

# Harry Gottlieb

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The silkscreen and social concern  
in the WPA era

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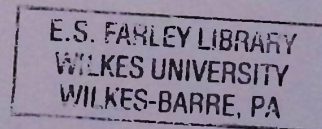
organized by  
The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum  
Rutgers-The State University of New Jersey

with essays by  
Sheryl Conkelton and Gregory Gilbert

## EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum  
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey  
November 6 to December 31, 1983

Sordani Art Gallery, Wilkes College  
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania  
January 8 to February 12, 1984



cover: *Change of Shift*, c. 1940 (cat. 7)

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1. *Bootleg Mining*, 1937, color lithograph, 14 x 18 1/8. The Syracuse University Art Collections. (cat. 14)

## Harry Gottlieb and the Development of Serigraphy

Gregory Gilbert

During the 1930s, a number of innovations in color printmaking were developed under the aegis of the WPA's Federal Art Project. Encouraged by these technical strides, Project administrators organized a special unit in 1938 to experiment with silkscreen as a fine art medium: the unit's efforts resulted in the development of serigraphy, which has become one of the WPA's most popular and enduring contributions to modern printmaking. Of the unit's six founding members, Harry Gottlieb was one of the most prolific, and in 1940 he achieved the distinction of having the first one-man exhibition devoted to serigraphy. Throughout the forties he lectured widely on the new process, playing a crucial role in promoting serigraphy as a major graphic art form. Although Gottlieb is a central figure in the history of serigraphy, no previous study has focused on his pioneering works in the medium and his early efforts to broaden and enrich its technical capabilities.

In 1935, Gottlieb settled in New York City, and in the following year he was assigned to the WPA/FAP's newly formed graphics division. Like many of the Project's programs, the division was established to produce original works of art for schools and other public institutions. With the excessive cost of materials for painting and sculpture during the Depression years, Project administrators quickly realized that printmaking afforded the cheapest mode of artistic production and multiple print editions made possible distribution on a national scale. During its six years of existence, the graphics division handled a large percentage of the Project's allocations and functioned as a veritable laboratory for stylistic interchange and technical exploration. While many artists worked in etching and other copper plate media, a number of printmakers investigated the artistic potential of relief and 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 various graphic art processes. Gottlieb had mastered lithography in the early part of the decade, and 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.

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In the late 1930s, the graphics division perfected several color printmaking methods, beginning in 1937 with the revitalization of color lithography.<sup>2</sup> This process had been used since the early 19th century for manufacturing commercial reproductions, yet Project artists began to exploit the technique for its own expressive potential, combining color with liquid tusche to create a wide range of painterly effects in their prints. During this period, Gottlieb produced a number of color lithographs, such as *Makers of Steel* (cat. 16) and *Pittsburgh at Night* (fig. 7) of 1937. One of his most successful and celebrated efforts was *Bootleg Mining* (fig. 1), a five color print of the same year. In this work, Gottlieb executed the design in tusche crayon and wash, balancing the translucent passages in the landscape with the powerful, linear markings of the figures and industrial machinery. Despite the popularity of color lithography in the division, it was a difficult process to master, requiring specialized equipment and the supervision of a skilled printer. Similarly, the color methods devised for woodblock printing and carborundum etching were costly and posed an array of technical problems to the artist. The burgeoning interest in color printmaking necessitated the development of a less expensive, less laborious technique, and in 1938 silkscreen emerged as a viable alternative medium.

Like lithography, silkscreen had been employed as a commercial process and was generally used for printing signs and labels. In producing a silkscreen print, the artist prepares a hinged box-like frame, which holds a tightly stretched screen of silk or nylon. The design is created by placing an impervious lacquer or cut stencil on the screen, blocking out the areas *not* to be printed. Once the stencil or masking agent is in place, the artist then uses a squeegee to force ink through the open areas of the screen onto a piece of paper. If several colors are to be printed, a series of stencils for each color must be cut and the finished work is created through successive applications of different inks; these separate steps are called progressive proofs and it is not until every color has been applied that a coherent design is produced.

While attending an executive committee meeting for the Artists Union in 1938, Gottlieb heard a recommendation to utilize silkscreen as a fine art medium. The proposal had been submitted by Anthony Velonis, an artist assigned to the Project's poster division. Velonis, who was aware of the widespread interest in color processes, used silkscreen in executing posters for the WPA and was interested in modifying

the technique for printmaking purposes. In his recommendation to the Artists Union Committee, Velonis outlined the many advantages of using silkscreen for fine art printmaking that had attracted Gottlieb to the medium. Unlike lithography, etching and woodblock printing, silkscreen did not require unwieldy presses, 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. This was an important benefit, as many printmakers felt that their creativity was hampered by working in the bustling, public atmosphere of the division workshop. The method was also economical, as stencils and inks were inexpensive and an untreated, low-grade paper or cardboard could be used for printing. Furthermore, an almost unlimited number of prints could be produced using a resilient nylon screen; in many intaglio processes, the incised areas of the plate are extremely fragile and often become worn down with repeated printings, resulting in the output of small editions. Perhaps the most radical aspect of the silkscreen technique was its ability to emulate various graphic art 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 translucency of a tempera or watercolor. As Velonis remarked, "In a sense it is not a graphic medium at all, but lies somewhere between the duplicating process and easel painting."<sup>3</sup>

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, promoting it as a legitimate form of creative expression. Indeed, many of the staff designers were painters, not commercial technicians, and they were concerned with the aesthetic as well as the functional aspects of their work.<sup>4</sup> While the growing popularity of color printmaking contributed to the development of serigraphy, the artistic character of the FAP posters may have also prompted Velonis to consider utilizing silkscreen as a print medium.

During his tenure on the poster division, Velonis wrote a series of silkscreen manuals for the WPA/FAP. Entitled *Technical Problems of the Artist: Techniques of the Silkscreen*, these brief primers explained the pro-film method and various other techniques that could be utilized in conjunction with cut stencil printing.<sup>5</sup> The pro-film stencil method was used widely for commercial purposes, as it allowed for the printing of evenly cut designs and uniform applications of color. However, printmaking required a greater modulation in line and ink tone, and in the late 1930s Velonis attempted to combat the planar character of the silkscreen medium by developing more flexible stenciling techniques. Two of the most effective were the glue stop-out and the tusche wash-out methods, which employed masking fluids that had to be brushed onto the screen to harden into a stencil, giving printed images a more fluent, painterly quality. It was also possible to achieve a varied range of textures with the tusche wash-out method, as the surface impressions of rosin board or sandpaper could be transferred to the screen. Often, all three techniques were combined to produce a single print; the artist relied on pro-film to delineate his composition and used the other methods to add details or effects of modeling. In his technical brochures, Velonis also maintained that more subtle tones could be produced by thinning viscid silkscreen paints with a transparent base or varnish. The WPA office in Washington received an overwhelming 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.<sup>6</sup>

Velonis formally submitted his silkscreen proposal to the WPA/FAP in 1938, and with the support of the Public Use of Arts Committee and the United American Artists, the Project approved an experiment to utilize the technique as a fine art process. In November of that year, a special Silk Screen Unit comprised of six FAP artists was organized, and Velonis was selected to supervise the group; the six artists were Harry Gottlieb, Hyman Warsager, Ruth Chaney, Eugene Morely, Louis Lozowick, and Elizabeth Olds; even earlier, Gottlieb had expressed his immediate interest in the technique to the



executive committee of the Artists Union. Audrey McMahon, the director of the New York WPA/FAP, was responsible for launching the silkscreen project, recommending that each artist produce four trial prints. The entire Unit was then required to submit twenty-four works to McMahon and to deliver a group report on the viability of silkscreen as a print medium.<sup>7</sup> By August of 1939, Project administrators deemed their efforts a success and the Silk Screen Unit was officially recognized as a branch of the WPA/FAP.

Although the silkscreen group was designated as a unit, this was something of a misnomer. After Velonis trained each artist in the technique, they were permitted to execute prints in their own studios, as no centralized silkscreen workshop had been established.<sup>8</sup> It was not until the Unit issued its official report to the Project that the printmakers met to discuss their progress. Consequently, the Silk Screen Unit can only partly be viewed as a collective experiment, as the artists worked independently to advance their own innovative solutions in the medium. It should be stressed that many Unit members continued to employ other printmaking methods during this period, treating silkscreen as merely one process in their technical repertoires. For example, both Hyman Warsager and Ruth Chaney were noted for their persistent interest in the color woodcut. Elizabeth Olds remained a prolific lithographer, and the famed modernist Louis Lozowick produced only one silkscreen while on the Project. Gottlieb, on the other hand, worked exclusively in silkscreen from 1938 to 1940, and throughout the early forties the majority of his output was devoted to the process.

The stylistic diversity evident in the Unit's products underscored the adaptable nature of the silkscreen medium. While some of the artists worked in an

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2. *On the Beach*, 1939, serigraph, 12 1/2 x 14 3/8.  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
 Gift of WPA New York Project, 1943. (cat. 1)

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The stylistic diversity evident in the Unit's products  
 underscored the adaptable nature of the silkscreen  
 medium. While some of the artists worked in an

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 an  
 amalgam of styles, including militant political  
 cartooning, the German *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and perhaps  
 most notably, Mexican proletarian art. In fact, Jacob  
 Kainen has asserted that Gottlieb's prints from the  
 1930s reflect an affinity for José Clemente Orozco's  
 work.<sup>9</sup> Several of the stylistic traits associated with Social  
 Realist art, such as a simplification of forms and an  
 expressive distortion of the figure, can be detected in  
 Gottlieb's prints from the 1930s.

Gottlieb's expressionistic manner was perfectly suited  
 for working in silkscreen, as stencil printing lends itself  
 to designs based on simplified cut-out shapes. Gottlieb  
 used this to excellent advantage in his first silkscreen  
*On the Beach* of 1939 (fig. 2). Here, he has stressed the  
 rigid outline of the stencil by employing a forcefully cut  
 stroke, which gives the elements in his composition an  
 emphatic, plastic quality. This sense of three  
 dimensionality was reinforced by the layering of vibrant  
 tones in bold, curvilinear shapes. *On the Beach* was  
 printed in nine colors, an ambitious undertaking for  
 Gottlieb's first essay in the medium; however, he used a  
 rather thick paint mixture, which resulted in the  
 printing of flat, highly saturated hues. In executing his  
 design he relied heavily on the cut stencil method,  
 applying a limited range of textures to suggest the  
 granular surface of the beach and to animate the broad  
 expanses of flat color. In later prints he experimented  
 with a wider range of brushed stencils and pigments,  
 and soon he was able to imitate a variety of painterly  
 and graphic effects with equal fluency.



3. *Fishermen's Luck*, 1939, serigraph, 15 1/8 x 20 1/4. The Syracuse University Art Collections. (cat. 2)

Gottlieb's second silkscreen, *Fishermen's Luck* of 1939 (fig. 3), displays 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 or tempera. He was also able to mimic the fluid motion of a brush by cutting the stencil with a more rhythmic stroke. 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 motion. As Sidney Alexander observed, "A realist, he is deeply involved with his subject, but he struggles against being chained to it. . . the picture is a subjective-objective vision."<sup>10</sup> In *Fishermen's Luck*, Gottlieb expressed vigorous figural action by transforming the fishermen into a series of energetically curved lines. This sweeping stroke was also used to suggest the thrusting force of the waves, which were reduced to stylized bands of color in the manner of a 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

flecks of pigment resemble the spattered markings of an ink and brush drawing. In this work, the swarthy figures of two rock drillers dominate the composition, giving these silhouetted forms an almost monumental quality. This was one of Gottlieb's few attempts to aggrandize the worker; in the majority of his prints he incorporated figures into the industrial landscape, and often used them as compositional foils for the larger elements in 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 unmodeled tones. Like the previous two silkscreens, *Drillers* was printed in nine colors, yet Gottlieb reverted to using more opaque pigments to enhance the graphic character of this work.

*The Strike Is Won* of 1940 (fig. 6), one of the artist's most celebrated political images, represents another experimental effort to extend the graphic range of the medium. Here, the sharply articulated forms and the layered planes of stippled color were used to imitate woodcut printing. Gottlieb relied on the expressive force of his Social Realist vocabulary to convey the exuberance of the strikers, rendering their faces and gesturing bodies



4. *Winter on the Creek*, 1940, serigraph, 12 x 14 1/8. Print Collection and Tilden Foundations. (cat. 5)

with the blunt economy of a political cartoon. Further, the striking pictorial design and vibrant hues were effective in evoking the boisterous, militant atmosphere of the demonstration scene. Throughout the late 1930s Gottlieb maintained an active interest in this subject, issuing the *Strike Is Won* in both four- and ten-color editions.

As silkscreen designs are not reversed in printing, Gottlieb was able to execute detailed preliminary drawings that were easily transferred to the stencil. The artist often prepared his sketches in color, indicating the various color separations that would be used in printing each progressive proof. For instance, he produced preparatory color studies in gouache for such silkscreen works as *Mending the Nets* and *Nor Rain Nor Snow* (cats. 3, 9, 23, 24). While Gottlieb executed preliminary sketches for entire silkscreen compositions, studies for individual figures exist as well. One such example is a sensitively rendered pencil drawing for *The Strike Is Won*, which depicts the elderly worker at the bottom right of the print (cat. 6). When compared with the boldly incised figure in the silkscreen, this work reveals



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Gottlieb's ability to modify his formal approach to suit the character of a particular medium. A handsome, skillfully drawn sketch of a single figure also exists for *Drillers* (cat. 4).

*Winter on the Creek* of 1940 (fig. 4) was Gottlieb's most masterful effort in simulating painting techniques in silkscreen, and proved to be his greatest commercial and critical success as a serigrapher. Executed in eleven colors, it was also his technical tour de force in the medium. In producing this work, the artist printed alternating layers of opaque and transparent colors, building his tones in much the same manner that an oil painting is executed through a successive application of glazes. Further, Gottlieb used masking fluids to mimic the feathery touch of a brush, printing thick, impasto-like touches of pigment which gave the surface of his work the delicate texture of a gouache. Unlike the mechanical operations of lithographic or intaglio methods, the matrix of a silkscreen can be freely manipulated, and the artist is able to alter the tonal quality of a print by simply lifting the frame or controlling 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.<sup>11</sup> In 1942, *Winter on 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 to be so popular with the print-buying public in the early 1940s that Gottlieb issued a second version of the work. It was 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 developed an almost systematic approach to expanding and perfecting the technical capabilities of silkscreen, as he experimented with an extensive range of stencil methods and pigment mixtures. In executing his prints, he emulated a variety of painting mediums and graphic art processes in order to demonstrate the flexibility and artistic potential of the new technique. Gottlieb produced such a prodigious number of silkscreens that he was able to hold the first one-man exhibition devoted to the medium at the ACA Gallery in March of 1940. The ACA Gallery had been organized and founded by Herman Baron, who sympathized with the political ideals of the Social Realist artists of the 1930s and had taken a keen interest in Gottlieb's achievements 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.<sup>12</sup>

During the same month as Gottlieb's show, two group exhibitions of silkscreens were organized at the Weyhe Gallery and the Springfield Museum; however, Gottlieb's display received a great deal of critical attention and several reviewers praised the artist for his facile command of textural effects and the novel use 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 contribution to the graphic arts. At this time, not only was there an emphasis in the United States on developing such indigenous styles as Regionalism and Social Realism, but there was also an interest in innovating printmaking methods that would rival accomplishments in European graphics.

Two of silkscreen's most enthusiastic promoters were Elizabeth McCausland and Carl Zigrosser. McCausland, an influential and politically-oriented art critic of the 1930s and 1940s, championed silkscreen as a modern democratic art form, asserting that the low cost of the process would make high quality color prints available to the masses. McCausland was particularly active in promoting Gottlieb's works during the forties, exclaiming that he was a ". . . pioneer in the movement to popularize graphic art. . . ." and adding that ". . . Gottlieb rates credit for having made a substantial contribution to the fine arts use of silk screen."<sup>13</sup> Carl Zigrosser, who was a renowned curator of graphic art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was the first scholar to encourage the growth and acceptance of silkscreen as a print medium; as late as the mid-forties there was still a great deal of entrenched prejudice against color printmaking in all media, and many graphic art societies excluded color lithographs, woodblock prints and serigraphs from their publications and exhibitions. Yet, Zigrosser's writings were extremely effective in stimulating both professional and public interest in silkscreen. He was also the first graphic art specialist to conduct a systematic study of the history of silkscreen and his 1941 article "The Serigraph, A New Medium" remains the definitive overview of the early development of the process.<sup>14</sup> 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 cited Gottlieb as being one of the most energetic proponents of the new medium.

Not only were critics and printmaking specialists involved in promoting serigraphy, but Gottlieb was extremely active in advancing the process through a series of lectures and demonstrations that he conducted from the late thirties through the middle years of the forties. The first large public demonstration of silkscreen was held on August 11, 1940 at the Works Progress Administration Building of the New York World's Fair. Of the six artists assigned to the Silk Screen Unit, Gottlieb was selected to demonstrate the various techniques utilized in silkscreen printing. Elizabeth McCausland was also present at the demonstration and

addressed the audience on the social significance of the new medium.

Shortly after serigraphy had been introduced to other artists in the graphics division, it quickly became one of the more popular printmaking methods, and by 1940 twenty percent of the Project's graphic allocations were being reproduced by the technique.<sup>15</sup> Soon, such a large number of printmakers began to employ the process that an independent Silk Screen Group was established in New York in May of 1940; like many Project artists, Gottlieb joined the Silk Screen Group, but he was affiliated with the organization for only a brief period.<sup>16</sup>

In 1940, after leaving the WPA/FAP, 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 Nebraska. At several of these locations, the artist actually helped to implement studio programs in serigraphy. In addition to his appearances in the Middle West, Gottlieb also lectured on the technique at Columbia University and the Museum of Modern Art, where the process was later used for printing reproductions of the museum's holdings. Gottlieb's lectures generally dealt with the technical benefits of utilizing serigraphy as a print medium, and he often demonstrated the process and invited members of the audience to pull their own prints. He also exhibited such educational materials as progressive proofs and color separations for various works, most notably a series that he prepared for the print *The Long Island Ducks*, c. 1941 (cats. 12 a-m). In many respects, 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 graphic arts; unlike Velonis, who preferred to disseminate knowledge of serigraphy through his technical writings, Gottlieb attempted to forge a more personal and immediate link between this new democratic art form and a responsive public. Gottlieb's efforts to promote the medium on a wider scale were also realized in 1940, when he acted as art and technical director of a film depicting the silkscreen technique, which was produced by Julius Roffman of the Educational Film Institute of New York University.<sup>18</sup> Featuring Gottlieb demonstrating the various steps in silkscreen printing, it was the cinematic counterpart to Velonis' 1938 technical manuals on silkscreen published by the WPA/FAP. Distribution of the film spread knowledge of the technique to areas that lacked college

ican contribution to the graphic arts. At only was there an emphasis in the United States on developing such indigenous styles as Social Realism, but there was also an emphasis on developing printmaking methods that would compete with the achievements in European graphics.

Silk screen's most enthusiastic promoters were Walter Dill Scott and Carl Zigrosser. McCausland and politically-oriented art critic of the forties, championed silkscreen as a modern printmaking form, asserting that the low cost of the process would make high quality color prints available to a much wider audience than was possible with other methods. McCausland was particularly active in promoting the technique during the forties.

Gottlieb was a "... pioneer in the movement toward a more democratic graphic art..." and adding that "... credit for having made a substantial contribution to the fine arts use of silk screen.""<sup>13</sup> Carl Zigrosser was a renowned curator of graphic art at the Museum of Art, was the first scholar to study the growth and acceptance of silkscreen as a printmaking medium as late as the mid-forties there was still a widespread entrenched prejudice against color silkscreen in all media, and many graphic art societies, including lithographs, woodblock prints and their publications and exhibitions. Yet, the efforts of these artists were extremely effective in promoting professional and public interest in the new medium.

McCausland was also the first graphic art specialist to do a systematic study of the history of silkscreen in his article "The Serigraph, A New Medium" in the *Graphic Arts Quarterly*.<sup>14</sup> A definitive overview of the early development of the technique. In fact, it was Zigrosser who coined the term "serigraphy" in order to differentiate the fine art technique from its commercial ancestry. In his 1940 book *The Serigraph*, Zigrosser also cited Gottlieb as being one of the most important proponents of the new medium. He was a critic and printmaking specialist who was promoting serigraphy, but Gottlieb was more active in advancing the process through a series of lectures and demonstrations that he conducted during the forties through the middle years of the forties. At a large public demonstration of silkscreen printing on August 11, 1940 at the Works Progress Administration Building of the New York World's Fair, McCausland was assigned to the Silk Screen Unit, and was selected to demonstrate the various techniques of silkscreen printing. Elizabeth McCausland was also present at the demonstration and

addressed the audience on the social significance of the new medium.

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art programs or professional art schools. Gottlieb's commitment to the graphic arts was shared by a large number of Project artists, who later became the mentors for an entire postwar generation of fine art printmakers in this country. Their activities contributed to the burgeoning growth of printmaking studios, university graphic workshops and the unprecedented market for prints in the 1950s and 1960s.

Shortly after Gottlieb had left the WPA/FAP, the onset of World War II prompted the gradual dissolution of the Project, and many of the artists were encouraged to produce propagandistic prints for the war effort. Gottlieb executed several serigraphs depicting war themes, such as *Montage of American Soldiers* and *Damn the Torpedo* of 1942 (fig. 5), yet these were produced after his tenure on the Project and no doubt stemmed from his own patriotic sentiments. In March of 1942, the entire WPA/FAP was renamed the Graphic Section of the War Services Division, and additional silkscreen and lithographic equipment was provided for artists who were now obligated to execute works supporting the Allies.<sup>18</sup> The technical experimentation that had insured the rapid maturation of serigraphy was now openly discouraged and the process was once again being utilized for the more functional purpose of printing governmental posters. Despite this regressive trend, artists such as Gottlieb continued with their experiments in serigraphy on an independent basis and in the latter part of the forties the technique gained a wider following in both the United States and Europe.

Throughout the 1950s there were numerous technical innovations made in serigraphic materials and equipment, and in the 1960s a large number of Pop and Op art exponents began to employ the technique. Ironically, Op art's emphasis on flat, intense hues emphasized the planar character of the medium and Pop's reliance on media imagery served to realign serigraphy with its earlier commercial associations. While the process reached its full art historical legitimacy during the Pop and Op eras, this actually served to obscure the pioneering advancements made by Harry Gottlieb and other Project artists during the 1930s. However, in reviewing these fertile years in the medium's early history, Gottlieb emerges as a pivotal figure in the development of silkscreen as a fine art process. Through his prodigious output of prints and extensive lectures on serigraphy, Gottlieb was influential in establishing the technique as a viable and potent means of expression for modern artists.



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

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>As Carl Zigrosser noted in his "Serigraph, A New Medium," *Print Collectors Quarterly*, December, 1941, 467. Guy Maccoy actually had the first one-man exhibition of silkscreen prints, which was held at the 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.

<sup>2</sup>Jacob 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., 1972, 167.

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

<sup>4</sup>William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, Columbus, 1969, 438.

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

two brochures were later reprinted by the WPA in 1941 in one volume entitled *The Silk Screen Process*.

<sup>6</sup>O'Connor, *The New Deal Art Projects*, 324.

<sup>7</sup>Elizabeth Olds, in a letter to the author, April 2, 1983.

<sup>8</sup>Olds, letter.

<sup>9</sup>Kainen, "The Graphic Arts Division," 167.

<sup>10</sup>Sidney Alexander, *Harry Gottlieb*, New York, ACA Gallery, 1948, 2.

<sup>11</sup>Harry Gottlieb, in an interview with Sheryl Conkelton and Gregory Gilbert, March 10, 1983.

<sup>12</sup>Herman Baron, *American Contemporary Artists Gallery Papers*, Archives of American Art, New York, D304, 678-680.

<sup>13</sup>Elizabeth McCausland, "Silk Screen Color Prints," *Parnassus*, March, 1940, 34-35.

<sup>14</sup>Zigrosser, "Serigraph," 460.

<sup>15</sup>Milton Meltzer, *Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects*, New York, 1976, 79.

<sup>16</sup>Gottlieb, interview, March 10, 1983.

<sup>17</sup>ACA Gallery Papers, D304, 1169.

<sup>18</sup>"Silk Screen Process Filmed," *The Magazine of Art*, August, 1940, 481-482.

<sup>19</sup>Kainen, "The Graphic Arts Division," 171.

## Harry Gottlieb: Art and Social Con

### Sheryl Conkelton

We too are interested primarily in art, but we realize that the creation of important art is a social phenomenon and does not begin and end in the artist's studio.

Anonymous address to the American Artists Congress, November 1, 1936

The social and political significance of works of art created under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration from its inception in 1935 to its dissolution in 1943 is immediately apparent. Not only does the content of these works make comment on the social and political temperament of the times, but the very existence of these works refers to an unprecedented system of government patronage for American art and artists. The importance and implications of this patronage were far reaching and tremendously involving for those artists who participated in the WPA programs. The artists and the work they did came to be regarded as integral to 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 particular events and emotions 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 responsible activity. His major concern was not to espouse a particular political platform but to express the humanist ideal in the representation of people coping with the situations caused by tremendous economic depression.

Gottlieb's political activity was centered upon the idea of the artist's responsible role in society and, in turn, upon the government's responsibility to foster the artist and his art. He was very involved in encouraging government agencies to be supportive of art as well as industry and to be active in the dissemination of art to a wide audience. The development of this audience was of great concern to Gottlieb; he taught and lectured on art and spoke often on the issues surrounding art education. He was supportive of proposals and projects which created a wider and more receptive audience. His 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.

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study in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship. He settled in Woodstock, where he had lived prior to his trip, and became aware of the growing organization among artists seeking government support as the Depression grew worse. Mrs. Juliana Force, who had given Gottlieb his first one-man exhibition in 1929 and was the first director of the Whitney Museum, was already involved with her own committee to raise funds for artists who had lost their usual sources of patronage when the Depression hit. Gottlieb joined her campaign and became chairman of the committee to raise funds.<sup>1</sup> He was very successful in organizing a diverse group of artists into a supportive group. The lobbying efforts by this and other groups were instrumental in establishing the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in December 1933. Gottlieb continued to assist in efforts to increase public support of artists.

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 all kinds of activities, as well as landscape scenes. Upon his return to Woodstock, leisure time subjects gave way to a consistent depiction of people's labor: men at work in an icehouse and the excavation of a city street, among other images. The pleasantly wooded landscape began to reveal hidden quarries, busy railroad houses and other industrial scenes.

The emphasis on the worker and the industrial landscape was accompanied by the full development of certain stylistic characteristics which had been exhibited to a lesser degree in his earlier works: disruption of scale within a continuous scene, alteration of naturalistic color and a blocky and summary description of the figure. This style had much in common with a general style developing among some of his contemporaries; it remained fairly consistent throughout Gottlieb's career. During the thirties, the term "social viewpoint" was used to describe paintings and prints of this kind. It has come to be known as "social realism," but at the time it was not considered realistic.<sup>2</sup> Its distortions created a condensed account of the scene the artist sought to portray, with important elements selected and carefully emphasized to create a mood or impress a point.

As Edmund Wilson pointed out in his essay on George Bellows, American artists at the time were working from a point of view for which there was no American tradition.<sup>4</sup> They drew upon a wide variety of elements gleaned from sources as varied as the Surrealist



6. *The Strike Is Won*, 1940, serigraph, 12 1/4 x 16 3/4. Ellen Sragow Gallery. (cat. 6)

While Gottlieb was never fully convinced that abstract art was valid,<sup>23</sup> he supported the right of other artists to paint in this way. At a 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."<sup>24</sup>

Gottlieb's interest in and support of the educative purposes of the Union was evidenced by his participation in the Art School that was set up by the Union on Fourteenth Street.<sup>25</sup> 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 Manship, and Stuart Davis rented a space

and held classes. Some of the teachers made lithographs to sell to support the school, others donated their time to give demonstrations and teach classes.

The issue of racial discrimination was always an important one for the Union. Gottlieb was a member of the Artists Committee Against Discrimination which was formed within the Union in 1936 specifically to fight a clause included in the FAP contract that refused "aliens" the right to exhibit at the Municipal Art Center.<sup>26</sup> He felt very strongly about the issue of discrimination; in a serigraph he produced later entitled *The Strike is Won*, (fig. 6) the foreground scene contains a group of people of various races united in the celebration of their hard-won victory.<sup>27</sup>

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 which attempted to insure this, among them the Municipal Art Center and the Artists

Committee Against Discrimination. He also gave support of another Union proposal for public inclusion of an artists' pavilion in the United States exhibition at the 1939 World's Fair. His article in the June 1937 issue of the *Art Front Organizer* rationalized the project for artists:

The whole plan would remove the illusion of mystery and romantic rubbish that many people have concerning art and the artists, and replace it with an understanding of the artist's craft and the place he fills as a responsible member of society.

His words carried in them an echo of the ideas of both the Artists Union and the WPA/FAP. In Gottlieb was an ideal president: as its leader he supported the purposes of the artist's organization; as its spokesman he strove to maintain a relationship between the militant union and its members. The issues Gottlieb chose to actively and personally support by speaking at meetings and writing articles and publications were usually those which were also supported by both organizations, and so less controversial. For example, while many of his contemporaries, including Elizabeth Olds, exhibited their work at the exhibition at the ACA Gallery in October 1937 to benefit the Spanish loyalist cause, Gottlieb's work was absent. At the same time, his support of other causes such as the Artists Committee Against Discrimination illustrate his steadfast humanist framework: each focused on an immediate benefit for the artist but contained within a larger purpose of integration and artmaking with society at large. The democratic ideal of improving society was always present.

Gottlieb remained uncontroversial because of his espousal of the humanist cause, although the John Reed Club, out of which the Union grew, professed Communism. The early organizers and leaders were all radical leftists: the Union's *Art Front*, modeled after the Russian journal *Left Front* and its early organizational brochure and journal articles were full of leftist politics. However, there is little of this type of rhetoric in Gottlieb's writings; what he expressed was a desire to see the human condition improved and a belief in the power of art as a progressive force.

In the spring of 1937 layoffs among the artists were once again considered and this time, in June, a number of artists were fired. Gottlieb among them and Stuart Davis went personally to Holger Cahill and spent several hours debating the necessity of



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but were unsuccessful in their attempts to convince him to support the artists.<sup>30</sup> Gottlieb was eventually rehired, but not before he had participated in every effort to secure the rehiring of all the dismissed artists, including showing the lithograph *Bootleg Mining* (fig. 1) in an exhibition entitled "Pink Slips over Culture."<sup>31</sup>

Gottlieb was succeeded in his one year term as president by Philip Evergood. Gottlieb continued to be active in the Union, sitting on the National Executive Committee which coordinated the activities of artists unions across the country;<sup>32</sup> thus Gottlieb's political involvement did not cease completely, but simply became less important as he focused on the art of silkscreen itself as a vehicle for humanist expression and communication when he joined the newly formed FAP Silk Screen Unit in 1938. The depiction of incidents of human struggle served him in his pursuit of a socially responsible art. His membership in the Artists Union identified him with the industrial workers and he totally involved himself in the struggle of the working class. With other artists he would often drive out to industrial towns and mining sites to sketch from life and discuss life and politics with the people there. In one incident, in order to be admitted to a mine during a particularly unstable time for a local union, he and another artist joined the miners union to prove their support for the workers there.<sup>33</sup>

Particular issues would provoke sketches for prints, the idea for the final image being one which would convey a concise narrative of the situation. The serigraph, *Mine Disaster*, c. 1939, (cat. 5) illustrates a specific episode that occurred while Gottlieb was visiting a mine. In it, he chose to focus on the human drama that he became a part of rather than the specific details of the incident. The print shows an almost locationless, dark setting, out of which emerge small figures of various size and proximity, displaying emotions of shock and horror. In another serigraph, *The Strike is Won*, (fig. 6), the figures are much closer to the spectator, as if to include him in the emotional victory.

Gottlieb's art was basically optimistic. It looked towards social betterment, itself a tool of progress. This connotation can be discerned even in the rather anonymous figures placed within an industrial landscape in the serigraph *Change of Shift*, c. 1940 (cover illustration). Several workers are seen descending towards the factory to begin their shift. While the looming towers and flames could be seen as threatening, the discontinuity of space that separates the workers from



9. *Liberty*, 1941, lithograph, 13 x 19 3/8. The Syracuse University Art Collections. (cat. 22)

Gottlieb pursued a very active supportive role in the various political and professional organizations that existed during the thirties; his participation was motivated not by political ideologies, but by his view of himself as an artist, a position newly activated by both independent and government sponsored agencies. The choice of issues to support was, for Gottlieb, based on his response to the idea of the artist as a responsible social being with a particular purpose to fulfill. As seen in his prints, the issues in which he sought active

participation were those which involved larger questions: freedom to pursue personal expression, the opportunity for all individuals to appreciate art and culture and, ultimately, artistic and economic survival. Gottlieb's subjects and themes from the WPA years were very closely linked to his political and social convictions. The drama and emotion which he portrayed ultimately expressed his deep belief in humanist ideals and communicated his desire for social improvement.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Harry Gottlieb, in an interview with S Conkelton and Gregory Gilbert, July 23, 1983.  
<sup>2</sup>Interview, July 23, 1983.

<sup>3</sup>Patricia Hills and Roberta Tarbell, *The Tradition and the Whitney Museum of Art*, New York, 1980, 84.

<sup>4</sup>Edmund Wilson, "George Bellows," *An American Earthquake*, New York, 1951.

<sup>5</sup>Gerald M. Monroe, "Artists as Military Workers During the Great Depression," *American Art Journal*, 14, 1, 1974, 37.

<sup>6</sup>Monroe, 7.

<sup>7</sup>*American Artists Bulletin*, Winter 1933.  
 Gottlieb Papers, Archives of American Art.

<sup>8</sup>Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Deal for Art*, Hamilton, New York, 1977.

<sup>9</sup>Interview, July 23, 1983.

<sup>10</sup>Harry Gottlieb, "Self Government at Municipal Art Center," *Art Front*, February, Gottlieb Papers, D343, 176.

<sup>11</sup>Stuart Davis, "The American Artists," *American Magazine of Art*, 28, August, 1919, in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories in Modern Art*, New York and Los Angeles, 1968, 468.

<sup>12</sup>Gerald M. Monroe, "The Artists Union in New York," *Art Journal*, 32, Fall 1972, 17.

<sup>13</sup>Morris Neuwirth, "219," *Art Front*, February, Harry Gottlieb Papers, D343, 153.

<sup>14</sup>Monroe, "Artists as Militants," 8.

<sup>15</sup>Harry Gottlieb, in an interview with S Conkelton and Gregory Gilbert, March 10, 1983.

<sup>16</sup>Gerald M. Monroe, "Art Front," *American Art Journal*, 13, 3, 1973, 13. See also controversy over a Rivera mural: Park and Markowitz, *Deal for Art*, p. 10. See also Edward Bruce, "The Public's Reaction to the Sculpture under the Section of Fine Arts," *The American Art Journal*, Princeton, 1973, 58-67.

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<sup>4</sup>Edmund Wilson, "George Bellows," reprinted in *An American Earthquake*, New York, 1958, 96.

<sup>5</sup>Gerald M. Monroe, "Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression," *Archives of American Art Journal*, 14, 1, 1974, 37.

<sup>6</sup>Monroe, 7.

<sup>7</sup>*American Artists Bulletin*, Winter 1937, Harry Gottlieb Papers, Archives of American Art, D343, 93.

<sup>8</sup>Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *The New Deal for Art*, Hamilton, New York, 1977, xiii.

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<sup>11</sup>Stuart Davis, "The American Artists Today," *American Magazine of Art*, 28, August, 1935, reprinted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories in Modern Art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968, 468.

<sup>12</sup>Gerald M. Monroe, "The Artists Union of New York," *Art Journal*, 32, Fall 1972, 17.

<sup>13</sup>Morris Neuwirth, "219," *Art Front*, January, 1937, Harry Gottlieb Papers, D343, 153.

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<sup>17</sup>Interview, March 10, 1983.

<sup>18</sup>See Thomas Craven, "Art and Propaganda," *Scribner's Magazine*, March, 1943, 191; "Nationalism in Art," *Forum*, June, 1936, 160. See also articles by Stuart Davis and Thomas Hart Benton in *Art Front*, January and April, 1935.

<sup>19</sup>Holger Cahill, "The Federal Art Project," *New Horizons in American Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936, reprinted in Chipp, 472-473.

<sup>20</sup>"The WPA Art Project: A Summary of Activities and Accomplishments," National Archives, cited by Park and Markowitz, 26.

<sup>21</sup>Hills and Tarbell, 82-83.

<sup>22</sup>"Policy of American Artists Congress," February, 1936, Harry Gottlieb Papers, D343, 11.

<sup>23</sup>Interview, March 10, 1983.

<sup>24</sup>"Artists United Front," *Art Project Reporter*, July, 1936, Harry Gottlieb Papers, D343, 501.

<sup>25</sup>Interview, July 23, 1983.

<sup>26</sup>"Our Municipal Art Gallery and Center," *Art Front*, February, 1936, Harry Gottlieb Papers, D343, 176.

<sup>27</sup>Interview, March 10, 1983.

<sup>28</sup>Harry Gottlieb, "The World's Fair and the Artist," *Art Front Organizer*, June 18, 1937, Harry Gottlieb Papers, D343, 451.

<sup>29</sup>Monroe, "Art Front," 13.

<sup>30</sup>McKinzie, 99.

<sup>31</sup>"On the Fine Arts," *The New Masses*, July 27, 1937, American Contemporary Artists Gallery Papers, D304, 1140.

<sup>32</sup>Harry Gottlieb Papers, D343, 104.

<sup>33</sup>Interview, March 10, 1983.

<sup>34</sup>"Win the War Conference May 24," *Joint Bulletin of the American Artists Congress and United American Artists*, May, 1942, Harry Gottlieb Papers, D343, 45-47.

<sup>35</sup>Monroe, "Artists as Militants," 10.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>*Report for 1942: An American Group, Inc.*, Harry Gottlieb Papers, D343, 537.



## A Conversation with Harry Gottlieb

*The following interview with Harry Gottlieb took place on March 10, 1983, at the artist's home in New York City. For convenience, the questions of both interviewers, Sheryl Conkelton and Gregory Gilbert, are combined and designated 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, Arnold Blanch, Wanda Gag, and Elizabeth Olds also studied at the Institute. In 1917, Gottlieb served as a military illustrator for the Navy, developing visual aids*

**INTERVIEWER:** What was your earliest involvement with art?

**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 cartoons and I started to copy them. I got a great kick out of doing that, and that's the way 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 my father living in one tenement room. And the second day after we arrived, a cousin of mine, whom I hadn't met before, came and told me that, "Tomorrow I'm going 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:** So, in other words, you didn't have a lot of time to devote to art when you were young?

**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 leisure. At any rate, I shined shoes, as I say, and sold newspapers every day. And I'd go to the saloons where I knew that if I

for a communications school in New London, Connecticut.

*Gottlieb settled in New York City in 1918 and during that same year he became a scenic and costume designer for Eugene O'Neill's Provincetown Theatre group. In 1923, Gottlieb settled in the artist colony of Woodstock, New York, where he remained for twelve years. The artist's residency at Woodstock was interrupted in 1931, when he spent a year-long Guggenheim Fellowship studying in Europe. In 1935, Gottlieb joined the Federal Art Project, and he worked in the graphics division until 1940; during this period, Gottlieb was an active member in such political organizations as the Artists Union and the Artists Congress, and in 1938 he was associated with the WPA/FAP's Silk Screen Unit. After the dissolution of the WPA programs, Gottlieb remained actively involved with the silkscreen technique and continued to work in the medium until the middle years of the 1970s. Gottlieb last lectured on serigraphy in 1975 at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.*

shined a man's shoes and he was feeling good, he'd give me a tip. You learn these little things very early. So, I did that all the way through school, because we were quite poor. My father needed whatever he could get from us. And I have an older brother who hardly went to school at all. It was one or two years and then he went to work. Never got any other education. I paid my way through. I never got a cent from my father for anything I needed. And I also learned how to work a sewing machine and mend my own clothes, and do all the things that you associate with a household. I would have to do it myself.

So, I was a young worker, and that stayed with me when I went to art school. I had a job during the summer with a laundry, that I could still give some money at home and at the same time pay for my tuition and other expenses. Now, I say this without resentment. I felt it was necessary. You grow up very quickly under poverty, and I accepted the fact that I had to do this, and that was it.

When I finished high school, I had to make up my mind what was I going to do. I had been drawing, had been 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.

I decided I had a choice — either go to the University of Minnesota, which is in Minneapolis, or else go to art school. They had a summer course at the art school, so I decided to try to find out whether this was for me or whether I should go to college. It was the most wonderful experience. There was nothing else like it that I've ever had in my life. And so there was no question about what I was going to do.

**INT:** You studied at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

**HG:** We had a very fine head of the school. His name was Robert Koehler, a German artist. And he did something which was remarkable. He did the first painting on labor strife.

**INT:** Didn't he paint that when you were there?

**HG:** No. Painted it earlier. And he painted a great many other paintings which were very creditable, very good. This was the first one that was done in the United States, and it was shown at the Whitney Museum a couple of years ago in an exhibition they had.

**INT:** When did you begin art school?

**HG:** I'll tell you what happened to me. It was unfortunate. When I told my family I was going to art school, my father said, "What? Can you make a living at it?" That's the first question he asked. And I got bombarded from all sides on this, so I had to pay attention to it. And what was the result? The result was I took a design course so I could make a living designing wallpaper or textiles. Not that I wanted to. I was just forced into it in a sense, because I had nothing to counteract it. And so I missed some of my art education that would have been very valuable to me. I had to pick it up on the way.

**INT:** Did they use any silkscreen techniques in this design course?

**HG:** Silkscreen didn't exist.

**INT:** It wasn't even a commercial process then?

**HG:** Well, I never heard of it.

**INT:** What type of courses did you take in art school?

**HG:** Well, I did drawing, and very little painting. Most of it was drawing. There was some design. So I kept on drawing, and I painted on my own. I may have brought the paintings I did for the teacher to criticize. I don't remember specifically.

**INT:** What type of subject matter were you interested in at that time?

**HG:** I was interested mainly in nature, and I did drawings, primitive drawings, of people I knew.

**INT:** Did you do any lithography or etching while you were at school?

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HG: I was interested mainly in nature, and I did drawings, primitive drawings, of people I knew.

INT: Did you do any lithography or etching while you were at school?

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

INT: How important do you think your artistic training was to your later development as an artist?

HG: Well, it gave me a base that wasn't a particularly full base. As a matter of fact, when I came to New York to live I decided to take a course with a very fine graphic artist — popular and a realist. [The artist was John Sloan.] I signed up for the course for a month, and he didn't come the first time I was there. They don't come all the time. They come once or twice a week to criticize. And I lost my interest. I paid my money, but I never went. I never really took the course. This was in 1919, but earlier, when I finished my classes, there were prizes given to the student that made the most progress, and I was second. The artist who got the first prize decided to enlist in the Navy. This was World War I. I was not politically motivated in any way, but I didn't like the idea of accepting something that he sacrificed. So I also enlisted. Isn't that crazy? To this day I couldn't figure out any other reason but that I just didn't want to accept his sacrifice.

There was Navy training at an institution in Minneapolis and then we went during the summer to live in Harvard dormitories. And then the basic training was at New London, Connecticut. You either served on a submarine or a sub chaser. It was very difficult, because you had to learn the equipment in the dark so you could take it apart and put it together in the dark. You can imagine what kind of concentration you had to have. So I got the idea that if I, as an artist, could do large closeups of these small parts, it would be easier to understand them. I told the commandant my idea, and he thought it was a good idea. So I spent the rest of my time doing this as the artist on the staff.

In the Navy, when you got a signal that the admiral was there, you dropped everything and stood at attention. At one time, I was working on something at a table, doing a picture of a part, and I paid no attention. And when the admiral, under the guidance of the commandant, came through, I was the only person working. He was interested; the commandant had to explain. Since it was the first time this had been done, naturally he went into it in some detail and the admiral praised him to the sky for having the initiative to do this.

All the time I was in the Navy, I never was on a ship, never even saw a ship. I played the role of the artist on the staff, which they should have had in the first place. But that's my Navy training.

INT: And when you left the Navy, you went back to Minneapolis?

HG: I went back to Minneapolis just for a short period, just to sort things out. I didn't intend to stay. I

had realized that New York was the place for me because from New London, on the 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 interesting. The first job I had was at \$50 a week at a studio that made designs 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 that very long. I got a job with a factory making armatures. I didn't stay there very long. It was very, very difficult. I wasn't used to using my arms or muscles in that way. A job opened up at the Provincetown Theater. I had a very interesting period of several years there.

INT: And after Provincetown, you went to Woodstock?

HG: I went to Woodstock because I had to find somewhere I could go and develop myself as an artist 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 picture frames. I love landscape painting and at Kingston, New York, only ten miles away, there was very interesting material. There was a very small waterway that had small boats that came from Pennsylvania to bring in coal. The landscape there was 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 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 lithographer probably in the world.

INT: You worked in a studio?

HG: A workshop.

INT: Do you remember the name of the lithographer?

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

INT: Did he teach you how to do lithography?

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

INT: Did you do any lithographs in Woodstock?

HG: Four. One in particular, *The Round House*.

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

HG: That's right. Oh, I did several drypoints, but very, very simple.

INT: Where did you do your drypoints? Were those also in Woodstock or was that earlier?

HG: Several in Woodstock.

INT: Were they landscapes?

HG: Well, one was a landscape in a sense. There were huts that the fishermen had to put all their equipment in, and maybe their fish, too. But basically it was people.

INT: The lithographs you did in Paris, were those color lithographs or black-and-white?

HG: I only did one color lithograph. when I came to 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 could not enjoy Italy? And I did some work there.

INT: When you finished your Guggenheim, did you come back to New York?

HG: I came back to Woodstock, that was my home. Mrs. Juliana Force was in charge of a small project that was opening in Woodstock. I got on it. A small group of us met and discussed the possibility of enlarging the project. I got in touch with some artists in New York, and their suggestion was that we hold a meeting of all the artists in Woodstock to find out what the conditions were. I'll tell you, they had a very, very tough time: we had to set up an organization just to make it possible to eat and get kerosene for heat. They said, "Hold a meeting and see if you can get your project organized." So, we got together and sent out a call for this meeting. And, much to our amazement, we saw artists whom I had never seen — academic artists, and other artists that I knew. This was an awakening to think that we had separated ourselves, and it had taken an emergency to get together again as artists to talk about our craft. It enlarged the project, naturally, because we had found out that some of these artists were just as badly off as we were! Which was an interesting thing. I doubt very much whether it ever got back to the old division. So you learn from things. Then, in '35, the things I'd heard about New York were so exciting I decided to move. I had had enough of Woodstock. As a matter of fact, basically, I don't believe in art colonies.

INT: Because they are isolated from life, or isolated from things that were going on artistically?

HG: Both. I think it's much more cut off from life than the other, though both were operative.

INT: When you originally came to New York and you started going to galleries and museums, what particular artists or what styles were you interested in?

HG: Burchfield just fascinated me.

INT: Was it because of his style or the subject matter that he painted?

HG: Oh, it was his subject matter, and his point of view, his attitude. I explored — not abstract art — but really putting more design into my work. I never at any time was fully convinced that abstract art was valid for me, for the simple reason that I considered art a language to communicate my experiences.

INT: When you began to do your work in New York, were you involved with communicating certain ideas or just depicting things that you saw?

HG: I did some people at work. For instance, they were working on the tracks that we had for the streetcars at that time, and I did some drawings. When I first moved to New York, I lived in a brownstone on Fifth Avenue and 14th Street. And just across the street, on the second floor of the building, was a beauty parlor school. And so I did drawings of that, of the people that were there and the teachers.

INT: When you came to New York, were you immediately involved in the WPA projects here?

HG: Yes, in '35. And then, in 1936, I was president of the Artists Union.

INT: Oh, that happened that quickly?

HG: Well, the so-called "established artists" didn't want to get involved in it. It's too bad, but that was the situation. I was avid to experience whatever could be experienced in such an exciting time and place. I wanted to become involved. So, in '36 I was president.

INT: Did you get involved with the silkscreen project right away or did that come later?

HG: That came later, because I didn't know anything about it and no one else knew anything about it, except the people who were doing commercial work.

INT: I think you originally told us that when you were the president of the union, Anthony Velonis came and asked you to be part of his silkscreen unit. Is that right?

HG: No. He brought a proposal to the executive committee of the union. He thought that the silkscreen process was suitable for fine art production. We were impressed, and so we set up a committee to meet with the administration to create a pilot project to try it out. The administration approved of this idea. From what I'd

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process was suitable for fine art production. We were  
impressed, and so we set up a committee to meet with  
the administration to create a pilot project to try it out.  
The administration approved of this idea. From what I'd

heard, it was a really exciting possibility; I became one  
of the men on the pilot project. There were five or six  
others. It was the most exciting experience I've had as  
an artist because it opened up such possibilities. I think  
that it democratized art. For example, my prints sold for  
\$5 and \$10. Now, I don't have to tell you, they sell for  
\$200 to \$500. That's the difference. Anyway, I feel very  
strongly about the meaning of that meeting and what  
it's accomplished.

INT: Did the idea that you could make art available  
to lots of different kinds of people influence what you  
depicted in your silkscreens?

HG: Naturally.

INT: It didn't just come from the WPA and the  
idea that you were documenting it?

HG: No. It had nothing to do with that. I did what  
I wanted. It wasn't often that there were conflicts.

INT: You never really had any problems in such a  
matter?

HG: I never had any problem whatsoever.

INT: So there was no sense of censorship?

HG: No. I could understand that the people who  
live in a community where a mural is to be done in a  
post office would want a committee to be set up so that  
the community could meet with the artist and help to  
establish what the subject would be. They might have  
some ideas themselves, and I think it'd be wonderful. If  
the artist was interested, it'd be beautiful and give it all  
the more meaning.

But that's a question of prior conference to  
determine what the subject would be and what it  
couldn't be. I don't believe in censorship at all. For  
example, I believe entirely that an artist should be able  
to work in the way that he wants to, whether it's  
abstract or realistic or what-have-you.

INT: There's a similarity in the way that a lot of the  
artists painted and drew. Was that something that you  
did consciously? Did your style change?

HG: My style didn't change.

INT: What were you particularly interested in about  
the silkscreen process?

HG: In the first place, it doesn't require extensive  
machinery, and all the other print-making crafts do,  
with the exception of wood block. Number two, you can  
print on any paper that you want. You don't have to  
buy expensive paper to print on. It's a question of  
expense, you see. Number three, you can have large  
editions — you can sell them very reasonably and  
expand the audience for art. And number four, which is  
very, very important — you can live anywhere. You



you see, because of the freedom of the work wherever you are, whether you live and or God-knows-where. You're free. You equipment and you just go ahead and do it, what you can.

you worked on the art by yourself, but you with other artists over the artistic issues?

t. the Artists Union.

The only reason we got together on that fight for the project and to fight for any kicked off without reason.

didn't involve artistic matters.

Well, if something happened artistically justified in our minds on the Project, then it on, you see? But in deciding about and that sort of thing, unless it was really we never had anything to do with it. opened up a school of silkscreen with is, didn't you?

we got some literature out, but never e school.

en you demonstrated, was it to make of the new silkscreen process, or was it to them how to do it?

e's only one place where I've taught, and oln, Nebraska. They asked me if I would ouse, and I had a few days free. And so I dents there, and gave sessions. I could the process so they could go home and do It's so simple.

didn't you actually travel to teach

Just to demonstrate, to introduce it.

that tied to your interest in trying to make ssible to the public?

course. you want them to become interested e medium to produce their own silkscreens? ell you, everyone who came to a n pulled their own print.

en we talked before, you mentioned how make incidents and situations known to a ce. Was this what you intended when you es like *Bootleg Mining*?

nt to tell you about two incidents, dramatic t one of the coal mines in Pennsylvania road that came out from the coal holes that ad dug in order to get the coal out. The mine ed to hire a steam shovel to destroy the road.

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

HG: That's right. So the miners found out about it and they met this man driving the steam shovel and they told him, "Buddy, turn around. You're not going to do anything to this road. We know what you're here for." And the guy said, "But I have nothing against you people. It's the only job I can get." The miners pulled him off the steam shovel and destroyed it. What else could they do? So the mining company preferred charges. The committee of the miners asked the judge, "Well, Judge, what are you going to do about this?" He said, "What can I do? You admit you did it." When the case was decided, he found the miners guilty, fined them \$10 and took it out of his own pocket because he too depended on the coal.

Anyway, there's another story which is different but interesting. One day we came out there and saw the president of the union. We asked him if he knew some territory that we hadn't been to. He thought of one and he said, "Yes, there's a very nice area. I think you'll like it." He told us which way to go, and we went along this terrible road — 15 miles of lousy road. And finally we came to this area and it was most interesting. We parked the car and started to take our material out, and then saw about ten miners with a leader marching toward us. When they came up, the chairman of the committee said, "If you don't get out of here in five minutes, your car is going to be upside-down." "Why? What have we done?" we said. He said, "You know what you've done." We tried every way to convince them that we were their friends. Nothing doing.

So we rode all the way back to see the miners' president. He thought it was a joke, and we didn't think it was a joke at all. It was a serious matter. He gave us his card and he wrote on it, "These people are O.K." So we drove back over this lousy road, and showed the mine leader this card. He said, "We no longer have confidence in the president. In fact, we suspect that he's caused this trouble we've had."

So we said to this miner, "Look, it may mean nothing to you, but it means a hell of a lot to us to be made to feel that we're your enemy. Isn't there anybody that you trust to say we're O.K.?" And he thought, "Well, all right. I'll give you a last chance. There are two guys that have a breaker." A breaker is a machine that breaks coal into different sizes for different uses. We knew them, so we went back over this lousy 15 miles, and saw these two guys, and they thought it was a joke, too. Again, we didn't think so. They said, "Look. We have a very simple solution — join up." So

we became members, paid our dues, and we got a card, and we drove back over this 15 miles. We had to clear ourselves. That was the most important thing. So, we saw this guy and we showed him our union cards. We shook hands all around and we were brothers.

Oh, incidentally, I didn't tell you why they were so suspicious of us. A committee was sent to New York to bargain to sell coal to Burns Brothers, the big company in New York. And Burns Brothers wanted to buy it, but at a price unacceptable to the miners. So they couldn't come to any agreement. Burns Brothers got in touch with Mayor LaGuardia, and he sent detectives out to the coal fields to see where the coal came from. If it came from bootleg mining, it wasn't allowed to come into the city. So anyone with a license plate from New York was suspect.

INT: It was really important for the miners to know who you were and feel that you were part of their group.

HG: Sure. Oh, we got invited to a very select meeting in a small hut once, when they were talking strategy. They knew we were artists — in fact, we showed them some of our work while it was going on, you know. And so they knew that we were spreading the good news.

INT: So, in some ways, your involvement with, say, documenting the activities was a way of spreading knowledge about what was going on with this situation?

HG: Well, we hoped it was it, but that wasn't all — the real thing was the drama. For instance, the one I did of the mine disaster. The interesting thing to me is the fact that not only are they mourning the loss, but they're organizing in the background. They're discussing what they're going to do about it.

It reminds me of the stories that I've heard about the farmers of that period. A story was told that in Montana there was a farmer who was losing his land because he couldn't pay his taxes, and the state was going to auction it off to the highest bidder. The farmers in that area got together, because it could happen to any of them, and they let everybody who was at that auction know that no one was to bid higher than the farmer himself on the land. And it was understood, if they didn't obey that order, something would happen. And that's what happened. The farmer was the only one that bid. So he got his land back. People stuck together in those emergencies. Otherwise they lost. I don't think people stick together enough in relation to the things that happen to them.

INT: So, in a way, in your prints, you were making

this message your contribution to the situation.

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 together over a certain kind of subject matter?

HG: There were artist organizations which entered the political field, you see? It didn't necessarily have to do with art, but eventually it would get into the art just by the nature of things that the organization stood 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 ideals 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. I 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 while you were president?

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

authority, being president. Now, I don't know what you 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 really was a people's Congressman. When the hearing was held, the first thing that Marcantonio did was to ask a cop, "Do you know who this man is?" indicating one of the artists. "No, I don't know." Didn't know him from Adam — in other words, he could have been pulled off the street. There was no evidence. The case was dismissed. Now, this is the important thing: LaGuardia said, "I will never again allow my police to play this role." It happened at that time that there was a strike on a ship in the harbor. The National Maritime Union heard about this statement of LaGuardia's, and they had their men go on the ship and sit down, instead of marching outside in a picket line. So the ship company urgently asked LaGuardia to do the same thing for them as he had done against the artists, and LaGuardia said, "You read and heard my statement, and that's the way it is." The ship company had to settle the strike, so, indirectly, the artists played a role.

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

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

INT: And no one felt the need to keep organized?

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

## Catalogue of the Exhibition

All dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

### SERIGRAPHS (SILKSCREENS)

1. *On the Beach*, 1939  
12 1/2 x 14 3/8  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of  
New York Project, 1943
2. *Fishermen's Luck*, 1939  
15 1/8 x 20 1/4  
The Syracuse University Art Collections
3. *Nor Rain Nor 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
5. *Mine Disaster*, c. 1939  
13 5/8 x 13 1/4  
The Syracuse University Art Collections
6. *The Strike is Won*, 1940  
12 1/4 x 16 3/4  
Ellen Sragow Gallery
7. *Change of Shift*, c. 1940  
16 3/4 x 20 3/8  
The Syracuse University Art Collections
8. *Winter on the Creek*, 1940  
12 x 14 1/8  
Print Collection, The New York Public Library  
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations
9. *Mending the Nets*, 1941  
14 5/8 x 22 3/8  
The Syracuse University Art Collections
10. *Going to Work*, 1941  
15 1/4 x 20 1/4  
The Syracuse University Art Collections
11. *Steel Town Panorama*, 1941  
16 5/16 x 21 1/2  
Print Collection, The New York Public Library  
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations
12. a.-l.: Twelve progressive proofs for *Long Island Ducks*, c. 1941  
12 3/4 x 16 3/4, each proof  
Collection of the artist  
m.: *Long Island Ducks*, c. 1941  
12 3/4 x 16 3/4  
Collection of the artist
13. *Damn The Torpedo*, 1942  
12 1/4 x 18 1/4  
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### COLOR LITHOGRAPHS

14. *Bootleg Mining*, 1937  
14 x 18 1/8  
The Syracuse University Art Collections
15. *Pittsburgh at Night*, c. 1937  
12 7/8 x 19  
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

17. *Coal Mine Country*, c. 1935  
14 1/2 x 19 1/2  
Ellen Sragow Gallery
18. *Coal Pickers*, 1936  
10 x 13 7/8  
The Syracuse University Art Collections
19. *Zinc Plant*, 1937  
13 x 16  
Print Collection, The New York Public Library,  
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations
20. *Street Near a Steel Mill*, 1937  
13 3/8 x 18 1/4  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of WPA  
New York Project, 1943
21. *Three Lane Traffic*, 1937  
10 1/2 x 14  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of WPA  
New York Project, 1943
22. *Liberty*, 1941  
13 x 19 3/8  
The Syracuse University Art Collections

### GOUACHES

23. *Mending the Nets*, 1941  
14 3/8 x 22  
The Syracuse University Art Collections
24. *Nor Rain Nor Snow*, c. 1939  
10 3/8 x 13 7/8  
The Syracuse University Art Collections



#### DRAWINGS

25. *Ruins of the Quarry at Kingston*, 1930  
pastel on paper  
19 x 23 3/4  
Ellen Sragow Gallery
26. Study for *Coal Mine Country*, c. 1935  
ink wash and pencil on paper  
13 7/8 x 16 5/8  
Ellen Sragow Gallery
27. Study for *Bootleg Mining*, 1936  
charcoal and pencil on paper  
10 3/4 x 14  
Ellen Sragow Gallery
28. *Steel Mill Operation*, 1936  
pencil and charcoal on paper  
10 3/4 x 14  
Ellen Sragow Gallery
29. Study for *Drillers*, c. 1939  
pencil and ink on paper  
15 x 11 1/2  
Ellen Sragow Gallery
30. Study for *The Strike Is Won*, c. 1940  
pencil on paper  
11 1/4 x 17 1/2  
Collection of the artist

#### DOCUMENTARY ITEMS

##### PUBLICATIONS AND EXHIBITION CATALOGUES

1. a-b. Anthony Velonis, *Technical Problems of the Artists: Technique of the Silk Screen Process*, Vol. I and Vol. II: *Methods Other Than Profilm* Federal Art Project, New York, 1938  
Harry Gottlieb, New York
2. Sketch and mock-up of exhibition catalogue: Harry Gottlieb's One-Man Silkscreen Exhibition. ACA Gallery, New York, 1940  
Harry Gottlieb, New York

##### PHOTOGRAPHS

3. Photograph of silkscreen demonstration at New York World's Fair  
August 11, 1940  
Miscellaneous Mss: McCausland Papers  
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution  
photo: Friedmacher
4. Photograph of silkscreen demonstration at New York World's Fair  
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5. Photograph of silkscreen demonstration at New York World's Fair  
August 11, 1940  
Miscellaneous Mss: McCausland Papers  
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution  
photo: Friedmacher
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. *Low Tide* by Gottlieb  
Department of Special Collections and Archives,  
Rutgers University Libraries
8. *Art Front*, January 1937. cover photo of "219" strike  
Department of Special Collections and Archives,  
Rutgers University Libraries
9. *Art Front Organizer*, June 18, 1937, article by Gottlieb, "The World's Fair and the Artist."  
Harry Gottlieb Papers  
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution