

ART SECTION

Revolutionary Art Today

THOMAS S. WILLISON

THE modern painter who wishes to represent social reality and revolutionary struggle has far greater difficulties to overcome than the poet or novelist. These have always dealt with human beings, even when literature was most aestheticized and indifferent to social reality. The models of the self-absorbed literary artist have been writers like Proust and Joyce who, whatever their indifference or insensitiveness to large sections of society and to whole fields of human action, have a marvellously sure perception of individual feeling. The modern writer had to be attentive to the minutest variations of internal life; in his subjectivity, he was a delicate and refined observer. The great painters of the same time, men like Picasso and Matisse, on the other hand, have only the slightest interest in acting and feeling human beings. They convert the human subject into an abstruse arabesque or intense spot of color. Their human beings are faceless or expressionless, separated from each other, or bound together through deformations which negate their human character or their psychological richness; they are ultimately still-life, if the natural shapes are preserved. This reduction is not inherent in art, but in a certain style of art, a style that had an historical necessity, but not the eternal validity that is claimed for it. But even the more realistic contemporary artists have much the same character. Those who in opposition to abstract art call themselves objective painters are scrupulously objective about apples, pots, furniture, buildings, machines, mountains, nude bodies—essentially impersonal objects.

When an artist who has painted in this manner resolves to paint a momentous or moving reality, which today is the reality of class struggle and the decay of capitalism, he experiences the utmost difficulty in conceiving his new material. His whole practice of art has unfitted him for the representation of a large field, dense in meanings, with interacting, changing, differentiated human beings. He must create for the first time images of great occasions, continuities of action with gradations of feeling, the plastic equivalents of complex ideas and the realities of environment as acting on masses of people and yet as the creation of these same people. If art were simply a synthesis of form and a subject, one could say: the talented painter who has occupied himself so long with form has only to acquire the "right" content and add it to his form and he will have produced a successful art.

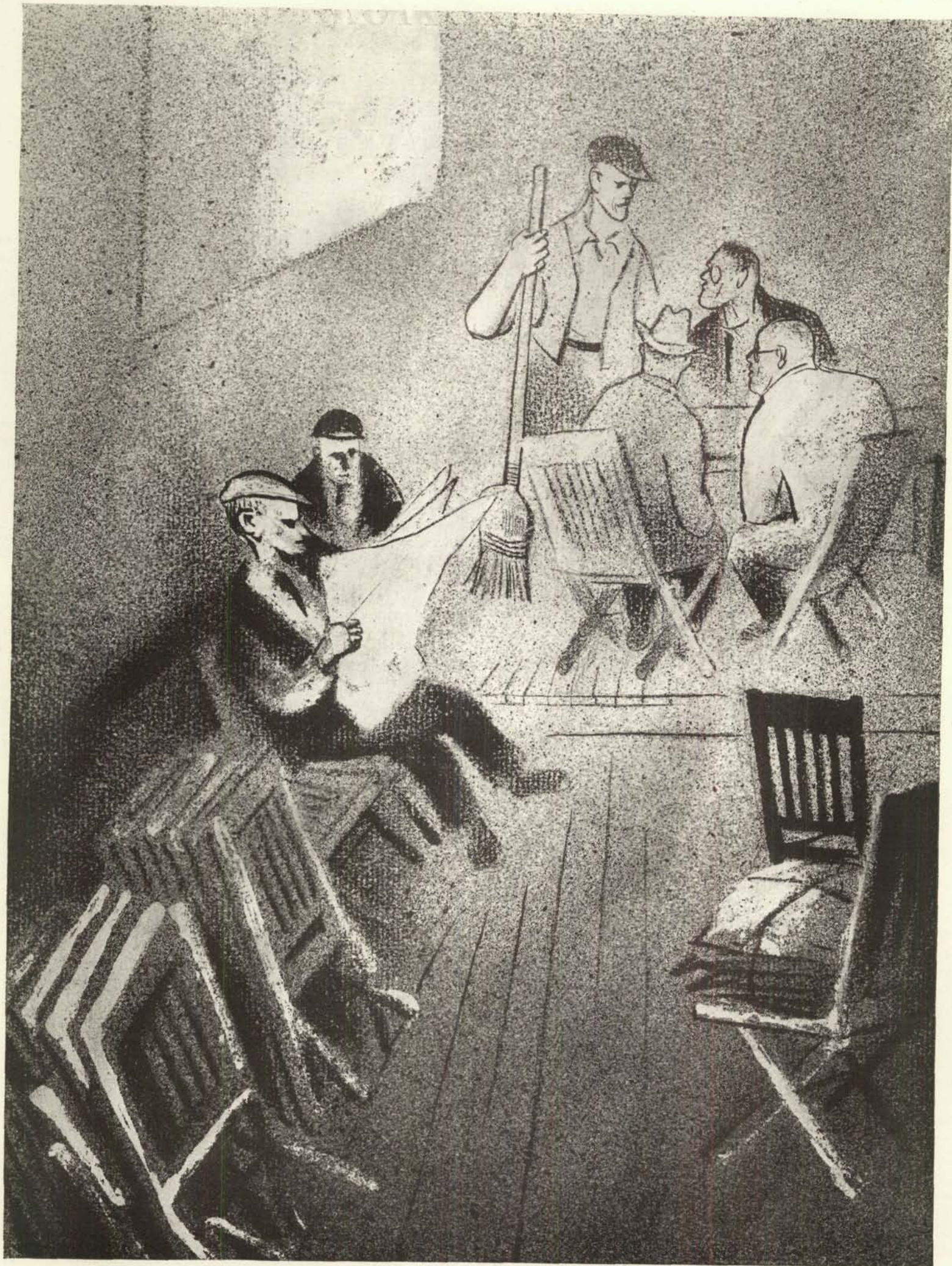
The artist who has gone beyond the stage of inserting into a painting, conceived entirely in terms of his original subject-matter and form, some detail that signifies, however vaguely or precisely, his new revolutionary sympathy, will seize first upon the most striking and common aspects of the world he wishes to render, just as an archaic artist draws an object in its simplest form and makes the few parts equally clear. He identifies the revolutionary struggle with the demonstration, the picket-line and the unemployed, or with obvious personifications of the capitalist class. This in itself is not a weakness; but we must confess that we still have no satisfactory, no "classic" representation of even these themes, which are so simple and so frequently attempted. In general they are rendered as spectacles; the appearance or composition of the scene predominates over its inner life, its psychological tensions and latent meanings. These do not presuppose qualities intrinsically foreign to painting; they are situations which may be realized concretely through painting, as we can judge from the dramatic and psychological values of older arts. The difficulty is not that the solutions hitherto achieved are static, but that their movement is mainly picturesque or formalistic, involving on the part of the spectator a merely complementary filling out of the suggested objects in the scene, a recognition of places and types of person, rather than an active penetration of a densely worked-out picture, with an inexhaustible richness of human relationships. But as little as one can penetrate a flat surface, so little can one penetrate a representation devoid of meanings. The purely formalistic study of older arts has blinded painters to the richness of significance in these works, a richness manifested in postures, gestures, expressions and formal devices, which are still legible, despite our ignorance of the original meaning and symbolism of the whole.

It must be pointed out, however, that the artist's experience as a "pure" painter is not altogether a hindrance in his new art. It is not merely that the old technique and developed sensitivity to colors and shapes and handling are still valid—to a certain degree these are conditioned by the underlying attitudes of the painter and may have to be changed. But there are intimate conditions of his former practice which survive in the new art in a transfigured and heightened way.

The world he now wishes to depict is too complex and many-sided to be photographed in cold blood. His view of it embraces such

energies and interplay that his perception of the simplest event must embody more than meets the eye and no single scene by itself can be wholly adequate or the highest goal of his realistic imagination. He must develop, if he wishes to attain the desired intensity or comprehensiveness, formal devices which, while foreign to the snapshot appearance, are capable of widening and deepening the scope of the meanings in a representation. In this effort he maintains the tradition of conscious formal freedom established by the art of the last thirty years, but on a new plane and in a context which thoroughly transforms the original sense of this artistic independence. The revolutionary cartoon and mural exhibit this continuity of art to the highest degree; in their most realistic aspect they are much less realistic than the corresponding easel-pictures and often recall the creations of abstract art; but they are, in consequence, far more compact or extensive, pointed or thorough, in their realism.

The revolutionary artist does not find at hand an already digested material, a repertoire of traditional compositions of important subjects, like the old church pictures of the enthroned Christ, the baptism or crucifixion or the last judgment, from which he can proceed. He begins as an individual artist who must create his own themes as he created his abstractions or neutral compositions of objects. He has the whole responsibility of his conceptions. There are no formulas or prescribed rules of revolutionary painting. He is absolutely original and individual in creating this social art which binds him to a group. As a member of this group he shares a common experience and is stimulated and guided by general principles and practices which have crystallized in long struggles and constant discussion. But as an artist he requires now a courage and self-reliance of another order than his self-reliance as a pure artist. For whereas in the latter situation he judged his works in an absolutely sovereign spirit, admitting no judgment of a layman, his work now is addressed consciously to the masses as well as to artists. He does not merely desire the masses' respectful approval as a sign of his technical success; he desires their critical absorption of his work as a sign of its real effectiveness. In addressing himself consciously to a wider and more serious audience to whom the subjects of his art are their most vital experience and matters of life and death, he takes on a series of new responsibilities, practically unknown to artists in the past.



WILLIAM GROPPER

Union Hall



PEGGY BACON

Pity the Blind



SELMA FREEMAN

Strike Talk



Left

GILBERT WILSON

Robber Barons

Left below

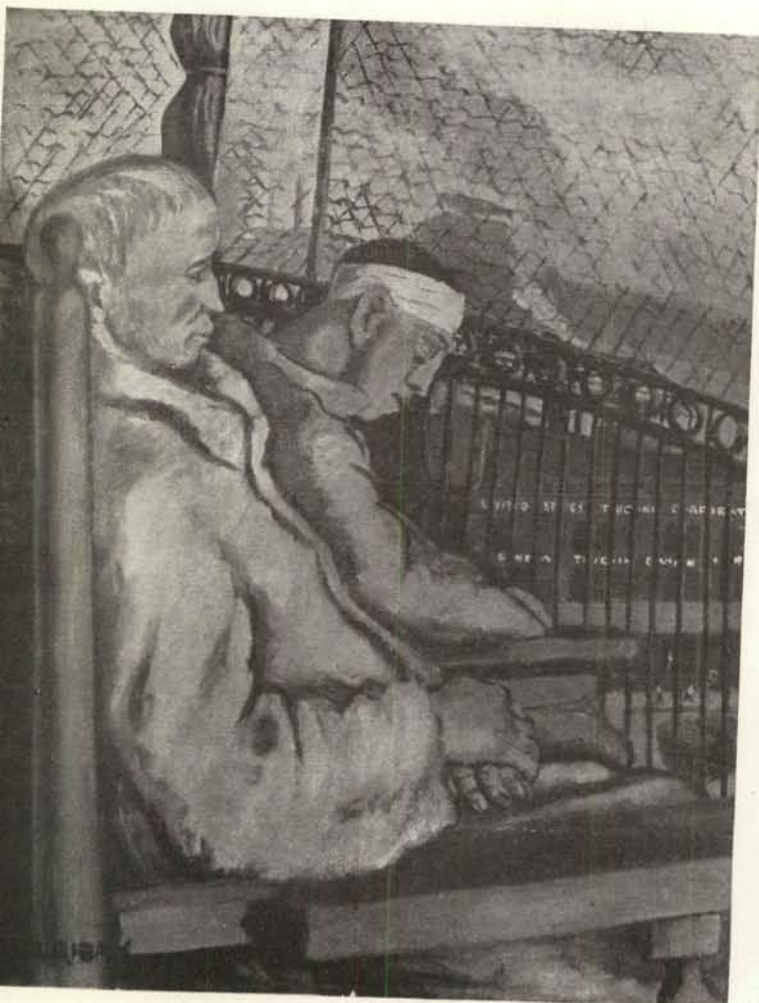
LOUIS RIBAK

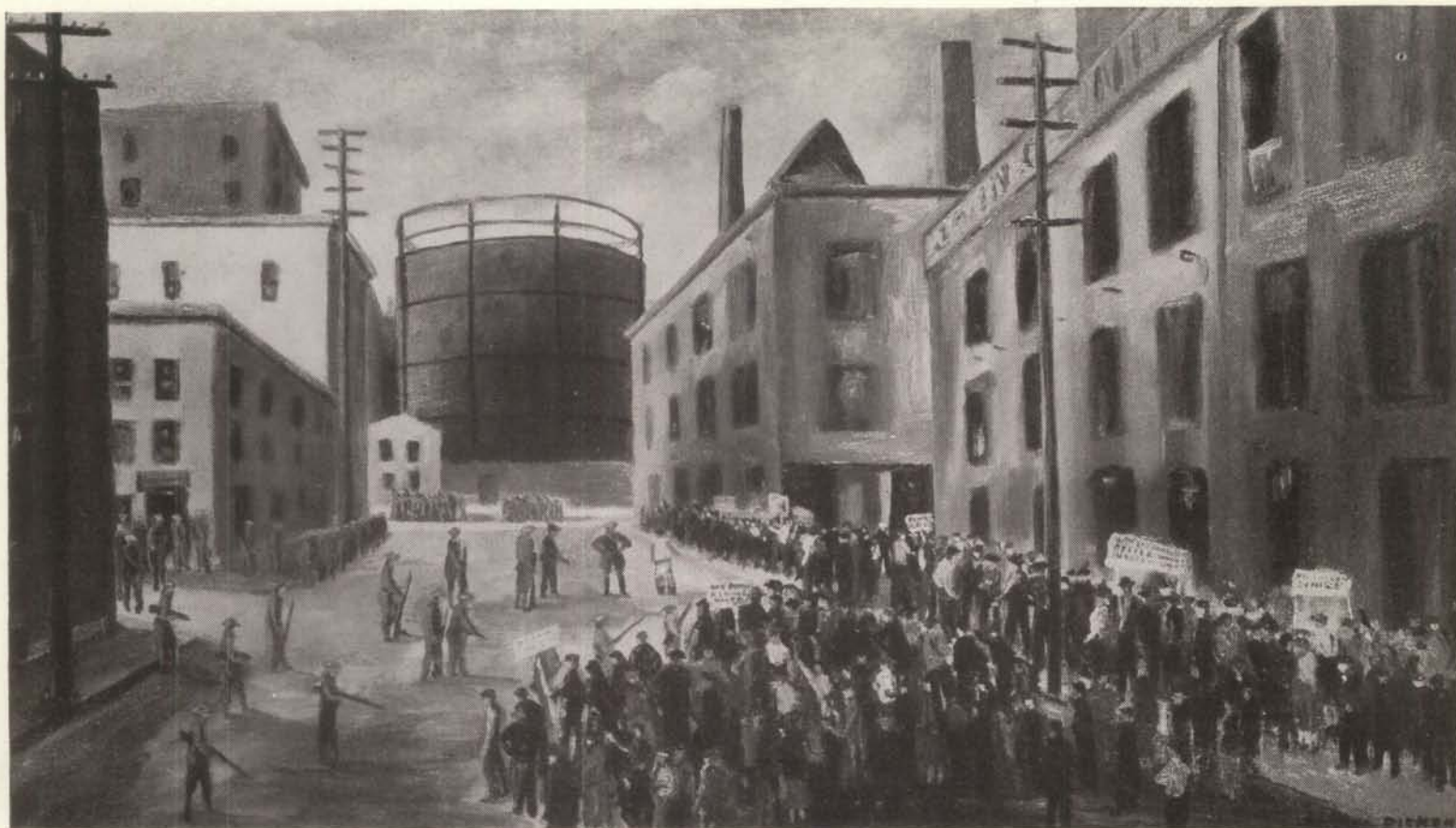
Industrial Victims

Right below

WILLIAM SIEGEL

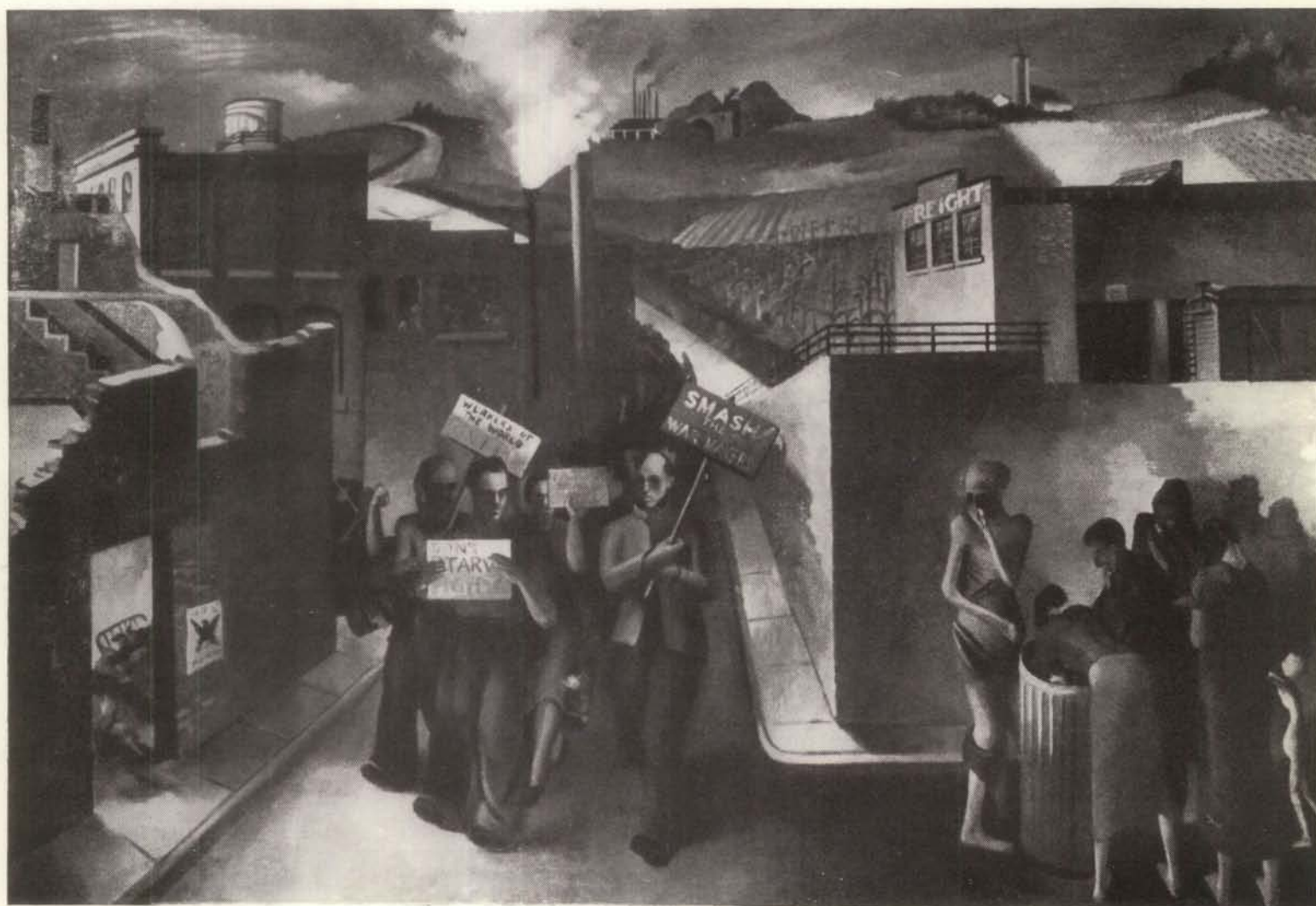
Symbols of Fascism





GEORGE PICKEN

Strike



JOE JONES

Demonstration

The Third Mortgage

ARNOLD BLANCH



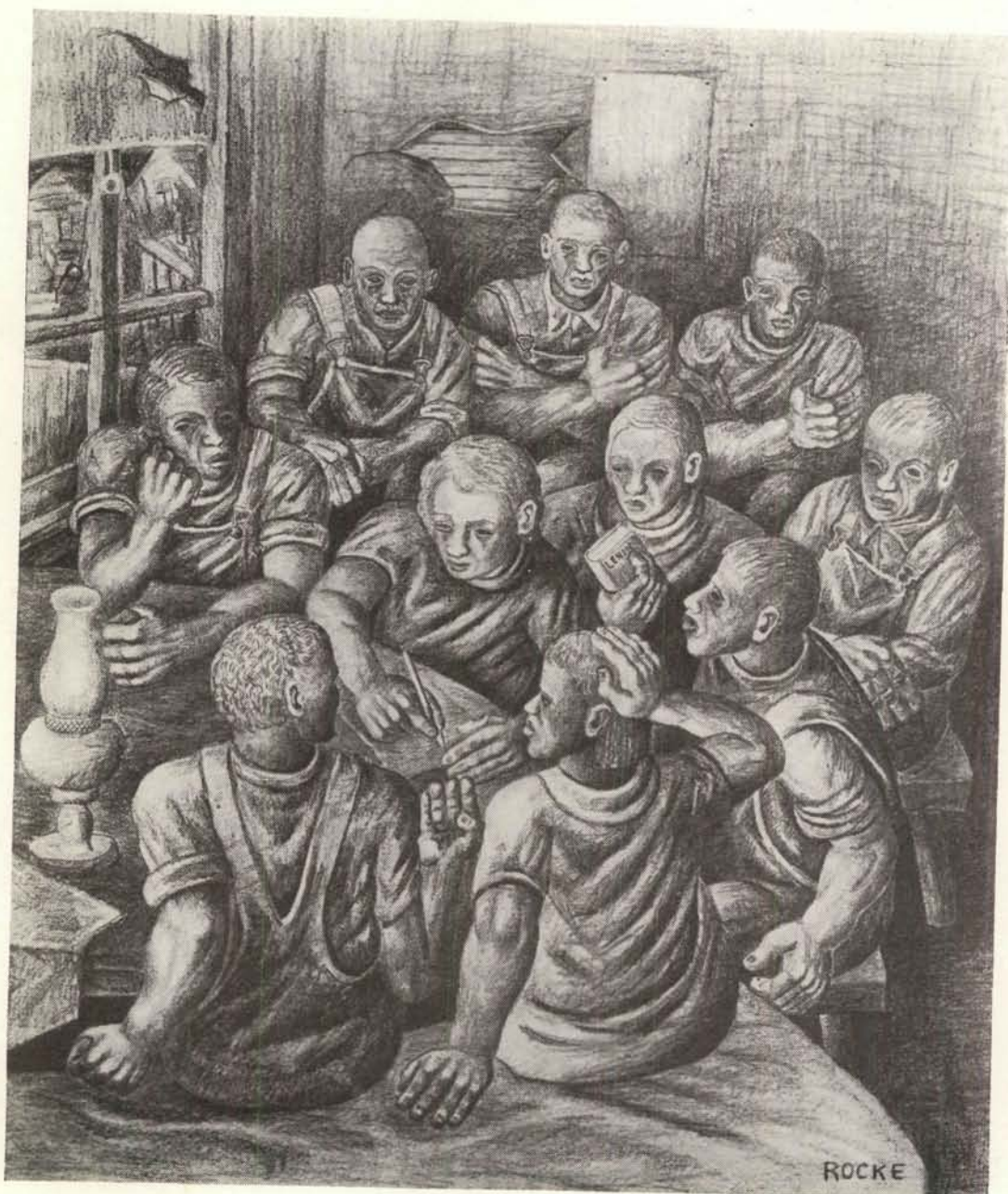
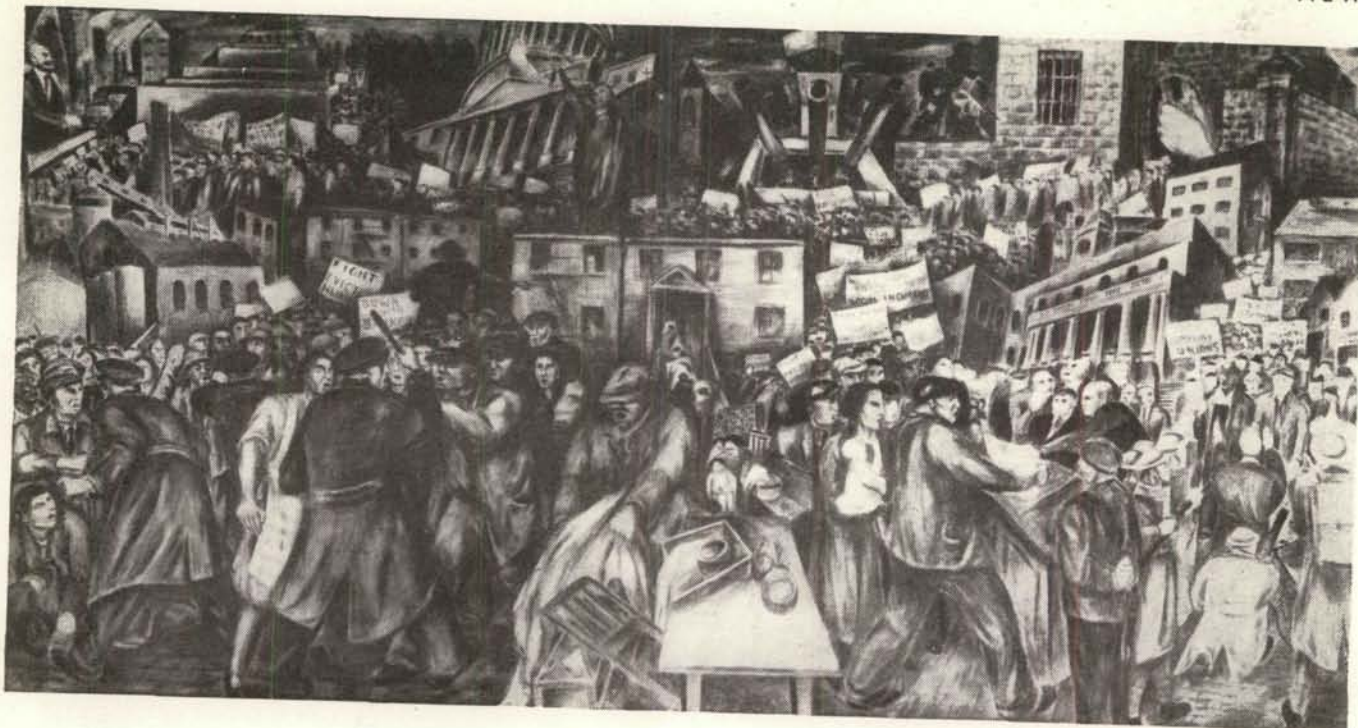
RUSSELL LIMBACH

"Kiss that Flag"



REGINALD MARSH

A Box at the Metropolitan



Above

JOSEPH VOGEL

America

left

GILBERT ROCKE

The New Comrade

ROCKE



JACOB BURCK

The New Deal



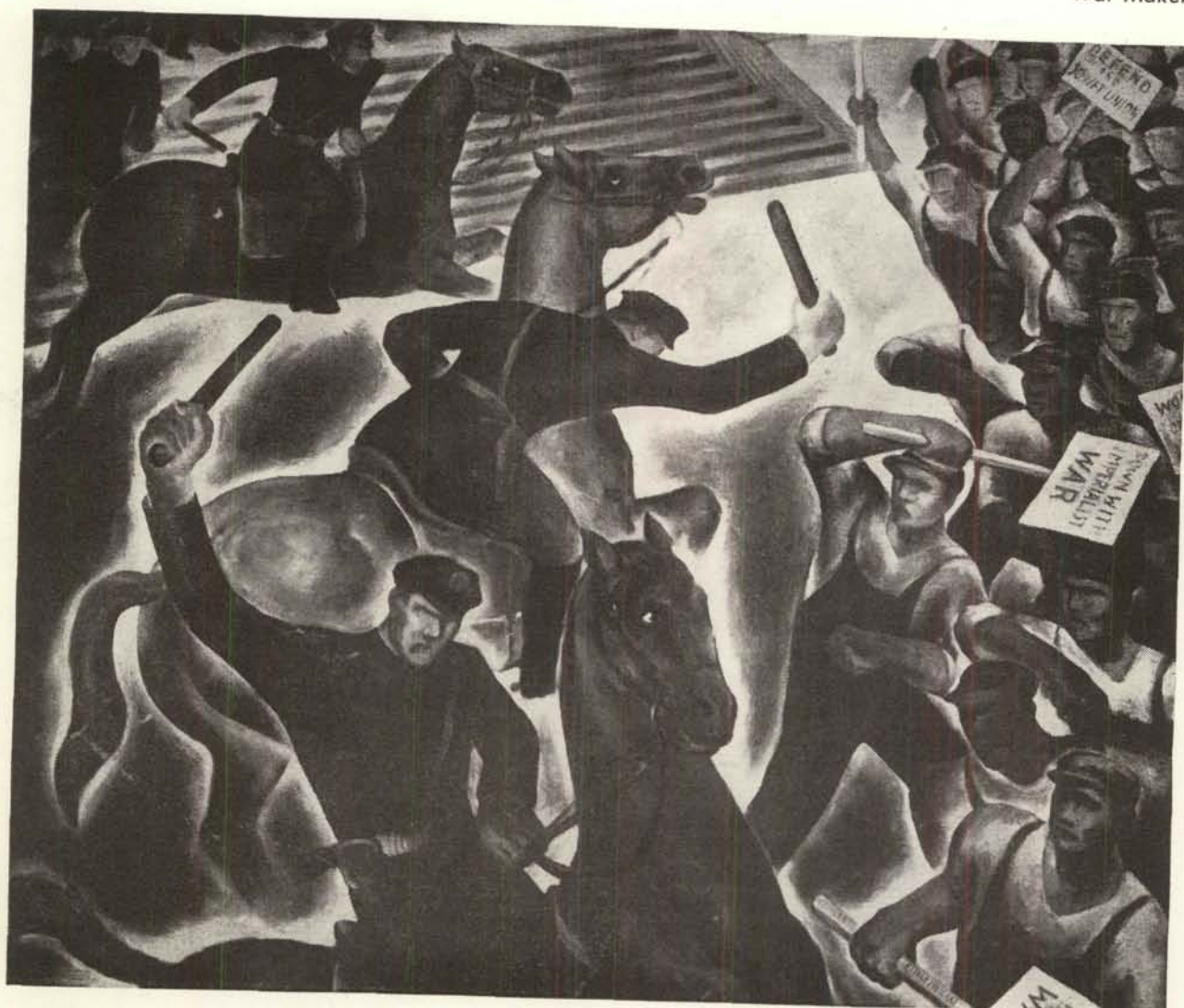
LIL ADELMAN

"Free Speech"



ANTON REFREGIER

War Makers

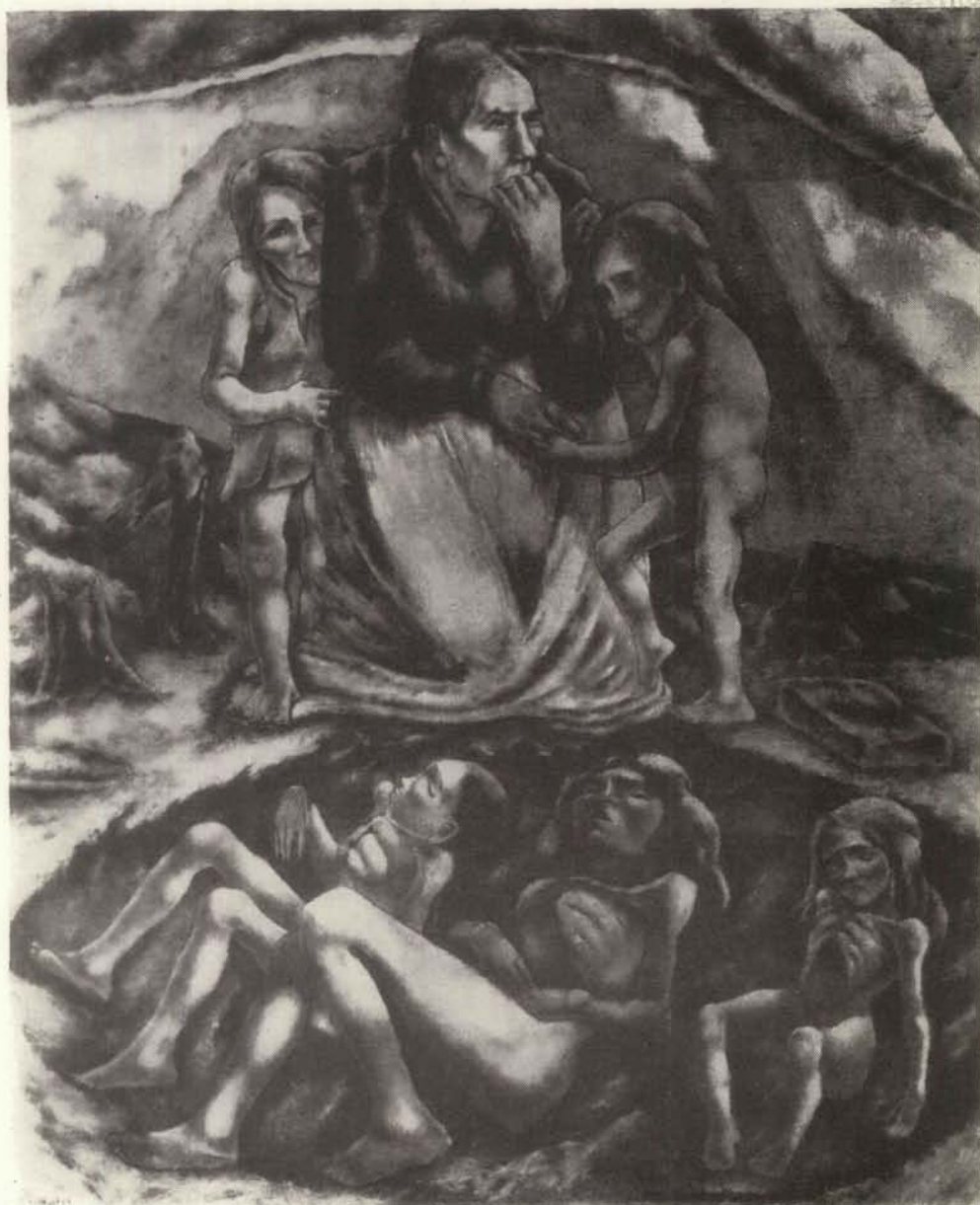


EITARO ISHIGAKI

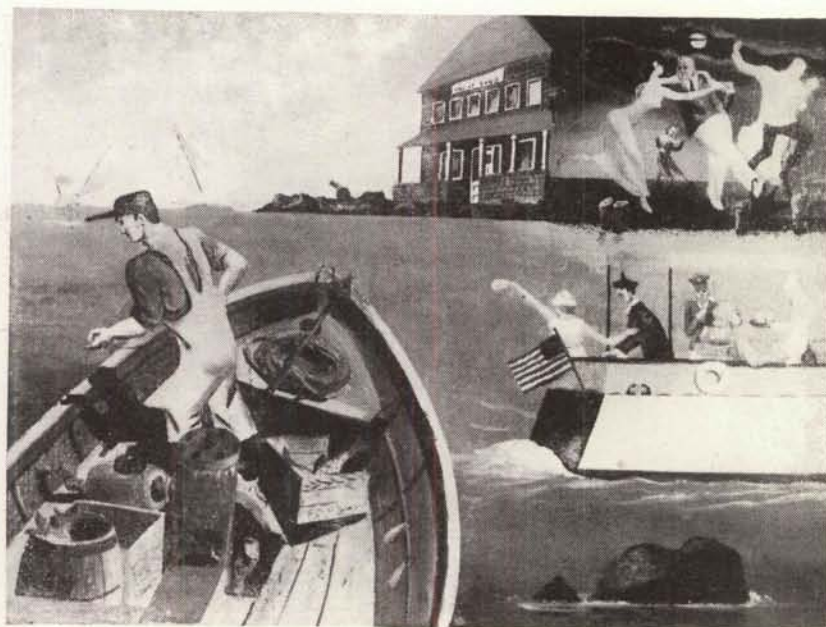
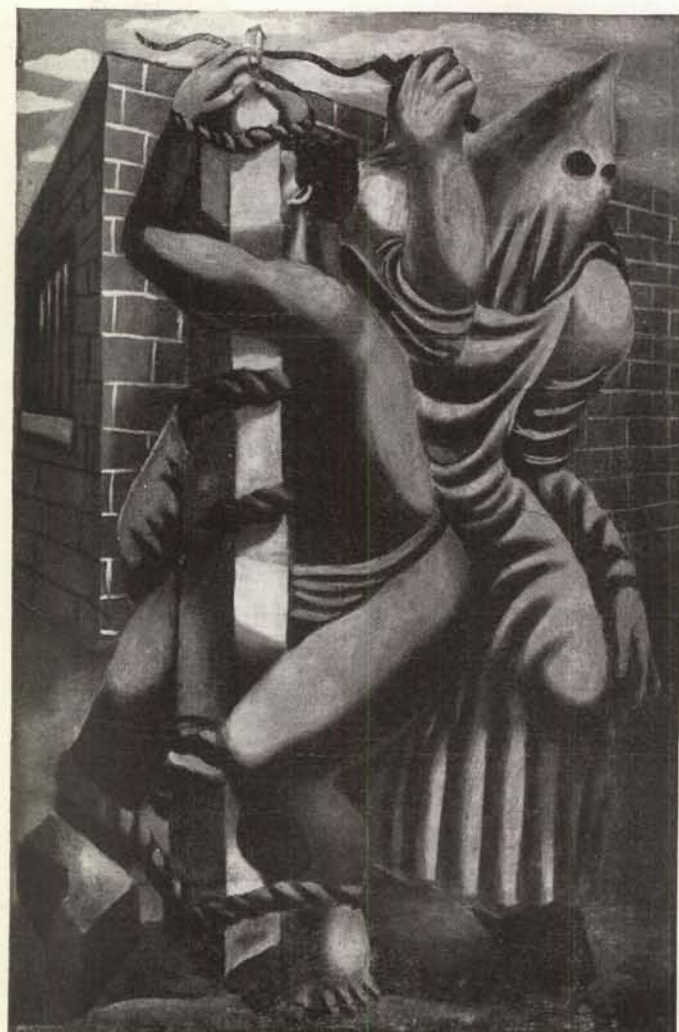
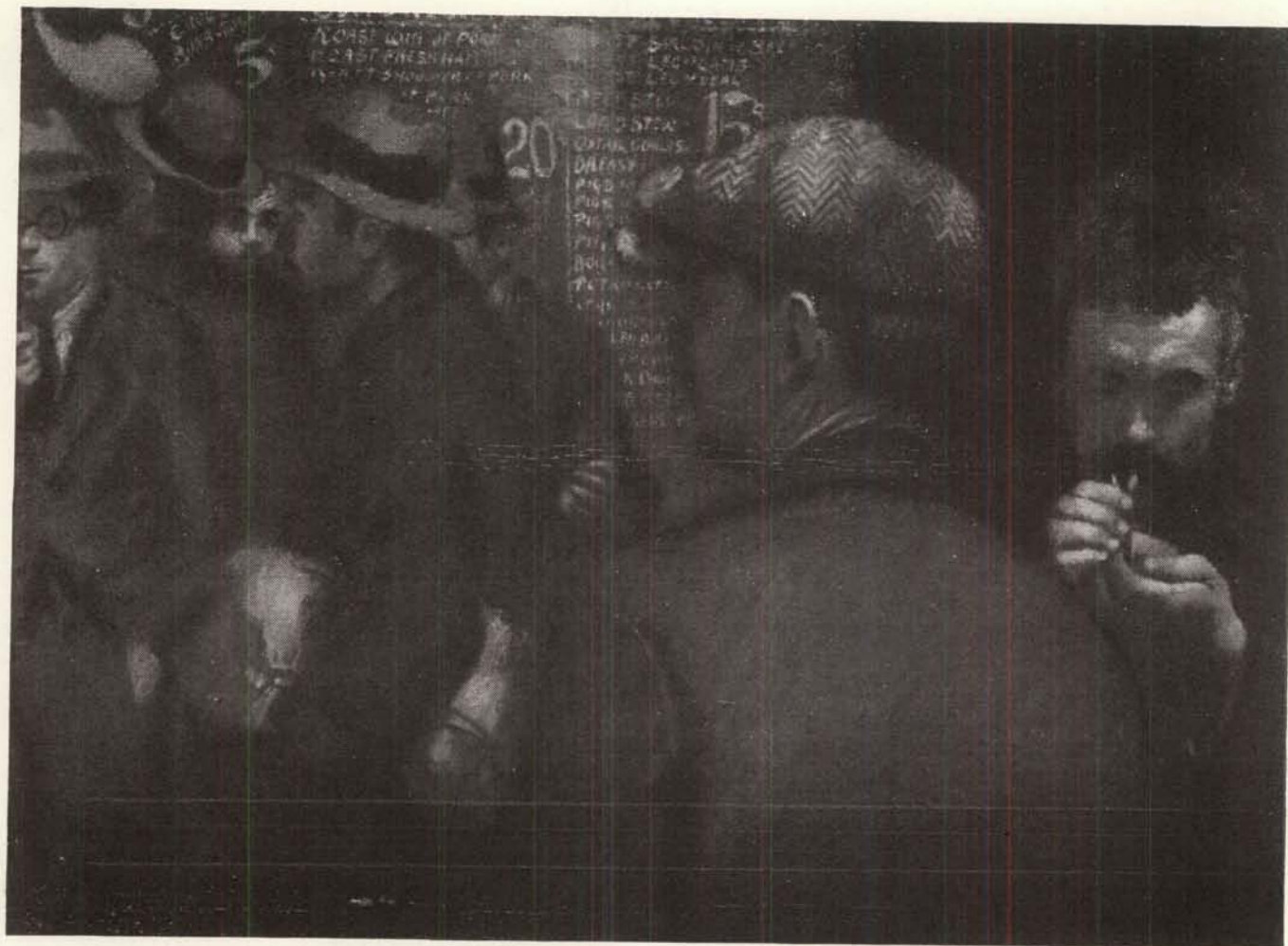
American Cossacks



GEORGES SCHREIBER
Family Affair



GEORGE BIDDLE
Starvation



Top: RAPHAEL SOYER
Bowery Nocturne

Above: JIM GUY
Two Classes

Left: LUIS ARENAL
Ku Klux Klan



NICOLAI CIKOVSKY

East River



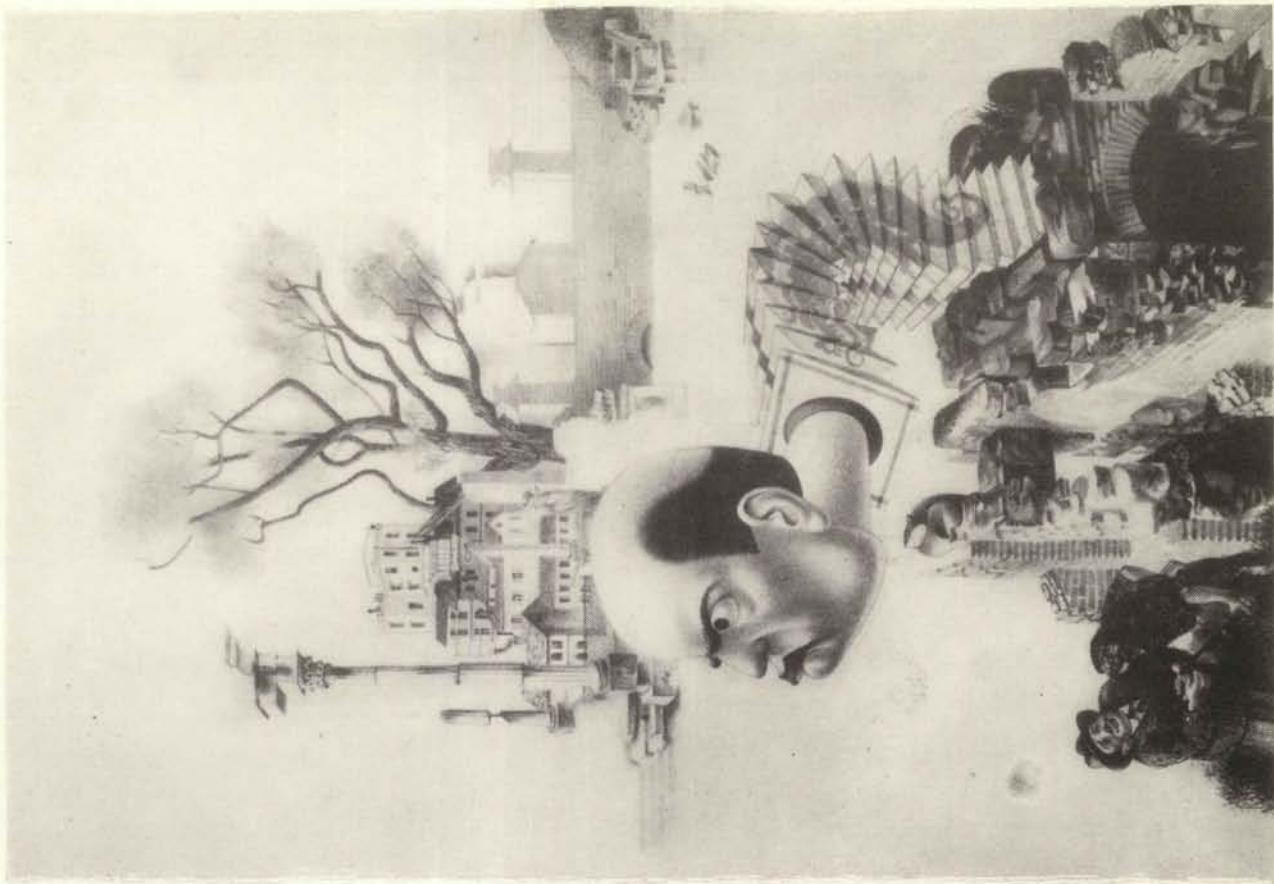
MABEL DWIGHT

Merchants of Death



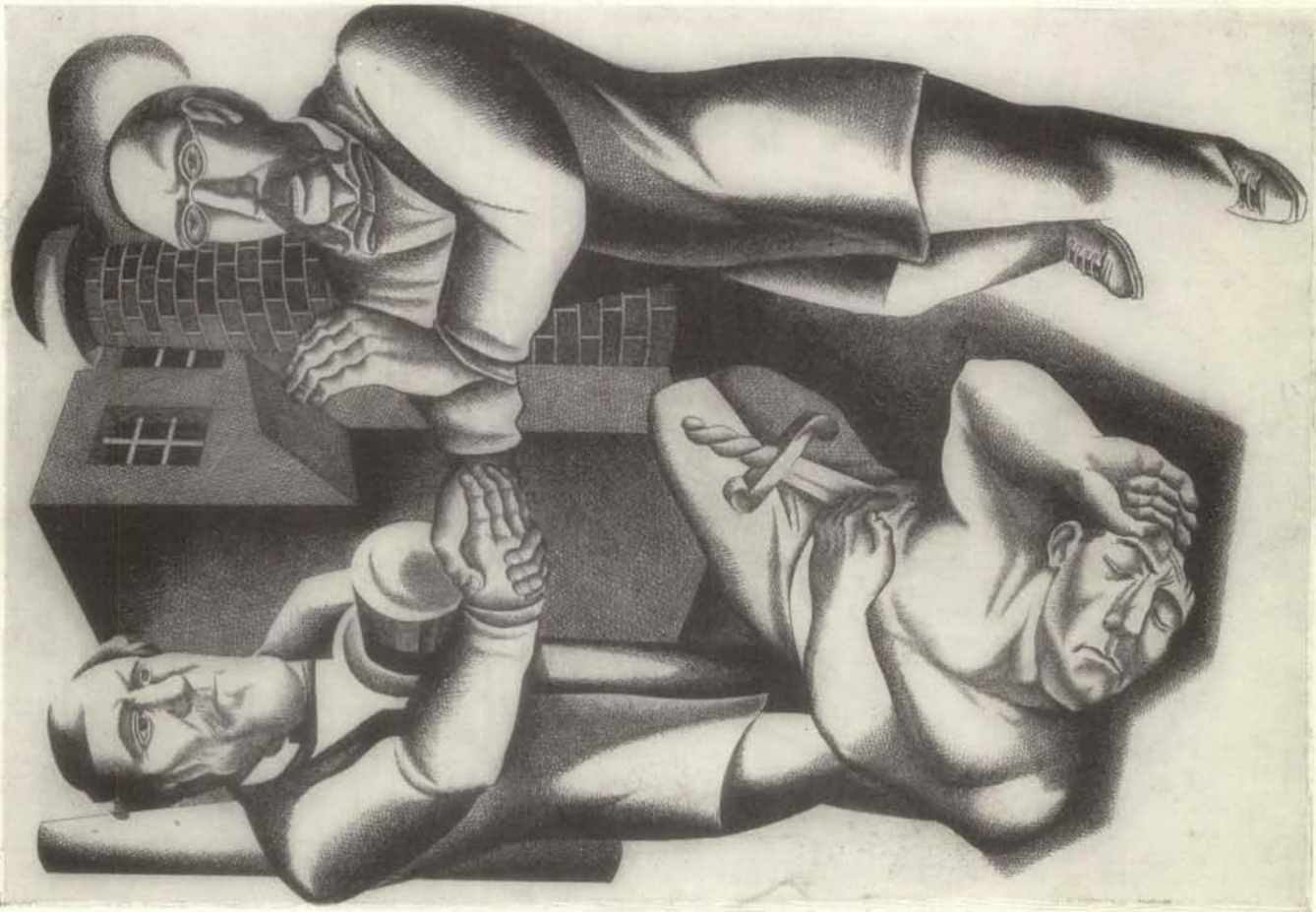
Impasse

ADOLF DEHN



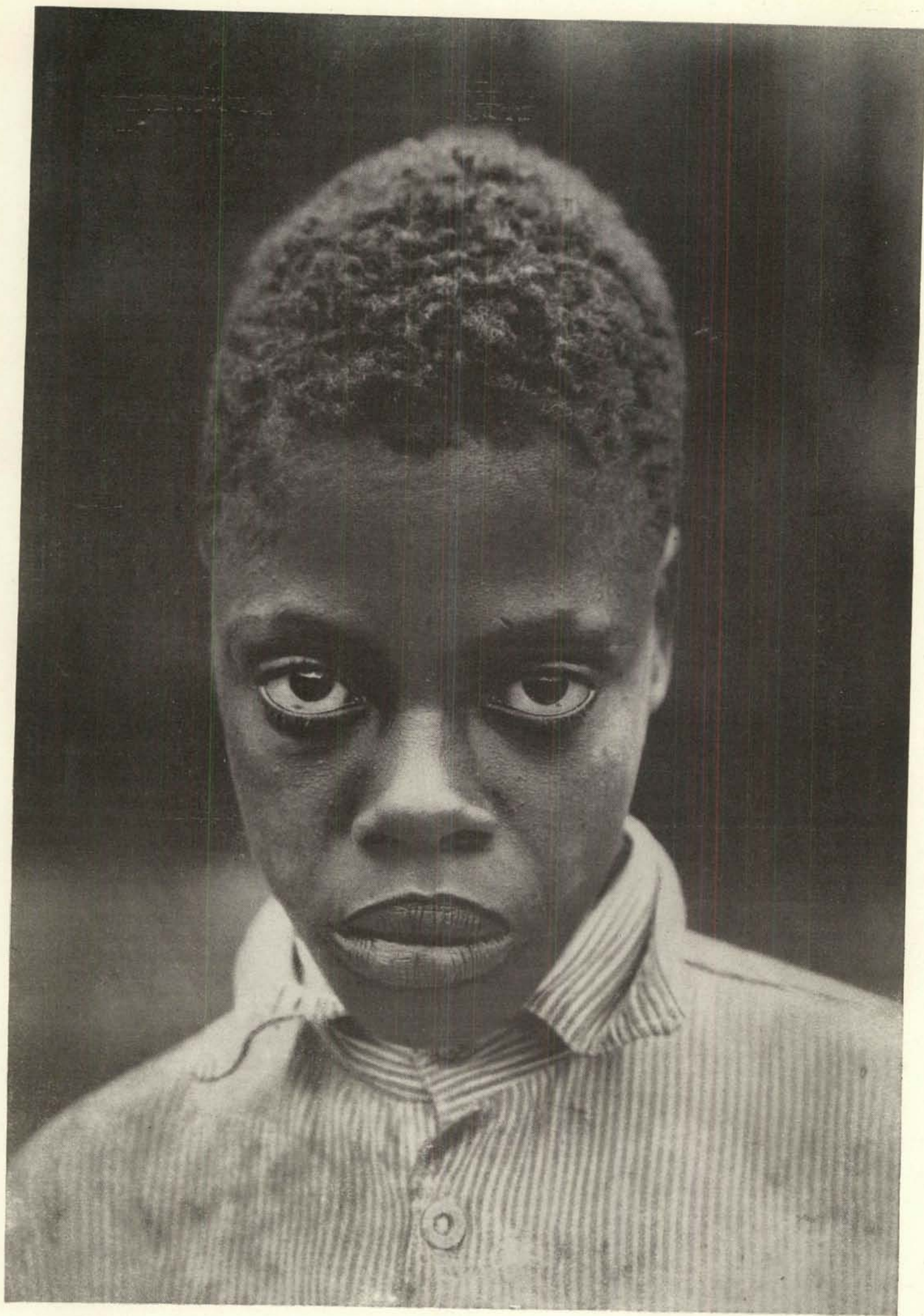
Fascism and Ruins

PETER BLUME



Haymarket

MITCHELL SIPORIN



MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE

A Young American

American Artists' Congress

The effort of American artists to create a more searching and vital cultural movement is taking on deeper significance. American artists, whose works have ever been distinguished by high creative integrity have been considerably more hampered than their fellow-workers, the writers, by the nature of their economic base. Where the writer had a vast potential audience, the artist was generally limited to creating individual objects destined to pass (if they passed at all!) into the hands of private collectors for private delectation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that writers began before artists to identify their aims with the interests of the broad masses of American people. But during the crisis years, influential artists have also embarked upon a sweeping revaluation of their background and their current direction. Ideological realignments have been powerfully stimulated by struggles for economic security and younger artists especially have been leading the way in effective mass action for government support through the militant Artists' Union.

The interaction of all these forces and the sharp conflicts that have developed as a result of reactionary efforts to stifle progressive artistic expression have thrown the entire American art world into ferment. This complex situation, intensified by the imminence of a new world war threatening universal extinction of art and artists, sets the stage for the forthcoming American Artists' Congress announced in the call printed below.

This congress can achieve results not merely parallel to those of the Writers' Congress held in New York this past spring. It is not only possible, but imperative that the artists build up and consolidate their ranks into an even wider front as an unwavering bulwark against the destructive forces of war and fascism. A glance at the list of signatories gives ground for believing this aim will be achieved.—THE EDITORS.

Call for an American Artists' Congress

THIS is a Call to all artists, of recognized standing in their profession, who are aware of the critical conditions existing in world culture in general and in the field of the Arts in particular. This Call is to those artists, who, conscious of the need of action, realize the necessity of collective discussion and planning, with the objective of the preservation and development of our cultural heritage. It is for those artists who realize that the cultural crisis is but a reflection of a world economic crisis and not an isolated phenomenon.

The artists are among those most affected by the world economic crisis. Their income has dwindled dangerously close to zero.

Dealers, museums and private patrons have long ceased to supply the meager support they once gave.

Government, state and municipally sponsored Art Projects are giving only temporary employment and to a small fraction of the artists.

The wage scale on these projects has been consistently below the standard set by the House Painters' Union. Present government policy on the Works Program will drive it below subsistence level.

All these attempts have failed conspicuously to provide that economic base on which creative work can be accomplished.

In addition to his economic plight, the artist must face a constant attack against his freedom of expression.

Rockefeller Center, the Museum of Mod-

ern Art, the Old Court House in St. Louis, the Coit Memorial Tower in San Francisco, the Abraham Lincoln High School, Rikers Island Penitentiary—in these and other important public and semi-public institutions suppression, censorship or actual destruction of art works has occurred.

Oaths of allegiance for teachers, investigations of colleges for radicalism, sedition bills aimed at the suppression of civil liberties, discrimination against the foreign-born, against Negroes, the reactionary Liberty League and similar organizations, Hearst journalism, etc., are daily reminders of fascist growth in the United States.

A picture of what fascism has done to living standards, to civil liberties, to workers' organizations, to science and art, the threat against the peace and security of the world, as shown in Italy and Germany, should arouse every sincere artist to action.

We artists must act. Individually we are powerless. Through collective action we can defend our interests. We must ally ourselves with all groups engaged in the common struggle against war and fascism.

There is need for an artists' organization on a nation-wide scale, which will deal with our cultural problems. The creation of such a permanent organization, which will be affiliated with kindred organizations throughout the world, is our task.

The Artists' Congress, to be held in New York City in early December, will have as its objective the formation of such an or-

ganization. Discussion at the Congress will include the following:

Fascism and War; Racial Discrimination; Preservation of Civil Liberties; Imprisonment of Revolutionary Artists and Writers; Federal, State and Municipal Art Projects; Municipal Art Gallery and Center; Federal Art Bill; Rental of Pictures; the Art Schools during the Crisis; Museum Policy in the Depression; Subject Matter in Art; Aesthetic Directions; Relations of Media and Material to Art Content; Art Criticism.

We, the undersigned artists, representing all sections of the United States, ask you to show your solidarity with us by signing this Call and by participating in the Congress.

Ivan le Loraine Albright	Jacob Kainen
George Ault	Morris Kantor
Peggy Bacon	Jerome Klein
Herman Baron	Karl Knaths
A. S. Baylinson	Frederic Knight
Maurice Becker	Benj. Kopman
Ahron Ben-Shmuel	Eve Kottgen
Theresa Bernstein	Edward Laning
Joseph Biel	Doris Lee
Henry Billings	Russell Limbach
Jolan Gross Bittliheim	Erle Loran
Lucile Blanch	Louis Lozowick
Arnold Blanch	Eugene Ludins
Lou Block	Jack Markow
Peter Blume	William Meyerowitz
Aaron Bohrod	Edward Millman
Cameron Booth	Lewis Mumford
Margaret Bourke-White	Elizabeth Olds
Ernest Brace	Peter Paul Ott
Edith Bronson	George Picken
Alexander Brook	Walter Quirt
Sonia Gordon Brown	Anton Refregier
Jacob Burck	Boardman Robinson
Paul Burlin	Gilbert Rocke
Paul Cadmus	Andree Ruellan
Nicolai Cikovsky	Saul Schary
John Cunningham	Katherine Schmidt
Lew E. Davis	Georges Schreiber
Stuart Davis	Alfred A. Sessler
Adolf Dehn	Ben Shahn
Julio de Diego	William Siegel
Thomas Donnelly	Mitchell Siporin
Aaron Douglas	David Smith
Ed Dreis	Moses Soyer
Mabel Dwight	Raphael Soyer
Dorothy Eisner	Niles Spencer
Charles Ellis	Benton Spruance
Ernest Fiene	Harry Sternberg
Todros Geller	Jack W. Taylor
Hugo Gellert	Morris Topchevsky
Lydia Gibson	LeRoy Turner
C. Adolph Glassgold	Abraham Walkowitz
H. Glintenkamp	Lynd Ward
Aaron Goodelman	Louis Weiner
Harry Gottlieb	Charles S. Wells
Waylande Gregory	Charmion von Wiegand
Wm. Gropper	Gilbert Wilson
John Groth	Arnold Wiltz
Minna Harkavy	Caleb Winholtz
Bertram Hartman	Jan Wittenber
Emil Holzauer	Ann Wolfe
Eitaro Ishigaki	Art Young
Joe Jones	Santos Zingale
	Nick Zirol

Copies of this Call can be obtained from Stuart Davis, Secretary, Artists' Congress, 52 West 8th Street, New York City.