

# Bearing Witness: Drawings by William Gropper

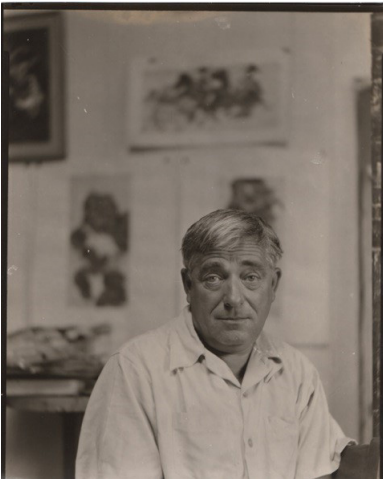
Feb 14  
Nov 6  
2016



# Bearing Witness: Drawings by William Gropper

Feb 14  
Nov 6  
2016

**Cover:** William Gropper (1897-1977), *Hunger March* (detail), 1932. Ink on tinted paper. From the collection of Harvey and Harvey-Ann Ross



Unknown photographer. *William Gropper in the Studio*, c. 1960s. Digital print. Courtesy the Gropper Family

"I'm from the old school, defending the underdog...If the Mexicans in Los Angeles were mistreated, I would feel Mexican. I react just as Negroes react, because I have felt the same thing as a Jew, or my family has." [1]

Printmaker, painter and visual editorialist William Gropper (1897-1977), spent seven decades bearing witness. Born to impoverished immigrant parents on the lower East Side of New York, Gropper learned early of social injustice and the abuse of human rights, themes that would remain with him throughout his life. Evidence of an inordinately prolific career, the works in *Bearing Witness: Drawings by William Gropper* address issues of political hypocrisy, surveillance and censorship, genocide and immigration that resonate with the current socio-political climate. What is demonstrated in this exhibition is a sharply captured chronicle of the world Gropper lived in.

Gropper's early upbringing was informed by profound life events. His mother supported their family working as a seamstress, an occupation he would depict in his work many times. In 1911, his beloved aunt Rachel whom the six Gropper children depended on for making their stark life bearable was a victim of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. This event further radicalized his thinking and fueled the notion of what made art significant. Gropper quit school at fourteen, worked twelve hour days and took night art classes at the progressive Ferrer School where he was exposed to the ideas of Robert Henri and George Bellows of the Ashcan school. Their teachings had a profound impact on the young Gropper's artistic development which he later recalled, "I began to realize that you don't paint with color – you paint with conviction, freedom, love and heart-aches, with what you have." [Ibid] [2]

From 1917-1919, the youthful Gropper worked on staff for the *New York Tribune* Sunday section until he was fired for a cartoon he drew featured on the cover of the *International Workers of the World's Rebel Worker*. In 1920, Gropper contributed political cartoons to the *Liberator*, in which his burgeoning style can be seen influences as diverse as James Thurber of the lofty *New Yorker* to the populist cartoonist Rube Goldberg and *The Katzenjammer Kids* (a comic strip created by Rudolph Dirks and drawn by Harold H. Knerr from 1912 to 1949).

In 1920, Gropper traveled to Cuba and, in 1927, made a trip (the first of three) to the U.S.S.R. with fellow writers Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis and Scott Nearing, further cementing his political convictions. In 1937, Gropper was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship which he used to tour the Dust Bowl, Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle, resulting in a series of paintings and drawings. These sympathetic drawings with their poignantly written observations were published in *The Nation* as firsthand reportage on the resulting crises of disease, poverty, and migration. This work is as relevant today with its parallel to the devastating effects of climate change on the landscapes of the United States and the world. Gropper reported on the nascent United Nations charter conference in San Francisco for *Freiheit* and the *New Masses* in 1945.

Early works on labor in the 1920s and 1930s reference themes of human rights and labor relations inspired by Gropper's working class background. Other works reflect the burgeoning menace of pre-fascism and the events leading up to the Holocaust. Images of the rise of Mussolini and Hirohito in the 1920s and





William Gropper (1897-1977), *Hoover's Hounds*, c. 1948. Published in *Freiheit*, 1948. Ink on paper. From the collection of Harvey and Harvey-Ann Ross

Hitler in the 1930s reflect the Axis power of dictatorships in the world political arena, while other works highlight the years leading up to World War II and its aftermath. Gropper's views of the hypocrisy of the American political system are evidenced by an obsessive 30-year series portraying the United States Senate manipulated by personal interests and Wall Street's corporate greed. This series had its genesis in 1936, when *Vanity Fair* sent Gropper to Washington, DC for several weeks, to document the proceedings of the United States Senate, its committees and its prominent members.

For more than thirty years, Gropper produced powerful cartoons for mainstream periodicals *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, *New York Post*, *Esquire* and the *New York Tribune*, avant-garde magazines such as *The Bookman* and *The Dial*, and leftist or Yiddish publications *New Masses*, *The Nation*, *Revolutionary Age*, *New Directions*, and the *Sunday Worker*. Incredibly prolific, for the communist Jewish *Freiheit* alone, over a twenty-eight year period Gropper created an astonishing 9,000 daily political cartoons. This work as an editorial cartoonist allowed him to support his wife and two young sons and, at the same time, contribute to progressive causes. Additionally, he had been painting since 1920, and while it wasn't the center of his artistic practice, he received his first solo painting exhibition in 1936, with his paintings soon after acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art.

Known as the "people's artist," Gropper's influence worldwide was deeply felt in the 1940s. In 1944, an enormous dinner celebration was organized by the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, in honor of Gropper's 47th birthday. Sponsors and speakers included Leonard Bernstein, Marc Chagall, Aaron Copland, Carl Sandburg and Dorothy Parker. Cards were sent in by Theodore Dreiser, Grover Whalen, Langston Hughes, Rockwell Kent, Paul Robeson and Howard Fast. The evening's host was Hollywood screenwriter Edward Chodorov, whose opening remarks illuminated Gropper's political stature and charismatic persona:

*"We pass over lightly the Niagara of books, booklets, pamphlets, folders and what-nots which are illustrated by the smiling but dangerous little man...the most modest guy that ever lived...Bill has given us so much – of the years of his life – the fertility of his brain – the guts and courage of his art – that he can take from us a little honor. Little enough, God knows!"* [3]



William Gropper (1897-1977), *Lincoln Observing Corrupt Politicians, Silver Shirts and the K.K.K.*, c. 1936. Ink and Chinese white on paper. From the collection of Harvey and Harvey-Ann Ross

Gropper's first anti-Hitler cartoon appeared in print as early as 1930, but his embracing of Jewish themes is not fully evident until the mid-1940s when he was invited to visit with other artists, to the unveiling of the Warsaw Ghetto monument. "I'm not Jewish in a professional sense but in a human sense; here are six million destroyed. There is a ritual in the Jewish religion of lighting a candle for the dead, but instead of doing this, I decided to paint a picture in memory, every year. In this way, I paid my tribute, rather than burning a candle." [4] After the Holocaust, he created the suite of impassioned lithographs, *Your Brother's Blood Cries Out*, 1943; with the best-selling author Howard Fast, the illustrated poem, *Never to Forget: The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto*; and in 1970, *The Shtetl*, a suite of twenty-four color lithographs on village life.

Targeted by the FBI for his leftist sympathies as early as 1941, it was in 1953 that Gropper was subpoenaed to appear before Senator Joseph McCarthy's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, to answer the allegation that his work was inspired by Communism. Gropper prepared a written statement to demonstrate his position to the committee but was not allowed to present it.

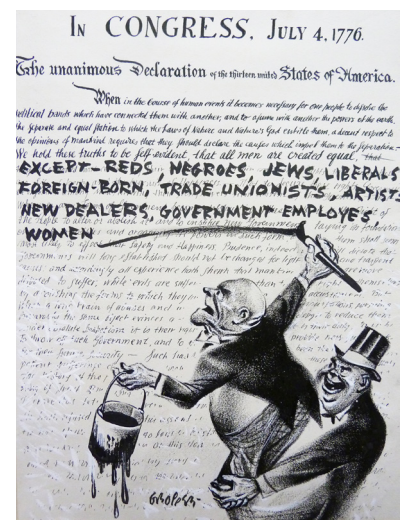
"You drew a rather celebrated painting of the United States Senate at one time. Were you under the orders of the Communist Party at the time that you made that painting?" [5]

He invoked the Fifth Amendment prohibiting self incrimination and was subsequently blacklisted. This was a devastating outcome for an artist who truly loved the freedom of expression that America stood for. In that dark time, Gropper derived inspiration from Goya's series of lithographs, *Los Caprichos*, satirical etchings depicting late 18th-century Spain and its discontents, expressing his disdain for McCarthy's witch-hunt and the current American political climate in his own series of fifty lithographs, *The Caprichos*, 1953-1956. This "Inquisition" affected him both professionally and personally, depriving him of scheduled commissions and museum exhibitions, for a period of eight years. In a letter dated November 2, 1961, to John Baur, curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Gropper states, "...From that date on, I have been completely ignored by the Whitney Museum. You will agree that blacklisting is a most disgraceful behavior for any cultural institutions to practice in this country. How long does this blacklisting have to continue?" [6]

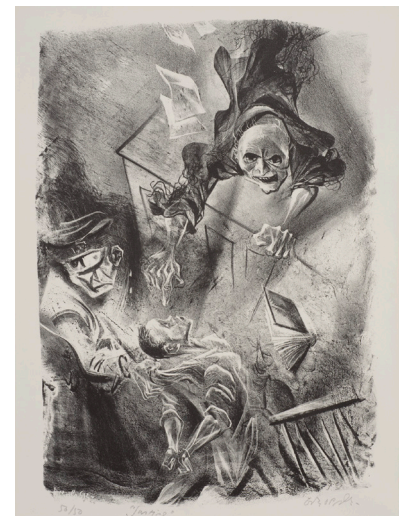
William Gropper was considered the most accomplished of political cartoonists in this country, only rivaled by George Grosz internationally, and may be the greatest anti-fascist artist in the history of art. *Bearing Witness: Drawings by William Gropper* has been organized to shed some light on an artist fully lauded in his own time, though remarkably under-appreciated since his death in 1977. A lifelong humanist, it is his impassioned commentaries on fascism, war, freedom of speech and action, capitalism and labor rights, corruption and hypocrisy, immigration and racism, which resonate so viscerally almost 100 years later.

*Bearing Witness: Drawings by William Gropper* is curated by Louise Weinberg, Queens Museum Registrar/Archives Manager.

1. August L. Freundlich, *William Gropper: Retrospective* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press in conjunction with the Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery of the University of Miami, 1968. 2. Ibid.
3. William Gropper Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries. 4. August L. Freundlich, *William Gropper: Retrospective* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press in conjunction with the Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery of the University of Miami, 1968. 5. State Department Information Program, Hearings before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate, May 6, 1953. 6. Gropper, William, November 12, 1961, Letter to Mr. John Baur, regarding "Whitney Biennial Exhibition," Digitized by The Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Archives, Whitney Museum of American Art



William Gropper (1897-1977), *Congressional Declaration*, c. 1937. Ink and Chinese white on paper. From the collection of Harvey and Harvey-Ann Ross



William Gropper (1897-1977), *Justice* from *The Caprichos* series, 1953-1956. Lithograph. From the collection of Harvey and Harvey-Ann Ross





William Gropper (1897-1977), *Paul Bunyan*, 1945. Oil on canvas, From the collection of Harvey and Harvey-Ann Ross.  
Photo by Hai Zhang

**Queens Museum**  
New York City Building  
Flushing Meadows Corona Park  
Queens, NY 11368

**T** 718 592 9700 **F** 718 592 5778  
**E** [info@queensmuseum.org](mailto:info@queensmuseum.org)

[queensmuseum.org](http://queensmuseum.org)  
[@QueensMuseum](https://www.instagram.com/QueensMuseum)

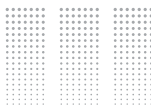
[#WilliamGropper](https://twitter.com/WilliamGropper)



*Bearing Witness: Drawings by William Gropper*  
is generously supported by Harvey M. Ross.  
Additional support is provided by the New York  
City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New  
York State Council on the Arts with the support  
of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York  
State Legislature.



**Council on  
the Arts**



**QUEENS MUSEUM**