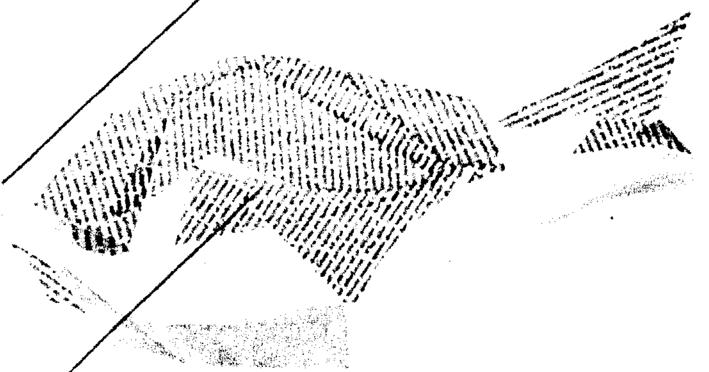
Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century

The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture

Toby Clark



PERSPECTIVES

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ONE

Revolution, Reform, and Modernity, 1900-1939

6. Fernand Léger
The Mechanic, 1920. Oil on canvas, 45" x 35" (116 x 88.8 cm). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Across the spectrum of radical thinking in the early twentieth century which embraced a shifting mixture of anarchism, socialism, and communism, Karl Marx's ideas provided the most enduring theory of revolution. In their slim tract *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95) briskly outlined a compelling vision of the future of the Western world: Revolution will arise inevitably as the nemesis of capitalist modernization. The ever-accelerating rate of technological expansion, economic development, and commercial exchange cannot hold together; the energies and collisions set in motion by capitalist modernity will exceed the capacity of its forms of social order to contain them. Ultimately, bourgeois capitalism will expose its contradictions to the proletariat who, gaining consciousness, will emerge as the redemptive agent of a new phase in history.

But neither Marx nor Engels described in detail what role art might play in this process. They did not specify the topics that revolutionary art should represent, nor how and to whom they should be represented, although in their occasional remarks on nineteenth-century art and literature they indicated their general preference for realism. They particularly admired the French realist novels of Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850). During the early twentieth century, Marxist-oriented art movements adopted numerous different and often opposing approaches. The issue of realism remained a central concern, but definitions of realism became increasingly divergent. The notion of realism is complex because

it does not only imply a "realistic" style, faithful to appearances, but also an accurate perception of reality itself. Inevitably, artists differed over how the real world should be correctly perceived.

The Mechanic (1920; FIG. 6) painted by the French artist Fernand Léger (1881–1955) is clearly not realistic in appearance, but Léger claimed that his style adhered to realism because it accurately conveyed the underlying spirit of modern life. He believed that this spirit lay in collectivization, mechanization, and the rise of mass culture. The picture adapts the sharp colours and clear forms of advertising posters, which Léger viewed not so much as the visual language of consumerism, but as a new kind of urban popular art. The painting combines the direct address of the billboard poster, recently improved by new printing techniques and brighter inks, with a high-art monumentalism drawn from the public art of ancient Egypt. The Egyptian style can be seen in the simplified profile, as too perhaps can Léger's enthusiasm for Charlie Chaplin, then on view on an equally monumental scale on the cinema screens of Paris. The mechanic, a skilled worker, or what Léger called "the creative artisan," is intentionally depersonalized to imply a collective identity (though an insistently masculine one) bearing all the self-celebrating air of a film star or an advertised commodity. From his socialist point of view, Léger upheld factory-made objects as the products of working-class labour and knowledge, and sought to emulate in art their rational modes of production. Out of the dissolution of class-based distinctions between art and mass culture, and between artists and the makers of useful objects, he anticipated a democratization of cultural values which would amount to revolutionary change: "On the day when the work of the whole world of workers will be understood and felt by people exempt from prejudices, who will have eyes to see, we will truly witness a surprising revolution. The false great men will fall from their pedestals and values will finally be in their place."

In contrast with Léger's positive image of the modern hero, politicized artists in the nineteenth century had tended to depict working-class life in themes of injustice and martyrdom. These were mainly addressed to the conscience or charitable sentiments of middle-class audiences. An early example, Henry Wallis's (1830–1916) *The Stonebreaker* (FIG. 7) would have stood out to its Victorian viewers in England in comparison with more conventional depictions of rural workers, who usually featured as unobtrusive and picturesque accessories in landscape paintings. In John Constable's landscapes, for example, the naturalistic treatment of trees and clouds tends to obscure the vaguely archaic

7. HENRY WALLIS
The Stonebreaker, 1857. Oi on panel, 25½" x 31" (65.3 x 79 cm). Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

Stonebreaking was a commc form of forced labour for work-house inmates. Wallis's painting would have been viewed as a general commer on the plight of the poor, anc a specific call to reform Britain's Poor Law regulation The left-wing newspaper the *Morning Star* suggested that "it should be presented to one of our metropolitan work houses and hung up in the boardroom."

appearance of farm labourers, whose lives are sketched without evidence of social conflict. Wallis's stonebreaker is not portrayed as an example of human harmony with nature, nor as a symbol of the dignity of work nor the nobility of poverty. Instead, the drudgery and wretched isolation of the landless peasant have reduced him to the lifeless state of his tools and the broken rocks. His twisted body contrasts eerily with the tranquil pastoral setting and indicates that he is not resting but dead. To make clear its message, the picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1858 with a quotation from the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881): "For us was thy back so bent, for us were thy straight limbs and fingers so deformed; thou wert our conscript on whom the lot fell, and fighting our battles wert so marred. For in thee too lay a God-created form, but it was not to be unfolded ..." The painting's attention to the tiniest details – the scuffed boots, the stitches on the man's shirt – announces an ethical obligation to view and represent life with unflinching clarity. In the twentieth century this approach has been called social realism.

8. EUGÈNE DELACROIX
Liberty Leading the People, 1830. Oil on canvas, 8'6" x 10'8" (2.6 x 3.25 m). Louvre, Paris.

Although political violence in the countryside was common throughout nineteenth-century Europe, the city was the main site of organized revolt. *Liberty Leading the People* (1830; FIG. 8) by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), which depicts the July Revolution of 1830, is the most famous painting of urban uprising, but it remains an unsettling image. The pistol-wielding street urchin and top-hatted dandy have a contemporary air that is incongruous alongside the mythic figure of Liberty, a familiar emblem in French political iconography. Delacroix may have intended to reinvigorate an allegorical convention by conflating it with a new quality of realism. The effect of this attempt to modernize history painting has been called mock-heroic, even ironic. The picture was held to be too unconventional by the French government, which bought it in 1831 but only exhibited it on a permanent basis from 1863. Although Paris had been Europe's capital for revolution, the modernization of the city in the late 1850s was designed to prevent further uprising. The slums were demolished, their radicalized inhabitants removed to the outskirts of the city, and the narrow, easily barricaded streets were replaced with broad boulevards in which the state's cavalry and artillery could be better mobilized.

Among European cities, Berlin's expansion from the late nineteenth century was rapid enough to resemble the level of hectic acceleration which Marx had believed would end in the collapse of capitalism. Its population of one million in 1880 had increased to more than two million in 1910 and doubled again in the next decade, despite the losses sustained during the First World War. The atmosphere of acute instability is conveyed in Ludwig Meidner's (1884–1966) painting *Revolution* (1912, FIG. 9) which clearly cites Delacroix's image but reinterprets revolution as catastrophe. At the time, Meidner was preoccupied with apocalyptic themes; from his imagination he painted the city being bombed, burning, or just blowing up spontaneously. He recalled the summer of 1912: "I unloaded my obsessions onto canvas day and night – Judgement Days, World's Ends, and gibbets of skulls; for in those days the great universal storm was already baring its teeth and casting its glaring yellow shadow across my whimpering brush-hand." In the painting, the face that peers up from the barricade at the bottom left is a self-portrait. Though Meidner became an ardent revolutionary, as an artist in the German Expressionist movement, which embraced a heightened revival of Romantic individualism, he mainly conveyed his political views through the evocation of the sensations of fear and alienation in the modern city. The deliberate lack of objectivity distinguished his approach from social realism. The political intention of his art lay in the aim to communicate his subjective responses as authentically as possible.

9. LUDWIG MEIDN
Revolution (Battle Barricades), 1912. canvas, 31½" x 4[illegible] 116 cm). National Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kultu Berlin.

In January 1919, M published a statem calling on German join in the revoluti it must be: emanci the working class. emancipation of th and poets ... To th of future mankind: human dignity, lov equality, and justic are all equal ... W and soul, with our must participate. F question of sociali God's order in the

The graphic work of Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945), who lived in the poorer districts of northern Berlin, exemplifies an approach which combines the emotional charge of German Expressionism with sober social realist concerns. Her *Mother with Dead Child* (FIG. 10) shows its subject without a context; there are no narrative details of the kind which Wallis included to explain the death of his stonebreaker. But as a printmaker, she was able to specify a meaning for some of her pictures by adding a caption or slogan and using them as posters on behalf of the socialist and pacifist causes she espoused. This technique enabled her work to move from the gallery walls, to the pages of left-wing newspapers and the walls of the street. Her style combined the direct message-bearing capacity of graphic design with a psychological intensity which made her subjects more than just stereotypical victims.

KÄTHE KOLLWITZ
...er with Dead Child,
. Etching, 16¼" x 19"
x 48.6 cm). Staatliche
...en, Berlin.

The theme of the mother and dead child obsessed Kollwitz as a private fear which was tragically realized in the death of her son in the First World War and of her grandson in the Second. Her strategy of infusing social realism with emotive themes became a widespread approach in left-wing art. But does this persuasive intention compromise realism's claim to "truthfulness?"

This question is particularly problematic where realist approaches intersect with the techniques of social documentary. The American photographer Lewis Hine (1874–1940) was an influential figure in the development of documentary photography. Hine worked as a campaigner for The National Child Labor Committee between 1906 and 1918 and within the wider Progressive Reform Movement. This was not a revolutionary movement, but one which sought the improvement of working-class conditions through legal reform. Hine's practice combined propaganda with social anthropology, taking pictures as part of a project to collect information and statistics on poverty, and as he put it, for "publicity in our appeal for public sympathy." His own sympathy for the people, especially the working children he photographed, is not in doubt, but recent attention to the ethical implications of photography has raised questions about the ideological assumptions and functions which underpin his work. His *Family in Tenement, New York City* (FIG. 11) is typical of the studies he made of poor housing conditions as part of the Reform Movement's campaign to extend the bureaucratic basis of welfare provision.

11. LEWIS HINE
Family in Tenement, New York City, 1910. Gelatin silver print. George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.

Through this photograph the spectator is brought like a visitor to the family. Most of the children look back with faces which variously suggest curiosity, anticipation, or indifference, and the mother's expression has an air of hospitality which removes any sense of intrusion or voyeurism. The family remains anonymous in the title, though, and despite the naturalness of the image, it is being shown as a sociological example. The room, the household objects in it, and the children's clothing are inspected as evidence of the family's economic and social status. There are no signs here of extreme poverty, so what is it that makes this family an object of the viewer's concern? Studies of Hine's work have pointed out how often he showed such families without a father present, using the absence of a male provider to signal the family's lack or neediness. The positioning of the spectator/photographer as filling this gap underscores the paternalistic impulse of the Reformist ideology, which tended to regard social reform within a Christian framework of fatherly care and authority. Hine's work underlines the problem for socially concerned documentary: that in depicting the poor for philanthropic purposes, such images require their subjects to conform visually with the expected styles

of "being poor." His photographs also show that realism can never be truly objective because all images are contrived; mediated through the process of representation.

Brecht and the Critical Audience

Questions about realism and about how themes of working-class life should be treated were linked to debates about how working-class audiences should be addressed. The argument between Georg Lukács (1885-1971) and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) during the 1930s drew up the lines between two main opposing positions in Marxist aesthetics which had begun to emerge after the turn of the century and which Marxists have battled over ever since. Lukács, a Hungarian communist critic and philosopher, championed realist art and literature of a kind which could reveal the fullness of the social world and its underlying forces in the meticulous but plain-speaking manner of the nineteenth-century novel. Modernist experimentation should be avoided. Lukács disapproved of Expressionism in particular, as failing to grasp the essence of social reality by merely depicting its surface appearances, perceiving these subjectively as fragmentary, chaotic, and unknowable. He called on artists to use art to fulfil the functions that Friedrich Engels had described: to show life as it really is and to reflect it undistorted, as in a mirror. With the novel in mind, he stressed the importance of *narrative* and *typicality*. Above mere description, narrative is the means to reveal the structures and forces of society by showing the interactions of typical characters in typical situations. In this he clashed with the views of the German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht, whose modernism credits popular audiences with a capacity for adjusting to experimental art. Brecht argued for the need for new techniques to involve the audience in the production of meaning. If art should be didactic, it should not just impart a message to a passive audience, but provide an experience through which the audience engages and actively develops its own critical analysis. To do this, a work of art, like a play, painting, or novel, should not pretend to be a mirror in which the mediation of reality is made invisible. For the theatre, Brecht devised a special approach, his "A-effect," which he developed in plays written between the late 1920s and the 1940s, such as *The Threepenny Opera* (FIG. 12), *Mother Courage*, *Galileo Galilei*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The "A-effect" (short for "Alienation effect," *Verfremdungs-Effekt*) countered naturalist conventions of theatre by openly revealing the means by which illusion is created. Brecht called this "the gest of showing." So that the audience is not lulled into a suspension of disbelief, in Brechtian theatre the scenery looks like scenery, props look like props, and acting looks like acting; that is, "showing other people's behaviour." There is no illusion of an invisible fourth wall separating actors from audience: "the stage and auditorium should be purged of everything 'magical' and no 'hypnotic tensions' should be set up." The audience should not be " 'worked up' by a display of temperament or 'swept away' by acting with tautened muscles." Brecht upheld the example of Chinese theatre in which the actor "does not conceal the fact that he has rehearsed it, any more than an acrobat conceals his training." Thus a character's actions seem not inevitable, but the result of decisions, and the audience remains open to judging the choices made and aware of the circumstances that produce or prevent alternative choices. Sometimes an actor might directly ask the audience a question, such as "What should I do next?" Brecht said that "in this way his performance becomes a discussion about social conditions with the audience he is addressing." Ultimately, the didactic role of Brechtian theatre is directed to generating a critical view of the real world, and of seeing through the illusion of the naturalness or inevitability of the existing social order and conceiving alternative conditions: "Criticism of society is ultimately revolution; there you have criticism taken to its logical conclusion and playing an active part."

Brecht developed his ideas against a backdrop of theatrical innovations in Germany which included a flourishing workers' theatre movement. By 1930 there were 150 German workers'

12. BERTOLT BRECHT *The Threepenny Opera*, Premiere im Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, Berlin, 31 August 1928. Scene with Roma Bahn as Polly and Enrich Ponto.

13. *Red Rockets*, street agitation for the workers' press, Dresden 1929.

A communist newspaper described the Red Rockets thus: "They are shopfloor workers and apprentices, using the little time and energy left over from wage-slaving to make theatre after work. They are their own writers, directors, actors, musicians, and stagehands. Their art, and it is art, is a new growing art. Its roots are not in any particular acting school but in the life of an unbeaten rising class. What do they play? Everything that concerns the worker: scenes from his life, his daily needs, the factory, and the revolutionary struggle. Our groups are not yet the great proletarian theatre of the future but they are its seeds."

theatre groups. Some of these were travelling troupes of players who performed provocative revues using vaudeville and music hall styles, sometimes mixing them with acrobatics, songs, and jazz music. Closely linked to the communist movement, the groups put on theatrical sketches which addressed, from a revolutionary perspective, anti-war and anti-racist themes, and presented attacks on the growing presence of fascism, amidst general buffoonery aimed at the ruling order. The dramatic approach of the groups combined an awareness of avant-garde theatre and the satirical tradition of cabaret. They travelled to small towns and rural areas and also performed and recruited in factories. One of the most active of these troupes was the Berlin-based Red Rockets (FIG. 13). A Red Rockets performer declared: "Our troupes don't exist to produce 'culture.' ... Our first and foremost task is to explain with our images and scenes, satire and vivid presentation to young people what words alone leave unexplained. We must make them warm to our slogans, awaken and develop their class consciousness, their sense of belonging to the oppressed and exploited and their understanding that it is their duty to join our ranks and take part in the struggle." These theatre groups were constantly harassed by the police. The Red Rockets were banned outright in 1929, and other left-wing theatre groups were driven underground when the Nazi Party came to power in 1933. But the views of Brecht and the workers' theatre movement about the importance of audience participation have had a lasting influence on political theatre.

"Deeds not Words": Women's Propaganda and the Avant-Garde

Most radical art movements of the early twentieth century adopted class-based issues as their principal concern. But alongside these, the campaign for women's rights, especially the right to vote, was conspicuous among political struggles in Europe and the United States. Most of those who produced propaganda for the suffrage movements were not professional artists, though the implications of their work sometimes challenged dominant ideas about art. Some even took on the art institutions directly, and adopted them as the stage for political action.

The British campaigner for women's suffrage Mary Richardson did this in 1914 when she took a small axe into the National Gallery in London. She used it on *The Rokeby Venus* (c. 1650; FIG. 14) by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), smashing the glass and slashing the painting a number of times before being restrained and arrested. She explained at her trial that her motive had been to draw attention to the treatment of the suffragette leader Emily Pankhurst, who had been on hunger strike in London's Holloway Prison. It was not an isolated event but one of many propaganda activities which the militant wing of the suffrage movement had carried out in Britain since 1905 to gain the vote and to oppose wider discrimination against women. The attack on the painting would have been partly understood as an extension of the suffragettes' tactic of smashing department store windows, which assaulted the feminized spaces of consumerism like a parodic inversion of

"Lest We Forget" Sung At A Fashionable Wedding.

DAILY SKETCH.

HOW THE ROKEBY "VENUS," BOUGHT BY THE NATION FOR £45,000, WAS SLASHED WITH A CHOPPER BY A SUFFRAGETTE IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY.

14. Newspaper coverage of the damage done to Diego Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus*, c. 1650, by the suffragette Mary Richardson on 10 March 1914.

The uniform of
ıeral" Flora Drummond
379–1953). Photograph.
eum of London.

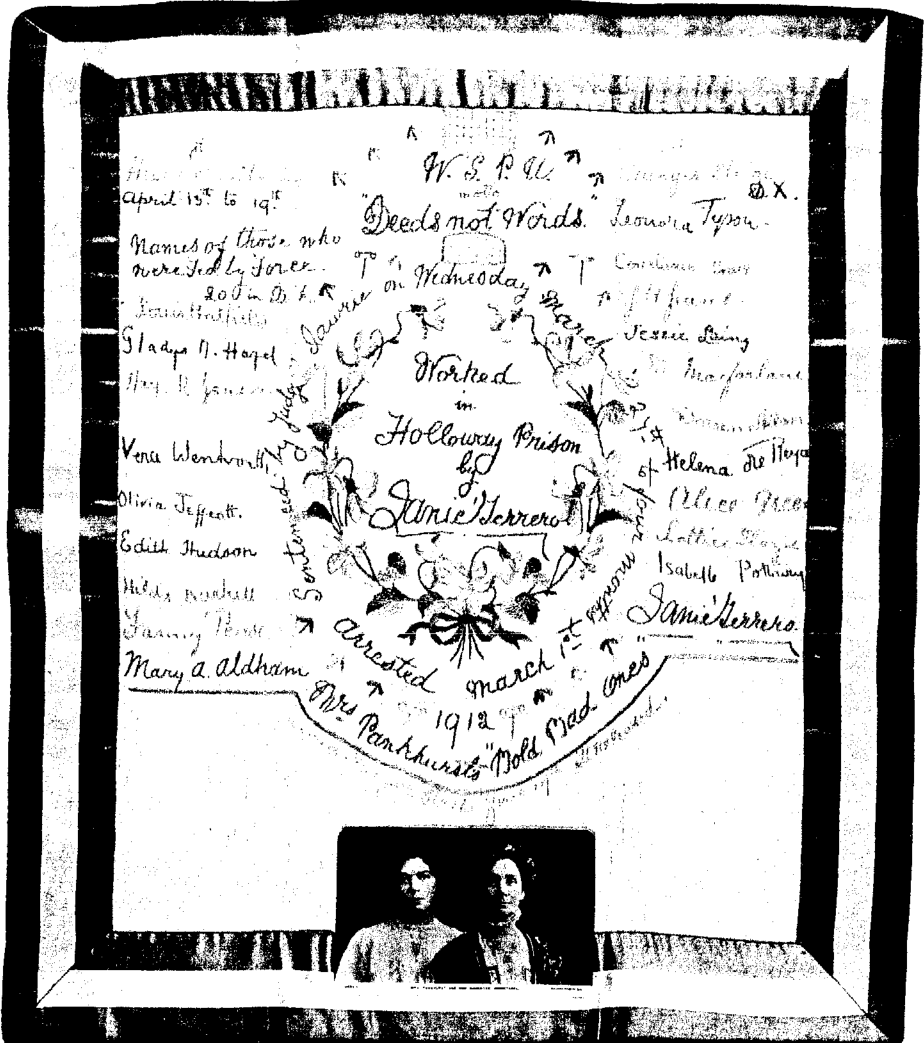
nmond's uniform had
ı donated by a firm of
lia manufacturers for the
nen's Sunday
onstration, 21 June
3. It recalls the uniforms
omen in the Salvation
y, though the riding crop
ore like that of a cavalry
er. Militant suffragettes
Drummond called
nselves a "suffrage army
ıe field." By 1913
mmond had been
sted and imprisoned
e times for her activism.
ong her acts of protest,
had hired a steam launch
l taken it down the River
mes to the House of
nmons. Standing on the
in roof, and accompanied
a brass band, she
lressed the Members of
liament through a
gaphone before being
ısed off by the river
lice.

shopping. By moving the battle to the nation's foremost art museum, Richardson brought the values of the state's guardians of culture into the line of fire, and by choosing a famous picture of a nude woman, she targeted the point of intersection between institutional power and the representation of femininity.

Richardson's act provoked a complex set of meanings and effects. At first sight, it looks like an attack on the control and exposure of the female body as an object of male erotic pleasure. Richardson remarked that she had disliked the way men in the gallery had "gaped" at the picture. But she admired the painting itself, comparing Velázquez's Venus with her own political heroine, saying, "I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history." Yet Richardson had not destroyed the picture, but altered it, making a new image – the slashed Venus – which was widely reproduced in photographs in the national press, as Richardson had surely anticipated. Though the newspapers' response was hostile, demonizing "Slasher Mary" as a monstrous hysteric, Richardson had succeeded in using the mass media to disseminate "her" picture of a wounded heroine, in effect a metaphorical portrait of the martyred Pankhurst and of the suffering of women in general.

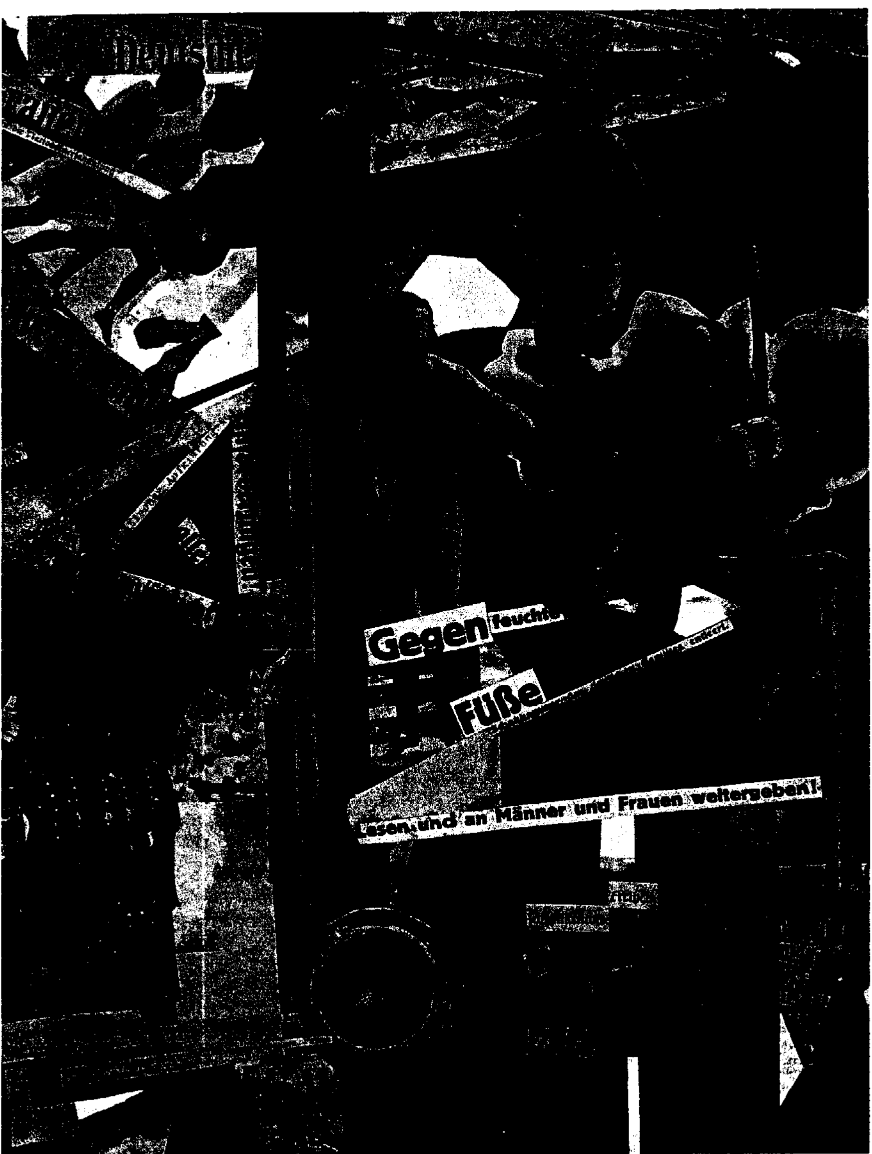
In addition to individual headline-grabbing actions like Richardson's, the suffragettes held public rallies on a scale unprecedented in Britain and seldom matched until the American Civil Rights and Vietnam demonstrations of the 1960s. "Women's Sunday," held on 21 June 1908 in London's Hyde Park, amassed some 500,000 demonstrators. Many of them had arrived on the thirty chartered trains and marched to the park in seven separate processions. The event had been advertised with posters on buses and billboards, as well as handbills distributed at factories, shops, hospitals, and restaurants, and through the campaign offices set up throughout London. The logistical complexity of the event was stressed by the newspapers, forced to adjust their usually patronizing view of the suffrage movement; as one paper conceded, "it displayed military (apart from militant) genius to a degree that was quite astonishing." Women's Sunday marked a notable stage in the historical transformation of the art of demonstration from its origins in religious processions and evangelical meetings to its modern style of political expression.

In addition to the scale of the suffrage movement's events, the organizers carefully planned their visual effects. The movement adopted its own colours – purple, white, and green – displayed



16. Janie Terrero
Suffragette handkerchief, worked in Holloway Prison, 1912. Silk, 20 x 18" (51 x 45.5 cm). Museum of London.

The embroidered slogan at the top, "Deeds Not Words," was the motto of the militant suffragettes. Beneath it are listed the names of women convicts on hunger strike. The stitched arrows refer to the markings on prison uniforms. Suffragettes on hunger strike endured force-feeding until the British government introduced the Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Act in 1913, by which hunger strikers were released and then re-arrested when their health had recovered. It was nick-named "The Cat and Mouse Act."



HANNAH HÖCH
'a Panorama (Dada
dschau), 1919.
omontage, 17¼ x 13¾"
x 35 cm). Berlinische
erie, Berlin.

in clothes, accessories, and elaborate banners, and some of its leaders wore specially designed costumes (FIG. 15). These gave the movement a visual coherence and used fashion as a means of ideological statement. The aesthetic dimension of the movement had been developed in artistic groups like the Suffrage Atelier, which was formed in 1909 and described its aim as being to provide women with "training in the arts and crafts of effective propaganda," and to advance "the women's movement by supplying pictorial advertisements, banners, and decorations." Working collectively, the women artists practised skills such as drawing, stencilling, and needlework to produce political artefacts. They consciously disregarded the conventional hierarchy which sets art above craft and upholds the "timeless masterpiece" above anonymous ephemera (FIG. 16).

In Germany, women gained the right to vote in 1918 and the first women politicians ran for office in January 1919. The artist Hannah Höch (1889–1978) celebrated this with a photomontage called *Dada Panorama* (FIG. 17). At the top left-hand corner, the face of Anna von Giercke, an activist recently elected to the Assembly, is among the toga-wearing women shown dancing into the picture. The American president Woodrow Wilson, with a tiny body, hovers above as if to greet them. The two men in bathing suits are President Ebert and Reichswehrminister Noske, leaders of the Social Democratic Party who had been photographed while bathing at a seaside resort. Höch has given Ebert a pair of little riding boots (as a protection "against damp feet," according to the slogan) and both have flowers like feminine adornments, but also like absurd penises. Their flabby impotence contrasts with the lithe girl gymnast who dives past them, while, to the left, heads topple off the military establishment. As one of the first artists to develop photomontage, Höch made full use of the technique's capacity for subversion and silliness, creating an image of both sexual and political revolution – "unbridled freedom for HH," says the caption at the bottom.

Höch was involved with the Berlin Dada group, founded in response to the First World War and the revolutionary turbulence of post-war Germany. Communist in orientation, the German Dadaists opposed militarism, nationalism and colonialism, and amidst their rejection of dominant cultural values they viewed art itself with contempt: "Art should altogether get a sound thrashing," wrote the Dadaist Richard Hülsenbeck, "and Dada stands for that thrashing with all the vehemence of its limited nature." They particularly despised the mystical bent of German Expressionism, which, despite links with the radical left, often elevated

art as a mode of inspiration or of special access to the spiritual. In this they detected the kind of obsequious sentimentality which leads to nationalism and war; as Hülsenbeck put it, "the most absurd idolatry of all sorts of divinities is beaten into the child in order that the grown man and taxpayer should automatically fall on his knees when, in the interest of the state or some smaller gang of thieves, he receives the order to worship some 'great spirit.'" They modelled themselves less as an artistic group and more as a radical cell of agitators working in the field of art, arranging inflammatory exhibitions and issuing manifestos in the name of "The Dadaist Revolutionary Central Council."

Photomontage (the combination of photographs into a composite image) had particular value to the Dadaists as a means of producing propaganda imagery conceived as a counter-aesthetic. As well as its facility for satirical effects, as in the grotesque travesties of Höch's *Dada Panorama*, its dissolution of pictorial composition resonated with the real state of collapse in post-war Germany's social order. Avant-garde circles throughout Europe were developing pictorial procedures which broke away from rules of compositional harmony and conventional ways of creating the illusion of perspectival space. Among Dada artists, linear perspective implied a rationalist system which was bound to the logical and utilitarian outlook of Western capitalism, an outlook that in their view had reduced the working classes to industrial wage slaves and had produced a deadly war machine. They also viewed realism in painting as adopting a passive relationship to the world; merely copying it, not changing it. In contrast, photomontage combined the photograph's proximity to objective reality with a dynamic process of reordering which enacted, at least metaphorically, the revolutionary reordering of society. Dadaists also liked the technique because it requires no special skills and thus overthrows the status of the artist as a trained specialist. It is said that they first encountered the technique as a hobby – a kind of modern folk art – invented by German soldiers in the trenches, who, to amuse themselves and their friends, combined their photographs with pictures from magazines and sent them home as postcards.

In her later work Hannah Höch moved away from explicit engagement with left-wing themes of class struggle and anti-fascism, and as a result she has been regarded as a "less political" artist. But recent study of her work in the Weimar period after the First World War has revealed how she retained ideological concerns which focused on the representation of women and sexuality. The 1920s saw rapidly shifting images of women in the media, reflecting the changing roles of women in society. The German press was fascinated by the "new woman," the urbanite with a salary who expressed her independence by wearing trousers and smoking cigarettes in public or engaging in sports and sexual experimentation. Höch's photomontages of the 1920s explore and reinvent images of femininity drawn from the press. Some combine parts of photographs of men and women to form images of androgyny; in one, Marlene Dietrich's legs are placed upside-down on a pedestal like a triumphant phallic monolith. At the time, this sort of intervention with media images of gender and sexuality would probably not have been viewed as explicitly political, nor as propaganda, and for Höch they related in a more personal way to her own sexuality and her long-standing lesbian relationship with the Dutch writer Til Brugman. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, strategies like these have taken a central place in feminist art and theory, so conspicuous an element in the political make-up of postmodernism.

In this context, the French artist Claude Cahun (1894–1954) has been recently reevaluated and recovered from obscurity as the "lost Surrealist." Born as Lucy Schwob to a family of Jewish intellectuals, she engaged in a varied career of art, acting, poetry, and political activism. She became involved with the Surrealists after meeting them as members of a group of communist artists and writers in 1932. At this time, there were serious tensions in the Surrealists' relationship with communism. The Surrealists, who had formed in the early 1920s under the leadership of André Breton (1896–1966), had insisted that theirs was a revolutionary movement, one that sought the overthrow of capitalism through the liberation of the unconscious; a revolution of the mind based on complete personal freedom from both external oppression and from the internal repression or censorship of the mind's unconscious life, as expressed in dreams and fantasy. From its earliest years, the Surrealist group had tried to join forces with the French communist movement, but despite temporary alliances, they were generally rebuffed by the communists, who viewed Surrealism as too undisciplined at best, and at worst as middle-class, decadent, and fatuous. By 1934, the aesthetic policy of the international communist movement was oriented towards Moscow's increasingly doctrinaire insistence that the only proper communist art was an easily legible realism expressing clear working-class themes. Opposing this, the Surrealists argued for art which could more fully incorporate the psychological life of individuals.

Cahun had left the communists in 1933. Much of her artistic activity depended on the radical transformation of her own

. Claude Cahun
[Se]lf-Portrait, c. 1927. 4⅜ x [..] (11 x 8 cm). Jersey [M]useums Service.

appearance (FIG. 18). She had worked on montages and photographic self-portraits since 1914 as a student at the Sorbonne, and from 1919 she wore dramatically short hair, sometimes dyeing it pink, green, and gold. Alongside her adoption of various pseudonyms, her self-portraits explore a repertoire of playfully shifting identities, portraying her as a soldier or convict with shaved head, or as a wild parody of the Hollywood good-time girl, or as a circus acrobat. Like Höch's art, Cahun's work was closely allied to her lesbianism and to a practice which involved a parodic masquerade in a series of stereotypical feminine roles which only emphasized her adamant refusal to conform to them. Until recently, these activities lacked a context through which they could be widely understood as "political." As a form of propaganda, they are certainly oblique, although at an everyday and popular level the adoption in public of a non-conformist appearance has been readily understood as a form of political statement since long before the age of hippies and punks. As it transpired, Cahun's most explicit propaganda work would be as a member of the Resistance forces against the Nazi occupation of Jersey, where she lived during the war, engaging in four years of anti-Nazi activities which included flying a banner from a church which read, "Jesus is great, but Hitler is greater – for Jesus died for the people but the people die for Hitler." She was arrested in 1944 and condemned to death by the Gestapo. Despite a reprieve, she spent nearly a year in prison from which she never fully recovered, physically or mentally.

Murals and National History

For many countries outside Europe, revolution has accompanied the emergence of the modern state out of a condition of colonialism. In this process, public art has functioned to articulate revised narratives of national identity. Mexico's revolution, initiated by an uprising against the dictator Porfirio Díaz in 1910, led to the ideological dominance of Marxist nationalism which was expressed artistically in the Mexican mural movement. Beginning around 1921, a number of Mexican muralists produced state-sponsored art which reinvented the nation's history on an epic scale. In *The History of Mexico* (FIG. 19), painted on three walls of the National Palace in Mexico City, Diego Rivera (1886-1957) depicted a vision of the nation's past and future from the perspective of the new regime. The viewer is placed physically in that perspective, enveloped by a virtual panorama which swirls through history and myth. On the right-hand wall, Rivera shows the pre-Columbian world as an idyllic era governed by the legendary god-king Quetzalcoatl. On the far left, the ongoing revolution is shown under the guiding figure of Karl Marx, who points towards a utopian future of harmony between industry and nature. Between these mystical poles, the centre wall shows in interweaving layers the effects of the sixteenth-century Spanish Conquest, leading from the bottom, where the Aztec prince Cuauhtemoc battles with Cortez the conquistador, upwards through contrasting scenes of war, work, Christianization, and education. These are portrayed as dialectical struggles between repression and resistance, cruelty and enlightenment, destruction and development. The process culminates at the top of the centre arch with the leaders of the revolution holding a banner with their slogan "Land and Freedom." Overall, Rivera's mural valorizes the revolutionary nationalism

Overleaf
19. Diego Rivera
Legacy of Independence, centre arch of *The History of Mexico – From the Conquest to the Future*, 1929–35. Mural. National Palace, Mexico City.

20. Diego Rivera
Zapatista Landscape – The Guerrilla (Paisaje zapatista – El guerrillero), 1915.
Oil on canvas, 4'8" x 4' (1.44 x 1.23 m). Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.

Emiliano Zapata was world-famous as the personification of the Mexican revolution. In a mixture of Cubist portrait and still-life, the painting assembles symbols of the peasant's way of life: the sombrero, the patterned textiles, the rifle, and the mountainous terrain. It suggests the *Zapatista* slogan "Land and Freedom," though also inadvertently the internal fragmentation of the revolutionary movement. Zapata was shot in 1919 in a spate of fratricidal killings.

of his patron, the government, by providing a synthetic allegory of its origins.

Rivera had developed his mural style gradually. As a young artist living in Paris, he had first treated revolutionary themes in the urbane idiom of Cubism (FIG. 20). But after returning to Mexico, he was encouraged by José Vasconcelos, Secretary of State for Public Education, to replace avant-garde interests with an extensive study of church art of the Italian Renaissance. Rivera then applied to this knowledge of ecclesiastical didacticism a vein of Mexican populism by drawing on the famous graphic work of José Guadalupe Posada, who created satirical prints for the press. For Rivera and the other main muralists, David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974) and José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), murals could address a collective audience and avoid the private and property-related format of small-scale painting. As they stated in their manifesto, "A Declaration of Social, Political, and Aesthetic Principles," published in 1924: "We repudiate so-called easel painting ... because it is aristocratic, and we praise monumental art in all its forms, because it is public property ... Art must no longer be the expression of individual satisfaction which it is today, but should aim to become a fighting, educative art for all." Their movement presented an important model for the practice of mural painting throughout Latin America and the United States, and also, from the 1960s, in countries in post-colonial Africa. But while the Mexican muralists may have provided Mexico with a national image which might help to reinforce self-respect, cohesion, and independence, they also aimed to legitimize a regime which was soon mired in corruption and civil abuses. Though barely hinted at in Rivera's paintings, the revolution and ten years of civil war had killed more than a million Mexicans.

Radical Art on the Grand Scale

Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (FIG. 21) has been widely regarded as the highest achievement in modernist political painting. Yet it is difficult to appraise *Guernica* now without a sense that its prestige is inseparable from the unparalleled status of its creator, who when he made it was already the richest, most celebrated living artist and charismatic participant in the forging of his own image as a genius. It is also hard to assess it in detachment from the pathos of its subject and, even in reproduction, from the knowledge that it is a very *big* painting. It was initiated in January 1937 when Picasso (1881–1973) was offered a commission by Spain's embattled Republican government to paint a mural-sized picture

1. PABLO PICASSO
[G]uernica, 1937. Oil on [c]anvas, 11'5½" x 25'5¾" ([3].5 x 7.8 m). Museo [N]acional Centro de Arte [R]eina Sofía, Madrid.

for the Spanish pavilion of the 1937 Paris World's Fair. This was the first state commission Picasso had received for a public monument. That he accepted it was probably due to his ardent support for the beleaguered Republic in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and a general sympathy with the communistic make-up of its Popular Front government. Though he was initially stuck for ideas, the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica some four months later provided him with his topic.

Even by the standards of modern warfare the incident marked a stunning level of arbitrary brutality. The attack on an undefended town of no military significance was apparently ordered from Berlin and was carried out by squadrons of the German Condor Legion on behalf of the fascist antigovernment rebels. They bombed and machine-gunned the town for more than three hours, ostensibly aiming for a bridge, the only strategic target, which they missed, destroying instead 70 per cent of the town, the ruins of which burned for three days. The Nationalist press of Francisco Franco (1892–1975), the fascist rebel leader, claimed that the town had not been bombed at all, but dynamited by retreating communists, a story repeated in conservative French newspapers. In 1946 Hermann Göring remarked off the record during the Nuremberg Trials that this high-density aerial bombardment, the first *Blitzkrieg*, had been mainly conceived as a training exercise. Though only one of innumerable war crimes committed by both sides in the Civil War, the incident seems specially marked out for the kind of bewildered outrage conveyed by Picasso's painting.

The Paris World's Fair, mounted in the waning years of European peace before the Second World War, was a showpiece event oriented towards trade and popular entertainment. It was also a major site for the playing out of ideological rivalries in art and design, particularly evident in the gigantic pavilions of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which confronted each other in an architectural glowering match. For other countries, it was a time of transition in left-wing positions on aesthetics. Though communist art in the West was largely dominated by realist tendencies, the Popular Front, an international organization launched from Moscow in 1935, sought to expand the communist platform abroad by encouraging a more pluralistic constituency to include modernists and liberal sympathizers under the common cause of anti-fascism (although inside the Soviet Union cultural policy was increasingly restrictive). *Guernica* was received as an important statement for this new politico-cultural alliance. Some communist critics rebuked Picasso for not including in the painting a clear pro-communist message – he had in fact considered doing so, having included in two early studies the clenched fist of the Republican salute, one version holding the communist symbol of the hammer and sickle. But although Picasso had suppressed this motif in the final version, most Popular Front critics agreed to acclaim the painting.

Picasso himself described *Guernica* as a work of deliberate propaganda, adding that it was the only example of propaganda art in his career – though he later worked on imagery against the Korean War, and as an open Communist Party member after the Second World War, he drew a portrait of Stalin. But he was not clear in stating what, precisely, his picture meant. It is evidently an allegorical or symbolic work, but what do its elements symbolize? The bull has been assumed to represent Franco or fascism, and the horse to symbolize the Republic or "the people," though Picasso was reluctant to confirm these interpretations. In using these motifs he had barely deviated from his imagery of the 1930s, which had mainly elaborated on private themes, with no obvious political intent. In his use of bullfighting motifs, the bull had appeared as an ambiguous symbol of aggression and passion, often erotic, with strong suggestions of self-portraiture in tune with Picasso's tendency to histrionic representations of his sexuality. Imagined images of violence against women had also recurred in his earlier work.

Those who criticized the painting from a left-wing and anti-modernist position described it as too vague; these critics would have preferred a more literal and realistic image which could

22. *Madrid – Military Action of the Rebels (Madrid – L'Action "Militaire" des Rebelles)*, c. 1937. Poster. Musée de la Publicité, Paris.

communicate its meaning and its political position more clearly. It is true that the intended meaning of *Guernica* is dependent on its title and context, but this reliance on text and site is not uncommon (nor specifically modernist) in propaganda. A large proportion of propaganda posters, for example, would lack a clear meaning without their written slogans, and some of these are incomprehensible when removed from their context. Propaganda images are seldom devised to communicate independently, and accordingly, *Guernica* was designed to be understood alongside a broad set of Spanish Civil War images, especially the widely distributed press photographs and newsreels. The black and white scheme of the painting sets up a comparison with these, and at the time its success was partly judged against them. Is *Guernica* more or less effective than the contemporary poster (FIG. 22) which shows a photograph of a dead child? A simple "objective" revelation

of the fact of death, it is also a thoughtfully conceived image, with the uncanny stare of the dead child returned to the viewer against a patterned rainstorm of aeroplanes. How does *Guernica* match up against the Nationalist poster *Communism Destroys the Family* (FIG. 23)? Crudely sloganed but flamboyantly stylized and coloured, it is modernist in its own way.

One difference between them is that *Guernica* is an original, unique object, while the other images have functioned only as reproductions. This has been an important consideration in distinctions between a "work of art" and a piece of graphic design; it has also often underpinned distinctions between "true art" and "mere propaganda." But a feature of any work of art is that the more it is reproduced photographically and distributed in books, posters, and postcards, the more the original object – the real thing – acquires a special aura. Ever since it was first shown, the possession and location of *Guernica* has been determined by political interests. Picasso started the controversy himself by insisting that the canvas should not be allowed into Spain until the end of Franco's regime (the fascists had won the civil war in 1939). He made the withholding of the object an additional political statement, but one which he could not always control. From 1939 to 1981 it resided in New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), adding greatly to the blue-chip status of the collection and featured there as an episode in the museum's history of modernism. After the death of Franco in 1975 (Picasso had died in 1973) the painting could be "returned" to Spain – but to which part? The town authorities of Guernica wanted it, and so did those of Picasso's birthplace Málaga, and of his childhood village Horta de Sant Juan (formerly Horta de Ebro). Barcelona, which has a Picasso museum among its tourist attractions, also put in a claim. The debate continued for several years. Eventually, in 1981, the Prado got it: "an authentic cultural kidnapping done by the Madrid government," according to the Basque Nationalist Party; a symbol of national reconciliation, according to Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez; and a good photo-opportunity for all the politicians who turned up for its gala reception. The painting was later moved to a special room in Madrid's Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, though postcards of it decorate bars and cafés throughout the Basque region, where it still resonates with separatist sentiment. Overall, the history of *Guernica* shows that the political meaning of any image can never be static or inherent. Nevertheless, as it is known internationally, mainly through photographs, it remains for many people an enduring symbol of resistance to fascism and war.

23. *Communism Destroys the Family (El Comunismo destruye la familia)*. Spain c. 1937. Poster. Hoover Institution, Stanford University, California.