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Forgotten Messages From the Angry 1930s

Northwestern University's Block Museum will open 'The Left Front: Radical Art in the "Red Decade," 1929-1940.'

By Kyle MacMillan



When curators think of 1930s America, they tend to focus on the crucial support hard-pressed artists got from the government's Works Progress Administration and the social-realist movement that filled murals and other works of the time with sturdy, sometimes idealistic figures.

Often overlooked have been the anticapitalist leanings and fiery political activism of many of the period's artists. As the Great Depression took hold, they banded together nationwide to form 30 branches of the John Reed Club, named after the American journalist who chronicled the Russian Revolution.

A pioneering exhibition explores the artistic and sociopolitical legacy of this leftist group and its more broad-minded successor, the American Artists Congress. "The Left Front: Radical Art in the 'Red Decade,' 1929-1940" starts Friday and runs through June 22 at

Northwestern University's Block Museum of Art in Evanston, Ill. The more than 100 objects include paintings and original prints, as well as posters, books and ephemera associated with the two collectives. Much of the material is drawn from the Block Museum's holdings, plus loans primarily from public and private collections in Chicago.

"These artists did self-identify as leftists, and that's a part of the story that has in a lot of ways dropped out," said John Murphy, one of two doctoral candidates who co-curated "The Left Front."

During the so-called Red Decade, artists joined writers and intellectuals in grappling with what form revolutionary art should take and whom it should address. Among those in the show are Stuart Davis, an important bridge from early American abstraction to 1940s and '50s abstract-expressionism; William Gropper, a social-realist cartoonist and painter who traveled to the Dust Bowl in 1937 on a Guggenheim Fellowship, and Rockwell Kent, a kind of socialist mystic who made paintings, murals and illustrations for such books as "Moby-Dick."

"What we discovered is that there was not a definitive answer to these questions" raised by artists about their revolutionary role, said co-curator Jill Bugajski. "This was a really active, really fiery debate in the '30s that had no resolution."

While art histories of this period have typically zeroed in on New York City, this show broadens that focus. With influential institutions such as Jane Addams's Hull House, Chicago had its own rich history of social activism, which featured resident artists like Bernece Berkman, Carl Hoeckner and Morris Topchevsky.

The word "communism" can still spark strong emotions. But the show's two curators believe enough time has passed for a fresh, more objective look at this period in American art history.

A key object in "The Left Front" is one of two known copies of a catalog that accompanied a 1931 display of works by John Reed Club members at the Museum of Western Art in Moscow. (The Amherst Center for Russian Culture at Amherst College in Massachusetts lent the catalog.)

"That may be something that 30 or 40 years ago would have been controversial," Mr. Murphy said. "I don't know how it will read now. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, I don't know that that would bother people necessarily the same way it would have before."

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