as the New Deal as a whole. This fact was obvious to those who supported the WPA and the New Deal art projects. The journalist and historian Joseph Starobin, writing in the *New Masses*, echoed the widespread pessimism about the future of the art projects in the Spring of 1939: “If one reads the signs of 1939 correctly, the projects are facing more than a

²⁶ The organizations consolidated into the FWA were the Bureau of Public Roads, the Public Buildings Branch of the Procurement Division, the Branch of Buildings Management of the National Park Service, the United States Housing Authority, the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, and the Works Progress Administration.

²⁷ For more on the Reorganization Act and its effects on the art programs, see Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 129-30.

fight for their continuation, more than a fight to retain an existing status which is itself a reduction from the 1936-37 levels. The fight to retain the federal art achievements can only be realistic in the context of larger issues in which the New Deal as a whole is at stake.”²⁸ Artists at the fair began to feel the pressure of budget reorganization – for example, Refregier was dismayed to learn that the FWA decided not to fund a theatrical performance that was initially meant to accompany his mural.²⁹ This change of plans was indicative of the increasingly limited scope of the art programs, despite the positive reception of the murals in mainstream press.

The Reorganization Act may have redirected much of the WPA’s budget, but they did still continue to fund public mural commissions. While his mural was up at the Fair, Guston completed another government mural at the Queensbridge Public Housing Project in Long Island City, Queens, New York. Guston had actually received the commission in 1938 but paused this work while completing *Maintaining America’s Skills*. After the opening of the fair in April 1939, Guston returned to the public housing mural. Titled *Work and Play*, the mural at Queensbridge shows Guston’s continued development of an increasingly modernist style, influenced by Léger and Picasso (fig. 4.5). For the wall in the Jacob A. Riis Settlement House Community Center, Guston painted a long horizontal scene filled with figures partaking in a wide variety of activities. Some of the figures are pulled from his previous murals, while others would go on to feature in future work. The jackhammering construction worker from *Maintaining America’s*

²⁸ Joseph Starobin, “Barbarians on Capitol Hill,” *New Masses*, May 9, 1939.

²⁹ “Only recently Congress wiped out the Theatre Project. It was Congressman Woodrum who got up on the floor of Congress and read some passages from plays produced by the WPA and that might have touched on sex. And as a true demagogue asked: “Is this what government money is going for?” The Project was killed. There will be no performance in the theater. And so very few people will wander into the lobby to see my murals. But how can I think of this when there are hundreds of theater people from the project all over the country who are now without means of support and who are now denied the right to practice their art and thus serve the people. Now there is danger of Congress destroying all the rest of the Cultural Projects. For years they have been trying to do this.” Anton Refregier, “Notes on Mural – WPA Building – New York Worlds’ Fair,” Anton Refregier papers, Archives of American Art.



Figure 4.5, Philip Guston, *Work and Play*, 1938-40, at the Queensbridge Housing Project in Long Island City, Queens, New York.

Skills is now here in Queensbridge, at work on the left side of the image in front of a stylized crane and blueprint. Guston also re-used the gestures and body positioning of two other figures from the World's Fair mural; one of the men playing with a basketball moves his right arm in front of his face in the same manner as the surveyor from the previous mural, and the woman playing cello sits in nearly the same position as the female scientist. In fact, Guston had been refining some of these motifs for years – the group of basketball players is a recontextualization of the basketball players in Guston's drawing for the cancelled mural in King's County Hospital (fig. 6). So, Guston recontextualized one figure in the group for the World's Fair mural, then re-used the group in its entirety for the mural at Queensbridge. It may be that Guston returned to this group because *Recreation and Athletics* was never completed, but in any case, he was clearly refining a certain vocabulary of gestures and postures that he would return regularly re-use in his figural painting. Overall, the mural emphasizes the benefits of a healthy community, enlivened by both labor and leisure. The joys of both mind and body are supported by the life within the local community, with the figures on the wall reflecting the best outcomes of public housing. There at the Community Center, residents of Queensbridge could take part in educational initiatives, sporting events, and community life, and their social and educational development was reflected in the painting above them.

While painting the mural, Guston was under scrutiny by WPA administrators. By the late 30s, federal officials were increasingly concerned by potentially subversive Communist messages in WPA artworks.³⁰ Guston was forced to pause his painting for a few weeks while censors investigated his mural; supposedly, they thought that Guston was attempting to include a

³⁰ For more on the efforts to stop Communism and subversion on the WPA Cultural Projects, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 147-154 and Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 137-149.

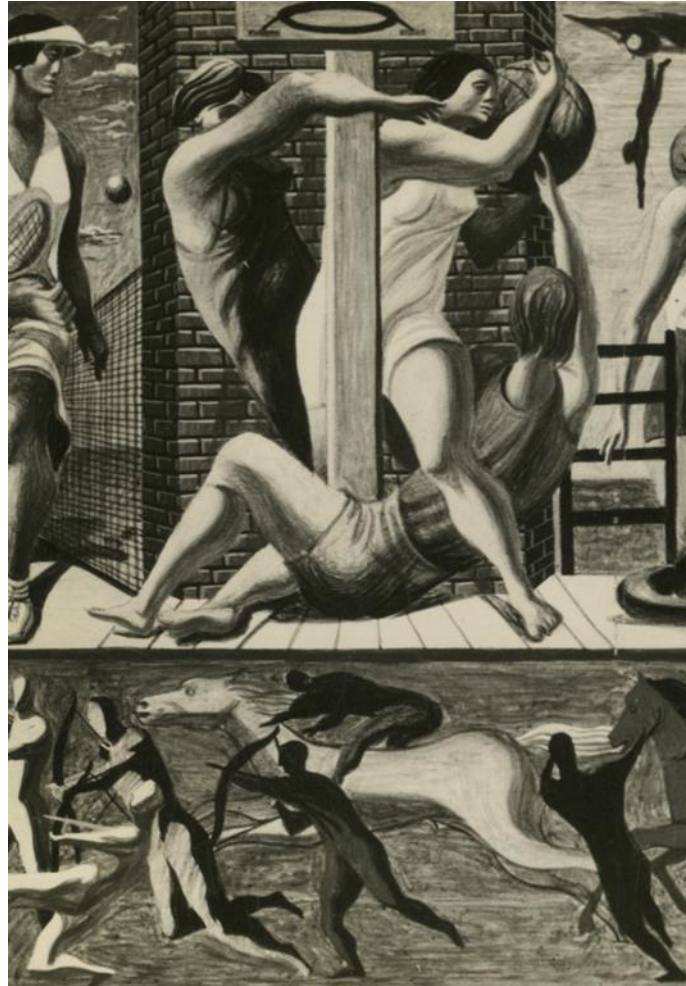


Figure 4.6, Philip Guston, detail of basketball players from study for *Recreation and Athletics*, 1937-38

hidden hammer and sickle in the form of the curved dog's tail intersecting with the leg of a boy on the left side of the image (fig. 4.7). Guston later recalled this episode with a sense of amusement, recognizing the absurdity of these desperate attempts to root out Communist influence.³¹ These censorious efforts on the part of WPA officials correlated with budget cuts after the Reorganization Act of 1939, as long-standing accusations of money wasted on public art became inextricably tied with the drive to redirect government spending towards war preparation. This also overlapped with the increasingly common characterization of federally employed artists as Communist layabouts, who were taking money from the government rather than finding traditional employment.³² WPA officials felt the need to prove that no federal money was being spent on subversive political statements; these administrators, under the watchful eye of reactionary politicians, were wielding a hammer, and they saw Guston's mural as a potential nail.

After a brief inquiry, Guston was allowed to return to painting. Working in the middle of a lively community center also attracted the attention of the residents of Queensbridge. Guston took the opportunity to show local children his painting techniques, demonstrating the process of mural painting to a curious audience (fig. 4.8). Through this public act of teaching, Guston was able to connect his own labor to the larger life of the community. The mural emphasizes the wide range of activity supported by robust public life, and his own work as a painter and teacher became one of the many activities taking place in the community of Queensbridge. In this period, Guston became increasingly focused on education, which would become central to the next decade of his career.

³¹ Guston related this story to Dore Ashton in his notes for her typescript of *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, and she repeated the story in the final version of the book. See Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 46.

³² Harris analyzes relationship between anti-communism and criticisms of the art projects in detail in the final chapter of *Federal Art and National Culture*, 121-149.



Figure 4.7, Philip Guston, detail of boys play-fighting and dog's tail from *Work and Play*, 1938-40.



Figure 4.8, Philip Guston teaching local children while painting *Work and Play*, 1940

In 1939, Guston joined the faculty at the American Artists School.³³ The AAS was founded after the dissolution of the John Reed Clubs in February, 1936 – the advisory board consisted of many well-known John Reed Club and Artists’ Union members such as William Gropper, Margaret Bourke-White, Max Weber, and Stuart Davis, as well as prominent writers and intellectuals such as Lewis Mumford, Walter Pach, and Meyer Schapiro.³⁴ The school was dedicated to the development of technical artistic skills, as well as a broader program of individual self-actualization and social education. The school published a mission statement in a brochure from 1936: “The American Artists School . . . establishes its fundamental premise that the student must be developed as an independent thinker at the same time he is trained to be a competent artist.”³⁵ The painter Max Weber followed this statement with one of his own, writing the following:

“This era calls for a new aggressive independent art which should serve as a dominant educational and social force. We must have an art that will cope and interlock with the rapidly changing philosophy of life, an art that will express the new vision, reality and hope, an art that will extricate itself slowly from squander, abuse and academic servility. The American Artists School, realizing this, is instituting an investigative method of training in the plastic arts. The artists conducting this school are motivated solely by

³³ I have not seen any mention of Guston’s time at the American Artists’ School in scholarship. However, there are multiple archival documents from the American Artists’ School in Anton Refregier’s papers with Guston’s name listed as faculty. He is listed under “faculty” on the School’s official letterhead in letters from June and December 1939, so he taught there for at least six months. See letter from Louise Redfield to Anton Refregier, June 23rd, 1939 and letter from Stuart Edie to Anton Refregier, December 5th 1939, Series 2: Correspondence, Box 1, Folder 38, Anton Refregier Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

³⁴ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, “The American Artists School: Radical Heritage and Social Content Art,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 26, no. 4 (1986): 17. This is one of the few pieces of scholarship on the School, and contains crucial information about the activities organized by the School.

³⁵ Marquardt, “The American Artists School,” 18.

these aspirations, and are seriously bent upon supplying this long felt need in art education.”³⁶

The school offered classes in drawing, painting, sculpture, illustration, mural painting, and cartooning. While these classes were meant to develop technical skills, students were generally encouraged to make work on social issues and the realities of American life. Additionally, the school hosted a series of lectures, most of which were focused on politics and economics, rather than aesthetic issues. Overall, the school wanted its students to draw from their daily experiences of American life and create an art suited to that environment. The language of the school is clearly related to the statements of the John Reed Club and the American Artists’ Congress, but with a more direct focus on the creation of an individual’s artistic perspective through a combination of technical and intellectual development. In the May 1937 issue of *Art Front*, Philip Evergood emphasized the openness and democratic nature of the School’s pedagogy:

“There is no rule for creating an American Art. We of the American Artists School don’t presume to have the secret. But we are doing this; we believe that artists that can clearly see the complicated structure of America and pick out its basic social pattern, who are sympathetic to its people and its culture and traditions, who are interested in the psychology of its classes and groups have the basis for saying something about America.”³⁷

By 1939, when Guston joined the teaching faculty, the school had introduced its first art history courses, as well as more technical classes on pottery, architecture, and anatomy. This was one of Guston’s first formal teaching experiences, and in the following years of the 1940s Guston

³⁶ Marquardt, “The American Artists School,” 18.

³⁷ Philip Evergood, “Building a New Art School,” *Art Front*, May 1937, 22.

continued teaching at multiple schools. Although the School was short lived, closing in 1941, its brief existence speaks to the changing circumstances for socially minded artists in the late 1930s. Like the American Artists' Congress, the School dropped the overtly revolutionary language of the John Reed Club – the Congress and the School both reflect the changing strategies of the Popular Front, focusing on individual development rather than the advancement of class consciousness and working-class emancipation. Although students were encouraged to engage with and make work relating to social issues, there was far less emphasis placed on the relationship between art and active class struggle. The School was a continuation of certain educational and social practices of the John Reed Club, but the revolutionary energy of the early 1930s had at this point been redirected to support for the liberal reforms of the New Deal and the Popular Front coalition.

While Guston was beginning to establish his teaching career in 1939, he also found a new motif that would interest him for the next few years of his life: groups of children play-fighting with hand-made equipment. Guston first explored this subject as part of the figural program of the Queensbridge mural (fig. 4.7). Three boys, their faces obscured either by their improvised armor or by their position relative to the viewer, are engaged in a mock battle, using trash can lids, rope, and pieces of wood as shields and weapons. A dog, seemingly riled up by the intensity of the skirmish, attempts to join the boys' fun. Guston said he saw boys fighting with trash can lids on the street, and he was fascinated by the scene. The moment of playful conflict triggered an association with the work of Paolo Uccello (fig. 4.9), whose work he had admired since seeing being shown reproductions by Schwankovsky and Feitelson in Los Angeles.³⁸

³⁸ Ashton mentions that William Gropper had explored a similar subject in the *New Masses* and in his paintings, which Guston may have seen at some point – Guston did not recall these works, but given the fact that Gropper was a teacher at the AAS, and a prominent New York artist running in similar circles, it is likely Guston encountered his work at some point. Gropper was also an executive member of the Artists' Union. For Ashton's reference to



Figure 4.9, Paolo Uccello, *Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano*, 1438-40

Gropper and Guston's note in response, see Guston's notes to Ashton's typescript, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art. Specifically, Gropper had a show at the ACA gallery in March 1937, when Guston was just getting established in the city and frequently attending shows at the ACA Gallery. The show featured a painting of children in oversized military uniforms. See "ACA Galleries, Paintings by William Gropper, 1937 March 7-21," William Gropper papers, 1916-1983, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The foreshortened dead soldier on the ground in the first painting in Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* series is potentially the source of Guston's prone figures lying perpendicular to the viewer, seen in quite a few of Guston's mural designs (Morelia Mural, King's County Hospital Study, San Antonio Post Office Study)

After including this scene at Queensbridge, he returned to the subject in 1940 for a standalone easel painting titled *Gladiators* (fig. 4.10).³⁹ Here, a fourth boy has joined the clash between the three boys and the dog from Queensbridge. Each figure seems to swirl around the center-point of the image as they grab and swing at each other. Guston had used a similar circular composition for *Bombardment*, but instead of providing a sense of depth in space, in *Gladiators* he flattens out and abstracts the space around his figures. The increasing influence of Max Beckmann on Guston's work is clear here – although the two artists had very different approaches to color and texture, Beckmann's heavily costumed figures, often wielding crude enigmatic objects and interacting in tight spaces, interested Guston in this period.⁴⁰ Although he was also developing an interest in cubism, Beckmann's solid and heavy objects, rendered with thick black lines, provided a forceful counter to the fractured geometry of Picasso and Léger. *Gladiators* also shares some qualities with the work of Guston's old friend Fletcher Martin. His painting *Trouble in Frisco*, which was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1939, shows a fist fight between a dockworker and a strikebreaker, seen through a porthole of a ship (fig. 4.11). The fight in Martin's painting also circles around a center point, and displays a similar interest in ripples of clothing and the physicality of hand-to-hand combat. Guston's various interests coalesced in this dynamic and colorful scene, and the painting marked a significant change in his

³⁹ Although I have not seen it mentioned in any of Guston's recollections, I speculate that Giorgio de Chirico's *Gladiators and Lion* (1927) may have been a source of inspiration for Guston. The painting was acquired by the Detroit Institute of Fine Arts in 1928 and was reproduced in various American catalogs and publications in the late 20s and early 30s. It features a similar circular composition and a brick wall backdrop. De Chirico's work on similar subjects could act as a bridge for Guston, connecting his older interests and painting style with his newly developing subject matter and interest in Modernist techniques.

⁴⁰ Stephen Greene, Guston's student at Iowa in the 1940s, recalled that they would regularly discuss Beckmann, writing to Dore Ashton that "We did talk a lot about Beckmann, a great deal... What neither of us really understood about Beckmann was the toughness, the physical toughness of the paint, the ways things are put to-gether, the unyielding, non-seductive side of Beckmann that was so essential. Perhaps what moved us most was that overwhelming psychological impact that we felt close to." See notes provided to Dore Ashton, in her research files for *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Series 4: Research Files, Box 8, Folder 26, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. Ashton expands on Guston's interest in Beckmann in *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 64-65.



Figure 4.10, Philip Guston, *Gladiators*, 1940



Figure 4.11, Fletcher Martin, *Trouble in Frisco*, 1938

practice – after *Gladiators*, he began to focus almost exclusively on easel painting, which would be his primary medium for the rest of his career.

For *Gladiators*, Guston essentially isolated one of the groups of figures from Queensbridge into their own painting; in 1941, Guston returned to the subject of children in mock battle with an entirely new composition, which he titled *Martial Memory* (fig. 4.12). Guston later described this image as his first fully mature easel painting.⁴¹ Five boys, equipped with paper hats, teapot helmets, sticks, cardboard wings, and trash-can lid shields, huddle in the center of the image. While the boys in *Gladiators* and *Work and Play* were in the midst of battle, these warriors are in a moment of rest, seemingly gathering themselves before continuing their fight. In contrast to the bright colors of *Gladiators*, in *Martial Memory* Guston uses a soft palette of blues, browns, grays, woody yellows, and brick red to create this scene of urban life. The boys seem to blend in with their environment; the colors of their clothing and skin tones are reflected in the buildings and street debris around them. Guston's familiar brick wall blocks the view of the street in the background, making the buildings appear as if they are floating unmoored, beyond human control. This armed group huddled in front of a brick-wall recalls his work from the beginning of the decade, but with a much greater emphasis on symbolism and psychology – Guston has replaced the ghoulish KKK members of *Conspirators*, whose violent intentions are clear and unilateral, with this more opaque group of internally warring boys. There is an eerie stillness to this image that creates a sense of foreboding possibility – although these boys are in a brief moment of mutual peace, the potential for violence lurks at the edges of the composition, as if they are ready to burst into brutal action in an instant.

⁴¹ Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 47.

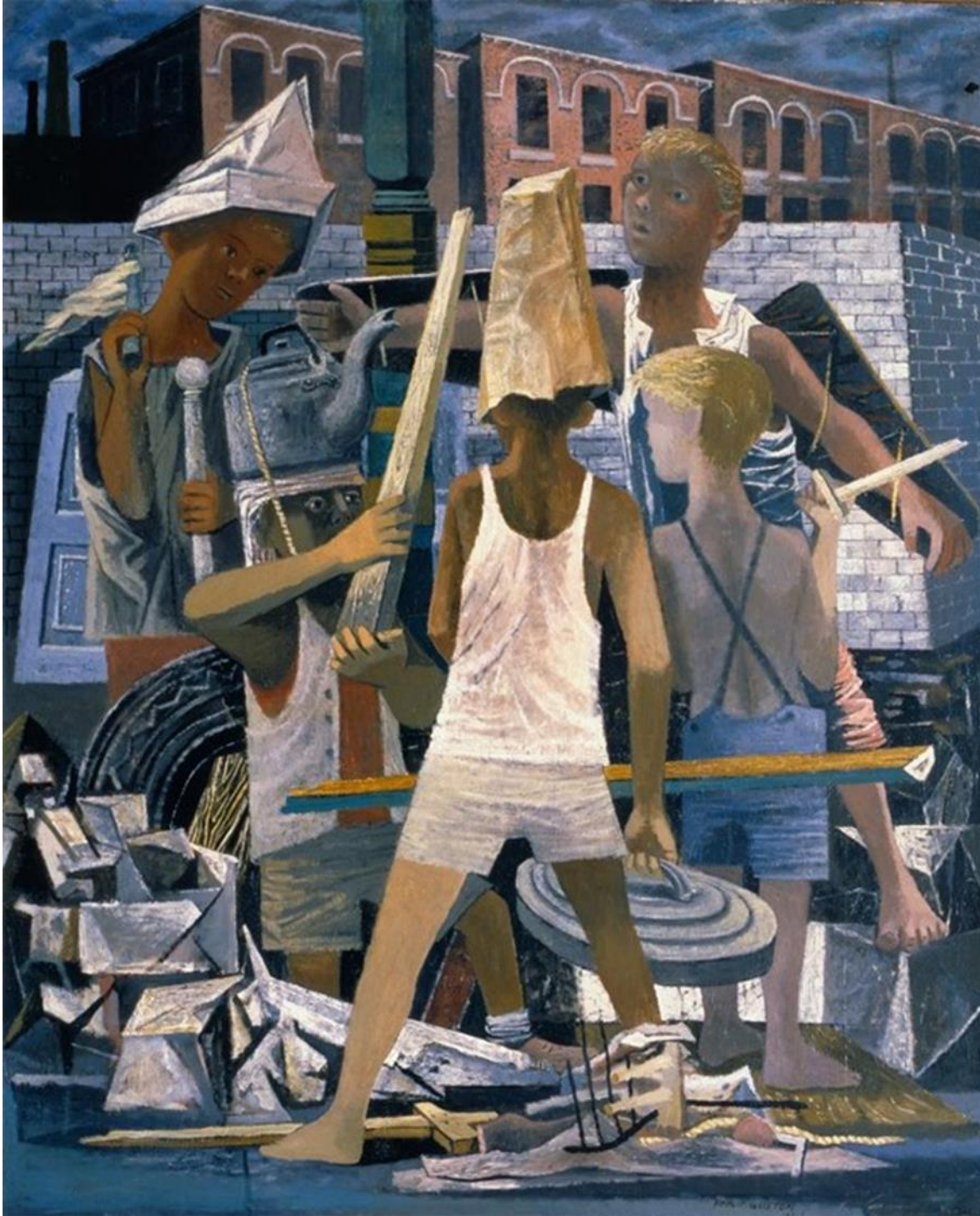


Figure 4.12, Philip Guston, *Martial Memory*, 1941

Martial Memory was a major new step for Guston; he was moving away from the monumentality, solidity, and large scale of his mural painting in favor of a more intimate, personal, and symbolic style. As he became more comfortable with easel painting, Guston's work moved inward, and his figures became more entangled in their environments. He eschewed some of the spatial legibility of his earlier work for a more subtle and abstract form of painting, focused on allegorical subject matter. Dore Ashton describes this new relationship between figure and ground as achieving the "planarity" of cubism, while still retaining some of Guston's signature motifs and recognizable figural style.⁴² The subject of children in mock battle also allowed Guston to reflect on the circumstances of the early 40s. The painting looked back at the activities of poor children on the streets during the Depression, using their imaginations to entertain themselves in a time of economic devastation, yet it also pre-figured the grim future of a generation of young people being thrown into armed conflict abroad. In *Martial Memory*, Guston achieved a balance between his new formal interests and his new subject matter; as he gravitated towards certain modernist techniques, he also moved away the overt Communist politics of his earlier work in favor of a set of personal symbols. However, while this allegorical subject matter was new for Guston, it still allowed him to continue exploring themes from his earlier work, especially his anti-militarism and his fascination with social violence. In this sense, *Gladiators*, *Martial Memory*, and later works such as *If This Be Not I* were thematically connected to his earlier work, but representative of a new phase in his practice as a painter. The art historian H.W. Janson saw the painting and encouraged the St. Louis Art Museum to acquire it; he then wrote a glowing review in the museum's bulletin.⁴³ Guston was satisfied with the

⁴² Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 48.

⁴³ H.W. Janson, "'Martial Memory' by Philip Guston and American Painting Today," *Bulletin of City Art Museum of St. Louis* 27, no. 3/4 (December 1942): 34-41.

painting, and his newfound success in this smaller-scale, individualized, and studio-based format encouraged him to continue along this path.

As the budget of the WPA was being cut and redirected, Guston was clearly moving his practice away from public muralism. His increased separation from the New York-based world of public mural painting and political art was furthered when, in 1941, he left the city for the rural confines of Woodstock. In this sense, he reversed the call of the John Reed Club, literally retreating from the streets to an isolated studio. After leaving the city, Guston would continue to focus primarily on teaching and easel painting. However, despite slashed budgets, redirected funding, and increasing fatigue with the administrative process involved in public art, he did complete a few more government commissions in the early 40s.

While he was working on *Gladiators*, Guston was one of fifteen artists, a group that also included the young Willem de Kooning, selected to make artwork for newly built Navy ships.⁴⁴ He made three different designs for three different ships, and seems to have approached this project entirely practically. Gone are Guston's tight groups of figures and enigmatic collections of discarded objects; instead, he focused on pure decoration meant to create an atmosphere rather than provoke long-looking or intellectual contemplation. This made sense given the setting – one of the designs was simply meant to frame the bar in the cocktail room of the USS President Monroe (fig. 4.13). Only one color photograph of these Navy murals survives (fig. 4.14), and these three murals are, unsurprisingly, some of the least discussed works of Guston's career. Interestingly, for the USS Monroe panel, Guston experimented with sand-blasted glass, a working method that he would never return to again. It seems that this new medium did not suit

⁴⁴ "Awards Commissions For Art on C-3 Ships," *New York Times*, June 24, 1940.



Figure 4.13, Philip Guston, untitled mural for SS President Monroe, 1940



Figure 4.14, Philip Guston, untitled mural for SS President Adams, 1940

him, and these murals are anomalous in Guston's career. If it were not for the fact that these images remain in Guston's archives, a viewer would be unlikely to assume these murals were his work. They are also a clear indication of the reorganization of federal spending, with the government now shifting artists in their employ into military jobs.

While the Navy murals may have been a purely practical execution of an assignment, Guston did complete two other federally funded murals that he seems to have put more care into. In 1941, Guston and his wife Musa McKim shared a commission for a pair of murals in the Forestry Service building in Laconia, New Hampshire (figs. 4.15 and 4.16). Unlike his earlier collaborations with Reuben Kadish, Guston and McKim did not both contribute to the same image – instead they each executed individual panels, installed side-by-side. Guston's *Pulpwood Logging* shows four lumberjacks at work on a snowy winter day. All four workers are wearing jackets made of thick flannel, each with their own distinct color, and they go about their tasks with a sense of stern concentration. On the left side of the image, one man hunches forward while securing logs together with a metal chain. To the right, his colleague cuts into a log with a bow cut saw. In the center, a third worker stands beside a horse as he uses a peavy to move and rearrange logs. Finally, the fourth logger on the right side of the image is inspecting and organizing a stack of processed logs. The whole scene takes place in a clearing on the edge of a forest, a natural setting that shows the effects of human labor on the landscape. Overall, Guston's picture emphasizes the tranquility of these men at work; the horizontal composition allows the viewer to see the lumberjacks go about each of their tasks with silent determination, working seamlessly as a team without needing to say a word.

In contrast to her husband's depiction of human labor, McKim depicts a natural scene of woodland creatures in the forest in *Wildlife in the White Mountains*. Two ducks, a heron, a



Figure 4.15, Philip Guston, *Pulpwood Logging*, 1941, Laconia, New Hampshire.



Figure 4.16, Musa McKim, *Wildlife in the White Mountains*, 1941, Laconia, New Hampshire

beaver, and a racoon mingle in the foreground. On the right side, a mature bear watches over two cubs. Near the center of the image, a family of deer stop to drink from a creek – the buck watches for predators while the doe and fawn quench their thirst. But the buck does not look out over the landscape or towards the family of bears; instead, he stares directly at the viewer, as if he is considering whether or not we are a threat. Finally, in the background, a mother leads her two children through the forest, connecting the human family to the various animal families. When the two murals are placed next to each other, they project a message of sustainable forestry practice, with human labor and animal life in harmony.

After Guston and McKim finished their murals in Laconia, Guston was able to secure a visiting artist position at the University of Iowa, where he would remain for the duration of the Second World War. Despite the fact that he never finished high school, he was able to get this job on the back of his growing reputation, especially bolstered by the good press he received for the World's Fair mural. This move to a studio-based academic position was the last major step by Guston toward fully removing himself from the socially focused milieu of the WPA, the Popular Front, the Communist network of *New Masses*, and former John Reed Club artists. At Iowa, Guston threw himself into teaching, and quickly became popular with his students. Stephen Greene and JoEllen Rapee both recalled his gravitas, seriousness, and commitment, which fostered in both of them a romantic conception of the artist-intellectual.⁴⁵ Over the course of his four academic years in Iowa City, Guston would continue to develop an increasingly personal and internal easel practice, and later recalled to Dore Ashton that this move was important in refreshing and refocusing his artistic practice, saying “When I went to Iowa I was

⁴⁵ For more, including quotes by both Greene and Rapee, see Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 52-53.

sick of murals. All the committees. My mind was elsewhere.”⁴⁶ However, he did complete one more major mural project for the Federal government after leaving New York for the Midwest.

In Washington D.C., Guston painted a large triptych mural for the auditorium for what was, at the time, the Social Security Building. *Reconstruction and Well-Being of the Family*, which acts as a cover for the auditorium’s central projection screen, again straddles some of Guston’s older monumental mural forms and new formal interests (fig. 4.17). The central panel shows a nuclear family of six gathered around a picnic table in a lush orchard. The father sits facing the viewer, his arms spread open in a relaxed position, visually embracing his wife and four children. His large right hand rests on the table, and his stoic demeanor conveys a sense of stability. His direct eye contact implores the viewer to consider the status of his family – they are healthy, well-fed, clean, and safe. While his gaze is fixed on the viewer, the rest of his family members are in their own internal worlds. The younger son across the table sips on a beverage, while the older son turns towards the viewer, his mind occupied by the morsel he is eating and the twig in his hand. The daughter is framed by her father’s broad shoulders; she is lost in thought, with her head resting on her hand and her eyes staring into the distance. The mother tends to the baby, who seems to be fussing.

The picnic scene is flanked on each side by panels featuring laborers at work. In the left panel, two forestry workers dig holes and clear debris. On the right, two railway workers lay the foundations for new tracks. Once again, Guston repurposed some figures from earlier murals. All four of the laborers here are new versions of figures from his murals in Georgia, New York, and New Hampshire. However, much like his recent easel paintings, his figures seem to blend into their environment, rather than standing out like the monumental figures of his earlier work.

⁴⁶ Philip Guston, recollections provided to Dore Ashton, in her research files for *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Series 4: Research Files, Box 8, Folder 34, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 4.17, Philip Guston, *Reconstruction and Well-Being of the Family*, 1942, Washington D.C.

Additionally, the color palette is brighter, reflecting Guston's growing interest in Leger and Beckmann. The space of the image is flattened, with a greater interest in surface pattern and intersecting planes of color than his previous murals. Although he was working in the format of large-scale mural painting, Guston clearly used this commission to experiment further with his new aesthetic interests, developed in the studio. However, this increased focus on modernist aesthetics, with less emphasis placed on figures and subject matter, results in an overall mood of boredom. The central family seems uninterested in their picnic and the laborers seem to be operating mechanically. The reuse of figures from previous murals does not feel like a refinement of a motif. Instead, they seem more like choices made to save time and effort – convenient stock figures that he can use to finish the mural. This feeling of apathy seems to extend from Guston into the painting itself. It is as if he would rather be doing something else – far more attention is paid to the central still life, the archetypal studio painting, than the characterization of the figures. In fact, in a preliminary study for the mural, the central panel featured no figures at all; instead, it was flattened and abstracted cityscape, presented as a web of intersecting straight lines and planes of color (fig. 18). This early study, made in 1940, was one of Guston's first attempts to make an image with no figures at all. By 1942, the design was changed dramatically. This gap in time and execution potentially speaks to Guston's growing frustrations. It took nearly two years to finally execute this federal mural, and he had to replace his initial geometric abstraction with a greater emphasis on narrative – specifically, a narrative focused on a rosy depiction of the American family. Finally, this narrative was furthered by its setting – this idealized family's future was also supported by the Social Security program.

The changes in Guston's style and subject matter were related to a growing sense of instability, frustration, and exhaustion among American artists as the New Deal art programs



Figure 4.18, Philip Guston, preliminary study for *Reconstruction and Well-Being of the Family*, 1940, with enlarged detail of central panel.

were being dismantled. As an artist, he was working through the implications of the end of the WPA programs and his frustrations with the WPA system, which overlapped with his own exhaustion of his early monumental mural style. The animating energies of 1930s painting were beginning to wane, and Guston's was searching for new forms and new ideas that suited his changing circumstances. The changes in his painting, towards modernist technique and allegorical subject matter, reflected his shifting political and social engagements as an artist. Guston was turning inward, and left the public wall in favor of the easel. On the blank canvas, he could focus entirely on his own interests and continue pushing himself as a painter. In this sense, he began to focus on his studio practice *instead of* his previous political commitments, which were burdened by the web of contradictions that arise with questions of revolutionary efficacy and social responsibility.

However, these major changes in his practice originated from his mural painting. The seed of his increasingly abstract painting style was planted at the New York Worlds' fair. The subject matter that would occupy him for years to come emerged from his designs at Queensbridge. His frustration with administrative oversight and political uncertainty in the New Deal art programs was exacerbated by the reorganization of the federal spending programs themselves. The WPA transformed the lives and careers of thousands of artists, but the end of this period meant that the art community once again had to reckon with their own social role. This was a moment of profound uncertainty, and Guston's transformation of his own practice was intimately tied to a widespread and deeply felt need to find a path for art in America moving forward.

In the fall of 1939, just a few months after the Reorganization Act folded the WPA into the FWA, the critic and theorist Clement Greenberg published “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in the *Partisan Review*.⁴⁷ In this influential essay, Greenberg analyzed the relationship between advanced contemporary art, especially painting, and mass culture. He discusses the historical development of avant-garde artistic practices, which he connects with the emergence of revolutionary political ideas; he argues that the basic revolutionary notion that bourgeois life was not natural, but instead historically determined, “soon [was] absorbed by artists and poets, even if unconsciously for the most part. It was no accident, therefore, that the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically—and geographically, too—with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe.”⁴⁸ Artists began to recognize the historically determined nature of academic art, and looked to the language of political revolution to define their own practice against bourgeois standards of art.

However, this did not mean that avant-garde artists simply followed revolutionary political ideals – Greenberg argues that they became distrustful of all attempts to instrumentalize art for particular political or economic ends, and instead began creating art that resisted this sort of instrumentalization by eschewing subject matter in favor of pure form and abstraction:

“Hence it developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to “experiment,” but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from the public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by

⁴⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” originally published in *Partisan Review*, New York, VI, no. 5, Fall 1939, pp. 34-49, reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3-21. Although Guston never made direct reference to this essay at the time, he did mention to Ashton that he and others read *Partisan Review* and considered it the journal for more serious intellectual discussion as compared to *New Masses*. See Guston’s notes for Ashton’s typescript, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 38, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

⁴⁸ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 4.

both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. “Art for art’s sake” and “pure poetry” appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.”⁴⁹

By focusing on form, rather than content, avant-garde artists felt that they were able to sidestep any potential ideological distortion of their work. This led to an attempt to create art that required no social or political justification – instead, avant-garde art could stand on its own, without any reference to something outside of the work itself. In their effort to resist instrumentalization of their artwork, “the avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture – is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.”⁵⁰ The result was a space for aesthetically advanced artists to “keep culture moving” despite the fact that their art was detached from the social concerns and daily lives of the vast majority of people.

However, this detachment also required some base of monetary support, which avant-garde artists generally found in the form of wealthy and educated patrons:

“And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold. The paradox is real. And now this elite is

⁴⁹ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 5.

⁵⁰ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 6.

rapidly shrinking. Since the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have, the survival in the near future of culture in general is thus threatened.”⁵¹

The threat to “culture in general” was the growth of kitsch, which he describes as an industrial imitation of culture, satisfying the desires of the masses in order to make a profit: “Because it can be turned out mechanically, kitsch has become an integral part of our productive system in a way in which true culture could never be, except accidentally. It has been capitalized at a tremendous investment which must show commensurate returns; it is compelled to extend as well as to keep its markets.”⁵² For Greenberg, the masses were drawn to kitsch because it did not challenge them through aesthetic innovation, but instead comforted them through familiar reference and legible subject matter. In other words, kitsch directs the viewer to passively receive subject matter and narrative, whereas avant-garde art calls attention to its own form and medium, encouraging viewers to think deeply and question their assumptions. Here, Greenberg arrives at the crux of his analysis – how different relationships between form and content either resist or facilitate instrumentalization and profit-making, and the need to support and perpetuate “living culture” despite the paradox of non-objective avant-garde art being supported by the educated elite. Advancements in culture are akin to advancements in technology, in that both upend assumptions about the world and “corrode the very society under whose aegis they are made possible.”⁵³ The revolutionary nature of the avant-garde came about because of a self-awareness of the historically determined nature of social relations, and knowledge that these social structures can be destroyed and replaced. By focusing on advancing art and culture formally, the artist is able to create a truly critical art that confronts the viewer and allows them to reckon with

⁵¹ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 8.

⁵² Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 11.

⁵³ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 21.

received aesthetic notions; thus, in its most vital form, avant-garde art can bring about that same historical self-awareness in a viewer. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the socialist to support the creation of avant-garde art and protect it from the degradations of industrialized mass culture; something that is achieved by entirely removing oneself from social concerns and the burden of subject matter. John Roberts refers to this as the critical thrust of the avant-garde's "asociality" – that the political value of the avant-garde lies in its ability to resist instrumentalization and commodification through form, thereby presenting the viewer with something orthogonal to both aesthetic tradition and the organizing logic of capitalism.⁵⁴

Greenberg's analysis expanded on common discussions among artists and intellectuals in the 1930s. The issue of instrumentalization of art for political and economic ends was one of the central concerns of all people interested in art, from the Artists' Union, to WPA administrators, to art critics, to wealthy patrons, and to Communist revolutionaries alike. The economically driven, relief-based structures of the New Deal art programs meant that art of all types were produced under federal patronage, from sentimental kitsch of the type derided by Greenberg to advanced abstract painting.⁵⁵ In fact, the Deweyian model of art making, focused on daily experience, participation, and community driven production, implied that the people themselves are free to make work as they see fit, and are doing so because aesthetic experience is something fundamental to human life and their orientation within their social world. The value of aesthetic experience is inherent – we seek out aesthetic experiences and create art objects *because* they are satisfying in and of themselves, and do not require outside justification. The social role of art is then to provide opportunities for all people to have aesthetic experiences for their own sake,

⁵⁴ John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso Books, 2015), 34, 53-55.

⁵⁵ For more on abstract painting under the New Deal art programs, see Jody Patterson, *Modernism for the Masses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

which is often denied to people due to the overwhelmingly instrumentalized nature of social and economic life under industrial capital. The tradition of art provides a shared set of cultural and social meanings and an explicit means to externalize aesthetic experience, which becomes the basis of social exchange between artist and viewer. The average citizen can become an artist themselves through training and study and then go on to contribute to the cultural life of their community.

This creates an interesting relationship between Dewey's conception of art for experience's sake and Greenberg's notion of art for art's sake. Both derive their social/political value from their resistance to instrumentalization, but in very different forms and to very different ends. For Dewey, the administrators of the New Deal art programs, and their supporters in Congress, the federal government could provide funds that would allow millions of people to have an explicit and defined site for aesthetic experience and art-making; this would increase the general level of artistic activity in America, allowing access to a rich intellectual and cultural life that was previously denied to the vast majority of people, and create a shared site for social exchange. Because of the foundational nature of aesthetic experience, this was an inherently valuable undertaking that did not require monetary justification. The process of art-making and the act of viewing enriched people's daily lives explicitly because it did not have to be justified functionally or monetarily – having an aesthetic experience is a satisfying and edifying act in and of itself. The government, therefore, was stepping in to provide economic support that was impossible under laissez-faire capitalism; under this model, “[art] was free of the tyranny of the exchange-value relation that made all other objects equivalent.”⁵⁶ However, this philosophy was exactly the reason the WPA was under attack from the moment of its creation. The WPA was

⁵⁶ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 126.

constantly asked to justify itself monetarily, and critics characterized artists as unproductive parasites taking money from an increasingly “Communitic” government under Roosevelt. The FAP’s focus on communal activity and experiences unburdened by profit-making were seen by many as essentially antithetical to American life. For reactionary critics of the New Deal art programs, state-directed work creation and support for art-making outside of the pressures of the free market was an impossibility.

While the contradictions of the WPA were apparent from the capitalist perspective, the New Deal art programs were also unsatisfactory from Greenberg’s perspective. For Greenberg, the tendency of the masses to prefer kitsch, narrative, and aesthetic familiarity meant that culture would remain static, even if there was more of it being produced than ever before. Although New Deal art was not being instrumentalized by capital, it was being directly exploited by the government primarily to create comforting narrative art focusing on idealized depictions of American happiness. From this perspective, abstract painting which eschewed subject matter could not flourish under government funding. Avant-garde painting, with its subversive resistance to instrumentalization, would continue to be crowded out and overwhelmed under the Deweyian education system. In fact, some of the supporters of the New Deal art programs characterized advanced avant-garde painting as pure academicism and snobbery, which they contrasted with the socially relevant and communal nature of WPA art.⁵⁷ The art programs were

⁵⁷ The relationship between advanced art in Europe and the local/regional styles of American painting was a central concern among American artists in this period. Painters like Burgoyne Diller, Stuart Davis, and Arshile Gorky fiercely advocated for abstract art. However, many other artists emphasized the need for a local style, developed out of the conditions of American life without deference to European painting. Allow me to quote a few examples of statements by artists in *Art for the Millions*. Louis Guglielmi: “I have tried to indicate in this history of my growth as an artist and as a member of society why I feel it is necessary to create a significant art and not merely some super-deluxe framed wallpaper to decorate the homes of the wealthy,” 114. Walter Quirt: “Art is primarily a language of the emotions and not the mind. This does not mean a separation of form and content – it means a closer fusion of the two,” 79. Donald J. Bear: “There is only one standard; that of sincerity and an honest relationship, and in some cases a love for the multiple environments of America. Somehow the questions of technique and influences do not enter here. Each artists seems sufficiently articulate to communicate his particular attitude without straining after

crushed under the weight of these contradictions, and the social model of art that they espoused was untenable from these vastly different perspectives.

While the collapse of the art programs was gradual and part of a contentious struggle, the Greenbergian notion of advancing culture through non-objective, optically driven painting became increasingly powerful.⁵⁸ But in 1939, the triumph of “pure painting” was just one possible direction for American art among many. The New Deal art programs, in their brief existence, provided a testing ground for artists of all kinds by giving them the economic flexibility to develop their own aesthetic and social perspective. Thousands of artists were able to live and work rather than abandon their practice, and millions of people were able to participate in Community Art Centers and see public art in their community. But, this nascent social model of art-making was beset from the very beginning by budget cuts, political scrutiny, and aesthetic criticism from all sides. In a span of less than a decade, the art projects were a fleeting glimpse of a “different road beyond modernism, a road that was not taken, a vanishing mediator.”⁵⁹

Although Michael Denning was referring to the working-class culture of the 1930s as a whole, his description applies equally to possibilities of the art projects. The optimistic (or idealistic) vision of Dewey, Cahill, and the supporters of the projects was undermined by the reality of a social and cultural life organized around the logic of capital— a reality that was also recognized by the critical perspective of Greenberg. The projects were an attempt to qualitatively change the

virtuosity or imitating a special school,” 133. Mitchell Siporin: “By executing work in public the mural artist is doing a great deal toward dissipating the halo of mystery surrounding works of art. This accomplishment alone is of great value to the future of American Art,” 67. This emphasis on social relevance over avant-garde advancement was the subject of later vociferous criticism by Harold Rosenberg; he argued that this delayed the development of American painting for decades. See Rosenberg, “The Profession of Art: The W.P.A. Art Project,” in *Art on the Edge: Creations and Situations* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1975), 195-205.

⁵⁸ For more on the influence of Greenberg’s optical theories of painting, see Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵⁹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso Books, 1997), 27.

economic structure of art production that was essentially made impossible by a system of social relations that was still structured around industrialized profit-making.⁶⁰ As Warren Carter

⁶⁰ My analysis at the end of chapter 3, especially my argument that the federal art programs widened the gap between artists and the working class, furthers this point. One of the central tensions of the federal art programs is that they essentially socialized artmaking before actually doing away with the material contradiction of class exploitation, which created contradictions for capitalists, artists, and the working class alike. The government art programs *did* benefit artists, but benefitting artists was seen as antithetical to the logic of the free market, and the benefits they brought created a distance between artists and the labor movement. In other words, the federal art programs, and by extension the New Deal as a whole, were seen as too Communistic from a capitalist perspective and not Communistic enough from a working-class perspective. In the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx analyzed this unstable foundation for bourgeois democracy. Republican notions of democracy, freedom, and equality, formalized in written constitutions, were constantly undermined by the inherently unequal material relation of wage-labor. The working class was ostensibly given the right to participate in politics, and yet faced constant repression in order to maintain a fundamentally exploitative system of social relations. Governmental programs and institutions that provided material advances to the masses were subsequently deemed Socialist. Allow me to quote Marx at length:

“Whether it was a question of the right of petition or the tax on wine, freedom of the press or free trade, the clubs or the municipal charter, protection of personal liberty or regulation of the state budget, the watchword constantly recurs, the theme remains always the same, the verdict is ever ready and invariably reads: "Socialism!" Even bourgeois liberalism is declared socialistic, bourgeois enlightenment socialistic, bourgeois financial reform socialistic. It was socialistic to build a railway where a canal already existed, and it was socialistic to defend oneself with a cane when one was attacked with a rapier.

This was not merely a figure of speech, fashion, or party tactics. The bourgeoisie had a true insight into the fact that all the weapons it had forged against feudalism turned their points against itself, that all the means of education it had produced rebelled against its own civilization, that all the gods it had created had fallen away from it. It understood that all the so-called bourgeois liberties and organs of progress attacked and menaced its class rule at its social foundation and its political summit simultaneously, and had therefore become "socialistic." In this menace and this attack it rightly discerned the secret of socialism, whose import and tendency it judges more correctly than so-called socialism knows how to judge itself; the latter can, accordingly, not comprehend why the bourgeoisie callously hardens its heart against it, whether it sentimentally bewails the sufferings of mankind, or in Christian spirit prophesies the millennium and universal brotherly love, or in humanistic style twaddles about mind, education, and freedom, or in doctrinaire fashion invents a system for the conciliation and welfare of all classes. What the bourgeoisie did not grasp, however, was the logical conclusion that its own parliamentary regime, its political rule in general, was now also bound to meet with the general verdict of condemnation as being socialistic. As long as the rule of the bourgeois class had not been completely organized, as long as it had not acquired its pure political expression, the antagonism of the other classes likewise could not appear in its pure form, and where it did appear could not take the dangerous turn that transforms every struggle against the state power into a struggle against capital. If in every stirring of life in society it saw "tranquillity" imperiled, how could it want to maintain at the head of society a regime of unrest, its own regime, the parliamentary regime, this regime that, according to the expression of one of its spokesmen, lives in struggle and by struggle? The parliamentary regime lives by discussion, how shall it forbid discussion? Every interest, every social institution, is here transformed into general ideas, debated as ideas; how shall any interest, any institution, sustain itself above thought and impose itself as an article of faith? The struggle of the orators on the platform evokes the struggle of the scribblers of the press; the debating club in parliament is necessarily supplemented by debating clubs in the salons and the bistros; the representatives, who constantly appeal to public opinion, give public opinion the right to speak its real mind in petitions. The parliamentary regime leaves everything to the decision of majorities; how shall the great majorities outside parliament not want to decide? When you play the fiddle at the top of the state, what else is to be expected but that those down below dance?" Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch04.htm>

argues, Cahill's conception of the American artist, derived from Dewey, was "resolutely pre-industrial."⁶¹

Despite vociferous calls for the establishment of permanent art projects, based on appeals to the democratization of art, the benefits of education, and the healthy cultural life of the nation, the art programs, like the New Deal as a whole, were condemned to a slow and painful death.⁶² This fundamental contradiction between a system of art-making freed from the burdens of the market and the totalizing logic of capital was described with striking clarity years earlier in a statement from the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: "A society constructed on the basis of private property and natural in the individual appropriation of the product of art cannot have any interest in the artistic education of the people."⁶³ Instead, art was on its way back to the private

The mobilization of the working-class during the Depression exposed this fundamental contradiction. Supporters of the New Deal art programs constantly turned to rhetoric of freedom and social uplift, intimately tied to the goals of an egalitarian democratic state. The promise of the WPA art programs, with their community-focused, democratizing efforts, brought demonstrable material benefits for artists and massively expanded access to the arts in Community Art Centers. Yet, this concession by the state to the people was seen as itself socialistic, an effort by the state that went above and beyond the purpose of a democratic government under capitalism. The promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were an impossibility for the working class; they were compelled to enter into an inherently unequal social relation as wage-laborers, exposing the emptiness of these slogans. As they organized themselves in order to participate in a supposedly democratic political system, they faced constant repression by reactionary forces, who wanted to present themselves as the arbiters of social harmony and democratic freedom while keeping their boot on the necks of the working class. The reforms of the New Deal were still operating "within the framework of our present society," to use Meyer Schapiro's words, but they were condemned to failure because of the massive gulf between the egalitarian and humanist rhetoric of bourgeois democracy and the material reality of fundamental inequality. The art programs were supported by the language of "mind, education and freedom," and the New Deal as a whole was ostensibly a "system for the conciliation and welfare of all classes," but that system was rendered impossible by the need to maintain the exploitation of the working class. The democratization of art, the expansion of education, and the construction of community-based culture were counter to the needs of corporate consumerism.

⁶¹ Warren Carter, "The Artist as Worker: Radical Responses to the New Deal Federal Art Projects," in *Painting – The Implicit Horizon*, ed. by Avigail Moss and Kerstin Stackemeier, (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012), 34.

⁶² The Artists' Union regularly advocated for permanent government art projects. In the October 1937 issue of *Art Front*, they published a bill to create permanent federal art programs proposed by Congressman John M. Coffee of Washington on August 13th, 1937. See "The Federal Arts Bill," *Art Front*, October 1937, 5-9. For more on the long process of the dismantling of New Deal economic protections and regulations beyond the art programs, see Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁶³ From a letter on the workshop's stationary, Series 4: New York, 1934-1977, Box 4, folder 35, David Alfaro Siqueiros papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

sphere; a situation that seemed natural to capitalists. Greenberg recognized this structural contradiction, considered the aesthetic implications of this situation for artists, and concluded that non-objective, avant-garde painting was the best form to resist vulgar appropriation by capital, even if it required support from private wealthy patrons.

Philip Guston's experiences as a federal artist were shaped by the contradictory relationship between the New Deal art programs and the American economy of culture. As a young artist from a working-class background, he was given the time and resources to expand his technical skills and develop his aesthetic interests without having to sell on the market. Guston would later refer to the project as his "training ground," saying "everybody was given an opportunity to prove himself. The project kept me alive and working. It was my education."⁶⁴ Without these programs, he and many others would certainly not have been able to maintain a living as an artist over the course of the Depression.⁶⁵ He was of the perfect age and temperament to reap the benefits of federal funding and an open-ended, salary-based system of art-making. However, he also felt the deleterious effects of the inherently unstable foundation of the federal art projects. Administrative scrutiny, slow-moving bureaucracy and working on pre-determined subject matter all brought frustration, and conflicted with romantic notions of the freedom of the individual artist-genius. This troubling question of aesthetic freedom was multiplied by hostility towards advanced avant-garde painting and its associations with snobbery and Eurocentrism, as well as by issues of social relevance and the needs of the labor movement.

⁶⁴ Philip Guston, oral history interview with Philip Guston, January 29th, 1965, interviewed Joseph Travato, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-philip-guston-12053>)

⁶⁵ This is also something that Reuben Kadish valued about the programs. In his oral history interview from 1964, he emphasized the simple fact that many artists were able to continue working rather than having to get a different job to support themselves. He then pointed out that many people, including himself, had to abandon artistic practice after the end of these programs because they had to enter the job market. See Reuben Kadish, oral history interview with Reuben Kadish, October 22nd, 1964, interviewed by Harlan P. Phillips, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-reuben-kadish-12286#transcript>)

Guston, as a painter who never fully fell into either the abstract or the social realist camp, was once again caught between competing visions of American art. By 1942, he was tired of being pulled in different directions, and the country's attention had fully shifted to the war effort. Although the art projects had a profound effect on his early career, he was now prepared to join the rest of the art world in its return to the margins.

Epilogue

In the summer of 1946, the New York-based magazine *PM* published Ad Reinhardt's famous cartoon *How to Look at Modern Art in America* (fig. 5.1). In this immensely detailed drawing, Reinhardt articulates his conception of the American art world, organizing a wide variety of artists into different categories and artistic lineages by presenting individual artists as leaves on the branches of a tree. His primary concern is differentiating artists who make "abstract (pure) 'paintings'" from those who make "pure (illustrative) 'pictures'." He suggests that readers "start in the cornfields, where no demand is made of you," essentially dismissing the regionalism of Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton outright as sentimental kitsch. On the left side of the tree, abstract artists such as Burygone Diller, Willem de Kooning, Balcomb Greene, and Stuart Davis are shown as emerging from the traditions of Mondrian, Malevich, and Leger. Their branches seem to be strong and healthy, growing upwards towards the sun. In contrast, the branch that grows out of "social-surrealism" on the right side, influenced by Giorgio de Chirico and George Grosz, has nearly broken off, as it is weighed down by burdens labeled "subject matter," "Mexican art influence," and "World War II Artist Correspondents War Art." In this already damaged section, there is a smaller branch that is weighed down even further by "still lifes," "landscapes," and "studio paraphernalia." In the scope of the entire drawing, it is the weakest branch carrying the heaviest burden of tradition and reference. It features many prominent artists of the 1930s, including William Gropper, Harry Sternberg, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Philip Guston.

By 1946, Guston was facing a full-blown aesthetic crisis that had deep roots stretching backwards to the beginning of his artistic career. The notion of pure painting, free from the burdens of subject matter and reference, was a central topic of discussion among the avant-garde, and artists steeped in the traditions of the past or primarily focused on social issues were

HOW TO LOOK AT MODERN ART IN AMERICA

by Ad Reinhardt

Here's a guide to the galleries—the art world in a nutshell—a tree of contemporary art from pure (abstract) “paintings” (on your left) to pure (illustrative) “pictures” (down on your right). If you know what you like but don't know anything about art, you'll find the artists on the left hardest to understand, and the names on the right easiest and most familiar (famous). You can start in the cornfields, where no demand is made on you and work your way up and around. Be especially careful of those curious schools situated on that overloaded section of the tree, which somehow think of themselves as being both abstract and pictorial (as if they could be both today). The best way to escape from all this is to paint yourself. If you have any friends that we overlooked, here are some extra leaves... Fill in and paste up...

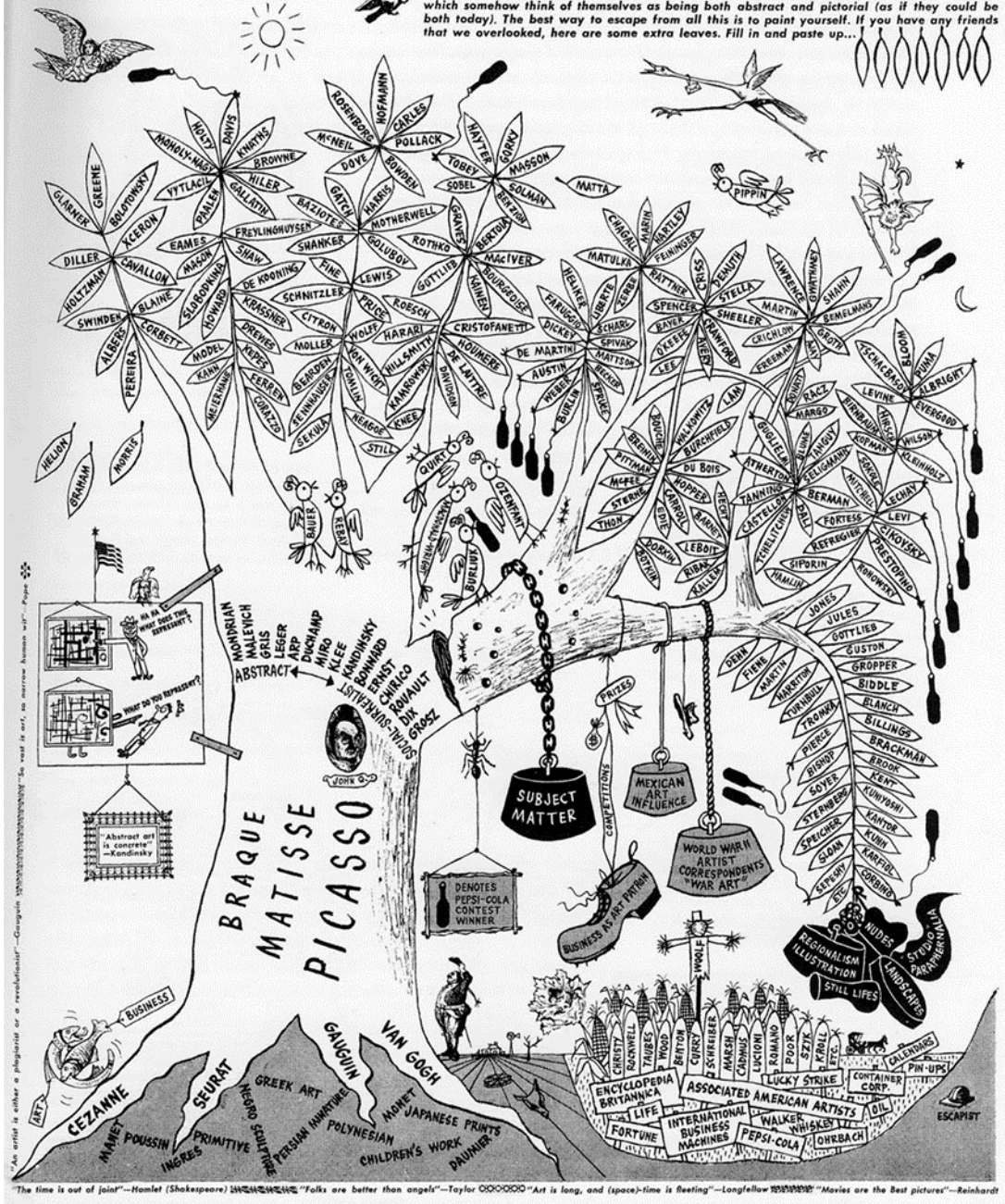


Figure 5.1, Ad Reinhardt, *How to Look at Modern Art in America*, published in *PM* magazine, 1946

characterized as aesthetically backwards. The traditions that influenced Guston's early work – Renaissance fresco, Mexican muralism, and the modern figural painting of Giorgio De Chirico and Max Beckmann – were under attack by an avant-garde that was becoming more and more hostile to all figuration and narrative reference. As a young artist dedicated to a romantic notion of the artist-intellectual, and a voracious reader, Guston was painfully aware that many of his peers in the art world saw his work as irrelevant. In 1943, Guston signaled his changing conception of the social role of the artist in an article on the completion of his mural *Reconstruction and Well-Being of the Family*, saying “I would rather be a Poet than a Pamphleteer.”¹ In his development as a young artist, Guston was confronted by a series of dialectical relationships that he attempted to work through in his artistic practice. In some instances, he attempted to resolve these contradictions and bridge these gaps, while in others, he allowed the contradiction to remain unresolved. These contradictions were interrelated, and ranged from concrete historical problems to abstract aesthetic issues.

At the beginning of the decade, as he entered adulthood, Guston was one of millions of people who were forced to reckon with the material contradictions of class society under capitalism – the split between exploiter and exploited, between employer and employee, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Guston attempted to work collectively with other artists and radicals in order to overcome these contradictions through the revolutionary emancipation of the working class. He also pursued his own artistic education, learning from older artists like David Alfaro Siqueiros and Lorser Feitelson. His efforts with his friends in the Manual Arts Group, the Block of Painters, and the John Reed club were direct attempts by these fledgling artists to address and overcome the contradictions of class hierarchy by acting as part of a mass

¹ Philip Guston, quoted in “Guston's Social Security Mural Completed Despite War,” *Art News* 42, no. 2 (March 1-14 1943): 8.

movement, mobilized by the development of class consciousness in historically contingent moment of social and economic crisis. Artists called on each other to exit their studios and join the workers in the streets, becoming active participants in historical and social change.²

His artistic and political development in these Communist spaces and organizations led Guston to another contradiction that connected the historical to the aesthetic: In his collaborative murals with Reuben Kadish, the two young artists reckoned with the relationship between political propaganda and “fine art.” As he moved through revolutionary artistic spaces, Guston and his colleagues made work that was meant to directly contribute to the Communist cause. The portable frescoes by the Block of Painters, the Worker’s Alliance Center mural, the mural in Mexico, and the work of the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop were all explicitly in support of working-class revolution. In this capacity, he was confronted by an art world populated by critics, former teachers, and established artists who denigrated political art as mere propaganda, inherently less aesthetically valuable than “autonomous” and “universal” fine art. The discourse about the relationship between propaganda and fine art was centered on the issue of instrumentalization of the arts. Creating art for political ends, attached to the explicit interests of a particular group, was seen as antithetical to a romanticized notion of the autonomous artist, who should be seeking something more elevated and refined, unburdened by the contingencies of history.³ This issue of instrumentalization was directly tied to another major contradiction, that between the economic and social interests of artists and those of the working class.

As the WPA developed into a full-fledged relief agency, artists had to adapt their artistic practices to the structures of employment; in other words, art-making was reconstructed as a “normal” job. For the first time, these artists had bosses, production quotas, administrative

² See Chapter 1

³ See Chapter 2

oversight, co-workers, shared working spaces, and salaries. And most importantly, they had an employer against whom they could collectively bargain. This massive structural change engendered a trade union consciousness, with artists working collectively to advance their interests under federal employment. This also connected the struggles of artists to the wider labor struggle of the period, as organizations like the Artists' Union and American Artists' Congress worked in solidarity with other trade unions. However, unlike the working class, the labor of artists was not being exploited for a profit by an employer – their work remained a craft, rather than something to be transformed into a commodity and sold for a profit by the capitalist (or in this case, the government) on the market. In fact, the WPA in effect *removed* artists from the pressures of the market. Instead, artists could experiment aesthetically, and meet fellow artists without pressure to sell, all while receiving recognition for their work *as an individual* in the forms of commissions forever attached to their names. Government artists had their work displayed in public spaces and discussed by a larger audience than ever before. However, the economic freedom provided by the New Deal art programs was also connected to the issues of the Popular Front; support for Roosevelt's administration and the class collaborationist strategies of the late '30s resulted in confusion and uncertainty for political artists. The murals painted in public buildings under the auspices of the federal government were of a very different character than the overtly revolutionary and antagonistic artistic practices of the John Reed Club, and the relationship between organized artists and the labor movement was increasingly complicated. Many artists and intellectuals began to recognize that the divide between the individualized professional artist and the exploited masses was potentially widened by the strategy of the Popular Front. The New Deal art programs themselves were also inherently unstable, as many reactionary politicians questioned the notion of government funding for the arts outside of the

free market. As they experimented with new forms and ideas, they were pulled in multiple directions by their contradictory economic interests, the demands of various administrators and audiences, and a desire to maintain a connection to the labor movement.⁴

The WPA created a situation in which artists could act as artisans/craftsmen, funded and patronized by the government. Advancing the interests of artists under this system did not necessarily entail any kind of advancement for the working class. As they experimented aesthetically and established themselves professionally, facilitated by the WPA system, many artists became increasingly interested in the major questions of the avant-garde. While they were achieving a measure of social relevance through the art projects, the aesthetic gap between artists and the masses remained. Despite efforts to advocate for permanent government art projects, artists were aware that the relief system was under attack and unlikely to last. In a sense, the revolutionary labor movement wanted pamphleteers, but Guston and others were becoming more like poets. Many artists began to feel that social relevance and aesthetic advancement were potentially at odds. At the beginning of the decade, artists felt compelled to comment on their times, pick a side, and participate in collective action. By the end of the decade, the lure of the blank canvas, where artists could remove themselves from political concerns and the messy questions of social relevance and historical contingency, was becoming too strong to resist.

However, this specialized social existence for artists did not suddenly destroy the revolutionary spirit in the arts. Artists and intellectuals were still concerned with the primary contradictions of class society, the development of revolutionary strategies, and the political role of art, but they moved from questions of social organization and historical action to the central contradiction of modern art – the relationship between avant-garde negation and positive

⁴ See Chapter 3

figurative reference. Critics like Clement Greenberg began to advocate for “pure” abstract painting, which eschewed subject matter as a means to avoid instrumentalization by capital.⁵ Figurative reference, with its attendant layers of symbolic, social, and cultural meaning, was ripe for exploitation by the industrialist, and was already successfully instrumentalized by advertising executives and the film industry. Mass-produced kitsch, which relied on ubiquitous imagery and easily understandable, sentimental narratives, was sold to the masses as culture, generating huge profits for capitalists. An avant-garde work of art, on the other hand is a product of human labor that is not valued as a money-making commodity but instead as something that is made for its own sake. The viewer is presented with an object that resists referential meaning and simple narratives, forces them to think critically, and is “out of step” with the organizing logic of capitalist profit-making. For supporters of abstract painting, avant-garde negation possessed a formal criticality that was missing in the agitprop and political art of the 1930s, which may have been socially relevant but did not challenge viewers aesthetically or “keep culture moving.” In fact, they claimed that political art was often static formally, because both viewers and creators wanted to clearly communicate certain political messages, which often required a legible and familiar style. In the most direct sense, the supporters of the avant-garde argued that art for art’s sake, by working in opposition to the totalizing profit-seeking logic of capitalism, was more politically effective than art forms that could be more easily instrumentalized by particular groups. Aesthetic autonomy was both a political and formal value of the avant-garde that transcended the historical contingencies of the period in favor of something more fundamentally critical.

⁵ See Chapter 4

As a young artist, Guston approached these major questions with an open mind, and moved toward a more symbolic and abstract style in the 1940s. This was not a simple matter of giving in to the external pressures of his peers. During the war and in the years following, he was reckoning with the overwhelming weight of the Holocaust, and was increasingly unhappy with his own work in the face of such an immense historical crime. Stephen Greene, a student of Guston's at Iowa, recalled that he and Guston would frequently have conversations about how to properly represent or allegorize the Holocaust.⁶ In the fall of 1945, he moved to a different teaching position at Washington University in St. Louis. Although he enjoyed the visual space of the city, he was having a very difficult time with his own painting.⁷ In a letter to James Brooks, he described his frustration: "Things are not going well with me as far as my painting is concerned and I am doing much thinking about it."⁸ A year later, in another letter to Brooks, he explained his evolving relationship with his work, writing: "I did a lot of thinking and contemplating and I seem to have untied the ropes that have been around me. I can see what a long struggle I've got ahead of me and I am so to speak starting from scratch again. I feel more purely plastic about painting than ever before and somehow a new vigor."⁹

His "new vigor" was the result of a long struggle with his own work, and his painting would become more fully abstract after 1946. Additionally, beyond the immense difficulty of

⁶ Ashton describes these conversations with Greene and Guston's difficulty in processing the Holocaust in a *Critical Study of Philip Guston*, 74-85.

⁷ Guston was trying to get Brooks to join him in teaching at Washington University, writing that he could help him secure a position there: "Jim, would you be interested in coming out here to teach next year... I find St. Louis very exciting visually and I know you would. The museum here is a very good one with a fine modern collection. How about it?" Letter from Philip Guston to James Brooks, November 11th 1945, Series 2: Correspondence, Box 3, Folder 1, James Brooks and Charlotte Park Papers, Archives of American Art. Brooks did not accept this offer, and it seems Guston extended his invitation to his former student Stephen Greene, who joined Guston at Wash U for the 1946-47 academic year.

⁸ Guston to Brooks, November 11th, 1945, Series 2: Correspondence, Box 3, Folder 1, James Brooks and Charlotte Park Papers, Archives of American Art.

⁹ Guston to Brooks, undated letter. Although the letter is undated, Guston mentions recently reading an article by Juan Gris in the August issue of *Horizon* magazine. Gris published an article in the August 1946 issue of *Horizon*, so this letter was likely written in the late summer/early autumn of 1946.

responding to horrific images, films, and reports of destruction and genocide, in general, Guston was someone who was rarely satisfied with his own work. He looked towards abstraction as a means to complicate and expand his studio practice, something he later referred to as “test[ing] your system.”¹⁰ As an artist, he had strong convictions and loyalties to certain forms and ideas, but these ideas had to be worked out on the canvas. He often used the metaphor of the courtroom or the trial, where the painting is making an argument for its right to exist.¹¹ When he was experimenting with abstraction, he was not simply following trends, but instead was testing his own conception of painting by pitting it against a rival. He was willing to hear and think through the arguments of abstraction, represented in court by his artistic contemporaries and critics like Greenberg.¹² Certain qualities of the abstract painting of his generation did intrigue him, especially the direct application of paint and the improvisatory approach to composition. He valued the immediacy of working directly on the canvas, a major change from his years of carefully planned mural studies. But he was again never completely satisfied with the results of abstraction in his painting, and his work retained certain formal qualities of figurative painting as compared to the large-scale, “all-over” style of many of his peers. His abstractions of the 1950s and 60s were primarily painted on relatively smaller canvases using small brushstrokes rather than sweeping gestural movement, with a greater density of paint in the middle of the canvas

¹⁰ Philip Guston, “On Survival,” talk delivered at the New York Studio School, June 1, 1974. Published in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) 233.

¹¹ For more, see his conversation with Bill Berkson from 1964 published in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations*, 32-37. Interestingly, Guston includes a criticism of Pop Art in this conversation, saying that “self-induced irony is a way of settling out of court,” 36.

¹² Robert Slifkin makes a compelling argument that Guston’s late paintings can be read as arguments against Greenbergian notions of “purity” and “flatness,” alongside their more literal political and social meanings. He focuses on Guston’s emphasis on meaning rather than the optical, something he refers to as “painting badly.” His reading of Guston’s late work is a major influence for my own thinking throughout this epilogue. See Robert Slifkin, *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

suggesting a figure-ground relationship, and even the use of atmospheric perspective (fig. 5.2).¹³ Guston's work in this period was precariously balanced – although he was painting abstractly, he remained fixated on the endless complexities and tensions of the picture plane. In a public conversation with the poet Bill Berkson, he explained his thinking: “I think painting is full of illusions and contradictions... the plane of a painting is a paradox, and maintaining this paradox is a necessity with me.”¹⁴ While his peers strived for pure painting on the flat canvas, Guston was interested in the contradiction between the surface plane and the older conception of the framed painting as a window into space.

In 1958, in the midst of his “abstract” period, Guston lamented the state of discourse around abstraction and figuration, especially the notion that abstraction provided “freedom” from the constraints of “objectivity” saying “I do not see why the loss of faith in the known image and symbol in our time should be celebrated as a freedom. It is a loss from which we suffer, and this pathos motivates modern painting and poetry at its heart.”¹⁵ Guston experienced the growing hostility towards subject matter and figuration as a loss.¹⁶ Distrust towards figurative reference was a cause of anguish, as artists were no longer using one of the primary means of creating social meaning; in a sense, contemporary painters were now creating paintings instead of images. Guston was always interested in the possibilities of the image: the symbolic, psychological, and social meanings embedded in objects, figures, and gestures, and the never-ending chain of

¹³ In an interview with David Sylvester, Guston discussed the notion of his abstract paintings maintaining a sense of depth, a quality that Guston felt he shared with Willem de Kooning. See “Interview with David Sylvester,” 1960, published in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, 21-28.

¹⁴ Conversation with Bill Berkson, *Guston Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, 34.

¹⁵ This statement in catalog for *Nature is Abstraction* a show at the Whitney Museum in 1958. Republished in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, 18.

¹⁶ Dore Ashton took notes on an ongoing conversation with Guston in 1956-57, and wrote the following: “The loss of the object was catastrophic. Painters celebrate the loss.” See Ashton's notes for conversation with Guston, 1956-57, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 27, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 5.2, Philip Guston, *Bronze*, 1955.

meaning stretching out from the image, with one idea and reference generating another. And, crucially, the use of figurative reference connects an image to artistic tradition, and the social use of those same references, symbols, and ideas throughout history. For Guston, abstraction was not freedom from the constraints of social relevance, political justification, and objectivity; instead, it was a limitation that the art world placed on itself to *avoid* dealing with the social and the human, as it had in the past. Other artists of the 1930s also lamented this loss. In an oral history interview on the WPA period, Anton Refregier spoke at length about the differences in the art world during the 1930s as compared to the 60s:

“I think that in every way, we can look back and say, "This was a terrific period." It was great wealth and it made us a kind of wonderful people. Forgive the expression, but I think we were less conceited, less egoist and we were closer to what I think the artist's function is. Artists are part of society. You know, Joe, today we have to be so careful when we say things like that. If we speak of love or humanity or world peace it's not very fashionable. We are so far away from real powerful human values. I think that every time I see my friend [Philip] Evergood, and hear him. He is the kind of guy that uses those words and he is not afraid of them. In some ways, it's difficult to evaluate that period because our yardstick is so different. But I think that humanism, serving the people, love, are good words and I hope they will come back into the language of our people.”¹⁷

From the perspective of the 1960s, many would see Refregier's plea as hopelessly naïve. But for many artists of the 1930s, this commitment to social relevance and politicized art was due to a set of humanist priorities outside of and beyond the aesthetic. While younger artists and critics began pushing for an autonomous and “pure” art, socially-minded artists of the 30s valued art

¹⁷ Anton Refregier, Oral History interview, November 5th, 1964, interview by Joseph Travato, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

that inserted itself directly into history. Throughout his career, Guston was willing to experiment with a variety of forms and techniques, but he never quite gave up on images. He also never fully abandoned humanism, as so many artists had done while developing a post-modern style.¹⁸ While abstraction had an important critical formal quality, Guston was drawn to images specifically because figurative reference retained a connection to the social and physical world. However, this did not entail a simple mimesis of life; instead, figurative reference allowed for the creation of its own world, something that Guston referred to as “super-reality.”¹⁹ This sense of heightened reality was what drew him to artists like de Chirico and Piero della Francesca during his early education, and something that he clearly explored in some of his very first artworks created in Los Angeles as a young man.

In the late 60s and early 70s, Guston began exploring his famous (or infamous) late style. After two decades of abstraction, Guston’s paintings suddenly became images again, populated with hooded figures, bricks, shoes, clocks, bottles, lightbulbs, and cigarettes. He even painted small panels of isolated individual objects, which acted as a sort of alphabet for Guston’s late work, with each object full of its own meanings and references (fig. 5.3). In a studio note from 1968, Guston wrote “For a brief moment, I forgot about art and made an image.”²⁰ In 1969, when he was working on the first group of large-scale paintings in his new style, Guston met with his friend, the art historian and critic Dore Ashton, who was working on a study of Guston’s work and career. In her notes from the meeting, Ashton wrote: “He had asked himself what is a

¹⁸ For more on Guston’s connection to the humanist tradition and his relationship to the posthumanist art of the 1960s and 70s, see Slifkin, *Out of Time*, 1-28.

¹⁹ “The Image,” published in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 110.

²⁰ Philip Guston Random Studio Notes, in research files for *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 25, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 5.3, Philip Guston, set of small panel paintings hung in his Woodstock studio.

painter after all. An image maker. Cave Paintings. A remnant of archaic times.”²¹ At the time, he began to lecture publicly on his new work, and he frequently returned to idea of the image’s pre-historic origins. In a conversation with students at the New York Studio School in 1969, he explained his thinking:

“I don’t want to talk about my work, but I’m involved with images. Real three-dimensional solid images. That’s what I’ve been drawing for a couple years... I was thinking on the way downtown, how the origin of art in the beginning, the origin of expression, was image making. Every time I see an abstract painting now I smell mink coats, you know what I mean? It’s really terrible. Terrible brainwashing.”²²

Guston’s words here are an interesting inversion of Greenberg’s defense of the avant-garde, which admitted that advanced abstract painting was supported by an “umbilical cord of gold.”²³ At this point in his life, he had no qualms expressing his distaste for pure abstraction, and he directly tied his revulsion to the exclusive and internal world of wealth in the arts. For Guston, belief in the critical capacity of pure abstraction was in a sense a delusion – by avoiding imagery and cutting themselves off from tradition, artists were essentially allowing their work to remain isolated from the messy and contradictory nature of life. He saw artists such as Barnett Newman and Kenneth Noland as working backwards from a preconceived conception of painting, rather than putting themselves through the unpredictable and chaotic challenge of creation and making

²¹ Notes from a meeting between Ashton and Guston, in research files for *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 25, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C. Interestingly, Ashton ends her notes from this meeting by saying that they “reminisced about Artists against War & Fascism,” which was the first conference organized by the American Artists’ Congress in 1937.

²² Philip Guston, “The Image,” in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, 109.

²³ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” originally published in *Partisan Review*, New York, VI, no. 5, Fall 1939, pp. 34-49, reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 8.

meaning.²⁴ And importantly, this delusion was only to the benefit of the wealthy, who now had an (expensive) abstract painting that could fade into the background alongside their equally refined décor.²⁵ By opposing the art-historical tradition, abstract artists were in effect plugging their ears: “Image making is the most fascinating.... It’s the *only* thing. The rest is just a lot of shit, making colors and selling yourself a bill of goods.”²⁶

However, Guston’s return to the image did not entail a straightforward return to his early style, abandoning two decades of his work in favor of his earlier monumental mural painting. Instead, he synthesized what he did value about his generation of abstract expressionist painting – immediacy, spontaneity, and unpredictability – with a direct inclusion of social content and figurative reference. He did not simply write off his abstract period, but instead redirected his decades of direct application of paint on canvas, done without drawing or preparation, into the spontaneous and chaotic generation of imagery. A representative painting from this period, such as *Bad Habits*, provides insight into the syncretic nature of his late work (fig. 5.4). In this image, two of Guston’s famous hooded figures gather around a massive bottle. They are surrounded by discarded objects that litter the room, including cigarette butts, empty bottles, and crumpled scraps of paper. On the wall behind them, there are small paintings hanging next to a clock, a dangling light bulb, and a window with its curtain drawn. These objects appear to materialize out

²⁴ In his 1969 conversation with students at the New York Studio School, he cited Newman, Noland, and Donald Judd as artists who worked from received notions of what was acceptable in art, which he also referred to as “Shibboleths.” For more, see “The Image,” 1969, published in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations*, 109-136.

²⁵ Guston’s growing distaste for abstraction and his association of pure abstraction with wealth pre-dated his transition to his late style. In a letter to Reuben Kadish from October 24, 1961, Guston described his disgust at shows he recently saw in New York, saying that he was “sickened” by what he saw, which led to a row with his dealer, Sidney Janis. “I don’t belong there. I feel like a cripple or a hunchback in chi-chi high society – all that slick, inhuman elegant products the boys are grinding out. The big belter at the Guggenheim is unbelievable – I felt as though I were looking at a series of posters done by different type commercial designers – just the blurbs were left off – but I guess C. Greenberg, etc. will supply that.” Philip Guston to Reuben Kadish, October 24th, 1961, Series 2: Letters, Box 1, Folder 60, Reuben Kadish Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

²⁶ Philip Guston, “The Image,” in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, 109.



Figure 5.4, Philip Guston, *Bad Habits*, 1970

of nothing – they are all rendered with simple and direct application of unmodeled and unmixed paint on canvas. The two hooded figures emerge from this same ether, but Guston also includes some illusion of depth by placing shade behind each of their heads. Their robes seem to be roughly stitched together, and the splotches of red paint that cover their clothing immediately call to mind Guston’s early images of violence committed by hooded ghouls, while also allowing the viewer to read these spots as literally red paint staining the figure’s robes. This is furthered by the action of the figure on the right, who holds a whip behind his head. The multiple meanings of this gesture are available for the viewer to contemplate: he can be read as either preparing to whip someone else or self-flagellating, which brings about wide ranging ideas of racist violence, complicity in oppression, self-destruction, religious mania, and more. These figures, with the massive bottle in between them, also allow us to think of addiction and alcoholism – “Bad Habits” of Guston’s that exist alongside the more overt political reading of a KKK figure preparing to indulge in his “habit” of white supremacist persecution. The wide-ranging and multiple meanings within an image are what fascinated Guston, and he contrasted his approach with the increasingly refined paintings of Newman and Noland.

At this point in his career, Guston was an anachronism, both economically and aesthetically. The profession of painter was a holdover from a bygone era, an artisan/craftsman in a capitalist system that was increasingly hostile to unique handmade objects not intended to be exchanged on the market as a commodity. Painters were not workers, nor capitalists, but a remnant of an older system of patronage that predated industrial capital. In aesthetic terms, Guston’s interest in the image was backwards and suspect – avant-garde artists, increasingly distrustful of subject matter and narrative, saw no place for figurative reference in advanced art. The image maker was being replaced with the conceptualizer; Guston’s social role as an artisan

who used his technical skills to make an image had all but evaporated. In a personal sense, many of his friends and peers in his generation of painters had died, and their work was often dismissed by younger artists as a failure. In the words of Robert Slifkin, Guston was a holdover from an earlier generation who were now seen as “ghosts inhabiting the art world.”²⁷

In 1973, Dore Ashton attended a conference in Boston, and took notes on Guston’s participation in a panel discussion. Much of the panel was on the topic of subversiveness and criticality in art. In her notes, she wrote “If subversion is to art itself, that is not enough. Leads to Shibboleths.” She followed this note with a direct quote from Guston: “Art is not enough.”²⁸ Guston’s interest in images, with their inherent connections to objects, ideas, gestures, behaviors, and relationships in the social world, was deeply intertwined with his desire to act critically at both the social and aesthetic level. Avant-garde asociality, with its critical formal capacity, was in effect operating as an internal conversation among artists, gallery owners, and wealthy collectors, and was ultimately a conversation about art rather than life and experience.²⁹ By the end of his life, Guston had grown tired of this conversation, and instead desired to act socially again. He did so by making images. Simply put, for Guston, images were more than art. Images had the capacity to act upon the viewer because they open outwards: the image leads you to more beyond the image, whereas abstraction leads you back to abstraction, back to the painting itself.

²⁷ Slifkin, *Out of Time*, 112.

²⁸ Dore Ashton’s notes from Guston’s participation in a panel discussion in Boston, Fall 1973, in research files for *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Series 4: Research files, Box 8, Folder 29, Dore Ashton Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D.C.

²⁹ In many different public conversations and lectures, Guston describes the lineage of the avant-garde as having “diminishing returns” because it ultimately leads to refinement and reduction rather than expansion. He even referred to avant-garde art as “didactic,” because its meaning can quickly understood as a rejection of tradition and reference, rather than expand outwards into unpredictability and chaos like an image does. This, of course, is a pointed term to use in the context of the relationship between abstraction and figuration, the latter of which was often denigrated as a means of communicating simple didactic messages. For more, see Guston’s conversation with Louis Finkelstein, 1972, published in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations*, 162-183.

These open-ended associative possibilities fascinated Guston; his late work renewed his belief in the potential of the image, and he expounded on this potential in public conversations:

“I was painting a hand. You know when you go on day after day on just a hand. A big hand. And then it goes through transformation. The hand starts writing. I draw. I make a hand drawing. It’s kind of an interesting feeling. It goes through metamorphoses. The hand starts to become an animal’s hand. I was so excited last night when I came in, it became a big paw. The hand had hair on it. And I thought “Gee!” That really sent me, you know? A paw, an animal’s hand, writing, drawing. And then I started thinking about the idea of God. And when animals first had hands. Evolution, the whole thing. It’s so exciting. So imagery is endless. The other thing, and you know what I mean by the other thing, ends up as plastic furniture. The image thing, and pursuing the image, is endless. It changes you.”³⁰

The long arc of Guston’s career led him back to the image.³¹ Although it can be argued whether he ever left the image in the first place, his interest in figurative reference had deep roots in his early career as a political artist and public muralist in the 1930s. Creating images was not only possible in the ‘30s, but something that seemed to have massive historical and social potential. The John Reed Club’s call to action in 1932 had never fully left Guston’s mind. The widespread and deeply felt need to comment on one’s time, to take a side, to participate in history, pushed Guston back to the image at the end of his life. In an interview from 1977, Guston was asked about his transition to his late style. His response shows how crucial his formative years during the Red Decade were to his career:

³⁰ Philip Guston, “The Image,” in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations*, 110.

³¹ “I could never paint abstractly, although I think for a lot of years I hovered. I think what’s happening to me over the last three or four years is that I’m tired of hovering.” Philip Guston, “The Image,” in *Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations*, 113.

“When the 1960s came along I was feeling split, schizophrenic. The war, what was happening in America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue? I thought there must be something I could do about it. I knew ahead of me a road was laying. A very crude, inchoate road. I wanted to be complete again, as I was when I was a kid... Wanted to be whole between what I thought and what I felt.”³²

In the late '60s, Guston was feeling a psychological split that reached back to his experiences during the Depression. The gap between his studio practice as a professional painter and the brutal realities of American social life had become untenable, and he desired to return to a moment in his life when his artistic and social/political goals were aligned. As a young artist, Guston was one of thousands who believed in images and their capacity to act upon the world. Through the John Reed Club, the Artists Union, the WPA, and more, artists in the 1930s did not attempt to transcend their historical moment; instead, they confronted history directly. Their work, limited by the structures of capitalist profit making, romanticized artistic aspirations, and constant attacks by reactionaries, was a brief moment in American history that quickly collapsed under its own weight; a vanishing moment of limited social relevance for the arts in America before they were returned to the margins in favor of consumer delights. As an individual, Guston's experiences during this period created the conditions for a long and renowned career as a painter. However, they also reflected the impossible contradiction of being a political artist in America. After decades of feeling split, Guston wanted to be whole again – both a poet and a pamphleteer, as he was when he was young.

³² Musa Meyer, *Night Studio* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 171.

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