

Harry Gottlieb



The sinkscreen and social concern
in the WPA era

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Harry Gottlieb and of Serigraphy

Gregory Gilbert



1. *Bootleg Mining*, 1937, color lithograph, 14 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

During the 1930s, a number of innovations in color printmaking were developed under the auspices of the WPA's Federal Art Project. Encouraged by the technical studies, Project administrators organized a special unit in 1933 to explore the possibilities of fine art mediums; the unit's efforts resulted in the

modern printmaking. Of the units six founding members, Harry Gottlieb was the only one who had previously been a professional printer. Although Gottlieb is a central figure in the history of serigraphy, no previous study has made any efforts to broaden and enrich its technical

In 1925 Gottlieb, then in New York City, was assigned to the following year he was assigned to the Federal Art Project's graphics division was established to produce original works of art for schools and other institutions for painting and sculpture during the Project administrators quickly realized that printmaking afforded the cheapest mode of artistic production. Multiple print editions made possible a national scale. During its six years of existence the graphics division handled a large percentage of the allocations and functioned as a veritable laboratory for stylistic interchange and technical

other copper plate media, a number of printmakers mastered planographic techniques, making significant advances in lithography, woodblock printing, and serigraphy. During the 1930s Gottlieb was drawn to printmaking, as it allowed him to translate the spontaneous application and textural effects of his drawings into a reproducible form. After entering the graphics division in 1936, he resumed working in the medium. However, he quickly adopted the experimental techniques that were circulating in the workshop, freely applying tusche washes and scraping his stone to achieve varied modulations in ink tone.

In the 1930s, the graphics division perfected with this revitalization of color lithography. This process had been used since the early 19th century, but artists began to exploit the technique for its own

balancing the traditional, linear markings of the figures and the powerful, linear markings of the figures and

Like lithography, silkscreen had been employed as a commercial process and was generally used for printing on the screen. The design is printed through a tightly stretched screen of silk or nylon. The design is printed through a tightly stretched screen of silk or nylon. The design is printed through a tightly stretched screen of silk or nylon.

then uses a squeegee to force ink through the open areas to be printed, a series of stencils for each color must be prepared. In the past, these separate steps are has been applied that a coherent design is produced. The process had been submitted by Anthony Velonis, who was interested in color processes, used silkscreen in executing posters for the WPA and was interested in

the technique for printmaking purposes. In his recommendation, Velonis outlines the many advantages of using silkscreen for fine art printing. Unlike linocut, the silk screen is merely a frame and a modest assortment of hand tools. Because the equipment used in silkscreen printing was portable and easily stored, it was possible for artists to perfect the craft in their own studios. An important benefit, as many printmakers felt that their work should be done in a public atmosphere of the division workshop. The method was also economical, as stencils and inks were inexpensive and an inexpensive grade paper or cardboard could be used for printing. Furthermore, an almost unlimited number of prints could be produced using the same stencil and ink. In addition, the processes, the incised areas, and the ink itself were fragile and often wore down with repeated printings, resulting in the output of small editions. Perhaps the most important benefit of the technique was its ability to emulate various graphic processes and painting mediums. Depending on the viscosity and tone of the ink, the silkscreen print could assume the dense luster of a work in oils, or the subtle transparency of watercolor. Velonis remarked, "In a sense it is not a graphic medium at all, but a means of expression on the duplicating process and easel painting."¹³

Velonis' knowledge of the process was extensive, as he had worked closely with silkscreen techniques on the Project's poster division. From its inception in the early thirties, the division attempted to transcend the pedestrian nature of the poster. Instead, many of the staff designers were painters, non-commercial technicians, and they were concerned with the aesthetic as well as the functional aspects of their work. While the growing popularity of silkscreen printing contributed to the development of serigraphy, the artistic character of the FAP posters may have also encouraged the consideration of silkscreen as a print medium.

During his tenure on the poster division, Velonis

entitled *Technical Problems of the Silkscreen*.¹⁴ The silkscreen technique was used primarily for commercial purposes, as it allowed for the production of designs and uniform applications of color. However, the technique was also used for artistic purposes, and in the late 1930s Velonis attempted to

developing more flexible stenciling techniques. Two of the most effective were the blue stop-out and the use of liquid glass. The blue stop-out was a liquid that could be brushed onto the screen and hardened into a stencil. The liquid glass was also used as a stop-out, but it was more difficult to apply and it left impressions of glass on the screen. Often, all the colors were transferred to the screen. In his technical brochures, Velonis also maintained that more subtle tones could be produced by using a variety of ink colors and by varying the thickness of the ink.

Velonis formally submitted his silkscreen proposal to the WPA office in Washington in 1938, and with the support of the WPA office, he received a number of requests for velonis' manuals from regional FAP centers, and his writings served as the basis for much of the technical experimentation that later occurred in the Silk Screen Unit.¹⁵

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Fig. 1. On the Beach, 1939. Serigraphic 12" (16" x 14" 5/8").

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abstract idiom, Gottlieb was an exponent of Social Realism, and a number of his prints dealt with the political and economic crises of the Depression era. Social Realism, emerging in the United States during the late twenties and thirties, was derived from a amalgam of styles, including immitant political

Several of the stylistic traits associated with Realist art, such as a simplification of forms and an emphasis on the figure, can be detected in Gottlieb's early work. His prints often featured bold, simplified shapes and a limited color palette.

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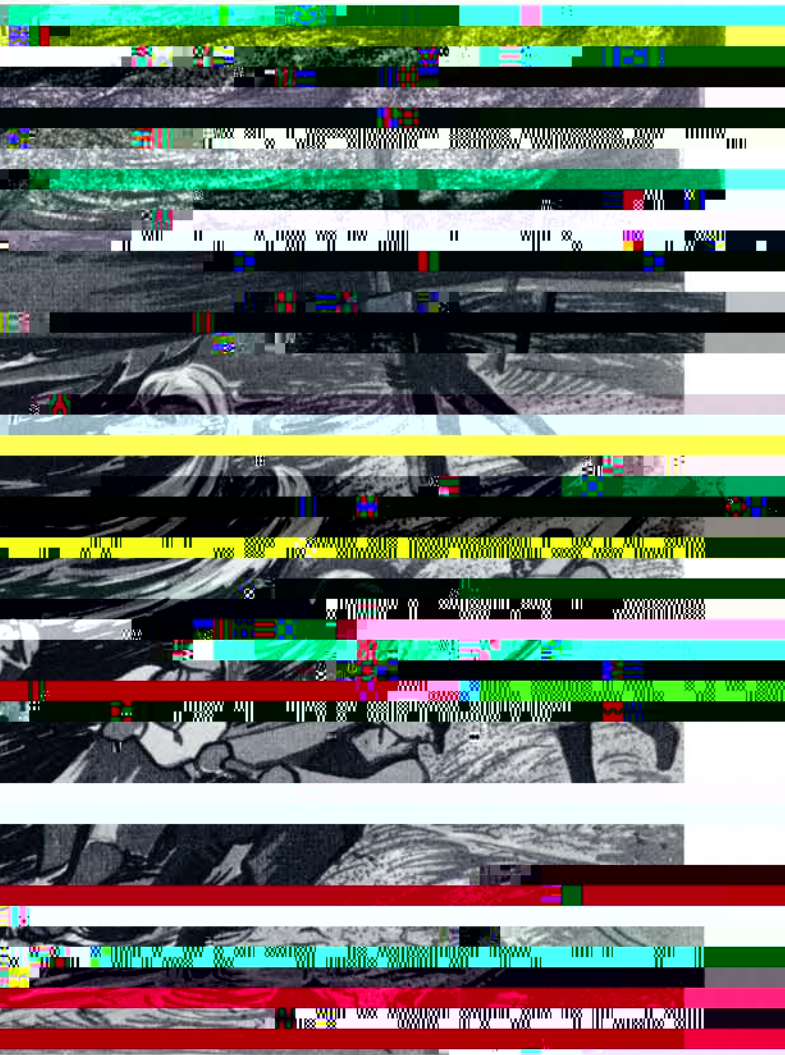
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3. *Fisherman's Luck*, 1929, serigraph, 12 x 14 1/8. Print Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations (cat. 7)

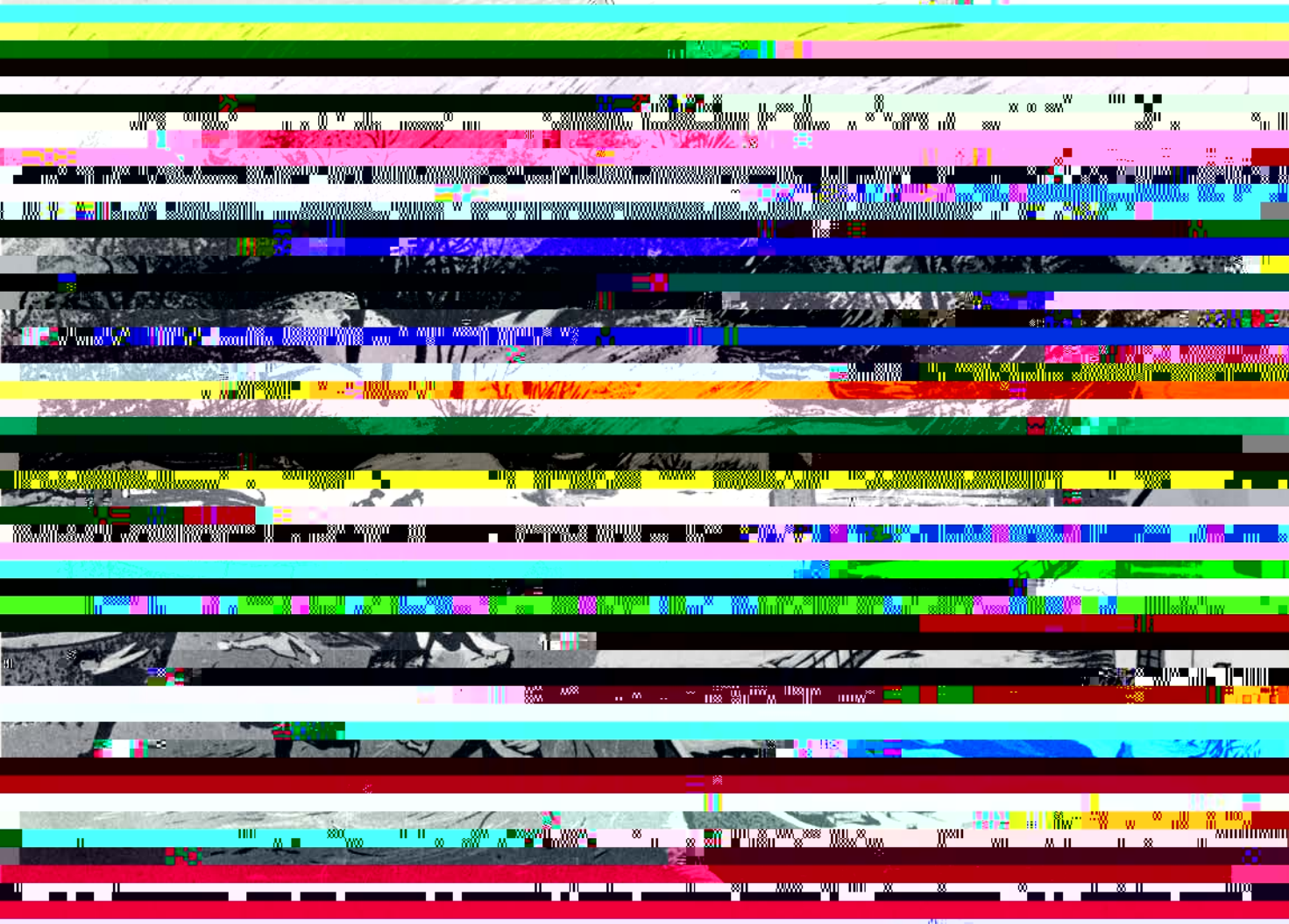
1939 (fig. 3), disclose his increasing mastery of the process. Unlike the dense tones used in *On the Beach*, Gottlieb employed thinner pigments to emulate the transparent quality of watercolor. He was also able to mimic the fluid and motion of a brush by cutting the stencil with a fine needle. Although Gottlieb worked in a representational style, he imbued the elements in his prints with an abstract energy in order to convey a sense of dynamic movement. Sidney Alexander observed, "A realist, he is involved in the picture is a subjective-objective vision."¹⁰ In *Fisherman's Luck*, Gottlieb expressed vigorous figural action by transforming the fishermen into a series of energetically carved forms. The sweeping stroke was also used to create the texture of the waves, which were reduced to stylized bands of color in the manner of Japanese woodcut.

With *Drillers* of 1939 (cat. 4), Gottlieb eschewed a painterly approach for a more graphic effect. The colors have been applied in uniform layers and the stenciled



4. *Drillers*, 1939, serigraph, 12 x 14 1/8. Print Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations (cat. 8)

ink and brush drawing. In this work, the graphic figures of two rock drillers dominate the composition, giving these silhouetted forms an airy, almost ethereal quality. The worker, in the majority of his prints he incorporated figures to add a human element and a sense of scale to the scene. As in *On the Beach*, a sense of figural solidity has been conveyed through the use of a forceful, rounded stroke and the application of unmodulated color. Although the palette is limited to nine colors, yet Gottlieb reverted to the use of thin pigments to enhance the graphic quality of the work. Here, the sharply articulated forms and the woodcut printing, Gottlieb relied on the expressive force of the strikers, rendering their faces and gesturing bodies



4. *Winter on the Creek*, 1940, serigraph, 12 x 14 1/8. Print Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations (cat. 8)

with the blunt economy of a political cartoon. Further, the strong, graphic design and vibrant hues were effective in making the work more accessible. Gottlieb maintained an active interest in this subject, issuing the *Strike Is Won* in both 1939 and 1940. As silkscreen designs are not reversed in printing, drawings that were easily transferred to the stencil. The various color separations that would be used in printing

(cats. 3, 9, 23, 24). While Gottlieb used preliminary sketches for entire silkscreen compositions, such as for *The Strike Is Won*, which depicts the elderly worker at the bottom of the frame. When compared with the boldly incised figure in the silkscreen, this work reveals

Gottlieb's ability to adapt the character of a particular medium. A handsome and successful artist, Gottlieb was a natural and critical success as a serigrapher. Executed in eleven color separations, the work reveals the same manner that of a building his work in the same manner that of a

like the methods, the matrix of a silkscreen can be freely manipulated, and the most subtle of the frame containing the force exerted on the squeegee. This not

only allows for widely divergent impressions to be produced from the same stencil, but gives silkscreen prints a more painterly, handcrafted appearance. Gottlieb often modified the technical steps of silkscreen, and once likened the flexibility of the process to the spontaneous quality of drawing. In 1944, *the Creek* received the Eyre Medal of the 40th Annual Philadelphia Watercolor and Print Exhibition, the first silkscreen to be awarded a prize in a national graphic arts competition. *Winter on the Creek* proved popular with the viewing public in the early 1940s that Gottlieb issued, also illustrated widely in a number of art periodicals during this period and has appeared in several silkscreen handbooks as a representative example of Gottlieb's work in the medium.

Throughout 1939 and 1940, Gottlieb took an almost systematic approach to expanding and perfecting the technical capabilities of silkscreen, as he experimented with an extensive range of stencil materials and pigment mixtures. In executing his prints, he emulated a variety of painting media and processes in order to demonstrate the flexibility and artistic potential of the new technique. Gottlieb produced such a prodigious number of silkscreen prints that he was able to mount the first one-man exhibition devoted to the medium at the ACA Gallery in March 1940. The ACA Gallery had been organized by Herman Baron, who sympathized with the political ideology of the WPA. Baron had taken a keen interest in Gottlieb's work in silkscreen. In his memoirs, Baron commented on the historical significance of Gottlieb's exhibition:

For the sake of giving it (silkscreen) a beginning let us say that it was introduced to the New York art world — and thereby to a nationwide audience — in the first large one-man show of work in the medium held at ACA Gallery... Harry Gottlieb, in my opinion, was the logical artist to introduce the new medium, the silkscreen print.¹²

During the same months, Gottlieb's first two group exhibitions of silkscreens were organized at the Weyhe Gallery and the Sprague Field Museum. Gottlieb's display received great attention at the Weyhe Gallery, where he demonstrated his facile command of textural effects and his command of color evidenced in many of his prints.

Gottlieb's ACA exhibition was more than a professional coup for the artist, in that several critics viewed it as an occasion to herald the birth of a new and

distinctly American art form. At this time, not only was there an emphasis in the United States on the development of a national style as Regionalism and Social Realism, but there was also an interest in innovating printmaking. Gottlieb's rival artists and students in the European graphics. Two of his most enthusiastic promoters were Elizabeth McCausland and Carl Zigrosser, an influential and politically active critic of the

democratic art form, asserting that the low cost of the process made it accessible to the masses. McCausland was particularly active in promoting Gottlieb's works during the forties, exclaiming, "as he was a pioneer in the use of the contribution to the fine arts use of silk screen." Carl Zigrosser, who was a renowned curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was the first scholar to encourage the use of the

great deal of entrenched prejudice against color printing in all media, and many graphic societies excluded color lithographs, silkscreens, and serigraphs from their publications and exhibitions. Zigrosser's writings were extremely effective in stimulating professional and public interest in the new medium.

and his 1941 article "The Serigraph, A New Medium" remains the definitive overview of the early development of the process.¹⁴ In fact, it was Zigrosser who coined the term serigraphy in order to differentiate the fine art silkscreen technique from its commercial ancestry. In his writings, Zigrosser also identified Gottlieb as the most energetic proponent of the new medium. Not only were critics and printmaking societies involved in promoting serigraphy, but Gottlieb was extremely active in advancing the medium through his series of lectures and exhibitions.

Of the six artists who were selected to demonstrate the various techniques utilized in silkscreen printing, Elizabeth McCausland was also present at the demonstration and

Gottlieb's serigraphy had been introduced to other artists in the graphics division, it quickly became one of the most popular media for an entire postwar generation of fine art printmakers.

Twenty percent of the Project's graphic allocations were devoted to the production of silkscreens. A number of printmakers began to work independently. An independent Silk Screen Group was established in New York in May 1940.

Gottlieb joined the Silk Screen Group, but he was not a member. In 1940, after leaving the WPA/EAP, Gottlieb conducted a series of lectures and workshops on serigraphy at the University of Minnesota, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the University of Omaha

and the University of Wisconsin. He also lectured on the technical aspects of the process to implement studio practice. Gottlieb's lectures generally dealt with the technical benefits of using the silkscreen as a print medium, and he often demonstrated the process and invited members of the audience to pull their own prints. He also

prepared and color separations for artists and lectured on the process. Gottlieb's lectures exemplified the ideological thrust of the WPA's art programs, as he actively sought to broaden the public's awareness and appreciation of the silkscreen technique. He disseminated knowledge of serigraphy through his personal and immediate link between this new democratic art form and a responsive public. Gottlieb's efforts were also realized in 1940 when he acted as art

director of a film depicting the silkscreen technique, and he also published a series of technical manuals on silkscreen published by the WPA/EAP. Distribution of this material spread knowledge of the

number of Project artists who later became the mentors for an entire postwar generation of fine art printmakers.

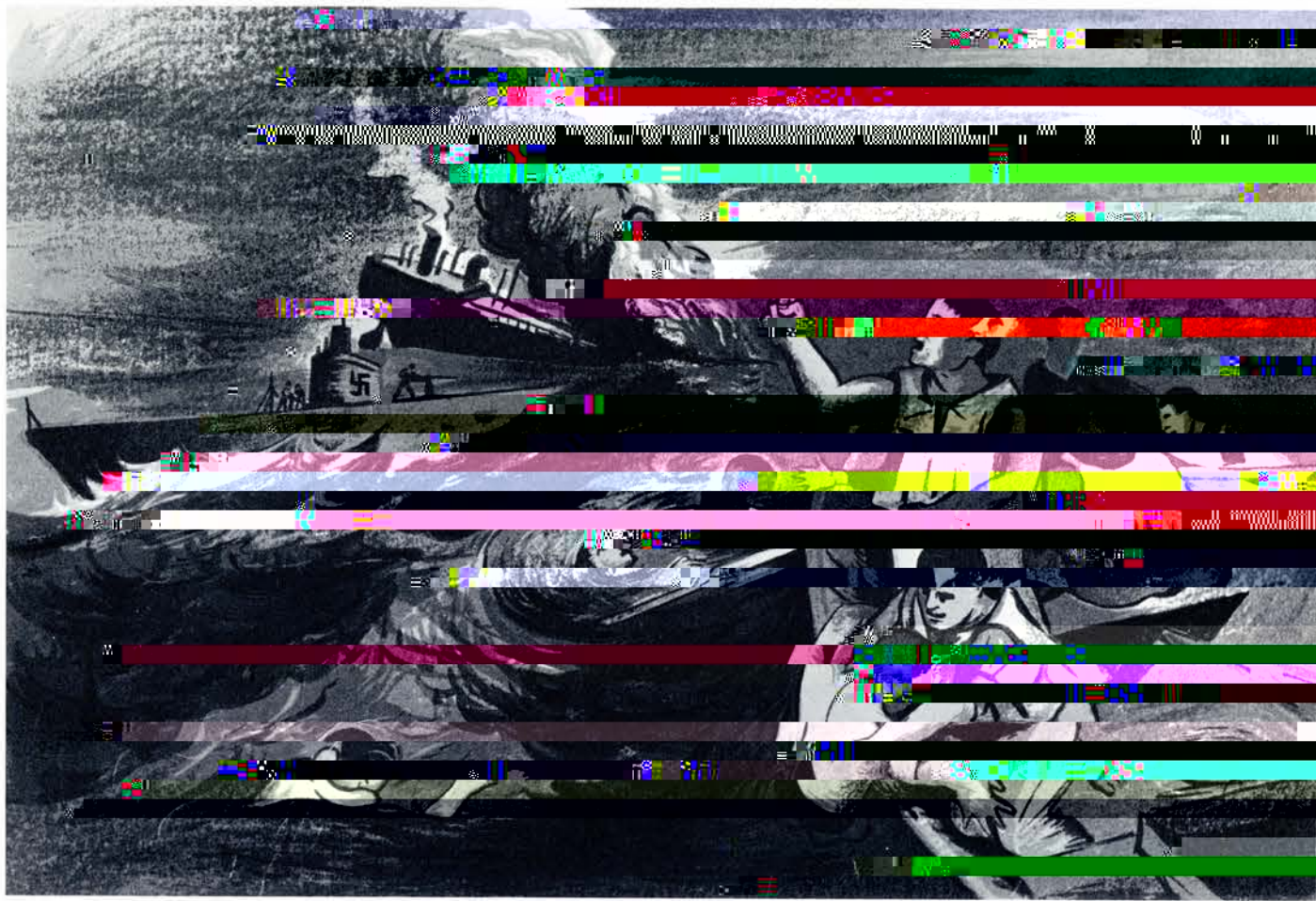
Shortly after Gottlieb had left the WPA/EAP, the Philadelphia Museum of Art

of the Project, and many of the artists were encouraged to produce serigraphs depicting war themes, such as *Montage of American Soldiers* and *Damn the Torpedo* of 1942 (fig. 5), yet the process stemmed from his own patriotic sentiments. In March of 1940, the Philadelphia Museum of Art

that had insured the rapid maturation of serigraphy was now openly discouraged and the process was once again being utilized for the production of propaganda. The trend against artists such as Gottlieb coincided with the

innovations made in serigraphic materials and processes. The program's support of political and technical innovations in serigraphy with its earlier commercial associations, the process reached its full art historical legitimacy

Gottlieb and other Project artists who later became the mentors for an entire postwar generation of fine art printmakers. In establishing the technique as a viable and potent



5. *Damn the Torpedo*, 1942. serigraph, 12 1/4 x 18 1/4. The Syracuse University Art Collections. (cat. 13)

Outlook: Art and Social Concern

We to be interested primarily in art, but we realize that the creation of important art is a social phenomenon and that the artist has a social responsibility.

Anonymous address to the American Artists Congress, New York, 1936

The social and political significance of works of art

dissolution in 1945 is immediately apparent. Not only does the content of the work make manifest the social and political temperament of the times, but the very existence of these works refers to an unprecedented artistic importance and implications of first

for those artists who... The artists and the work they did came to be regarded as a force for society's well being and to the recovery of that well being.

The artistic and political activities of Harry Gottlieb during this period are representative of the larger issues which concerned artists during the Depression years. His work focused on the artist's responsibility to record the natural events and events of the times, art was a record of his subjective experience, but he also saw art as a progressive force, as a socially responsive and

with the situations... depression.

Gottlieb's political activity was centered upon the idea of the artist's responsible role in society and, in... artist and his art. He was very involved in... government agencies to be supportive of art as well as industry and to be active in the dissemination of art... wide audience. The development of this audience was of great concern to Gottlieb; he taught and lectured on art

He was supportive of proposals and projects which... created a wider and more receptive audience... decision to work with the graphic media was partially motivated by this concern: prints were easily and inexpensively produced in large numbers and could be made available to the public.

Gottlieb's initial involvement in political issues and organizations...

study in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship... settled in Woodstock, where he had lived previously to his

among artists seen... as the Depression grew worse. Mrs. Juliette Force, who had given Gottlieb his first one-man exhibition in 1929 and was the first director of the Whitney Museum, was

when the Depression hit. Gottlieb joined her campaign and became chairman of the committee to raise funds. He was very successful in organizing a diverse group of artists into a supportive group. The lobbying efforts and other groups were instrumental in establishing the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in December

The subtle change in the subjects that Gottlieb chose to depict in his paintings and lithographs reflect his growing political involvement. The lithographs he created in Europe show people taking part in various activities, as well as landscape

to Woodstock. Leisure time subjects gave way to a consistent depiction of people's labor, men at work in an icenouse, the excavation of a city street, among other images. The pleasantly woodsy landscape scenes reveal hidden quarries, railroad houses and other industrial scenes.

landscape was accompanied by the full development of... to a lesser degree in his earlier work... within a continuous scene, alteration of naturalistic color and a blocky and summary description of the figure.

development among some of his contemporaries... remained fairly consistent throughout Gottlieb's career.

used to create a mood or impress a point... condensed account of the scene the artist sought to portray, with important elements selected and emphasized to create a mood or impress a point

As Edmund Wilson pointed out... essay of George Gethens. American artists at the time were working from a point of view for which there was no American tradition. They drew upon a wide variety of... as various as the Surrealist

two documents were later republished by the WPA in WPA... 1941.

¹As Carl Zigrosser noted in his "Medium," *Print Collectors Quarterly*, December, 1941, 467, Guy Maccoy actually had the first one-man exhibition... Contemporary Arts Gallery in New York in November of 1938; however, Maccoy had not utilized the fine art process of serigraphy that was perfected in 1939 by Harry Gottlieb and members of the Federal Art Projects's Silk Screen Unit. Serigraphy was comprised of a variety of techniques that involved the use of oil pigments, whereas Maccoy had executed his silkscreens in waterbased paints.

²Lois Kainen, "The Graphic Arts Division of the WPA Federal Art Project," in *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs*, ed. by Francis V. O'Connor, Washington, D.C., 1974, 107.

³Anthony Velonis, "Silk Screen Process Prints," *Magazine of Art*, July, 1940, 411.

⁴W... Administration and the Arts, Columbus, 1969, 438.

⁵Anthony Velonis, *Technical Problems of the Artist: Technique of the Silk Screen Process*, Vol. 1 and Vol. II: *Methods Other Than Profilm*, New York, 1938. These

⁶O'Connor, *The New Deal Art Projects*, 107.

⁷Elizabeth Olds, in a letter to the author, April 2

⁸Olds, letter.

⁹Kainen, "The Graphic Arts Division," 167.

¹⁰Sidney Alexander, *Harry Gottlieb*, New York, ACA Gallery, 1948, 2.

¹¹Harry Gottlieb, in an interview with... Conkelton and Gregory Gilbert, March 10, 1983.

¹²Herman Baron, American Contemporary Artists Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, New York, D304, 678-680.

¹³Elizabeth McCausland, "Silk Screen Color Prints," *Print Collector*, 1940, 400.

¹⁴Milton Meltzer, *Violins and Shovels: The WPA Art Projects*, New York, 1976, 107.

¹⁵ACA Gallery Papers, D304, 169.

¹⁶Silk Screen Process, *Print Collector*, *The Magazine of Art*, August, 1940, 438.

¹⁷Kainen, "The Graphic Arts Division," 171.

exploration of the subject and the Mexican revolutionary fervor of the Mexican muralists.

One of the stylistic factors of social realist painting was this influence of the Mexican muralists: Orozco, Siquieros and Rivera, each of whom executed important works in the United States. The pictorial style was strongly adopted by social realists who recognized in the forms an expressive strength that could communicate their reaction to the economic crisis. While the formal depiction and social comment were admired and assimilated by social realist artists, the nihilism and revolutionary elements in their murals were generally denounced as subversive. The influence through his admiration of painters like Charles Burchfield and through contact with his more radical contemporaries such as Philip Evergood, making use of some of the Mexicans' forms while deliberately avoiding their Marxian and revolutionary overtones.

The concern for documentation of the industrial and social scene carried with it the expectation that the depiction would contribute to an improvement. It is this, the social realist artists, that provided a common bond.

It was this bond that united the artist and his work. The artist could conceive of himself as a worker united by a common purpose with the work he had to do to improve economic and social conditions because of the expected benefit of his production. The artist's work included their political activity and vigorous support of pertinent issues. It was part of their identity as artists, and, by extension, as workers for social improvement. Thus, although there is no overt political content in Gottlieb's images, the style of subject matter and the stylistic characteristics exhibited in his art had political connotations.

Gottlieb's involvement in the social and political issues surrounding the Depression encouraged his interest in similar activities occurring on a much larger scale in New York City. The United Artists Group (UAG) had been organized as an offshoot of the controversial John Reed Club to rally artists to a campaign for government support. Their purpose was to lobby Congress and inspire public support for a program that would create a great deal of publicity that attracted many supporters.⁵

The UAG became the Artists Union early in 1935 and began to publish the magazine *Art Front* with articles by Stuart Davis, Meyer Schapiro, and others, and illustrations by artists such as Ben Shahn and George Grosz. The Artists Union functioned as a trade union would, albeit a militant one that employed a militant leader, and it was run as a basically democratic organization committed to the idea of a worker in need of government-created and -supported employment.

After the creation of the WPA in the spring of 1935, there finally existed a government agency which answered the needs of the Union and with which they began to work as a bargaining agent on behalf of the various WPA projects. The interaction of the WPA administration and Artists Union members was often strained, however. The Federal Art Program (FAP) provided much needed understanding of the implications of government patronage and a hope for improvement, not necessarily impersonal. It did not always coincide with the artist's place within society, but also of the role of art in society.

Gottlieb followed the lead of other artists in New York and through his own frequent trips to Washington, D.C., he became excited by the idea of comradeship and change, and feeling a little stifled in the small

city. In 1936 he quickly became involved in Artists Union activities, authoring an article in *Art Front* that participated in being a vocal supporter of the UAG's program and goals. Gottlieb joined the WPA/FAP graphics division when it was created in August 1936, to meet any economic requirements, such as "the

ones." In 1936, he was elected president of the executive board of the Artists Union. In addition to his union activities, he also worked for the American Artists Congress, and later progressive artists advocated February 1936 on "The Municipal Art Center."¹⁰ This was an issue that had recently won official

previous month. It represented a major victory for the rank and file of the union: prior to this it had been a rallying point as an institution that would provide a resource to develop and appreciate the audience and also function as a place in which to exhibit their work. Before Gottlieb became president, the leadership of the Artists Union had been in the hands of a few individuals committed to the arts by the federal government. It was the idea of a permanent art project that would legislate for this support. The project was set up at the Daily Ithaca, New York. Gottlieb was a featured speaker in support of the permanent art project. The project was sent to the WPA administration and President

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expression became important; the subject matter of a number of FAP sponsored works of art, particularly murals, had been selected by the artist. The artist's role in the administration of the program was the responsibility of the artist. He recognized the controversial nature of the program and the need for a permanent art project. The project was set up at the Daily Ithaca, New York. Gottlieb was a featured speaker in support of the permanent art project. The project was sent to the WPA administration and President

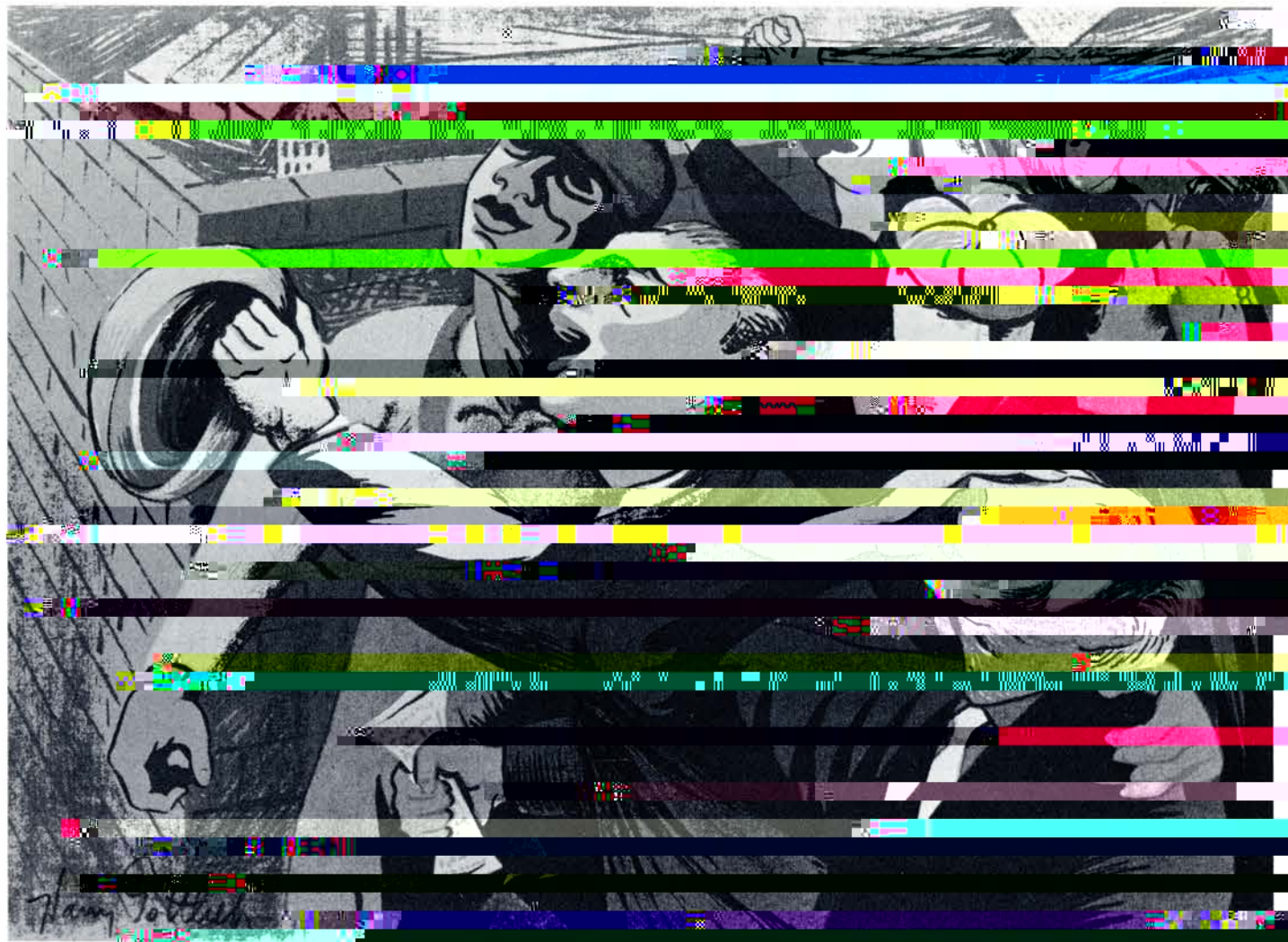
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6. 7 Harry Gottlieb speaking at the ACA Gallery, (cat. 6)

While Gottlieb was never fully convinced that abstract art was valid,²³ he supported the right of other artists to paint in this way. At the meeting of the Artists United Front in June 1936 he spoke on this subject, as recorded by the radical newsletter the *Art Project Reporter*: "Harry Gottlieb, president of the FAP local stressed the need for the artists' complete freedom of expression... one way to obtain this is to break down the project's limitations imposed by the administration."²⁴

Gottlieb's support of the educative purposes of the Union was expressed by his participation in the Art School that was set up by the Union on Fourteenth Street.²⁵ As the Depression worsened and the WPA/FAP grew larger and more bureaucratic, it became more and more difficult for artists to be placed on the rolls. Most artists who applied, particularly blacks, were rejected. In an effort to help these artists achieve the status and the necessary ability, Gottlieb and some other artists such as William Gropper, Paul Manshi,

and held classes. Some of the teachers made plans to sell to support the school, and to give demonstrations and teach classes. The issue of racial discrimination was always an important one for the Union, the Artists Committee Against Discrimination which was formed within the Union in 1936 specifically to fight the clause included in the FAP contract that refused the right to union at the municipal level. Gottlieb felt very strongly about the issue of discrimination; in a serigraph he produced later, entitled *Discrimination*, the foreground scene contains a group of people of various races united in the

Gottlieb was tireless in his support of the right of all people to art education, not only the training of artists but also the education of people in the appreciation of art. He defended the right of the public to have access to art as part of their daily life and was consistent in his support of projects

Committee Against Discrimination. He but were unsuccessful.

Gottlieb was eventually rehired to secure the rehiring of artists. The whole plan would remain the same as with an understanding of the place of this as a responsible member of society.

His words carried weight as its spokesman he strove to maintain a relationship between the important union and its members' employer. The issues Gottlieb has supported are supported by both organizations, and so less

Gottlieb was the federal president, as he supported the purposes of the Silk Screen Unit in 1938. The depiction of human struggle served him in his pursuit of social

support by speaking at meetings and writing for various publications were usually which were also supported by both organizations, and so less

including Elizabeth Olds, exhibited their work at an exhibition at the ACA Gallery in October 1937. In the event of the Spanish Loyalist cause, Gottlieb's work was absent. At the same time, his support of other programs such as the Artists Committee Against Discrimination, illustrate his steadfast humanist framework; each issue focused on an immediate benefit to and containing within a larger purpose of integrating artist and improving society at large. The dominant ideal of improving society was always present.

a proposed Committee in the early organizers and leaders were an radical artists, by Union's organization, was modeled after the Russian journals *On Guard* and *Left Affiliates* early to early organizations these ideas and journal articles were full of

desire to see the human condition improved and a deep belief in the power of art as a progressive force

In the spring of 1938, once again considered and this time, in June, a large number of artists were fired, Gottlieb among them. He

artists. Gottlieb was eventually rehired to secure the rehiring of artists. The whole plan would remain the same as with an understanding of the place of this as a responsible member of society.

His words carried weight as its spokesman he strove to maintain a relationship between the important union and its members' employer. The issues Gottlieb has supported are supported by both organizations, and so less

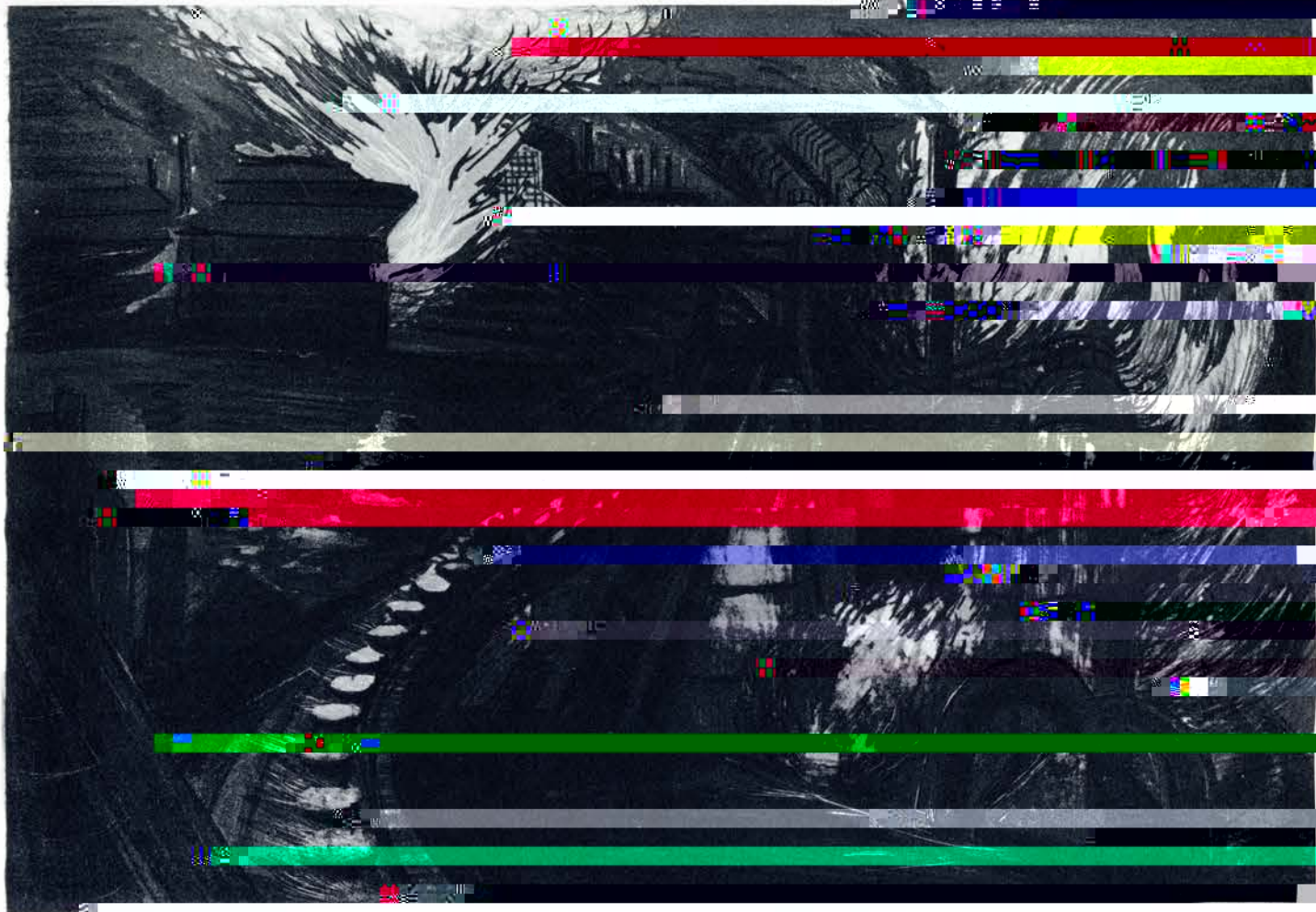
Gottlieb was the federal president, as he supported the purposes of the Silk Screen Unit in 1938. The depiction of human struggle served him in his pursuit of social

life and politics with the people there. In one incident, an unstable time to joined the miners union to provide support for the workers there.³³

Particular issues would provoke sections for political convey a concise narrative of the situation. The serigraph *The Strike*, c. 1939, depicts a specific episode that occurred while Gottlieb was visiting

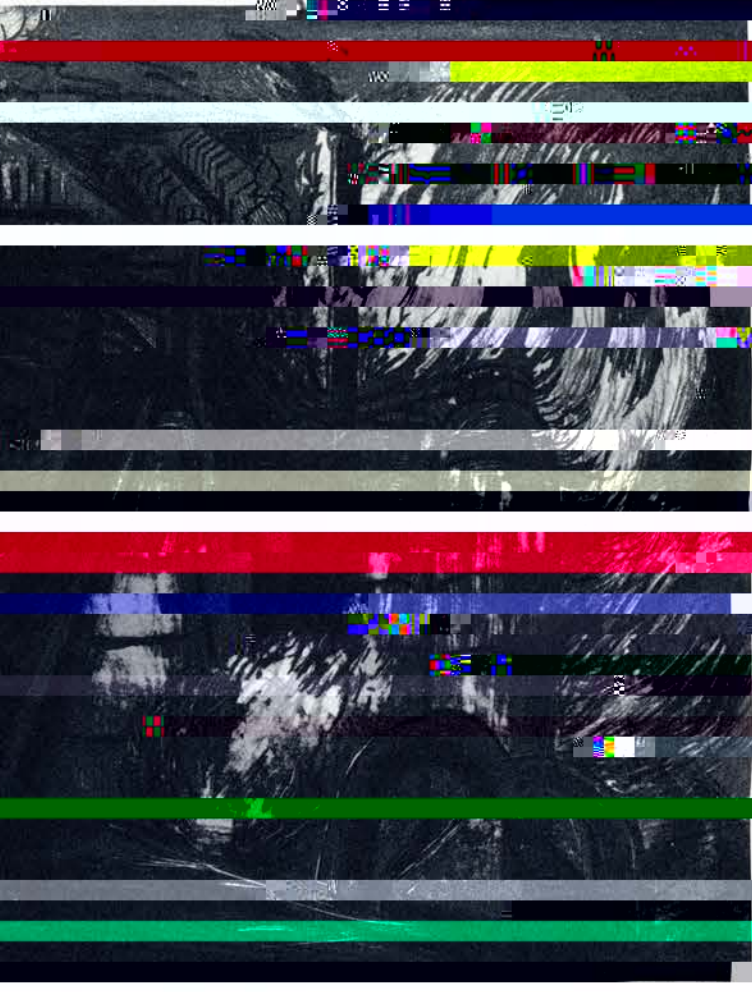
dark setting, out of which emerge small figures of and horror. In another serigraph, *The Strike* (fig. 6), the figures fit neatly to the spectator, as if a connotation can be discerned even in the rather

inustation). Several workers are seen descending towards the factory to begin their shift. While the looming



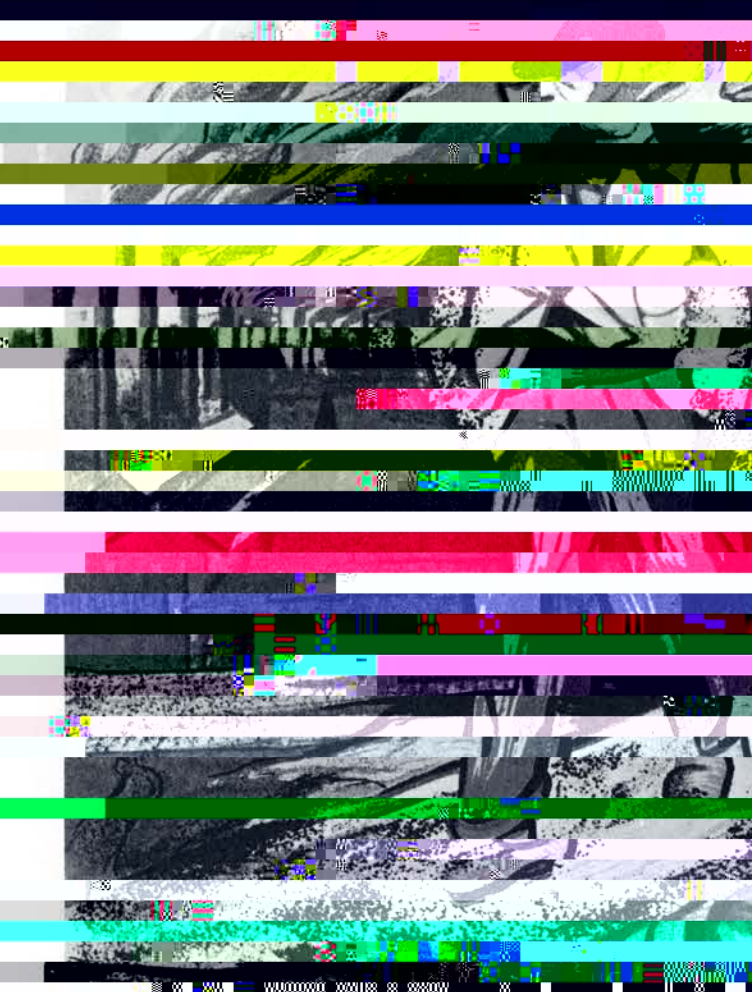
7. *Pittsburgh at Night*, c. 1943, color lithograph, 12 7/8 x 19. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The War Relocation Authority, New York Project, 1943. (cat. 15)

the factory and the bright colors prevent the industrial landscape from overwhelming the figures. This background becomes dramatic, almost exciting; one senses the optimism inspired by the shared project. In 1937, the presence of the factory is almost sublime: the colors are rich, the contrast of the velvety night is energetic, and the distant view removes the spectator from the grimy reality of such a place (fig. 1).
 In other prints such as *Bootleg Mining* (fig. 1) the rhythmic repetition of the postures of the workers conveys a sense of harmonious and communal endeavor. The underlying story explained by the title is very much present; these people have been forced by their economic situation to work illegally and under conditions to eke out an existence. In his image, however, Gottlieb does not focus on this issue: his image shows the human drama of workers striving toward a common goal.
 In the serigraph *Going to Work*, dated 1941 (fig. 8), posture and its rhythmic duplication is the most postcard-like of Gottlieb's images, with its treatment and



8. *Going to Work*, 1941, serigraph, 19 1/4 x 20 1/4. The Syracuse University Art Collections. (cat. 10)

such as the ill-fitting coats, to convey the poverty of these men who continue to strive. It is uncharacteristic of Gottlieb to mythologize the worker in this way. Sometimes Gottlieb would use the posture of his foreground figure of the man slumped on the fire hydrant in the silk screen *Nor Rain Nor Snow* (cat. 3), a reworking of an earlier image. The sad stillness of this figure is particularly evocative in contrast to the figures moving about him and the figures seated cozily where they are. The political climate of the time, however, was not as bleak as the situations shown in other prints. Gottlieb continued to work for the WPA. In 1941, he chaired a panel on 'Freedom of Expression in Art' for the American Artists Congress. He continued to serve on committees, including the Congress and United American Artists in the early part of the 1940s, during the four years prior to this joint



8. *Going to Work*, 1941, serigraph, 19 1/4 x 20 1/4. The Syracuse University Art Collections. (cat. 10)

of the Artists Union had declined. Many of the artists refused their energies on professional rather than political concerns because of increased production for the war. The union was not long for this world. Many agreed that with the common employer or the interesting melody and tunes to seek one, the function of the union was to organize a more orderly market. The Union ratified the Committee's recommendation to discontinue its activities. The union had been dissolved since January 1939. A new and less politically motivated organization was formed in 1941. When the WPA dissolved in June 1943, the major focus of the political activity of the artists was gone. In the political issue, World War II, and their will to be employed by the WPA were producing — and were



8. *Going to Work*, 1941, serigraph, 19 1/4 x 20 1/4. The Syracuse University Art Collections. (cat. 10)

some aspect of the war. Most of the artists were involved in the war effort. In 1942 he showed two war scenes in the annual exhibition. *Evening* (fig. 9) and *United* (1941) is uncharacteristic in its symbolic depiction of America's role in the harboring of refugees from the war in Europe, although the characteristically dramatic contrast of light and dark and the abbreviated description of forms are very much a part of Gottlieb's dramatic vocabulary. The artist's interest in information about the illness process and began to concentrate his energy on developing a wide audience for his work. He worked for the WPA under the auspices of the College Art Association, to give demonstrations and lectures on the technique. He became involved in the struggle for Artists Equity and helped

A Conversation with Harry Gottlieb

The following interview with Harry Gottlieb took place on March 10, 1985, at the artist's home in New York City. For convenience, the questions of both interviewers, Sheryl Galt and Constance Gill, are combined and designated as INT.

Biographical note: Harry Gottlieb was born in Bucharest, Rumania on January 23, 1895; in 1901 he settled with his family in Ireland. Following the death of his mother in 1903, Gottlieb emigrated with his father and five brothers and sisters to the United States in 1907. The family settled with relatives in Minneapolis, where Gottlieb attended the Minneapolis Institute of Art from 1915 to 1917. At this time, the school was one of the most active art centers in the Middle West, and such prominent Depression era artists as Adolf Dehn, Blanch Wanda Gao, and Elizabeth Olds also studied at the institute. In 1917, Gottlieb served as a military illustrator for the Navy, developing visual aids

for a community school in New London, Connecticut.

Gottlieb studied in New York City in 1918, and

group. In 1923, he joined the artist colony in Woodstock, New York, where he remained for twelve years. The artist's residency at Woodstock was interrupted in 1927 when he was awarded a

Guggenheim Fellowship study in Europe. In 1935

Gottlieb joined the Federal Art Project in the graphics division until 1940; during this period,

Gottlieb was an active member in such organizations as the Artists Union and the Artists

Congress, and in 1938 he was elected to the

WPA (FAP) staff. He was also a member of the

the Artists' Screen in New York City, and the

the medium until the late 1930s. He studied at the University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.

I decided I had a choice — either go to the University of Minnesota, which was a very good school, but detracted to my interest in the art school, or I decided to try to find a school where this was

INT: How did you feel about the University of Minnesota?
HG: Well, it gave me a base that isn't a particularly full base. As a matter of fact, when I came

it was the only one in the United States that was no question about what I was going to do.

artist was John Sloan. I saw that for the first time, and he didn't come the first time I was there.

INT: You said a lot of the Minneapolis Institute of

They would come at the time. They come once or twice

somebody which was remarkable. He did the first

criticize. And I lost my interest. I paid my

INT: Didn't he paint a canvas that he painted a great

there were prizes given to the student that made

good. This was the first one that was done in the United

most progress, and I was second. I got the first prize that

INT: Did you ever see the painting that he painted a great

wait. I was not particularly motivated in any way, but I

unfortunate. When I told my family I was going to art school, my father said, "What? Can you make a living

live in Harvard dormitories. And then the six training

at it. That's the first time I saw a basket, and I was

was a very good one. I had to learn the equipment in the dark so

bombarded from all sides that I had to go to pay attention to it. And what was the result? I had

because you had to learn the equipment in the dark so

I took a design course so I could make a living designing

You can imagine what kind of

forced me to do it in a sense, because I had to do it

large crossclips or small pins; it would be easier to

INT: Did you ever see the painting that he painted a great

was there, you dropped everything and stood at

design course?

attention. At one time, I was working on something at a

INT: Did you ever see the painting that he painted a great

And when the commandant, under the guidance of the

school?

commandant, came through, I was very person

HG: Well, I did drawing and very little painting.

would be interested; the commandant had to

Most of it was drawing. There was some design. So I

naturally he went into it in some detail.

kept on drawing and I brought the paintings I did for the teacher to criticize.

All the time I was in the Navy, I never was on a

INT: What type of subject matter were you

never even saw a ship. I played the role of the

interested in at that time?

artist on the staff, which they should have had in the

INT: Did you ever see the painting that he painted a great

HG: I went back to Minneapolis just for a short

INT: At that time, drawing was all I did.

period, just to sort things out. I didn't have to stay

INTERVIEWER: What was your earliest

HARRY GOTTLIEB: I spent my childhood in Ireland and we came from Ireland to Minneapolis, when I was about 13, 14 years old. I became interested in the Saturday Evening Post photographs and I started to copy them. I got a great kick out of doing that, and that's how I started.

Let me tell you an unfortunate situation. We were quite poor. As a matter of fact, when we arrived in Minneapolis, there were five children and I was the youngest. We lived in a tenement house. When we arrived, a cousin of mine, whom I hadn't met before, came and told me that "I know how to get you started selling newspapers and shining shoes on the street." It was a devastating announcement to me, because in Ireland you lived out the rest of your life as a newsboy.

INT: In other words, you didn't have a lot of time to devote to art when

HG: Well, worse than that — I didn't have any time to play with my playmates after school. I was so young and never, never had after-school activities. I shined shoes, as I say, and sold newspapers every day. And I'd go to the saloons where I knew that if I

shined a man's shoes and he was fagged out, he'd give

quite poor. My father needed whatever he could get from us. And I have an older brother who barely went to school at all. It was a very hard life. I never got any other education. I paid my way through. I never got a cent from my father for anything. I had to take care of myself. I had a sewing machine and I had to take care of the household. I would

So, I was selling newspapers. I had a job that stayed with me

summer with a laundry, that I could still give some money at home and at the same time pay for my tuition and other things. Now, I say this without resentment, but it was necessary. You grow up very quickly under poverty, and I accepted the fact that I had to do it.

When I finished high school, I had to make up my

mind what I was going to do. I had been drawing, but I wasn't very much interested in art in a primitive way, as I got no advice. There wasn't anybody that I could ask what should I do with my life; I had to feel my own way.

had realized that New York was the place for me because from New London, on weekends, once in a while I'd go to New York.

INT: Did you get involved with graphic arts and the political scene at the same time you began this new life?

HG: There wasn't anything. I saw some shows, some exhibitions which were very interesting. I was at \$50 a week. I had some business for textiles and wallpapers.

INT: So you used your training?

HG: I used my training, but I didn't make any designs. And I didn't stay with the factory long. I got a job with a factory making armatures. I didn't stay there very long. I was very, very diligent. I was using my arms or muscles in that way. A job opened up at the Provincetown.

INT: And after Provincetown, you went to Woodstock?

HG: I went to Woodstock because I had to find some work. I couldn't find any other work and at the same time make a living.

INT: Was there an artist colony there then?

HG: Yes, of course. Otherwise I wouldn't have gone. Woodstock was very important to me in the first place. I made a living making pictures of the landscape painting and at Kingston, New York, ten miles away, there was very interesting material. There was a very small waterway that had small boats in Pennsylvania.

very beautiful, and they had slaughterhouses and large buildings, subjects that were of interest to me.

INT: So you mainly did landscape work at Woodstock?

HG: Yes, and in 1931, I got a Guggenheim grant and went to Europe for a year.

INT: You did mostly drawings when you were in Europe?

HG: Lithographs. The best lithographs I ever made. I was very fortunate. Paris had the best lithography probably in the world.

INT: Did you work in a studio?

HG: A workshop.

INT: Do you remember the name of the lithographer?

HG: Desjardins. He was a wonderful, wonderful lithographer.

INT: Can you reach you how to find him?

HG: No. I had done several years. I had some experience.

INT: Did you see any other artists?

HG: Four or five. I saw them in Paris.

INT: So your work with lithography in Woodstock was your first involvement with the graphic arts?

HG: Yes, very simple.

INT: Was it a very simple process?

HG: Several things. I had to do the design. I had to do the drawing. I had to do the printing.

INT: Were they landscapes?

HG: Well, one was a landscape in a sense. There were nuts and bolts. I had to do some equipment in and maybe their fish, too. But basically it was a landscape.

INT: The lithography you did in Paris, was there any other artists there?

HG: Yes, I saw some. I saw some in Paris. I saw some in New York. During that year, the first few months I stayed in Paris, and then I went to Germany because of the museums. And, of course, I enjoyed Italy. Who doesn't enjoy Italy? And I did some work there.

INT: When you finished your work in Paris, did you come back to New York?

HG: I came back to Woodstock, that was the first time. Mrs. Juliana Force was in charge of a small project that was open in Woodstock. I got on it. A small group of artists were there and discussed the possibility of enlarging the project. I got in touch with some artists in New York.

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INT: When you started going to galleries, museums, and art schools, was it the most exciting experience you've had?

HG: Burchfield just fascinated me. I was very interested in what he did. I was very interested in what he did.

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have to live in a big city if you're going to do lithographs, whereas I carried an exhibition and all the equipment for printing in my hands. It has such an advantage from an artistic point of view.

INT: When Velonis wrote the silk screen, did you help with it?

HG: No. I had nothing to do with that.

INT: You started with a manual, didn't you?

HG: I did start, but I never finished it.

INT: Why did you remain interested in silk screen after the dissolution of the Silk Screen Unit?

HG: It was my own personal interest that caused me to spend every moment I could working toward an exhibition. I wanted to produce this process which I was not sure I could know.

INT: Is that why you were interested in it, because of its ability to mimic painting?

HG: Yes, because you could change it as you went along. It had so many possibilities and was so simple.

INT: What was the specific structure of the Silk Screen Unit? Did you have a group to discuss your projects?

HG: The six met as a group with Velonis so that he could teach us the process. That's all.

INT: After you initially learned the technique, you never really got together again as a group?

HG: No. You were on your own.

INT: So then you didn't discuss projects or proposals to Lynd Ward?

HG: Lynd Ward was the head of the graphics, and we had to work with him.

INT: And once that was all done, you went on ahead and did your own work?

HG: That's right. Everyone was on his own.

INT: What was the community like then? Did you get together and talk about projects?

HG: No. That was as likely as to talk about how you were doing on a painting.

INT: There was no group interaction?

HG: Well, the artists which had nothing to do with the project, but had to do with work outside.

INT: Is that the Silk Screen Group, organized in 1940? Were you a member?

HG: I was a member.

INT: So while you were associated with the Silk Screen Unit, you had a workshop where all of you worked together?

HG: No, you see, because of the freedom of the silk screen, you work wherever you are, whether you live on Staten Island or God-knows-where. You're free. You have all the equipment.

INT: Did you ever get together with other artists over the artistic issues?

HG: No. The only reason we got together on that basis was to fight for the project and to fight for any artist who was kicked out of a reason.

INT: Well, the Artists Union.

HG: No. The only reason we got together on that basis was to fight for the project and to fight for any artist who was kicked out of a reason.

INT: So it was just a group to discuss projects?

HG: No. Well, if something happened artistically, we would discuss it. But it was not a key conflict. You opened up a school of silk screen with Elizabeth Dias, didn't you?

INT: You opened up a school of silk screen with Elizabeth Dias, didn't you?

HG: Yes, but you could change it as you went along. It had so many possibilities and was so simple.

INT: When you demonstrated, was it to make people aware of the new silk screen process, or to actually teach them how to do it?

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INT: So that people couldn't get to the mine?

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Catalogue of the exhibition

All dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

SERIGRAPHS/SILKSCREENS

COLOR LITHOGRAPHS

1. *On the Beach*, 1939
15 1/8 x 20 1/4
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of WPA, New York Project, 1943
2. *Fishermen's Luck*, 1939
15 1/8 x 20 1/4
The Syracuse University Art Collections
3. *No Rain No Snow*, c. 1939
10 3/8 x 13 7/8
The Syracuse University Art Collections
4. *Drillers*, 1939
13 5/8 x 13 1/4
The Syracuse University Art Collections
14. *Portland Morning*, 1937
14 x 11 7/8
The Syracuse University Art Collections
15. *Pittsburgh at Night*, c. 1937
12 7/8 x 10
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of WPA, New York Project, 1943
16. *Makers of Steel*, 1937
13 1/16 x 19 7/16
Print Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

LITHOGRAPHS

5. *Disaster*, c. 1939
13 5/8 x 13 1/4
The Syracuse University Art Collections
6. *The Strikers' Work*, 1940
12 1/4 x 16 3/4
Ellen Sragow Collection
7. *Change of Shift*, c. 1940
16 3/4 x 20 3/8
The Syracuse University Art Collections
8. *Winter on the Green*, 1940
12 x 14 1/8
Print Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations
9. *Mending the Nets*, 1941
15 1/4 x 20 1/4
The Syracuse University Art Collections
10. *Under a Star*, 1941
16 5/16 x 21 1/2
Print Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations
11. *12 in. 12 Type composite proofs for Long Island Ducks*, c. 1941
12 3/4 x 16 3/4, each proof
Collection of the artist
12. *Long Island Ducks*, 1941
12 3/4 x 16 3/4
Collection of the artist
13. *Drift in the Fog*, c. 1942
12 1/4 x 16 1/4
The Syracuse University Art Collections
17. *Liberty*, 1941
13 x 10 3/8
The Syracuse University Art Collections
23. *Mending the Nets*, 1941
14 3/8 x 22
The Syracuse University Art Collections
24. *No Rain No Snow*, c. 1939
10 3/8 x 13 7/8
The Syracuse University Art Collections

this. HG: Trying to tell the truth by graphic means, let's say. But that wasn't the only thing. I hope it's a good work of art.

INT: Elizabeth Olds wrote that the social problems of the Depression and what happened during the New Deal provided a background for a movement to grow, a movement of artists which were later called the social content school. Did artists come from that kind of subject matter?

HG: There were artist organizations which entered the political field. I don't see it didn't need to do with art, but eventually it would get into the art just by the nature of things that the organization was for and what they wanted the world to be — the American Artists Congress, for example. And since we were part of the CIO as a union, we were somewhat influenced by the ideas which were projected and growing in relation to their problems. So we became part of the general program that the CIO unions had at that time.

INT: And you would support them?

HG: Absolutely.

INT: So, did you find that you were more involved in political things generally than as an artist?

HG: Certainly. That's right. Well, that's one of the reasons why I left Woodstock and wanted to get to the city, where so many exciting things were happening, which were really important.

INT: You were president just during 1936?

HG: For one year.

INT: The "219" strike at the Federal Art Project offices occurred in 1936. You were president?

HG: Right. Let me tell you about that: there was a committee set up to be in charge of this decided that I should stay in the office or the union, since I had the

heard about it but let me tell you again. The cops beat up the people mercilessly.

INT: What happened after the arrest?

HG: We got Marcantonio, who was the Congressman at the time, and Leahy was a people's Congressman.

When the hearing was held, the first thing that Marcantonio did was to ask a cop, "Do you know this man is?" indicating one of the artists. "I don't know." Didn't know him from Adam — in other words, neither had we ever picked the artist because there was no evidence.

The important thing, LaGuardia said, "I will never again allow my police to play this role." It happened at that time the National Maritime Union heard about his statement of LaGuardia's, and they had their men picket the line outside of machine outside in picket line.

So the ship company, they first asked LaGuardia to do something for them or he had done something for the artists, and LaGuardia said, "You read and heard my statement, and that's the way it is." This ship company had to settle the strike, so, indirectly, the artists played a role.

INT: What happened in the Artists Union? Did it just dissolve?

HG: You cannot have a union unless you have a common goal. That's the purpose of it. Once the Project was over, the union was over, unless they would turn it into a community center or something like that.

INT: Did you feel the need to keep organized?

HG: Well, we had an organization after that, but it had no basis. Self-employment projects had no basis.

DRAWINGS

- 25. *Ruins of the Quarry at King's Mountain, 1930*
pastel on paper
19 x 23 3/4
Ellen Sragow Gallery
- 26. *Study for "Day for Uddi in the Quarry," c. 1933*
ink wash
13 7/8 x 16 5/8
Ellen Sragow Gallery
- 27. *Study for "Portrait of a Man," 1936*
charcoal and pencil on paper
10 3/4 x 14
Ellen Sragow Gallery
- 28. *Study for "Operation," 1936*
pencil and charcoal
10 3/4 x 14
Ellen Sragow Gallery
- 29. *Study for "Drivers," c. 1936*
pencil and ink on paper
15 x 11 1/2
Ellen Sragow Gallery
- 30. *Study for "The Sink is Won," c. 1937*
pencil on paper
11 1/4 x 17 1/2
Collection of the artist

DOCUMENTARY ITEMS

- 1. a-b. *Anthropology and the Silk Screen Process*, Vol. I and Vol. II. *Methods Other Than Profilm Federal Art Project, New York, 1939*
Harry Gottlieb, New York
- 2. *Sketch and mark-up of a silk screen exhibition, ACA*
Gottlieb's One-Man Silk Screen Exhibition, ACA
Agency, New York, 1940
Harry Gottlieb, New York
- 3. Photograph of silk screen demonstration at New York World's Fair
August 11, 1940
Miscellaneous Mss: McCausland Papers
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
photo: Frieda Gottlieb
- 4. Photograph of silk screen demonstration at New York World's Fair
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Miscellaneous Mss: McCausland Papers
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
photo: Frieda Gottlieb
- 5. Photograph of silk screen demonstration at New York World's Fair
August 11, 1940
Miscellaneous Mss: McCausland Papers
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution
photo: Frieda Gottlieb
- 6. Photograph of Harry Gottlieb printing *Mending the Nets*
Harry Gottlieb Papers
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

MAGAZINES

- 7. *Art Front*, July-August, 1936. ill. *Le Monde* by Gottlieb
Department of Special Collections and Archives
Rutgers University Libraries
- 8. *Art Front*, January 1937. ill. *Le Monde* by Gottlieb
Department of Special Collections and Archives
Rutgers University Libraries
- 9. *Art Front* Organized by Gottlieb, "The World's Fair and the Artists"
Harry Gottlieb Papers
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

