

1

ARTISTS AGAINST WAR AND FASCISM

The eleven years separating 1935 and 1946 witnessed intense and sustained activity by many artists who first opposed expansionist wars overseas, then subordinated their dissent to serve the Allied cause during World War II (1939–45), and, finally, found themselves in a world overshadowed by the recent violence. For these men and women, the rise of virulent right-wing politics in Europe, the Italian conquest of Ethiopia (1935–36), the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), and the Japanese invasion of China (1937) were spurs to action. Whether they were aligned with the American Artists' Congress (AAC) or working independently, these artists considered it their responsibility to oppose fascism, militarism, and war. Their actions were predicated on the deeply held beliefs that art has a role to play in shaping public consciousness in progressive societies and that artists should link creativity with citizenship, to the mutual benefit of both. Art would gain by the broadening of its worldview beyond abstraction, experimentation, and hermetic symbolism. Citizenship might be improved by providing viewers with points of view that they may not have considered (or encountered), especially when the government and media have reason to shape the interpretation of events.

FIGHTING FASCISM

Announced in late 1935 in the wake of the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International (which was intended to foster an alliance of democratic groups into a popular front working against fascism), the AAC was the organizational heart of antiwar

art and activism in the United States in the years before the country's entry into World War II.¹ This was not the first time American artists had questioned the use of state violence. Many who participated in the Congress were familiar with the antiwar art featured in the John Reed Clubs earlier in the decade, as well as with the cartoons and illustrations published in the communist newspapers *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses* and, earlier, in the socialist magazine *Masses* (1911–17).² During World War I, some American artists produced work critical of the conflict. What distinguished the AAC, however, was both the scale of its organization—it was active not just in New York, but also in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., among other cities—and the prestige of its membership. The men and women who called other artists to join the first Congress, which met in February 1936, were quite diverse in their choice of style and media. They included Lucile Blanch, Peter Blume, Margaret Bourke-White, Stuart Davis, Mabel Dwight, Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, Minna Harkavy, Louis Lozowick, Anton Refregier, Ben Shahn, David Smith, and the brothers Moses and Raphael Soyer. Only united action, they warned, could counter the rise of fascism abroad and at home.³ Because so many of its members were artists of “recognized standing,” the organization was guaranteed attention.⁴ Mainstream media, primarily the *New York Times*, continuously published reports of the AAC's activities, thereby publicizing its political mission.

The simple claim that the AAC stood for peace and democracy while opposing war and fascism provided a rubric wide enough to contain the full spectrum of left-of-center politics, if only for about four years.⁵ A core group of the AAC supported the communist idea that art, especially social realist art, was a weapon in the war on fascism.⁶ Many members of the AAC were deeply troubled by the Soviet Show trials of 1936–38 and the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939. The organization was crippled by a major schism in April 1940 due to internal dissent over the Soviet invasion of Finland. Communists and fellow travelers refused to condemn this action, prompting such high-profile members as Stuart Davis and the art historian Meyer Schapiro to resign in protest. Although the Congress dissolved in 1942, its goals nonetheless remained a touchstone for several artists who continued to attack fascism in subsequent years.

To appreciate the accomplishments of the AAC, it is necessary to acknowledge the range of activities through which it sought to communicate with audiences beyond those who frequented art galleries and its members' individual acts of support for peoples fighting fascism. At the first meeting of the Congress, several artists confronted the growing political tension in Europe, a situation that led Davis to warn of “a devastating new World War.”⁷ Rockwell Kent insisted that “artists *should* be active in the movement against war, for artists, of all people in the world, are most concerned with life.”⁸ Hugo Gellert articulated the communist belief that fascism was a regressive political ideology, manifest in “the pyre, executioner's axe, torture chamber, bigotry, [and] racial and religious persecution.” Unchecked, it would return humanity not only to the Middle Ages, but ultimately to the life of the caveman.⁹ Such arguments, separating the world

into diametrically opposed progressive and regressive forces and simplifying it with the language of good and evil, would be evident in antiwar art through the end of World War II and were echoed for decades afterward. In the months following the first Congress, members refused to send work to the Berlin Olympics and to participate in the Venice Biennale to protest German and Italian fascism, respectively.¹⁰ When he was awarded a jury prize of \$600 by the National Academy of Design in April 1937, Kent signed the check over to the American Friends of Spanish Democracy.¹¹ At the second Congress, convened in December 1937, members voted to condemn the Japanese attack on China and to protest the fascist war in Spain.¹² Speaking to the Congress by telephone, Pablo Picasso assured them that the democratically elected government of Spain was protecting the art treasures of the country and summarized his commitment to political action by stating “that I have always believed, and still believe, that artists who live and work with spiritual values cannot and should not remain indifferent to a conflict in which the highest values of humanity and civilization are at stake.”¹³

Congress actions continued through the remainder of the decade. In September 1938, Philip Evergood, William Gropper, and other artists set up easels in Union Square, Times Square, and Columbus Circle in New York and painted posters to raise aid for the American Relief Ship for Spain.¹⁴ That December, the AAC charged the Metropolitan Museum of Art with subsidizing Nazi industry by selling Christmas cards and color reproductions, made in Germany, of popular works from its collection. The museum declined to change vendors, stating that quality and cost, not politics, were its primary concerns.¹⁵ In January 1939, Kent and Margaret Bourke-White were among the signatories of “An Open Letter to the Government and People of the United States,” published in the *New York Times*, urging the federal government to lift its embargo on Spain so that the republican government could fight the fascist insurgents, who were openly backed by Italy and Germany.¹⁶ In April, the AAC, along with individual artists and critics, joined a national protest against the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., when it refused to hang Peter Blume’s antifascist allegory *The Eternal City* (1934–37) in its sixteenth biennial. These events helped to keep the Congress’s issues at the forefront of American art.

Themed exhibitions organized by the AAC addressed the threat of imperialist war. Primary among these was *War and Fascism: An International Exhibition of Cartoons, Drawings, and Prints* at the New School for Social Research in April and early May 1936. In his introductory comments to the show’s catalogue, Harry F. Ward, chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union and of the American League against War and Fascism, reminded readers that “it is the high duty of artists to make these blind millions [of U.S. citizens] see and understand. It is their heavy responsibility to wake these sleepwalkers while there is yet time to escape the destruction toward which they are being driven.”¹⁷ The exhibition featured both historical and contemporary antiwar art. Works from Jacques Callot’s series *Miseries and Misfortunes of War* (1633) and Goya’s *Disasters of War* (1810–20) were shown alongside Pieter Breugel’s *Battle of the Penny Safes and*

the Strong Boxes (1557) and Dürer's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1497–98). Honoré Daumier was represented by twelve lithographs. In the catalogue, the writer Malcolm Cowley asserted that these venerable men “are still exerting an influence, are still teaching people to see the world through their honest eyes. May we honor them, both by remembering them and by following their example.”¹⁸ That their legacy was flourishing was evident in the work of the Germans Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Käthe Kollwitz; in that of the Mexicans José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros; and in that of several Americans, among them Phil Bard, Dwight Gellert, Gropper, Reginald Marsh, Refregier, and Mitchell Siporin. In his review of the exhibition for *Art Front*, Lynd Ward was careful to underline the desire to reach and instruct audiences. “This exhibition is action,” he asserted, noting that the New York venue was the first in a national tour and announcing the availability of the exhibition on filmstrip.¹⁹ Why was antiwar art important, and why did it need to be seen? Because through their ability to imagine and then to image, artists provided ways of seeing not only events elsewhere, but also the broader powers shaping those events. “The modern artist can see beyond the man killing and the man killed,” Ward continued. “He can identify those forces in society that make for death, forces that in Durer’s time could be but vaguely symbolized as the ‘Devil.’ The artist knows that whatever it was three hundred years ago, today war is an activity of the political and economic system we live under.”²⁰

Late in 1937, the AAC opened *An Exhibition in Defense of World Democracy: Dedicated to the Peoples of Spain and China*. Reproductions of drawings by Gropper, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Ward were sold to benefit Spain and China.²¹ Blanch, Evergood, Gropper, Har-kavy, I. Rice Pereira, Refregier, and Moses Soyer contributed explicitly antiwar work. The exhibition also provided a venue for Philip Guston’s *Bombardment* (1937–38; figure 4) and Picasso’s etchings *Dreams and Lies of Franco* (1937). Reviews were mixed, as would be the case for antiwar exhibitions over the next seventy-five years. Edward Alden Jewell, the *New York Times*’ principal art critic, complained that “the ideals” embraced by the artists were “more ‘necessary’ than is most of the art. For propaganda is one thing and paint is something else.” Guston’s painting, a view of civilians fleeing a daytime aerial bombing as if perceived through the lens of a periscope, “should have been named ‘Exploding Tondo’” because it was “one of the loudest” works on view.²²

Members’ exhibitions provided another venue for communication. The first was staged in April 1937 at Rockefeller Center, and the *Second Annual Membership Exhibition*, in April and May 1938, was held in the fifth-floor gallery of the John Wanamaker department store at Broadway and 9th Street. In the catalogue (its most expansive to date) for the second show, the AAC listed titles and reproduced works of art, several of which addressed the wars in China and Spain: Albert Abramovitz’s *Air Raid (Spain)*; Blanch’s *Afternoon in Spain* (1937; plate 1); Eitaro Ishigaki’s *Victim of War*; Ella Ostrowsky’s *Spanish Refugees*; and Refregier’s *Bombers!* (1938; figure 5).²³ The *Third Annual Membership Exhibition*, in February 1939, was held in a sixth-floor gallery at 444 Madison Avenue. These locations took the art into leisure and commercial



FIGURE 4
Philip Guston, *Bombardment*, 1937–38. Oil on Masonite, diameter: 42 in. (106.7 cm).
Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Musa and Tom Mayer, 2011.

spaces, in effect bringing it to a larger swath of the New York population than might otherwise have seen it. Accompanied by publications that offered commentary on the aims of the AAC, the exhibitions furthered the organization's goal of opposing war. In the catalogue to the third exhibition, Arthur Emptage stressed the artist's role in fighting fascism, writing: "Side by side with those defenders of democracy, the artist has fought. He has taken unto himself with true comprehension his responsibility as a creator and as an interpreter of the culture of today, but he has also recognized and accepted with understanding his role as a free citizen in a free country. He has not confined his struggles to his ivory tower or to his attic but has met the world on the highways and in byways."²⁴ A final group exhibition, in April 1940, effectively marked the end of the organization.

Representative works by AAC members reveal how they hoped to awake citizens to the nature of modern war. In Blanch's *Afternoon in Spain*, a woman lies in the grass with an infant propped against her hip. The flowers, picnic basket, and food



FIGURE 5

Anton Refregier, *Bombers!*, 1938. As reproduced in American Artists' Congress, *Second Annual Membership Exhibition* (New York: American Artists' Congress, 1938). From Gerald Monroe research material on American Artists' Congress, Artists' Union, and WPA, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Estate of Anton Refregier.

spread on a blanket, as well as the lush swath of green interspersed with dramatic contrasts of red, should establish the scene as a welcome bucolic escape. However, the jarring detail of a bullet wound in the woman's neck violently removes the scene from the realm of family bliss, and the absence of a male companion or protector underlines her profound vulnerability. Her exposed breast and disheveled clothing suggest a recent rape, a tragic element of the Spanish Civil War as well as a common theme in antiwar art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁵ As witnesses to the crime just perpetrated, viewers are compelled to feel outrage at her abuse and forced to consider the child's plight. Indeed, his apparent obliviousness to her trauma, and to his own uncertain future, marks a stark contrast between innocence and experience that was undoubtedly intended to shock American audiences out of their ignorance of events overseas. To not know what was happening in Spain was to embrace the political position of isolationism. And although the fate of this child remained uncertain, that of others still hung in the balance. There was yet time to send aid to Spain.

Guston's *Bombardment*, like Refregier's *Bombers!*, brings viewers face to face with one of the most controversial aspects of total war: the targeting of civilian populations. The explosion at the heart of Guston's painting propels its victims centrifugally to the edges of the tondo, seemingly knocking them right out of the composition and into the viewer's space. Women, children, and men scatter before the onslaught of bombers looming above the cityscape. The unit of shirtless man and woman holding a naked child in the left foreground constitutes a kind of Holy Family, evoking the Christian story of the Flight into Egypt to escape the murderous intent of Herod the Great, Roman client king of Judea. As in *Guernica* (figure 1), the mother and child provide the affective core of the composition, as their presence is intended to seal an emotional bond between viewers and the scene of domesticity violated. *Bombers!* names the unseen objects of its subjects' fears. The women's proximity to the picture plane, with bodies truncated just beneath the shoulders as they nervously scan the sky, collapses the distance between audience and image in another echo of Picasso's painting. Much like the horse at the center of *Guernica*, which symbolizes the suffering people of republican Spain, the three women in *Bombers!* are personifications of their country, especially as they are wrapped in the shawls traditionally worn by Spanish women.²⁶ None of these paintings includes soldiers, which further reiterates civilian vulnerability. Although they did not ground their paintings in a specific locale (with the exception of the title of Blanch's painting), each artist's work cautioned viewers that what was taking place in Spain might also happen in the United States.

There certainly was no lack of information about the war in Spain, especially the destruction of the Basque town of Guernica, which gave the war its most famous work of art. The *New York Times* devoted front-page coverage to the attack "far behind" the front lines.²⁷ Timed to coincide with the weekly late-afternoon market, the assault came in three carefully calculated waves: heavy bombing meant to cause civilian panic and stampede; machine-gun strafing to force the local populace into dugouts and shelters for protection; and finally incendiary bombing to collapse structures onto those who had taken refuge underneath them. What would not be confirmed until after the war was that the attack was carried out by the German and Italian air forces. The Germans used Spain as a testing ground for the blitzkrieg tactics it later deployed in World War II. G. L. Steer, who filed the report in the *New York Times*, called attention to the atrocity, writing, "In the form of its execution and the scale of the destruction it wrought, no less than in the selection of its objective, the raid on Guernica is unparalleled in military history. Guernica was not a military objective."²⁸ It was, he went on to explain, the center of Basque culture and the place where Spanish kings traditionally pledged to respect the democratic rights of the local citizenry. Conceived to demoralize the populace, the operation was an act of terrorism. It was also a political message that fascism would vanquish democracy.

Commissioned by the democratic government of Spain for inclusion in its pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques in 1937, *Guernica* had a profound

impact in the United States. Initially it was known through reproduction in several periodicals, including *Cahiers d'Art* and *Life* magazine.²⁹ Under the auspices of the AAC, it was first exhibited in the United States at the Valentine Gallery in New York in May 1939, just weeks after the fascists had claimed victory in Spain. Part of the fifty-cent admission fee went to the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign. At an AAC-organized symposium at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in late May, Peter Blume approvingly described Picasso's struggle to conceive a "vehicle of [the] most intense emotional experience of our time."³⁰ Philip Evergood pronounced the painting the pinnacle of Picasso's career.³¹ Looking back from the perspective of late 1944, Herman Baron, director of the American Contemporary Art (ACA) Gallery, summarized the importance of the painting: "*Guernica*, in its protest for outraged humanity, has become the symbol of the social responsibility of the artist."³² Elizabeth McCausland, a well-known art critic and an ardent supporter of art on the left, was more fulsome in her assessment of the painting:

In the *Guernica* he sought to shout, with the loudest language he knew, to the whole world of the unspeakable savagery and violations of fascism. Here perhaps, for the first time since the Renaissance, the artist put his art on the side of politics in a gesture as all-embracing as humanity and with a passion as great as Michelangelo's.

Guernica did not defeat the German, Italian and Spanish fascists in Spain; and it would be foolish to expect it to. It did, however, make its creator's position unmistakable.³³

As undeniably important as *Guernica* was, it was not the only example of an engaged art at hand. The Popular Front provided concurrent models of creative individuals who worked within their areas of expertise to address the world crisis of fascism.³⁴ History, too, furnished many precedents, several already mentioned in the preceding pages. Picasso's broader importance lay in his belief that one could, in fact, blend modern art of the highest ambition and accomplishment with political messages understandable to audiences who were committed to the same cause. Thus his art served as one reminder that the left was working together and that artists could play their part—perhaps even a leading role—in visualizing the power of a collective movement.³⁵

THE MEXICANS

Another important frame of reference, and source of inspiration, was the example of the Mexican muralists Orozco, Siqueiros, and Diego Rivera. All were represented in the collection of MoMA by works that either celebrate the armed struggle against political oppression or condemn the sublime technology, and the sometimes sexualized violence, of modern war.³⁶ Of the three, Orozco was perhaps the most important to American artists. "The artists' means of struggle . . . include the open revealing of all crimes and criminal attempts practised against intellectuals and artists in fascist countries," he

reminded his audience in remarks at the 1936 Congress, “and the waging of an intense campaign against the forces which are leading humanity toward a new massacre.”³⁷ He had already produced a major statement about violence perpetrated in the cause of empire, the fresco cycle *Epic of American Civilization* (1932–34) at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. In his notes published on the occasion of the mural’s unveiling, he was careful to stress the Americanness of the subject and visual form.³⁸ By this he meant the entire land mass of the New World colonized by Europeans. Superior technology was an essential ingredient in carving out and maintaining empire.

Orozco’s next major mural project in the United States was a commission by MoMA. *Dive Bomber and Tank* (figure 6), a portable six-panel fresco, was produced at the museum in June 1940 during the exhibition *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*. When asked to discuss the work, he limited his comments to its technical challenges, but the painting’s content leaves little doubt as to its meaning. A jumble of steel parts loosely resembling the wings and tail of an airplane and the treads and turret of a tank, as well as what might be a shell or bullet thrust upward in phallic aggression, is intermingled with steel chains, human legs, fragments of machines, and several masks apparently of indigenous origin. The implication is that in spite of its technological advances, the modern world is really no more civilized than the age it has supplanted. With an overall dimension of nine by eighteen feet, *Dive Bomber and Tank* is slightly smaller than *Guernica*. It shares with Picasso’s painting an overall grisaille tonality, an emphasis on massive destruction, and, in its current configuration, a pyramidal structure with a centralizing motif of piercing light.³⁹ The effect in both works is to focus attention on the foreground plane. As the art historian James Oles has argued, in contrast to Picasso, who emphasized human trauma and loss, Orozco pictured the means of that ruin.⁴⁰

In the summer of 1940, *Dive Bomber and Tank* was read in relation to the events rending Europe. Alfred Barr Jr., the director of MoMA, reminded viewers that it “was painted [less than] two months after Dunkirk,” the French port where the Germans had cornered Allied troops and forced them back across the English Channel.⁴¹ The war profoundly affected Orozco. He admitted that part of his inspiration for the mural came from combat photographs reproduced in newspapers.⁴² But his dive bomber and tank lack national insignia, introducing into the painting an element of ambiguity. This trait was seized upon by an anonymous reviewer for *Art Digest*: “The dive bomber, plummeting, shrieking agent of destruction, invented and developed by the U.S. Army and used by the armies of the German Reich to pockmark half of Europe,” is the subject of Orozco’s mural.⁴³ To so clearly acknowledge an American precedent for the Nazi war machine was to suggest that the United States was culpable, even if unintentionally and indirectly, for the devastation in Europe. The point also continued a theme prevalent in Popular Front rhetoric: that fascism was a potential development in all advanced, industrial countries.



FIGURE 6

José Clemente Orozco, *Dive Bomber and Tank*, 1940. Fresco, six panels, each 9 ft. × 36 in. (275 × 91.4 cm), overall 9 × 18 ft. (275 × 550 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York. Commissioned through the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City.

WILLIAM GROPPER AND DAVID SMITH

Two solo exhibitions in New York by active members of the AAC help us to measure the vehemence of antiwar and antifascist sentiment in the years preceding the U.S. entry into World War II. The first is William Gropper's *Paintings*, shown in March 1937 at the ACA Gallery. The second is David Smith's *Medals for Dishonor*, presented at the Willard Gallery in November 1940. At the time, Gropper was the better known of the two, with a long career as an illustrator and cartoonist (the art historian Andrew Hemingway has noted Gropper's popularity, with ten thousand people visiting his 1940 exhibition at ACA).⁴⁴ Both artists embraced the communist idea that art could be an effective weapon against the forces of darkness. Yet they differed dramatically in how they treated war. One elicited empathy by focusing on the plight of war's victims; the other wielded a brutal satire to condemn violence and, troublingly, to insist that fascism was a deeply seductive political force. Whereas Gropper often looked overseas in his art about war, functioning as a topical editorialist, Smith, at least initially, cast a jaundiced eye on the home front to confront his own country with its capacity for blood lust.

The titles of individual paintings in Gropper's 1937 exhibition, dedicated to the defenders of Spanish democracy, were concise: *Defenders*, *Snipers*, *Combat*, *Prisoners*, *Refugees*, *Casualty*, *Bombardment*, *Execution*, *Air Raid*.⁴⁵ Nouns without adjectives, they



FIGURE 7

William Gropper, *Refugees*, 1937. As reproduced in *Paintings by William Gropper* (New York: ACA Gallery, 1937). William Gropper Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

simply list the roles people play in war and the activities by which they are victimized. Four humans—presumably a family—scurry through a nondescript landscape in *Refugees* (1937; figure 7). Dressed in their Sunday best, they carry bags across their shoulders. A lifetime of work, dedication, and care is reduced to what they could grab quickly and carry. Though executed in oil, the image betrays Gropper's long years of experience as a graphic artist. The suppression of detail gives the scene a fleeting quality that suggests rapid movement through space.

In her study of antifascist art, Cécile Whiting argued that Gropper's painting was conceived and exhibited at a moment when Americans faced the arrival of refugees fleeing the sectarian and racist violence sweeping across Europe following Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933.⁴⁶ The influx increased during the Spanish Civil War, especially as the fascists drove toward their final victory in the winter of 1939. She also noted the extent to which Gropper's paintings in the ACA exhibition freely announce their stylistic and thematic debts to Goya. This deft art historical reference helped to link the current war in Spain with the Peninsular War (1808–14) while citing the moral authority of the Spanish artist as an important precursor to contemporary protest. The figures in *Refugees* recall those in the foreground of a painting formerly attributed to Goya, *The Colossus* (1808–10). The earlier depiction of war utilizes the allegorical figure of a giant striding across the land, impervious to the mass panic and destruction he causes; *Refugees* brings viewers down to ground level in order to share the same space



FIGURE 8
David Smith, *Propaganda for War*,
from *Medals for Dishonor*, 1939–40.
Cast bronze, $9\frac{5}{8} \times 11\frac{3}{4} \times \frac{7}{8}$ in. (24.4
 $\times 29.8 \times 2.2$ cm). The Estate of
David Smith, New York. Photograph
by David Heald. Art © The Estate
of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA,
New York, NY.

as the fleeing family. As Whiting further suggested, the lack of identifying symbols or markers that might place the figures in Spain works to transform them into types. Their plight is thus elevated to a universal level, above nationality or political allegiance, to establish a subject position that virtually anyone might occupy. In reproducing *Refugees* on the cover of the exhibition checklist and as the final image in the exhibition brochure, Herman Baron made the painting the one most likely to remain in viewers' minds after they had left the gallery. The message was as simple as it was pressing: without immediate help, the Republic of Spain would be in trouble. After it fell, which country would be next? When linked with other works in the exhibition and the art that followed it, *Refugees* conjures up a world dangerously in flux, where the family is at risk, parents are missing or unable to protect their children, houses are bombed into ruins, women are imprisoned, and sons are forced by circumstance to replace fathers as protectors of hearth and home.

Three years later, David Smith showed his series of fifteen bronze bas-reliefs, *The Medals for Dishonor*. Presented as a major event in contemporary art, the series was complemented by a catalogue with illustrations, two essays, and notes by the artist on the sculptures; given the complex symbolism of each work, viewers needed a suitable guide.⁴⁷ What they encountered was a sustained diatribe about human debasement and perfidy that suggested that the world of 1940, already more than a year into another global war, was not far removed from the superstition and violence of the Middle Ages.

Propaganda for War (1939–40; figure 8) is the gateway to the series. Smith organized four zones within the oval shape of a medallion, framed by a space that suggests a bullfighting arena (an idea traceable to *Guernica*) and flanked by a stage with a drawn curtain. A vertical ridge to the right continues a strong rhythmic pattern linking the

curtain, a fish, and a seminude woman. They stand on a platform with a Greek inscription that art historian Jeremy Lewison has translated as “propaganda for war” and as “the place or the stage of war.”⁴⁸ Two horizontal registers subdivide the center of the composition. In the top zone, a female nude is assaulted by a cannon. She is flanked to one side by a flying elephant and to the other by a pointing hand. The middle register contains another pointing hand, telegraph wires, and emblematic images such as a spider’s web, a running radio, and a walking phonograph speaker. The foreground is dominated by a clarinet-playing seminude woman, identified as a nurse by the cross on her head, who sits upon a bull. They are joined by a dead horse, walking horns, and piles of dung. Symbolic of rampant, masculine aggression, the bull is momentarily subdued by feminine enticement and the blandishments of several musical instruments after, presumably, having killed the horse seen in the immediate foreground.

Throughout, the composition is staffed with aggressive forms. The shape of the cannon, like that of the clarinet, trumpet, speakers, and radio, thrusts into space, discharging its issue, or threatening to do so. With its phallic outline, the cannon is disturbingly anthropomorphic. Its wrinkled surface suggests the folds of loose foreskin covering the glans of an uncircumcised penis, while the semierect posture intimates either a pre- or postcoital moment. Its size, physical posture, and legs indicate that it is a surrogate for men reduced to their hostile, instinctual selves.

Selective doubling in the medal establishes important interpretive links. In placement and in implication, the cannon echoes the form of the bull, with the woman in the upper register then analogous to the horse in the lower foreground. Dominance and submission in the realm of sexual intercourse are linked to aggression in the animal kingdom. The suspended fish and standing woman are in tight parallel formation. Inside the fish is a child, perhaps alluding to the origin of the human species in the lower strata of animals.⁴⁹ Formally and spatially, the opening in the fish is linked with the coin in the woman’s buttocks, one connoting birth, the other penetration by means of prostitution. Together they scandalously suggest that the perpetuation of the human species is something other than an act of loving intimacy between equals.

A demonic sideshow, *Propaganda for War* beckons viewers into a realm outside civilization’s restraints on deceit, lust, and murder. The confabulation of disparate elements, such as instruments that walk while rendering asunder the air with, as Smith describes it, “shrieks and emotional bombings,” “sour footnotes,” and “spew[ed] ballast,” constitutes a disorienting world.⁵⁰ Smith’s comments and imagery make it clear that propaganda deals in falsehood and that its effects are catastrophic. Pointing hands to either side of the medal direct attention to the piles of dung in the immediate foreground. The heated rhetoric needed to turn humans toward the work of organized killing is bullshit.⁵¹

The *Medals* are too large to be worn, and the lack of an accompanying ribbon further distances them from the pomp of military ceremonies, when medals are displayed for others to see. Smith instead wanted the would-be recipients of these medals to consti-

tute his first, and most important, audience. Their crimes and collusions as fascists are offered as evidence of their guilt. Hence the title of the series emphasizes their “dishonor.”⁵² Implicitly, the secondary audience was that of Smith’s creative and political community found in the ranks of the AAC: those individuals dedicated to democracy and peace and opposed to fascism, imperialism, militarism, and war.

Though mixed, critical response to the *Medals* played a pivotal role in spreading the artist’s message. Two reviews were of particular importance, one because it placed the series before an audience of nearly a million readers nationwide, the other because it was written with Smith’s input. The first, although skeptical and often dismissive, appeared in *Time* magazine and gave the *Medals* nearly a full page of attention.⁵³ In titling the piece “Mr. Smith Shows His Medals,” the magazine invoked director Frank Capra’s recent fable of political intrigue, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). The implication was that like the lead character in the film, Smith was idealistic and naive. This was not surprising, considering Smith’s assertion in the medal *The Fourth Estate* that the mainstream press willingly helped in the buildup to war. Within three months, *Time*’s publisher, Henry Luce, would urge U.S. entry into the war because, he reasoned, victory in combat would pave the way for the “American Century.”⁵⁴ In contrast, Elizabeth McCausland was quite positive. In September 1940, a full six weeks before the exhibition opened, she submitted a list of questions concerning the series to Smith. Her lengthy review, published in the *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, featured the kind of detailed information about process and content that only Smith could have provided.⁵⁵ Noting the “literary and communicative character of the symbols used by . . . Smith,” she argued that the *Medals* speak in “a language of fable, of myth, of truth shrouded in allegory.” In doing so, they were “a document of our time.” By drawing attention to the examples of Bosch and Breugel while characterizing the *Medals* as gothic and grotesque, she followed Smith’s lead in describing the series. Medieval art and the Middle Ages are mentioned several times in the exhibition catalogue, where Smith himself directly cites the epoch in his description of three of the *Medals*.⁵⁶ Importantly, the art and artists cited by Smith date to the epoch, which was dominated by the system of feudalism, by landed royalty, and by the Catholic church, all of which wielded power over the peasantry. Smith’s return to an age of authority exerted over the body through dismemberment, torture, and sexual subordination was his means to argue that as the modern world slipped again into global combat, it was reviving the Dark Ages. What he could not have known in 1940 was just how dark the next five years would be.

WORLD WAR II

After the Japanese attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, the United States officially entered World War II. By and large, the artists who had remained in the AAC after the schism of April 1940 found that they had to change their perspective on the conflict. Those who had maintained their allegiance to com-

munism in general and the Soviet Union in particular perceived the wars in Europe and the Pacific as ones of imperialist aggression.⁵⁷ David Smith's first wife, the artist Dorothy Dehner, recalled that although he "ultimately supported World War Two, . . . he deplored it, blaming the imperialist powers for getting the world into period holocausts."⁵⁸ With the United States committed to ending fascism, artists on the left could support the war effort without changing their politics. In line with core communist theory, many perceived the hostilities as a "people's war" fought for the benefit of the working classes. Still, it was a tricky proposition to reconcile earlier art and actions with the current reality of American politics. Smith modified the title of his series to *Medals for the Axes* and decided not to exhibit some of the bronzes, knowing that their content might be read as anti-American.⁵⁹ Other artists found that their political activity in preceding years was held against them. In the spring of 1943, the Office of War Information (OWI) purged radicals from the ranks of the artists whom it employed to produce posters.⁶⁰ Gropper, Evergood, and Refregier, who had been cleared to serve in the combat art units, which were organized in 1942, were dismissed in May 1943. Under the terms of the Hatch Act (1939), government employees, which the artists became once in uniform, were prohibited from engaging in partisan political activity.⁶¹ Their extensive involvement with the AAC apparently was read as such, though it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it was not so much politics in general as their leadership in an organization perceived to be a communist front that tripped up the three. All were deeply disappointed by the rejection but nonetheless produced antifascist and pro-Soviet art throughout the war. This was a common trajectory for many artists who continued to perceive their art as serving the cause of a better world.

ARTISTS' ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WAR EFFORT

In May 1942, the remaining members of the AAC joined with those of the Artists' Union to form the Artists League of America (ALA).⁶² Their call to fellow artists, published in the *Daily Worker*, was cast in stark terms: "The artist knows . . . that today it is impossible not to take sides. In this titanic struggle we see the future pitted against the past, the forces of humanity and civilization against the forces of darkness, obscurantism and medievalism. In an historical as well as a moral sense it is the epic conflict of good and evil. In this conflict only one side can prevail."⁶³ In consonance with its precursors, the ALA continued to use art to combat fascism. As had been the case in 1935 with the inaugural exhibition of the AAC, the ACA Gallery provided space and support for the League. The group exhibition in June 1942, *Artists in the War*, included work by Evergood, Gropper, Kent, Refregier, Ad Reinhardt, Moses and Raphael Soyer, and Lynd Ward, as well as a daylong symposium addressing how artists could work to support the Allied cause. In his catalogue comments, Kent stressed the obligations that artists confronted: "Our people must be awakened finally and forever to the issue of democracy

or fascism. The arts can awaken them.” He also reminded visitors to the exhibition that this task was nothing new: “Long before Pearl Harbor, artists were pleading for public channels for art through which to communicate their fervent awareness of approaching war.”⁶⁴ In February 1943, the ALA held an exhibition and workshop, *Art, a Weapon for Total War*, the goals of which were to “demonstrate how the artist can be utilized by agencies concerned with the problems of the war and the peace that will follow.”⁶⁵

A month later, the ALA staged the exhibition *This Is Our War* at the Wildenstein Galleries in New York. Guidelines for submission stipulated that entries should fall into the following categories: ideology of the war, the machine in war, men and women in war, and behind the front line. Following communist doctrine, they defined ideology as “Democracy at work. Fighting for an ideal and not for imperialistic aims. The people’s war, etc., etc.”⁶⁶ Blanch, Evergood, Gropper, Joseph Hirsch, Harkavy, Kent, and the Soyer brothers were among the nearly one hundred artists included. In his brief comments, reproduced in the catalogue, Kent quoted Ladislav Segy, chairman of the Exhibition Committee of the ALA, on the challenges confronting artists during the conflict—“We are conscious of a moral responsibility to society as spokesmen for those values which must go into the building of that better social structure which is the hope of all of us”—and pledged that the ALA would continue to work for victory.⁶⁷ The following year, the ALA reaffirmed its position, again stressing goals first articulated by the AAC: “To integrate the artist and his art in the war against fascism,—mortal enemy of democracy and culture.”⁶⁸

There were several other, less partisan venues for contributing to the war effort. Artists for Victory, a broad consortium of groups with a membership of over one hundred thousand by early 1943, formed in the weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁶⁹ Its major contribution was to organize large group shows. One opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in December 1942. Another, *America in the War*, opened simultaneously in October 1943 at several venues around the country, including the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, in Memphis; the Seattle Art Museum; and the Wichita Art Association, in Kansas. Artists for Victory also sponsored competitions to illustrate President Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms and themes of the fighting and home front, the enemy, and victory and the peace to follow, respectively.⁷⁰ Many of these designs were featured in an exhibition at MoMA in late 1942, by which point the OWI, created that June, was coordinating the design and display of official government posters.⁷¹ Unambiguous propaganda, this art was attuned to the needs of the war machine, which ran not on subtlety or diversity of opinion, but on simplicity. The Japanese and Germans were reduced to a visual language of racist caricature. There was little to no art that attempted to explain or suggest how and why the war began. Several artists who were, or would be, active on the left joined the military art units, among them Peter Blume, Marion Greenwood, Joseph Hirsch, Jacob Lawrence, and Mitchell Siporin, while others (including Philip Guston and Bernard Perlin) produced illustrations for *Fortune* and *Life* magazines. Another venue for supporting the war effort was fundraising efforts for Russian war relief. For

instance, in late April 1942, seventy-five artists donated works, priced between \$50 and \$250, for the cause.⁷² Fundraising for the Soviet Union remained a major activity through the war.

In short, there was ample opportunity to contribute to the war effort, whether or not an artist happened to be in uniform. Solo exhibitions remained an important venue for many of these artists and had the advantage of presenting a body of work conceived independently of the war units and the OWI, thus making these events a sensitive barometer of individual responses to the conflict. Here one can measure how several artists who opposed fascism and imperialism through their association with the AAC and ALA handled the challenge of linking politics and aesthetics during wartime.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS: GROPPER, EVERGOOD, AND SMITH

During the war, William Gropper had two solo exhibitions at ACA, the first in 1942. By then he had added images of organized resistance to his repertoire of refugees and shattered landscapes. Viewers hardly needed to read that the exhibition catalogue “was published for the benefit of Russian War Relief” to grasp his support for the Soviet Union.⁷³ The locale and uniforms seen in *Cossack*, *Cavalry*, *Behind the Lines*, *Partisans*, and *Spotter* reminded audiences of the bitter fighting in Eastern Europe following the surprise German invasion in June 1941. By the time the exhibition opened, in late March 1942, the Soviet Union had halted the German advance and launched its first counteroffensive, although the fate of Moscow, Stalingrad (Volgograd), and Leningrad (St. Petersburg) was still uncertain. Meanwhile, the United States was reeling from significant setbacks at the hands of Japanese forces throughout the Pacific; the paintings *Pearl Harbor* and *Bataan* were reminders of recent defeat. The events in the Soviet Union, like those in the Battle of Britain in the previous year, constituted the only good news for the Allies. Gropper’s paintings were thoroughly partisan in singing the praises of Russian resistance. They were also a reminder that victory in Europe would be impossible without the Soviet Union, which paid a disproportionate price in casualties. By war’s end, some twenty-five million Russians, soldiers and civilians combined, had died. American casualties numbered about three hundred thousand.⁷⁴

Gropper’s final exhibition during the war, in February 1944, marked the turn in the intervening two years. *Red Cavalry*, *Liberated Village*, *Italian People*, and *American Forces* celebrate Allied victories in the advance to Germany. The note of optimism in these paintings is expressed through communal activity—the works show a group of soldiers riding into battle, families gathering in a devastated landscape, people seizing the streets of their city, and a woman tossing a bouquet of flowers as U.S. troops march in formation through the landscape, respectively. The message remains clear: group unity leads to triumph.

Not included in the 1944 exhibition was a series of eight drawings, *Your Brother’s Blood Cries Out*. Reproduced in the July 1943 issue of *New Currents*, a monthly maga-

zine published by the Jewish Survey Corporation of New York, the series documents the brutal combat in Eastern Europe as the Nazis sought to eradicate Jews and other undesirable peoples from their empire. The systematic murder began in the summer of 1941. Several concentration camps were built in Poland, among them Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Treblinka, where over three million people were killed.⁷⁵ Others were herded into ghettos, the most notorious of which was in Warsaw, the site of an uprising and massacre that took probably thirteen thousand lives between January and May 1943. Survivors were deported to Treblinka. Throughout the war, a highly organized Polish underground provided the Allies with detailed information about German troop strength and movements, as well as the unfolding of the Final Solution. None of this prevented the Red Army from halting its offensive in 1944 to let German troops decimate the resistance gathered in Warsaw. As had been the case in Spain, the Soviet Union cynically withdrew support at pivotal moments to guarantee fascist victory, based on the ideological certainty that communism ultimately would triumph in the global war with capitalism if the latter was allowed to exhaust itself through imperialist conquest. However, the 1944 event postdates Gropper's drawings, which focus on the resistance and murder of the Polish people.

The series commences with a scene of Polish Jews digging a mass grave for the bodies of recently executed partisans while two Nazis stand guard. The second scene celebrates the heroic, if futile, uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. Women, children, and men, including three identified with the Star of David that Jews in the occupied countries were forced to wear, are gunned down by Nazis with automatic rifles and machine guns. In drawings three and four, respectively, German troops march in unison through a landscape strewn with the bodies of dead civilians and sadistically herd the survivors, beating them with the butts of their rifles. Number five shows three soldiers fleeing with a menorah, a scroll (possibly a Torah), prayer shawls, and other objects stolen from a synagogue, while in their wake the nude, emaciated bodies of their victims are left in a smoking pile of rubble. The scene was an eerie presentiment of what would be known more fully in the spring of 1945 when Allied troops liberated the concentration camps.

As a group, the drawings are suffused with the spirit of Goya's *Disasters of War*. *Untitled (No. 6)*, for instance, echoes the theme of *Tampoco (Nor this)*, in which a French officer sits calmly contemplating the dead body of a Spaniard hung from a nearby tree. Two other bodies hang in the distance. Gropper transformed it into an image of four Polish partisans hanging from the gallows (1943; figure 9). The stark white of the surrounding sky makes them the focal point of the composition. Four German soldiers are situated at ground level, looking at their recent work and smiling, perhaps even laughing. One casually rests a hand against the wooden upright of the scaffolding, as if affirming its sturdy design and simple efficiency. Another records the scene with a camera. This would not be the last time that an occupying force recorded its own cruelty, or that an artist would use the evidence to charge it with sadism. For American audiences and artists of the left, the scenario had racist connotations, given the frequency of lynch-



FIGURE 9

William Gropper, *Your Brother's Blood Cries Out*, 1943. Medium and dimensions not recorded. As reproduced in *Your Brother's Blood Cries Out: Eight Drawings by William Gropper*, undated/ unidentified creator. William Gropper Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

ing scenes in civil rights exhibitions of the preceding decades.⁷⁶ The link underlined the extent to which torture and murder were deployed to subjugate colonized peoples.

In contrast, the last two drawings of the series strike a note of optimism. In one, partisans huddle in a desolate landscape, guns and Molotov cocktails in hand, waiting to engage the enemy, while in the final drawing a Russian soldier assists refugees to a train. The clear implication was that European liberation would come from the east. *New Currents* magazine characterized the series of drawings as “a real contribution to an understanding of the plight of the Jews in the war.”⁷⁷ Individual copies of the drawings were available for the cost of a one-year subscription (\$1.50) or all eight for \$5. In titling the drawings *Your Brother's Blood Cries Out*, Gropper, himself a Jew whose parents hailed from the Ukraine and Romania, reminded the magazine's readers of the family ties that linked them to those suffering under Nazi occupation. These were potent images of the war within the war—and of human resilience—that helped to place the combat between the Allies and the Axis powers in stark, unflinching terms. As Gropper would write of his painting *Good and Evil* (1942), exhibited in 1945, “Here is portrayed the eternal contest between right and wrong. The Axis powers which have been fostering aggression against peaceful nations, inciting race hatred, enslaving and

plundering, and destroying culture, shall be conquered, and right shall prevail.”⁷⁸ The drawings published in 1943 ground this grand abstraction in actual events and make clear why the war had to be fought.

Philip Evergood maintained an energetic schedule during the war. He wrote and spoke often, helped raise money for Russian war relief, and produced a group of paintings often topical in their subject matter and allegorical in their symbolism.⁷⁹ Cécile Whiting has argued that these images fully articulate the communist line that the war represented a showdown between the forces of lightness and darkness, of good and evil, of progress and regression, while nonetheless fully supporting the U.S. war effort.⁸⁰ The approach allowed Evergood, and like-minded artists such as Gropper, to draw upon a rich pictorial history of struggle and transcendence. It suggested, too, as Evergood himself often asserted, that his goal was to develop a people’s art in support of the people’s war. In 1944, he insisted that the artist “stands shoulder to shoulder with the factory worker and the soldier in a common struggle which has awakened all to a common responsibility.”⁸¹

Although some paintings in his October 1942 exhibition at the ACA Gallery looked toward the eventual demise of fascism, others sought to educate viewers about the political ideology’s fundamental perversion.⁸² *Doom of the Chariots*, a fantasy of the German army marching in formation led by a charioteer; *Victory Buttons*, a portrait of a smiling factory worker flashing a victory sign; and *Introduction*, an image of a woman introducing a baby to her uniformed husband, posited with hope the world to come. The Roman Empire did not last; nor would the German. Victory rested on hard work. The next generation would be raised in political freedom due to the service of its parents.

Like *Doom of the Chariots*, *Fascist Company* (1942; figure 10) features the imperial imagery of a horse under the control of a fleshy nude male, whip in hand. A second nude, upright in stance and heroic in musculature, occupies the immediate foreground. Indeed, the horse and human are unified by the rope connecting them, the direction of their gaze (which seems to look out of the painting’s space to engage viewers), and their spatial position connoting subordination, with the plump male figure and skeleton seated above. Whiting has stressed the extent to which Evergood parodied the fascist infatuation with imagery of the equestrian monument in particular and with classicism in general.⁸³ However, in placing the horse on the ground, as opposed to situating it on a pedestal, Evergood refused to concede fascist victory. Both horse and human remain vital figures not yet fully broken. The corpulent male seen in profile was inspired by photographs of Italian leader Benito Mussolini and German Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, the two combined into a single grotesque figure whose moral turpitude is manifest in its bodily bloat, pallor, and painted toenails.⁸⁴ Unlike the worker and father in *Victory Buttons* and *Introduction*, respectively, the composite figure remains unproductive, both technologically and biologically. He needs the labor of others to build and protect his empire. His romantic paramour is a human skeleton with rouged lips by which Evergood meant to suggest Hitler. The rose through its ear indicates that the two are locked in a dance of death, with countless others their victims. The skeleton con-



FIGURE 10

Philip Evergood, *Fascist Company*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 44 1/2 x 31 3/8 in. (113 x 79.7 cm). Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey. Museum purchase: prior gifts of Frederic B. Pratt, Jack Steinberg, Roland B. Swart, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore C. Nevins, Mrs. Nancy Nevins D'Anjou and William W. Skinner, 1995.40.

juries up not only medieval fears of apocalypse, but also the Mexican artist José Posada's satirical prints from the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), several of which were included in the 1936 exhibition *War and Fascism*. In its broad citation of western art—imperial, religious, and political; Old World and New; ancient and modern—*Fascist Company* manifests a Popular Front sensibility in waging war on fascism. The very history of art, emblematic of creative, progressive civilization, was marshaled for the war effort.

Fascist Company echoes *Guernica*, too, in its subject, spatial organization, and emotional pull. The lacerated horse and felled soldier have been healed to insist that fascism is not yet triumphant. The severed limbs in the earlier painting emerge in the background as a bed of hands bursting forth from the soil. They are evidence of massacre, and the dead's call for justice. All the figures are pushed forward in space, with the foreground nude virtually stepping on the lower edge of the canvas. The bright-red backdrop of the factories, repeated in the orange-brown of the horse, compresses space

into a tension-laden, cramped area that seems ready to burst through the picture plane. The effect gives the entire scene a restive immediacy that affects viewing. In contrast, the greenish-brown tonality of the standing male's skin resonates against that of the horse, pushing him even further forward. A personification of the people, he seems like a bronze Greek statue come to life, heroic but at the moment enslaved. Standing before the painting, one can imaginatively enter a space identified with the working classes, with those men and women laboring in the war industries or wearing the uniforms of their countries. Or one can empathize with one's European brothers and sisters under the yoke of tyranny.

For Evergood, easily understood content served both the ambitions of artists and the needs of their audiences, especially in forging a shared sensibility of action in times of crisis. "Some of the world's greatest art has grown out of a desire on the part of the artist to change conditions in the social order under which he lived," Evergood wrote during the war.⁸⁵ Critics applauded the results, as did other supporters. Of the paintings included in his 1944 exhibition at ACA, Maude Riley asserted that they "pack a wallop. They are as impossible to ignore as a rasping tone of voice in a speaker."⁸⁶ *Newsweek* noted the "droves" of people who attended the exhibition's opening and described the canvases as "crude" but "with a purpose."⁸⁷

In his comments written for the 1944 exhibition catalogue, Moses Soyer summarized his friend's approach to the conflict: "Evergood's war pictures could roughly be divided into two categories: one dealing with the monstrous, unspeakable Nazis, destroyers of art, enslavers of peoples; the other with the heroic resisting spirit of humanity fighting for freedom." *Fascist Company* fell into the first category of picture, as did *They Passed This Way*, a new painting that, in Soyer's description, presented "a strafed, doll-like child lying dead in a field, still clutching daisies in her hand."⁸⁸ Certainly there was no dearth of evidence regarding Nazi atrocities. Yet the course of the war was changing by March, when his exhibition at ACA opened. American troops were moving up the Italian peninsula following the invasion of the mainland in September 1943. Their actions were celebrated in *Ex Soda Jerk*, in which a GI casually leans against an outcropping of rock after having killed at least ten Germans, their bodies strewn about the mountainous landscape. By February 1943, Soviet troops had successfully defended the city of Stalingrad, inflicting a crippling blow to German expansion in the east. *Veteran of Stalingrad* celebrates the victory. Little more than a boy, a Russian soldier stands with a rifle propped on his shoulder, his weight supported equally by a wooden crutch and a wooden leg. Behind him are piles of German cadavers.

Celebrating the war on the Eastern Front, Evergood reminded gallery-goers in New York of the sacrifices made by the Russians as they began to push back the invasion of their homeland, and thereby suggested that their struggle was a model to admire and emulate. Among the appreciative audience for these paintings was Vladimir I. Bazykin, first secretary of the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C., who acknowledged Evergood's propaganda on behalf of the Allied coalition.⁸⁹ This support culminated in Evergood's

series of twelve paintings, completed later in 1944, that were published as a calendar the following year under the title *The Story of American-Russian Fellowship*. Evergood's advocacy for the Soviet Union, as well as for a world free of war, continued unabated for the next two decades and played no small part in his being summoned to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the summer of 1959. For the moment, though, honoring the Soviet and U.S. advances was both possible and desirable.

Throughout the war, David Smith continued to challenge audiences by warning them about the seductiveness of fascism. In a brief review of his solo exhibition at the Willard Gallery in April 1943, Jean Connolly drew attention to a set of drawings she found deeply troubling. She complained that they "are a disappointment. They are too bitterly political to be looked at solely as drawings, and the emotion they arouse is rather one of pleasurable curiosity at the tortures of the victims than one of horror."⁹⁰ In identifying the element of ambivalence in Smith's drawings, Connolly read them correctly.⁹¹ She did not acknowledge, however, that this dualism was already present in his *Medals for Dishonor* or that the theme of female abuse was commonly used in contemporaneous war art and propaganda. Nor did she suggest that the male characters and elements within the drawings were themselves debased. Still, the fashion in which Smith depicted the subjugation of women was startling. It was his means of bringing his audience closer to the thrill of instinctual aggression.

Aryan Fold (Type I) (1943; figure 11) depicts a horrific scene of stripped women awaiting their savage, yet organized, assault. Their physical placement, most with buttocks exposed, indicates that the threat of penetration is both anal and vaginal.⁹² The wasted space beyond the pen contains further evidence of pillage, with severed body parts and broken armaments strewn about. Smith described the motifs and behaviors illustrated in the drawings as "sarcasms" in order to help audiences appreciate that attraction to such activity is itself a perversion.⁹³ A drawing of Hitler placed on the far wall indicates that the landscape is located somewhere in the Nazi empire, while the corpulent, undressed male, perhaps Hermann Göring, with one foot resting on a tiger skin is a reminder that colonialist domination included sexual privilege.

Rape was a common theme in antiwar art, both historically and in U.S. propaganda. This was especially true in the first eighteen months after the country entered hostilities—a period marked by intense fear of Japanese and German invasion as they continued to annex territory. At least five of the plates in *The Disasters of War* recount the rape of Spanish women by French troops. In April 1942, the regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton exhibited his series *The Year of Peril* at the American Artists Gallery in New York. Among the eight canvases was *Invasion*, a scene envisioning a fascist attack on the United States. The foreground is dominated by the struggle between a farm family and the invading goons, two of whom have exposed the wife's breast while pinning back her arms and legs. Her child cowers beneath her feet while her husband is penetrated orally by a bayonet. In his desire to arouse audiences from their isolationist complacency, Benton left little to the imagination about the fate awaiting American women should the

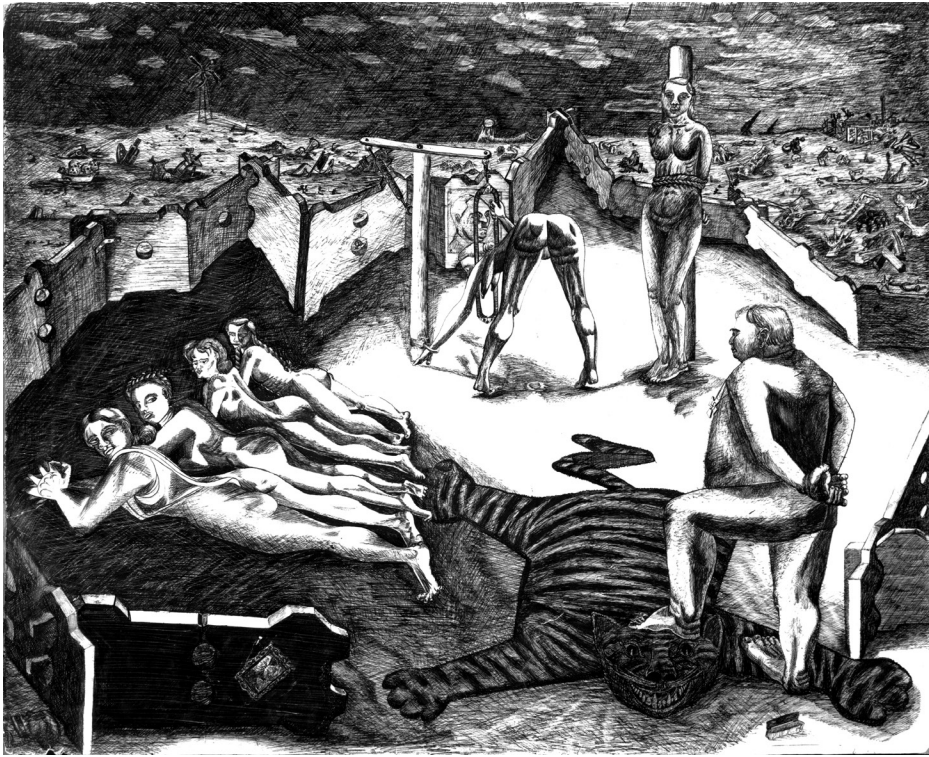


FIGURE 11

David Smith, *Aryan Fold Type I*, 1943. Pen and ink on paper, $19 \frac{5}{8} \times 25 \frac{1}{16}$ in. (49.8 × 63.7 cm). The Estate of David Smith, New York. Photograph by Geoffrey Clements. Art © The Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

homeland be breached.⁹⁴ In December 1942, MoMA exhibited some two hundred posters, commissioned by the OWI, designed to galvanize public support for Allied victory. Several, conceived under the themes “This Is the Enemy” and “Deliver Us from Evil,” focused on rape and sexual enslavement.⁹⁵ Selective breeding to further the Aryan race was a potent subtheme in such propaganda. For example, an advertisement in *Life* by the American Locomotive Company, which employed Smith from 1942 to 1944, acidly described a eugenics lineup as “a high honor for your daughter,” who might be shipped overseas to help perpetuate the master race.⁹⁶ In the advertisement, a corpulent male depicted in profile dominates the scenario, his implicit power revealed to readers who were meant to be shocked by the scene of degradation. The presence of a similar male wearing an Iron Cross in *Aryan Fold (Type I)* indicates that the sculptor was responding to this wartime fear.

As Jean Connolly recognized, however, Smith’s work was engaged in a precarious balance between attraction and repulsion. The two tendencies situated ambivalence

toward violence at the very center of his antiwar art. To some extent lodged within his biography, as scholars have asserted, the seduction of brute force was also a critical component in guiding audience response.⁹⁷ In this regard, Smith was acknowledging, and deploying, Sigmund Freud's thesis about human behavior and the threat of regression.

In the aftermath of World War I, Freud formulated his theory of Eros and Thanatos. The two represent opposite poles of attraction: community and self, progress and disintegration, life and death.⁹⁸ The tension is just as marked in erotic relationships between individuals as it is between groups vying for power. "One has . . . to reckon," Freud admitted, "with the fact that there are present in all men destructive, and therefore anti-social and anti-cultural, trends."⁹⁹ On further reflection, he confessed: "The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed."¹⁰⁰ The pleasure gained at another's expense followed from a fundamental insight about humans, namely that they were inherently aggressive, both sexually and physically. For Freud, humanity was "*Homo homini lupus*. (Man is a wolf to man.)"¹⁰¹ Within this worldview, sexual intimacy could easily give way to sadism, communities would disintegrate when factions ignored the rule of law, and people might easily go on killing one another once they experienced the intense satisfaction of asserting their will.

In a memorable exchange with the physicist Albert Einstein sponsored by the League of Nations in 1933, the psychoanalyst asserted that violence was the means by which humans settled conflicts because they were no different from the rest of the animal kingdom.¹⁰² "A lust for aggression and destruction" led humans to "countless cruelties in history and in our everyday lives," he reasoned.¹⁰³ Given industrial technology, he worried that future conflict might eradicate civilization altogether, and therefore he concluded that no matter how incompletely he understood the roots of human action, he could nonetheless state emphatically that civilization was the only adequate bulwark against the force of arms.

When the drawings shown at the Willard Gallery in 1943 are viewed through the lens of Freud's late theory about the precariousness of culture and human ambivalence concerning the choice of productive or destructive pleasure, it is evident that Smith presented to his audience just such a choice. He deliberately constructed the space of *Aryan Fold (Type I)* so that it seems to be under the control of viewers who master the scene through surveying the carnage at a close yet comfortable distance. From this perspective, the presumptive viewer becomes another domineering male, whose eye is first drawn to the two women highlighted in the middle ground, one with buttocks exposed, the other bound, nearly frontal and nude. Upright and phallic, the posts to which they are tied enhance the morbid, erotic tension of the space. To gaze on this scene is to encounter a situation in which Eros is subordinate to Thanatos and to wonder what one's sexual predilections might be outside of civilization's constraints. Subjectivity and morality are disturbingly fluid when one realizes that one's identification may not be with the victims of occupation, but with the invading forces. Although some of the women gathered in

the pen look over their shoulders at the standing male, others seem to look back out of the enclosure, acknowledging an external presence and in doing so hoping that someone will intervene on their behalf. This was not the first time Smith had set up a scenario in which audiences were put into the uncomfortable situation of assuming a position of mastery. The *Medals for Dishonor* were conceived not for the innocent, but for the guilty. However, in contrast to the *Medals*, the drawings mark an increased emphasis on sexual domination. They target what Freud had identified as those instinctual drives latent in every person. The attraction to violence was thus part of Smith's gambit to condemn fascism—whether or not actual viewers embraced that political ideology—by making them aware of the possibility of their own complicity in regression.

Gropper, Evergood, and Smith continued the progressive aesthetic agenda of the Popular Front throughout the war, particularly in situating fascism as politically and culturally regressive. Good was the prerogative of the Allied forces, evil that of the Axis. Yet whereas Gropper and Evergood celebrated the united front formed by the Soviet Union and the United States, Smith developed a more personal symbolism, one less easily tied to the tendentiousness of propaganda. His worry that anyone might be seduced into violence guaranteed that his view of imperialism would continue past the end of hostilities. Subsequent events would prove him prescient.

LOOKING BACK

Two exhibitions in the postwar years counter any easy sense that World War II can be defined as a “good war” or that the men and women who labored to defeat fascism constituted the “greatest generation.”¹⁰⁴ With nearly sixty million dead, six million of them in the Nazi concentration camps, and much of Europe and Asia in ruins, the war had taken a devastating toll. The fight against fascism had included the targeting of civilian populations, carpet bombing, and, in the late summer of 1945, the use of two nuclear bombs. In the abstract, Allied countries and peoples could justify the war as both defensive and just, which it was, but the experience was far more complicated. Both David Smith and Jacob Lawrence left audiences with much to consider in the immediate aftermath of the hostilities.

Critics who reviewed Smith's first postwar exhibition, at the Buchholz and Willard Galleries in early 1946, understood how profoundly the conflict resonated through several sculptures. In the *New Yorker*, Robert M. Coates asserted that Smith's “new show has a special interest . . . in that it illustrates—with an at times almost painful clarity—the effect of the war on the artists of his generation. Smith, I think, was more affected by the war than most.”¹⁰⁵ The critic noted that the “frenzy” of “raw violence” and the “horror” of the war had found suitable material expression in some of the sculptures, notably *War Spectre* (1944) and *False Peace Spectre* (1945; figure 12).¹⁰⁶ He also admitted that the result was “curiously disturbing to witness.”¹⁰⁷ Coates was not alone in registering the challenge of these sculptures. Harold Clurman, writing for the magazine *Tomorrow*,



FIGURE 12

David Smith, *False Peace Spectre*, 1945. Painted bronze and steel, $12\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{1}{4} \times 10\frac{3}{4}$ in. ($31.8 \times 69.2 \times 27.3$ cm). Private collection, New York. Photograph courtesy Washburn Gallery, New York. Art © The Estate of David Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

wasted no time in addressing the war: “This young American sculptor has put the nervousness, conflict, horror of our day into forms that seem to fly.” Impressed as he was by the evidence of Smith’s output and skill, Clurman ultimately left the exhibition troubled by its expressive content. He found that those sculptures conceived “to convey painful ideas” were “very disturbing” because they had “real violence” that hit viewers like “a high-voltage shock.”¹⁰⁸

In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, W. R. Valentiner, director of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, emphasized the challenge of opposing military violence while one’s country was engaged in global conflict: “Why should not the artist, with his deep insight, stress human values, especially in times when political propaganda emphasizes the opposite? Only the artist who stands in the midst of life and participates in the struggle that concerns us all can become a moral force, as in former ages when sculpture was an important influence upon the development of ethics.”¹⁰⁹ Of both *Spectres*, Valentiner noted the “expression of speed in a single direction.” He described the former as “a spectre that haunts us yet—a headless monster composed of steel and weapons, rushing along with passionate fury.” He categorized the latter, also made of

steel, with some bronze, as “a strange creature, once beautiful, but now, with torn-out feathers, fallen to ugliness.”¹¹⁰

The choice of steel was particularly resonant because of its associations with U.S. power and its successful prosecution of the war. In 1951, Smith proclaimed: “Possibly steel is so beautiful because of all the movement associated with it, its strength and function. Yet it is also brutal, the rapist, the murderer, and death-dealing giants are also its offspring. . . . In my *Spectre* series, I speak of these things.”¹¹¹ His insistence that steel was both beautiful and ugly, a sign of civilization and an agent of its destruction, came in the aftermath of the world’s most devastating conflict, one in which the metal had played a decisive role. Needles and bullets were made of steel, as were ambulances and tanks, armor and battleships. Some of these products were designed to protect and preserve human life, others to annihilate it.

Constructed shortly after the surrender of Germany in May 1945, *False Peace Spectre* is a bizarre combination of parts, some animate, others mechanical. It resembles an airplane, a bird of prey, and a phallus, interchangeable agents of destruction in Smith’s antiwar lexicon. Across the body of the *Spectre* is evidence of distress. If it is perceived as a plane, its wings are warped and its fuselage tattered. When it is seen as a bird, it has lost most of its feathers. Or if it represents a phallus, its foreskin has been ripped apart to trail its head like the ass’s ears and bells of a jester’s costume, the effect introducing a strong element of black humor to the sculpture.

In its organization, the *Spectre* reveals different information from one side to the other. On its right appears a small fetal figure resembling an embryonic bird, its presence heralding the imminent arrival of a future generation of specters. The head emerges from a pocket or pouch, intimating a womb, which would make the creature female. On its left side, the interior of the body is revealed through a layer of steel mesh. Inside is a winged phallus that one critic described as an “aerial bomb.”¹¹² Because the mesh is organized in the form of a scrotal sack, the tiny phallus is the seed of the rampant bird. Thus the *Spectre* is both male and female, a grotesque cross-breeding of opposites. Though apparently blind, the *Spectre* extends an offering on a platter. A mandolin and kneeling female nude ostensibly suggest the peaceful pursuits of culture—music and art—available after six years of war in Europe. A musical instrument and female nude also appear in *Propaganda for War*, but as Smith indicated in his notes concerning that particular medal, the dulcet sounds of music might give way to “shrieks and emotional bombings,” and the pleasure of sexual union might be a seduction into war hysteria because the nude “helps by what she is most able.”¹¹³ When the sculpture is viewed from underneath, the instrument’s shape is that of the cannon/phallus; hence the structure is actually a weapon camouflaged in the trappings of culture. In turn, the female nude is herself a monster. Her head resembles the bent snout of a cannon. One arm ends in a club. Her breasts are withered. A hag, she is seductive only from a distance. Like the spectre carrying her and the mandolin/cannon around which she has draped one arm, she aggressively rends space. The figures offered on the tray are

cast in bronze, a traditional material for sculpture, but their forms indicate the ease with which peaceful pursuits can be turned toward destruction. Smith described *False Peace Spectre* as “a blue bastard with bronze music cannon and bronze female offering on a tray.”¹¹⁴ Because the *Spectre* is weighted down with offerings and ordnance, it functions as an aerial Trojan horse for an age easily, and disastrously, fooled by the promises of fascism.

The note of pessimism struck in *False Peace Spectre* was hardly surprising considering Smith’s concerns about imperialism, first articulated in the *Medals for Dishonor*. By the end of the summer of 1945, the war’s full cost was evident. Cultures that had given the world the Bauhaus and *ukiyo-e* prints, respectively, had also ruthlessly annexed neighboring territory, inflicting a reign of terror on civilian populations. If Germany and Japan could succumb to such madness, why not other countries? Smith worried that the peace might be only temporary and that fascism was not so easily vanquished. The *Spectres* significantly tempered the relief and triumph that marked the end of hostilities.

While Smith labored in upstate New York, Jacob Lawrence served in the U.S. Coast Guard, from October 1943 to December 1946. He was among the more than one million African American men in uniform during the war, and like so many of them he had had to confront the racism and segregation then endemic in the military. Black soldiers were deeply sensitive to the discrepancy between the rhetoric of President Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms, under which the war was waged, and the actual conditions to which Black men and women were subjected. In 1944, Lawrence was assigned to the USS *Sea Cloud*, a weather patrol boat that was the first integrated ship in the history of the American Navy. Recognizing Lawrence’s talent, his commander assigned him to public relations work, thus officially giving him time and support to work as an artist. The results were exhibited at MoMA in October 1944. For the remainder of the war, he served on a troop transport ship that traveled between Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. His travels put him in contact with hundreds of servicemen who had seen combat and gave him the idea for a pictorial narrative about the war.

With the support of a Guggenheim Post Service Fellowship, Lawrence produced the *War Series* between January 1946 and the fall of 1947. Its first exhibition was at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton (November 1947), followed by exhibitions at the Downtown Gallery (December) and later the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, Massachusetts (April 1948). In notes provided for audiences, Lawrence explained his affective goals for the series:

In approaching this subject, I tried to capture the essence of war. To do this I attempted to portray the feelings and emotions that are felt by the individual—both fighter and civilian.

A wife or a mother receiving a letter from overseas; the next of kin receiving a notice of a casualty; the futility men feel when at sea or down in a foxhole just waiting, not knowing what part they are playing in a much broader and gigantic plan. Finally the shooting is over, the end of the war has come.¹¹⁵



FIGURE 13
Jacob Lawrence, *War Series: Victory*, 1946–47. Egg tempera on composition board, 20 × 16 in. (50.8 × 40.64 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger 51.19. Digital Image, © Whitney Museum of American Art, NY. ©2015 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

War begins and ends with moments of reflection while oscillating between the group and the individual, the front and home. In the first panel, *Prayer*, a man and woman kneel with heads bowed. Given their indeterminate age, they might be parents asking protection for a son in uniform, or they may be preparing for their own separation as he leaves for duty. Either way, their solemnity sets the stage for the elegiac mood suffusing all fourteen panels. Several scenes packed with soldiers and sailors follow, the cramped spaces of these images providing a fitting visual analogue to the massive numbers of Americans shipped overseas. *Shipping Out*, *Alert*, *On Leave*, *Beachhead*, and *Reported Missing* flesh out the narrative of departure, socializing, combat, and imprisonment that was part of the war's story. Most of the soldiers are clearly of African descent, although the variety of shading makes it difficult to read all of the men as being of one, monolithic group. The effect recognized the difference of ethnicity within Black communities and communicated Lawrence's progressive politics, which anticipated a racially liberated world in which men of European and African descent would serve together in integrated units.

In contrast to the group scenes, the ones of isolated individuals narrow the war to singular moments of confrontation with death. *The Letter* and *Casualty—The Secretary of War Regrets* focus on two women, both with heads bowed. In the first panel, a stark white letter sits on a black tabletop, its contents known only to the woman whose hands, resting on the table, support her weight. The ring on her finger reveals her married status, while the sloped shoulders betray her sense of relief in knowing that her partner is still communicating. *Casualty* captures the moment when the most feared letter arrives. An older woman in a housecoat stoops over a photograph of her son; the entire scene is framed by a doorway, so that viewers are forced into a domestic setting suddenly vulnerable to actions and events overseas.

The final image, *Victory* (1946–47; figure 13), punctuates the entire series. Rendered in dull browns to suggest combat camouflage, it, too, presents a moment of profound introspection. Like the women in the series, the soldier appears with head bowed, and thus he assumes the position of an Everyman reflecting on his experiences and giving thanks for his life. In a grand narrative of departure and return, Lawrence depicted humans confronted by forces far greater than themselves. Fate seems to be their guide and their protection. Calculating the cost of the war in personal terms while evoking its sublimity, he conveyed the unnerving knowledge that humanity is capable of unleashing powers far beyond its control. Victory over fascism left the world in the position to reflect that the next war might be more destructive still.