# *William Gropper: Artist of the People*, at Washington DC's Phillips Collection

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William Gropper: Artist of the People, *currently showing at the Phillips Collection in Washington DC, through January 5, 2025.*

The work of social realist artist William Gropper, now on view at Washington DC's Phillips Collection, is an important part of American art history of the past century. The paintings, drawings, lithographs and cartoons, dating from the 1930s through the 1960s, deal with social and political issues in an often biting and satirical fashion that retains its relevance today.

Gropper (1897-1977) was born in New York City to immigrant Romanian and Ukrainian Jewish parents. Twenty years old at the time of the Russian Revolution, he was among millions of young people in the US and around the world whose social and political outlook was shaped by some of the great events of the early 20th century—the First World War, the 1917 Revolution and later the Great Depression.

Gropper was trained in the American Realist School, especially the Ashcan School founded by Robert Henri, so named because of its insistence on dealing with the everyday lives of the working class. Other famous artists in this loosely organized movement included John Sloan and, somewhat later, George Bellows. The Phillips exhibit refers to Gropper as the "Honoré Daumier of his time," referring to the French artist of the mid-19th century who became famous for his satiric depictions of the venal bourgeoisie and its political representatives.

Gropper's art work was frequently seen in the 1930s and 40s in leading publications of the day, including *Vanity Fair*, but he contributed even more regularly to left-wing journals and newspapers associated with the Communist Party.

"With the human imagination it is difficult to understand the cruelty, madness and vileness that fascism seeks to create," said Gropper, in a quote from the early 1940s in the *Morning Freiheit*, the CP-affiliated Yiddish-language publication in the US that had been founded in 1923. This statement is posted alongside, "The Murderers Spill Our Blood," a powerful cartoon depicting the notorious Nazi massacre that destroyed the Czechoslovak town of Lidice in June 1942, in reprisal for the assassination of Hitlerite leader Reinhard Heydrich by the Czech resistance.

Gropper continued: "I cannot remain silent and watch as my Jewish brothers and sisters are murdered. I want to protest, scream, fight, and save the lives of the Jewish people."

The depiction of Nazi brutality retains all of its power today. It cannot fail to call to mind similar scenes playing out in Gaza at this very moment. The fascistic Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has carried out genocidal attacks that have killed at least 45,000 and perhaps as many as 200,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, in the last 14 months. The Zionist regime is emulating the Nazis with its collective punishment of the people of Gaza and the West Bank.

Gropper often dealt with the swinish and reactionary milieu in corporate boardrooms in the United States, and he warned of the threat of fascism at home. Striking in this regard is the cartoon, "Lincoln Observing Corrupt Politicians, Silver Shirts and the KKK" (1940), depicting a gaunt-faced and towering Abraham Lincoln grimly looking down at various pygmy-sized Klansmen, anti-communist politicians and the fascist Silver Shirts. The KKK had a brief heyday in the 1920s but remained active in parts of the US, especially the South, and Senator Huey Long of Louisiana and the fascist priest Father Coughlin were household names in the 1930s.

"The Factory" (1932) is scathing social satire, capturing the primary criminal element in capitalist society, the ruling class itself. The work depicts rows of workers operating industrial machinery in unison, while armed guards or police form a column around them. In the foreground, various corrupt managers and big businessmen fall all over each other in a debauched scramble to pocket the wealth produced by the disciplined collective work force.

Another effective work is Gropper's "Congressional Declaration" (1947), which depicts two wealthy reactionaries "amending" the Declaration of Independence

to add, after the phrase about all men being created equal, "except Reds, Negros, Jews, Liberals, foreign-born, trade unionists, artists, New Dealers, government employees, women."

Gropper at his best was able to mercilessly skewer the charlatanry and fakery on display in modern American political life, and also to show the plight of the poor and the destitute. It was inevitable, however, given the artist's political connections, that the aesthetic and political line of Stalinism would negatively affect his work, which had generally been insightful and sensitive up to that point.

Like many others, Gropper accepted the claim that the Stalinist bureaucracy was building socialism in the USSR. Stalinism had a destructive effect on his artistry in two overlapping respects. First, in at least some of his work the baleful influence of "socialist realism" can be seen—not social realism with its sharp look at social and political conditions, but rather hollow didacticism, idealized images of workers divorced from a concrete and honest look at social life, and lacking depth or understanding.

Gropper's work also sometimes followed the zigs and zags of the Stalinist political line. This is shown, whether intentionally or not, in the juxtaposition of two different images in the Phillips show.

"Pull the Rope Tighter," from 1940, shows both the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates (Roosevelt vs. Wendell Willkie) strapping "Uncle Sam" to a cannonball marked "war."

This was during the approximately 22-month period between the Stalin-Hitler nonaggression pact announced in August 1939 and the Nazi invasion of the USSR in June 1941. During this period, in line with the foreign policy of the Kremlin regime, the American CP and its supporters opposed US entry into the war. Gropper's work from 1940 reflects this policy.

Right next to this we see "Full Speed Ahead," from 1942, from the *Morning Freiheit*. This is a pro-war cartoon, with columns of American tanks and fighter planes roaring out of US factories into combat. In the time period between the two works, the Stalinists' geopolitical alliances abruptly shifted, and the brief opposition to the foreign policy of the US government immediately changed to slavish support for the war. Of course workers wanted to smash Nazism, but the Stalinists used that argument to support the capitalist state and the war aims of American imperialism.

Their super-patriotic line is seen in another work, "Untitled," (1942), featuring an image of the US Capitol with ominous silhouettes of notorious American fascists or fascist sympathizers, including Coughlin and Charles Lindbergh. Also included in this work, however, is Norman Thomas, the longtime leader of the US Socialist Party. Thomas, of course, was a pacifist, not a fascist, but to the Stalinists at that time, they were all the same—including the leaders of the Socialist Workers Party, the US Trotskyists, who were convicted under the Smith Act in 1941, with the Stalinists leading the campaign for their imprisonment.

Gropper's work during this period included pro-war racist caricatures of the Japanese, alongside idealized images of workers faithfully doing their part to build America's supposed "arsenal of democracy."

None of these issues are explained or even alluded to by the exhibition at the Phillips Collection. All that museum director Jonathan P. Binstock can say is that "Gropper was an artist of, by, and for the people who fervently believed in the power of art to bring people together and effect change." This approach shows the connection between the establishment liberalism of today and the Popular Front line of the American Communist Party of the 1930s and during the period of the US-Soviet alliance in WWII.

Despite the Stalinists' alliance with the Democrats during most of the Roosevelt presidency, the Cold War began almost immediately after the war, and it soon led, among other acts of repression, to the blacklisting of William Gropper.

His reaction to this is shown in part in the lithograph series known as the "Capriccios," in homage to the famous work of Spanish artist Francisco Goya in the early 19th century depicting the Spanish Inquisition. Gropper's work is dark and foreboding, featuring numerous sketches of ghoulish "inquisitors" looming over their victims. Lincoln is also featured, with knives in his back. The work gives a sense of the political and psychological impact of the McCarthyite witch-hunts.

The exhibit concludes with a life-sized painting, the "Eternal Senator," dating from 1935, when Gropper was doing some work in the capital. The American official, on his feet and speaking with his fist thrusting skyward, is being ignored by his colleagues. Newspapers and other items are littered on the floor, and the general impression is one of indifference and corruption. The image is a fitting finale to the exhibit.

It is necessary to see Gropper's life and work historically, with all of its contradictions. His best work is rewarding and deserving of appreciation.