

Social Realists of the Great Depression

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/social-realists-great-depression>.

Introduction

During the Great Depression, many American artists used their art to speak out against injustice. Their work emphasized the day-to-day experience of poverty and the suffering of the working class under capitalism: layoffs, labor unrest, racism, food shortages, housing crises, dustbowls, and both homegrown and European fascist threats. Many of these social realist artists (the term came years later) were Jewish, and they largely came from the working class, urban, and immigrant scenes that they painted. Primarily first- or second-generation immigrants from Eastern Europe, these Jewish artists depicted workers of a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities, displaying a class-based politics that they believed transcended ethnic differences. Some scholars, such as Ori Z. Soltes, theorize that Jews were disproportionately involved in social realist art because they were consciously or unconsciously expressing the value of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), or because they were reacting to the history of antisemitism and pogroms in Europe. This kit explores the works of several Jewish social realist artists and looks at the experiences and contexts that led them to embrace the convictions and aesthetics associated with this style.

Subjects

Art, Film, Music, Social Commentary

Reading and Background:

- There are many works of history that teachers may find useful for this topic. Matthew Baigell's *Social Concern and Left Politics in Jewish American Art 1880-1940* (2015) provides an overview of the broader topic of Jewish American art and the politics of the left, including socialism and communism, in the period before and during the Depression. It examines the impact of Jewish history and religion on activism, and the balance between Jewish particularist and universalist intentions that competed but also reinforced one another. Likewise, Ori Z. Soltes' *Fixing the World: Jewish American Painters in the Twentieth Century* (2003) covers a broad array of American Jewish artists and their work, and argues that they share a common conception of *tikkun olam* - repairing or fixing the world. Pages 22-44 cover several social realist painters.
- For a broad overview of Social Realism, teachers can turn to *American Painting: 1900-1970* by Tony Chiu, et. al. (1970), which includes a chapter on "The Social Realists" that is an excellent overview of the movement with many visual illustrations. Teachers may also enjoy *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (1973), a primary document reader that includes artist self-reflections and essays. The breadth of resources in this book demonstrates the controversial, vital, and turbulent nature of both the movement and the paintings.
- In addition, *The Art Story*, an organization seeking to make modern art more accessible, provides an overview of the artistic movement with "quickviews" of the artists involved.

Resources

1: Painting, William Gropper's "Youngstown Strike," 1937.

William Gropper (1897-1977) was a cartoonist, painter, lithographer, and muralist as well as a contributor of political writing to many left-leaning publications. He was born in New York City to immigrant parents who were employed in low-wage positions in the garment industry. His painting *Youngstown Strike* is a depiction of workers striking at the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1916. The painting was likely prompted by the Youngstown strike of 1937, during which there were violent confrontations between workers and the police. Gropper visited Youngstown during these later strikes, and they made a significant impression on him. The painting depicts workers, both men and women, protesting labor conditions at great personal risk. The artist aligns himself with the workers, depicting their shock and outrage at the anti-labor violence. You may



wish to direct your students to [this commentary](#) on the painting by art historian Howard E. Wooden, from which the information in this paragraph was drawn.

Suggested Activity: Have your students look at the painting and discuss the following questions: What emotions does Gropper capture in the painting and how does he portray them? Why are worker strikes of interest to social realist artists? Why might they have been of particular interest to Jewish artists of the time? How does Gropper demonstrate sympathy for the workers?

Source: William Gropper, *Youngstown Strike*, 1937. Museum Purchase 1985. Collection, The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio. Copyright Gene Gropper.

2: Lithograph, Harry Sternberg's "Miner and his wife," 1936.

Harry Sternberg (1904-2001) was a painter, muralist, and printmaker and a second generation immigrant, the youngest of eight children in an Orthodox Jewish family. In his artwork he depicted proletarian subjects in a way that aligned with his anti-fascist political activism and beliefs. His early work had a clear political message in favor of the working class. In *Miner and his wife*, Sternberg draws upon his first-hand experience visiting the coal mining region of Pennsylvania. As a result of those visits, Sternberg produced images of the poverty and danger in miners' lives and the need for reform. Teachers may wish to consult Baigell's *Social Concern and Left Politics in Jewish American Art 1880-1940* (2015) p. 150, for a further discussion of this piece.

Suggested Activity: Have your students look at the lithograph and discuss the following questions: Why would miners and their families be of special interest to social realist artists? Sternberg grew up in an Orthodox environment and later claimed that his art and life were deeply influenced by his East European Jewish immigrant background and milieu. Do you see traces of Sternberg's background in this painting? Do people have sympathy for miners today? Can you think of any contemporary artistic representations of miners? How might this black and white lithograph affect viewers differently than a color painting or a photograph would?

Source: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. Harry Sternberg, "Miner and his wife" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed June 14, 2017.

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/91556622-ecb7-b4f8-e040-e00a180...>

3: Audio clip and printed lyrics, Yip Harburg and Jay Gorney's "Brother Can You Spare a Dime," sung by Bing Crosby, 1932.

Although often described as a movement in painting, social realism was also seen in photography, music, and film. In 1932 New York City lyricist **E.Y. "Yip" Harburg**, together with composer Jay Gorney, wrote one of the best-known songs of the Great Depression, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime," for the musical review *Americana*. The song became famous through recordings by Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallee. Unlike the optimistic happy-ending tone of most Broadway songs, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime" offers no solace for the shattered dreams of the Depression. In this way, it is the lyric equivalent of the social realist paintings included in this kit. For further reflections on the song, listen to this [NPR story about the song](#), or read this [commentary](#), from which the information in this paragraph was drawn.

Suggested Activity: Have your students listen to the song and read the lyrics. Then invite them to pick the two lines they find most compelling and explain why. Ask your students: Why do you think the composers made the narrator a railroad builder and a WWI veteran? How is the experience of listening to a song different from looking at a painting for you? Does the song convey similar messages to the paintings in this kit? Do you experience those messages differently because of the medium? Bing Crosby was the most popular singer in the country at the time. What do you think of his singing? Do you think a modern singer would choose to sing these lyrics differently, and why? Invite your students to imagine a modern version of this song. What new lyrics might they add for the present moment? Who could they imagine singing it, and what would it sound like?

Source: Bing Crosby, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime," *The Essential Bing Crosby*. Columbia/Legacy, 2014.

E. Y. Harburg, J. Gorney, lyrics, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime," © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., NEXT DECADE ENTERTAINMENT, INC., SHAPIRO BERNSTEIN & CO. INC.

4: Lithograph, Boris Gorelick's "Lynching," 1936-1937.

Boris Gorelick (1909-1984) was a painter, muralist, and animator who immigrated to the United States from Russia with his parents at the age of four. He attended the National Academy of Design, the Arts Students League and Columbia University and

was the founder and president of the Artist's Union, an organization promoting American art during the Great Depression. He worked for the Works Progress Administration on a lithograph project in 1933 and became a member of the New York lithography workshop. He later moved to California where he became an animator for Playhouse Films and taught art classes at Otis Art Institute. Gorelick created *Lynching* after reading a newspaper story about the lynching of a young black man. His abstract representation of the event expressed his protest against such violence and hatred (Baigell 161). Teachers working with this resource may also wish to turn to this [set of lesson plans](#) on Race Relations from the Columbus Museum of Art, which features Gorelick's lithograph. Because of the very sensitive nature of this topic, teachers may wish to turn to additional sources for background about Jewish representations of the lynching of African Americans in this period. This [book](#) by Milly Heyd about artistic representations between Jews and Blacks is a good place to start.

Suggested Activities: Have your students look at the lithograph. Go around the room and have students identify what is happening in different sections of the drawing. Ask your students: Why would a Jew from New York be interested in southern racism? What did Jews and African-Americans have in common at the time? Ask your students to discuss their emotional response to the lithograph. How is looking at an abstract artwork different from reading an account about lynching in a history book?

Source: Boris Gorelick, *Lynching*, lithograph, WPA-FAP, ca. 1937.

5: Painting and commentary, Jack Levine's "Feast of Pure Reason," 1937.

Jack Levine (1915-2010) was a painter and printmaker best known for his satirical portrayal of political corruption, big business, militarism, and racism. The son of Lithuanian Jewish parents, he grew up amidst urban poverty in the South End of Boston. He created *The Feast of Pure Reason*, a satire of Boston political power, in 1937 while he was employed by the WPA. The controversial piece was placed on loan to the Museum of Modern Art.

Suggested Activities: Have your students look at the painting. Discuss the following questions: Who do you think the three characters are? What is the artist's view of them, and how is that attitude conveyed? What other objects are in the painting? What does each represent? Then read the commentary below the painting. Why would Levine choose to draw corrupt figureheads instead of victims of oppression, as did the other artists featured in this kit?

Sources: Jack Levine, *The Feast of Pure Reason*, painting, 1937. Art © Susanna Levine Fisher/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Reproduced with permission from VAGA: www.vagarights.com.

Hilton Kramer, "The Hazards of Modern Painting," in *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, ed. David Shapiro (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), 271.

6: Mural and commentary, Ben Shahn's "Jersey Homestead Mural," 1937-1938.

Ben Shahn (1898-1969) was born in Lithuania to Jewish parents, and immigrated to the United States with his family in 1906. In his work, Shahn attempted to contribute to social dialogue through his realist style, exposing unjust American living and working conditions. His mural for the community center of Jersey Homesteads is one of his most famous works.

Suggested Activities: Have your students take turns identifying what is going on in various sections of the mural. Ask your students to research what happened to the Jersey Homestead project. They may wish to consult one or more of the following sites: This excerpt of an oral history [interview](#) with Shahn, this [resource](#) on Shahn and the mural from the New Jersey Historical Commission, or this [website](#) on Shahn, which is part of a larger project on the legacy of the New Deal. How was Ben Shahn involved? What was the connection between his life and his art?

Have your students read the commentary by Diana Linden. Ask students if they agree that the mural casts Jewish immigrants' experiences as a version of the Exodus story. Where do they see evidence of that in the painting? What does Linden mean when she says that Shahn wanted to "privilege contemporary American life and working-class identity over elements of Jewish religious tradition and ritual"? Why might Shahn have wanted to do that? Ask your students if they ever make choices about which aspects of their identities to prioritize, and why.

Sources: Ben Shahn, *Jersey Homestead Mural*, 1937-1938, via [Roosevelt Arts Project](#).

Diana L. Linden, *Ben Shahn's New Deal Murals: Jewish Identity in the American Scene*. (Wayne State University Press, 2015), 61-62.

7: Video clips, National Hunger March documentary, 1931, and interview with filmmaker Leo Seltzer.

Many documentary filmmakers during the Depression era made films that were motivated by a social justice imperative. Like the social realist painters, the **Workers Film and Photo League**, a collective of left-wing American filmmakers, sought to capture the harsh reality of poverty and the struggles of everyday life. This excerpt from a documentary about a national workers' march to Washington, D.C., is an example of how filmmakers attempted to publicize and ennoble the struggles of the poor and the work of activists. In the second video, Leo Seltzer, a prolific social documentary filmmaker and one of the founders of the Workers Film and Photo League, describes how such films brought important information to communities that would otherwise not have had access to it.

Suggested Activities: Have your students watch the National Hunger March footage and the interview excerpt and discuss the following questions: What do you learn about the National Hunger March from this footage? Is the footage sympathetic to the marchers? How can you tell? Does the footage remind you of any documentary or news footage you have seen about contemporary events?

Comparison exercise: Invite your students to choose another work from this kit and create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the National Hunger March excerpt with other media included in this kit. How is a documentary film like a mural in its aim to bring ideas or attitudes into the public arena? How is a documentary film like a work of abstract art in its ability to focus on select details and angles? How is it like a piece of music as it works with the element of time, rather than with a still or static image?

Invite your students to create a work of art in the tradition of social realism, or to describe the work of art they would like to create. It may be a film, photographs, a song, a drawing, or a painting. Have students explain where their work of art would be displayed or distributed. Ask students to describe how they were informed or inspired by works in this kit in the creation of their own art.

Sources: Workers Film and Photo League of the WIR, *The National Hunger March, 1931*. Prelinger Archives Collection, The Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/0878_National_Hunger_March_1931_The_02_50_11_26

Selection from interview with Leo Seltzer (Title #640) conducted by Blackside, Inc., for the program *The Great Depression*. Interview Time Code 0:05:40-0:07:20. Reproduced with permission from the Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries.