

“BY POPULAR DEMAND”: THE HERO IN AMERICAN ART, c. 1929-1945

By

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## **Abstract**

During the 1930s and 1940s, as the United States weathered the Great Depression, World War II, and dramatic social changes, heroes were sought out and created as part of an ever-changing national culture. American artists responded to the widespread desire for heroic imagery by creating icons of leadership and fortitude. Heroes took the form of political leaders, unionized workers, farmers, folk icons, historical characters, mothers, and women workers. The ideas they manifest are as varied as the styles and motivations of the artists who developed them. This dissertation contextualizes works by such artists as Florine Stettheimer, Philip Evergood, John Steuart Curry, Palmer Hayden, Dorothea Lange, Norman Rockwell, and Aaron Douglas, delving into the realms of politics, labor, gender, and race. The images considered fulfilled national (and often personal) needs for pride, confidence, and hope during these tumultuous decades, and this project is the first to consider the hero in American art as a sustained modernist visual trope.

## Acknowledgements

I first became interested in the concept of national heroes and leadership in American culture as a college student and recent graduate working at Monticello and Mount Vernon. When I came to the University of Kansas in 2004, I began to realize that my first forays into the study of American icons could lead to a meaningful and challenging dissertation topic. Murphy Seminars on The Modern Portrait with Marni Kessler, David Cateforis, and Tamar Garb and on Reading American Pictures with Charles Eldredge, David Cateforis, and David Lubin shaped my sense of the field of American art and my scholarly priorities in significant ways.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
List of Figures.....	viii
Introduction: Heroes by Popular Demand .....	1
Chapter One: Two Saints on One Canvas: Florine Stettheimer’s <i>Cathedrals of Wall Street</i> ..	18
Chapter Two: “Our Workers are Heroes”: Philip Evergood’s <i>American Tragedy</i> .....	44
Chapter Three: The Hero of the Harvest: John Steuart Curry’s <i>Our Good Earth</i> .....	77
Chapter Four: Palmer Hayden’s John Henry Series: Inventing a Black, American Hero .....	103
Chapter Five: The Burdens of Womanhood: American Heroines of the 1930s and 1940s ...	138
Conclusion: The Heyday of Heroism .....	174
Figures .....	177
Bibliography .....	178

## List of Figures

- Fig. 1-1 Florine Stettheimer, *Cathedrals of Wall Street*, 1938-40
- Fig. 1-2 Florine Stettheimer, *Cathedrals of Broadway*, 1929
- Fig. 1-3 Florine Stettheimer, *Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue*, 1931
- Fig. 1-4 Florine Stettheimer, *Cathedrals of Art*, 1942-44
- Fig. 1-5 Florine Stettheimer, Set and Costume Designs for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 1934
- Fig. 1-6 Florine Stettheimer's Living Quarters and Studio
- Fig. 1-7 Florine Stettheimer, *Soirée*, 1917-19
- Fig. 1-8 George Washington, *Collier's* cover, 27 February 1932
- Fig. 1-9 Carrie Hall, George Washington Bicentennial Quilt, c. 1932
- Fig. 1-10 James Earle Fraser, *George Washington*, 1939, New York World's Fair
- Fig. 1-11 Postcard depicting the colossal recreation of John Quincy Adams Ward's statue of George Washington that stands on Wall Street, 1939, New York World's Fair
- Fig. 1-12 John Quincy Adams Ward, *George Washington*, 1882, Wall Street, New York, NY
- Fig. 1-13 Inauguration Fête on Wall Street, *The New York Times*, 30 April 1938
- Fig. 1-14 Edward P. Buyck, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, 1933
- Fig. 1-15 Henry Salem Hubbell, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, 1939
- Fig. 1-16 John Vanderlyn, *George Washington*, 1834
- Fig. 1-17 Roosevelt addressing Congress in House of Representatives, 1942
- Fig. 1-18 Miguel Covarrubias, *The Inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, *Vanity Fair*, March 1933
- Fig. 1-19 M. Falk, "The Greatest Presidents God Ever Created," 1945
- Fig. 1-20 L. De Ranieri, "Remember Pearl Harbor," c. 1942
- Fig. 1-21 Clock featuring Washington, Roosevelt, and Lincoln, c. 1930s
- Fig. 1-22 "Yes, You Remembered Me," political cartoon, 1930s
- Fig. 1-23 "The Lifting Depression," political cartoon, 1930s
- Fig. 1-24 Douglas Chandor, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, c. 1940s



- Fig. 1-25 Douglas Chandor, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, 1945
- Fig. 1-26 Walker Evans, Domestic Interior with Roosevelt Photograph on Rear Wall, 1930s
- Fig. 1-27 Walker Evans, Roadside Billboard with Painted Image of FDR, 1934-36
- Fig. 1-28 Photograph of FDR Inauguration, 4 March 1933, Washington, DC
- Fig. 1-29 Associated Press, Photograph of Franklin D. Roosevelt, c. 1930s
- Fig. 1-30 Alfred Eisenstadt, Bust of FDR outside building before opening of World's Fair, March 1939, New York, NY
- Fig. 1-31 Ben Shahn, Poster for National Citizens Political Action Committee, 1944
- Fig. 1-32 Ben Shahn, Jersey Homesteads Mural, detail, 1937
- Fig. 1-33 Film Still from *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939
- Fig. 2-1 Max Kalish, *New Power*, c. late 1920s
- Fig. 2-2 Harry Sternberg, *Riveter*, 1935
- Fig. 2-3 Julius Bloch, *The Striker*, 1934
- Fig. 2-4 Elizabeth Olds, *Miner Joe*, c. 1937-42
- Fig. 2-5 Alice Neel, *Pat Whalen*, 1935
- Fig. 2-6 Hugo Gellert, *Primary Accumulation 19*, 1933
- Fig. 2-7 Joe Jones, *We Demand*, 1934
- Fig. 2-8 Philip Evergood, (An?) *American Tragedy*, (circa?) 1937
- Fig. 2-9 Jacques-Louis David, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799
- Fig. 2-10 Paolo Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*, c. 1438-40
- Fig. 2-11 Perugino, *Delivery of the Keys to St. Peter*, 1481
- Fig. 2-12 Philip Evergood, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1929
- Fig. 2-13 Philip Evergood, *Centaurs and Men*, 1926-27
- Fig. 2-14 Philip Evergood, *Madonna of the Mines*, 1932, revised 1944
- Fig. 2-15 Bernece Berkman, *Current News*, 1937
- Fig. 2-16 Meyer Levin, "Theatres of War," c. 1937, publication source unknown
- Fig. 2-17 Philip Evergood, *Street Corner*, 1936
- Fig. 2-18 Hugo Gellert, *The Working Day 34*, from *Karl Marx' 'Capital' in Lithographs*, 1933
- Fig. 2-19 Artists' Union Logo, 1930s

- Fig. 2-20 Hugo Gellert, *The Working Day* 37, from *Karl Marx' 'Capital' in Lithographs*, 1933
- Fig. 2-21 James Guy, *Workers*, 1938
- Fig. 2-22 Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy* with swastika pattern highlighted
- Fig. 2-23 William Gropper, *Rot Front*, *The New Masses*, 8 February 1933
- Fig. 2-24 William Gropper, *Untitled*, *The New Masses*, 12 July 1934
- Fig. 2-25 Werner Drewes, *Distorted Swastika*, 1934
- Fig. 2-26 Anonymous, *Adam n' Eve*, *Leftward* 3, July 1933
- Fig. 2-27 Anonymous, *Workers Unite*, *Leftward* 3, April 1933
- Fig. 2-28 Francisco Goya, *Third of May, 1808*, 1814
- Fig. 2-29 Philip Evergood, *Epitaph*, c. 1953-55
- Fig. 2-30 Philip Evergood, *All in a Day's Work*, 1936
- Fig. 2-31 *Daily Worker*, 1 June 1937, p. 1
- Fig. 2-32 Anton Refregier, *Guernica*, 1937
- Fig. 2-33 Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937
- Fig. 2-34 Pablo Picasso, *Self Portrait*, 1907
- Fig. 3-1 John Steuart Curry, *Our Good Earth*, 1942
- Fig. 3-2 Currier & Ives, *American Homestead Summer*, 1868
- Fig. 3-3 Fanny Palmer, *American Farm Scenes #1: Spring*, 1853
- Fig. 3-4 William Sidney Mount, *Bargaining for a Horse*, 1835
- Fig. 3-5 Arthur Rothstein, *Farmer and Sons Walking in the Face of a Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma*, 1936
- Fig. 3-6 Walker Evans, *Floyd Burroughs*, 1935 or 1936
- Fig. 3-7 Thomas Hart Benton, *Cradling Wheat*, 1938
- Fig. 3-8 Grant Wood, *Fall Plowing*, 1931
- Fig. 3-9 John Steuart Curry, *Kansas Cornfield*, 1933
- Fig. 3-10 John Steuart Curry, *Tornado*, 1929
- Fig. 3-11 John Steuart Curry, *The Mississippi*, 1935
- Fig. 3-12 John Steuart Curry, *The Light of the World*, or *America Facing the Storm*, 1941
- Fig. 3-13 *Our Good Earth*, war bonds poster, 1942
- Fig. 3-14 *Our Good Earth*, war bonds brochure, 1942

- Fig. 3-15 John Steuart Curry, *The Stockman*, 1929
- Fig. 3-16 John Steuart Curry, *Chris L. Christensen*, 1941
- Fig. 3-17 James Earl Fraser, *Heritage*, 1935
- Fig. 3-18 James Earl Fraser, Medallion for Department of Agriculture, National Archives, Washington, DC, 1935
- Fig. 3-19 Winslow Homer, *A Veteran in a New Field*, 1865
- Fig. 3-20 Timothy O’Sullivan, *Harvest of Death*, 1863
- Fig. 3-21 George Inness, *Peace and Plenty*, 1865
- Fig. 3-22 *Help Harvest*, U.S. Crop Corps poster, 1940s
- Fig. 3-23 *Harvest War Crops*, U.S. Crop Corps poster, 1940s
- Fig. 3-24 John Steuart Curry, *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*, 1928-40
- Fig. 3-25 John Steuart Curry, *Parade to War*, 1938
- Fig. 3-26 John Steuart Curry, *Leaving the Farm for Army Training Camp*, 1941
- Fig. 3-27 *Don’t Let That Shadow Touch Them*, war bonds poster, 1940s
- Fig. 3-28 *Deliver Us From Evil*, war bonds poster, 1943
- Fig. 3-29 John Steuart Curry, *The Farm is a Battleground, Too*, 1943
- Fig. 3-30 *The Farm is a Battleground, Too!*, war bonds poster, 1943
- Fig. 3-31 John Steuart Curry, Study for *Wisconsin Agriculture Leads to Victory*, 1942
- Fig. 3-32 Photograph of John Steuart Curry at work on *Wisconsin Agriculture Leads to Victory*, 1942
- Fig. 3-33 Thomas Hart Benton, *The Sowers*, from *The Year of Peril Series*, 1942
- Fig. 3-34 John Steuart Curry, *Bathers*, 1928
- Fig. 3-35 Arthur Kampf, *Venus and Adonis*, 1939
- Fig. 3-36 Oskar Martin-Amorbach, *Out to Harvest*, 1938
- Fig. 3-37 Arno Breker, *Comradeship*, c. 1940
- Fig. 3-38 Arno Breker, *Sacrifice*, date unknown
- Fig. 3-39 John Steuart Curry, *Our Good Earth*, 1942, watercolor
- Fig. 3-40 John Steuart Curry, Study for *Our Good Earth*, 1942
- Fig. 3-41 Curry, *Our Good Earth*, 1942, lithograph
- Fig. 4-1 Palmer Hayden, *His Hammer in His Hand*, c.1947
- Fig. 4-2 Palmer Hayden, *When John Henry Was a Baby*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-3 Palmer Hayden, *He Laid Down His Hammer and Cried*, 1944-47

- Fig. 4-4 Palmer Hayden, *The Dress She Wore Was Blue*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-5 Palmer Hayden, *John Henry Was the Best in the Land*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-6 Palmer Hayden, *Where'd You Git Them Hightop Shoes*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-7 Palmer Hayden, *His Hammer in the Wind*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-8 Palmer Hayden, *A Man Ain't Nothin' But A Man*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-9 Palmer Hayden, *John Henry on the Right, Steam Drill on the Left*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-10 Palmer Hayden, *Died wid His Hammer in His Hand*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-11 Palmer Hayden, *Goin' Where Her Man Fell Dead*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-12 Palmer Hayden, *There Lies That Steel Drivin' Man*, 1944-47
- Fig. 4-13 Dorothea Lange, *Toward Los Angeles, California*, 1937
- Fig. 4-14 Eben Given, Illustration for Frank Shay's *Here's Audacity!* (1930)
- Fig. 4-15 James Daugherty, Illustration for *Their Weight in Wildcats* (1936)
- Fig. 4-16 Fred Becker, *John Henry's Hand*, 1936
- Fig. 4-17 Fred Becker, *John Henry's Funeral*, 1938
- Fig. 4-18 William Gropper, *John Henry*, from the series *American Folk Heroes*, 1945
- Fig. 4-19 William Gropper, *America: Its Folklore*, 1946
- Fig. 4-20 Palmer Hayden, *Big Bend Tunnel*, 1944-45
- Fig. 4-21 Photograph of Palmer Hayden, 1947
- Fig. 4-22 James Daugherty, Illustration for *John Henry and the Double Jointed Steam-Drill* (1945)
- Fig. 5-1 Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936
- Fig. 5-2 Norman Rockwell, *Rosie the Riveter*, 1943
- Fig. 5-3 Aaron Douglas, *Harriet Tubman*, 1931
- Fig. 5-4 Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, first image, 1936
- Fig. 5-5 *Allegory of Peace*, Ara Pacis, Rome, 13-9 BCE
- Fig. 5-6 Raphael, *Madonna del Granduca*, 1505-06
- Fig. 5-7 Lewis Hine, *A Madonna of the Tenements*, c.1906-17
- Fig. 5-8 Dorothea Lange, *Woman of the High Plains*, "If You Die, You're Dead, That's All." *Texas Panhandle*, 1938
- Fig. 5-9 Ward Lockwood, *Opening of the West*, sketch, 1937
- Fig. 5-10 Ward Lockwood, *Opening of the West*, 1937
- Fig. 5-11 Ward Lockwood, *Settling the West*, 1937

- Fig. 5-12 Dorothea Lange, *Rural Rehabilitation Client, Tulare County, California*, 1938
- Fig. 5-13 J. Howard Miller, *We Can Do It!*, 1942
- Fig. 5-14 Norman Rockwell, *Rosie the Riveter*, *Saturday Evening Post* cover, 29 May 1943
- Fig. 5-15 Norman Rockwell, *The Four Freedoms: Freedom of Speech*, 1943
- Fig. 5-16 Norman Rockwell, *The Four Freedoms: Freedom of Worship*, 1943
- Fig. 5-17 Norman Rockwell, *The Four Freedoms: Freedom from Want*, 1943
- Fig. 5-18 Norman Rockwell, *The Four Freedoms: Freedom from Fear*, 1943
- Fig. 5-19 Norman Rockwell, *Willie Gillis at the U.S.O.*, *Saturday Evening Post* cover, 7 February 1942
- Fig. 5-20 Norman Rockwell, *Willie Gillis' Package from Home*, *Saturday Evening Post* cover, 4 October 1941
- Fig. 5-21 Elizabeth Arden advertisement for home permanent, 1942
- Fig. 5-22 Heinz advertisement for condensed soups, 1944
- Fig. 5-23 Alberto Vargas, *Varga Girl*, c. 1940s
- Fig. 5-24 Cyrus Hungerford, *Their Real Pin-up Girl*, 1944
- Fig. 5-25 Michelangelo, *Prophet Isaiah*, Sistine Chapel, 1508-12
- Fig. 5-26 Photograph of Abbye Stockton, Muscle Beach, Venice, CA, c. 1945-48
- Fig. 5-27 Ben Shahn, *The Riveter*, 1938
- Fig. 5-28 War Manpower Commission, *Women in the War*, 1942
- Fig. 5-29 *Good Work, Sister*, "Victory-Builders" Division of Bressler Editorial Cartoons, Inc., New York, 1944
- Fig. 5-30 Norman Rockwell, *Rosie to the Rescue*, 1943
- Fig. 5-31 "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" c. 1837
- Fig. 5-32 Charles Keck, *Lifting the Veil of Ignorance*, Tuskegee University, 1922
- Fig. 5-33 Aaron Douglas, Cover for *FIRE!!*, 1926
- Fig. 5-34 Aaron Douglas, Cover for *Opportunity*, 1926
- Fig. 5-35 Aaron Douglas, Cover for *The American Negro*, 1928
- Fig. 5-36 Aaron Douglas, *Negro Labor*, Fisk University, 1930
- Fig. 5-37 Aaron Douglas, *Negro in America*, Fisk University, 1930
- Fig. 5-38 Harriet Tubman, woodcut, from Sarah H. Bradford's *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869)

- Fig. 5-39 William H. Johnson, *Harriet Tubman*, c. 1945
- Fig. 5-40 Stanislaw Julian Ignacy, Count Ostrorog, known as Walery, *Josephine Baker*,  
La Folie du Jour, Paris, April 1926
- Fig. 5-41 Aaron Douglas, *The Burden of Black Womanhood*, *The Crisis* cover,  
September 1927
- Fig. 5-42 Roscoe C. Wright, *Black Womanhood*, *The Crisis* cover, January 1928

## Introduction: Heroes by Popular Demand

“The popular hero, although his name may figure in the history books, and although his mortal frame may have been pinned down for centuries by an ancient and lordly monument, is a creature of modernity, a Protean figure whose aspect changes completely as each new generation lays hold upon him. Heroes are created by popular demand.”

-Gerald W. Johnson, *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, 1941<sup>1</sup>

“An age without great men is one which acquiesces in the drift of history.”

-Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Decline of Greatness,” 1958<sup>2</sup>

By 1941, when social commentator Gerald W. Johnson published *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, the United States had endured over a decade of unparalleled economic depression, labor and class disputes, and an environmental catastrophe that left the nation’s central farmlands devastated by drought. Throughout the 1930s, America witnessed a startling rise of fascist aggression in Europe and Asia, and, by the start of the next decade, became embroiled in World War II. “The American with any concern about his country’s destiny needs comfort,” Johnson explained.<sup>3</sup> Johnson (and others) believed that cultural heroes could provide such solace. In 1942 Wallace Stevens commented on the utility of the hero in a poem,

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald W. Johnson, *American Heroes and Hero-Worship* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Decline of Greatness,” *Saturday Evening Post* 231, no. 18, 1 November 1958, 71. Anthologized in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Hope* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), 23-33.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *American Heroes and Hero-Worship*, 18.

writing, “Unless we believe in the hero, what is there to believe?”<sup>4</sup> Theirs was an era that demanded strong leaders who could provide direction for the nation in the face of such economic and military crises. It was also a time of intense social change, as women and African Americans attempted to carve out social and political spaces in the national fabric. Amid such dramatic cultural evolution, the American hero emerged as a symbol of the ideals and aspirations of various segments of the population, each striving to achieve national importance and influence.

American heroes are both “protean figures” and anchors in Schlesinger’s “drift of history.” Each generation reinvents and reinterprets a hero’s worth and significance; heroes represent and provide context for the principal struggles and challenges that Americans face in any given era. In the 1930s and 1940s heroic figures emerged in the realms of politics and labor, along with the evolving African American and women’s rights movements. Such figures embodied qualities of leadership, integrity, and perseverance. A number of American artists responded creatively to the desire for heroic imagery and their works fulfilled both personal and national needs for pride, confidence, and hope. Studying heroic iconography from the 1930s and 1940s affords an opportunity to understand the complexities of American identity, the nation’s social and cultural politics, and competing agendas of progress in decades defined by change and crisis.

### **A “Usable Past” and the “American Scene”**

The search for and creation of heroic American figures in art of the 1930s and 1940s is part of an ongoing attempt by artists, critics, and writers to define a national identity. In large

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<sup>4</sup> From the poem, “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” in Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 275.



measure, this meant distinguishing American creativity from that of the artistically hegemonic Old World. Upon visiting the 1913 Armory Show, critic Randolph Bourne saw an aesthetic inferiority when comparing the work of the Americans to their European taste-making counterparts. Bourne directed artists to develop a “new American nationalism” in their art to remedy the “deplorable situation.”<sup>5</sup> His artistic directive predated the famous summons Van Wyck Brooks issued to the nation’s writers in the wake of World War I to “discover, invent a usable past.”<sup>6</sup> Having surveyed the landscape of American literature and culture up to 1918 and finding it both nearly bankrupt and plagued by insecurities when compared to European literary history, Brooks wondered what sorts of proud traditions and great icons Americans could conjure to provide direction and hope for the future. “We have had no cumulative culture,” he wrote.<sup>7</sup> “The past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value,” he lamented.<sup>8</sup> Like Bourne’s, Brooks’ solution was to ask writers to examine American culture and seek out subjects that would validate the present.

In the wake of Brooks’ important essay, over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, a deliberate and self-conscious Americanism became increasingly popular among myriad visual artists. The American art community sought to distance and differentiate itself from European modernism and to embrace their nation’s subjects as fodder for their art. As Stuart Davis created his synthetic cubist paintings of Lucky Strike tobacco packaging in 1921, he pledged to produce “really original American work.”<sup>9</sup> In a 1923 letter to Paul Rosenfeld, modernist champion and photographer Alfred Stieglitz longed for “America without that damned French

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<sup>5</sup> Randolph Bourne, “Our Cultural Humility,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 114 (October 1914): 506.

<sup>6</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial* 64 (11 April 1918): 339.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Davis’ journals, 1920-22, quoted in Matthew Baigell, *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 71.

flavor!”<sup>10</sup> In 1925, he opened *The Intimate Gallery* in New York, and promoted it as “an American room.”<sup>11</sup> In 1929, Stieglitz made his earlier nationalist impulse more explicit by naming his third New York gallery *An American Place*. There Stieglitz staged exhibitions devoted exclusively to his small coterie of native talent and subjects—Arthur Dove’s rural New York landscapes, Georgia O’Keeffe’s New Mexican desert scenes, John Marin’s Maine seascapes.<sup>12</sup> In such works as *Classic Landscape* (1931) and *My Egypt* (1927), Precisionists Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth compared the architecture of contemporary American industry—Ford factories and grain elevators—with such ancient monuments as the Parthenon in Athens and the pyramids at Giza.

Often in this period artists aggrandized American subjects and themes as a way of espousing and fostering pride in American art and culture. At other times artists took a more ambivalent or even pessimistic view of the history and life of the United States. Indeed, Karal Ann Marling has shown that Demuth’s title, *My Egypt*, is an ironic reference to his own mixed feelings about being an artist in America.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Charles Burchfield from Ohio and Edward Hopper from New England painted landscapes, architecture, events, and people that were recognizably and anecdotally American. However, as Matthew Baigell explained with regard to Burchfield’s and Hopper’s cityscapes:

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<sup>10</sup> Alfred Stieglitz, letter to Paul Rosenfeld, 5 September 1923, in Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1983), 212.

<sup>11</sup> Stieglitz used that phrase regularly, including in a 1927 gallery announcement reproduced in Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (New York: Random House, 1973), 169.

<sup>12</sup> For more information, see Sarah Greenough, ed., *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art; Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2000), passim.

<sup>13</sup> Karal Ann Marling, “*My Egypt*: The Irony of the American Dream,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 30.

These are not mean streets, but dead streets, lacking heroism, strength or even dignity. Social cohesion has given way to fragmentation. [They] painted the vanquished and, more important, the loss of community in the modern age. They reveal that the people and their spirit were emotionally stillborn. They painted a distraught community. Taking a hard inward look at the American character, they found confusion and despair in the face of modern times.<sup>14</sup>

The despair that Baigell sees in Hopper's and Burchfield's work was a product of a generation sent to discover its national traits and purpose, but without the urgency of a crisis or a deadline. In a similar vein, writers of the 1920s who mined American culture for subjects found presidents, Revolutionary figures, and the Puritans, among others, ripe for reexamination. However, many writers more often debunked than affirmed the tall tales of past greatness as a means of elevating their own generation's comparative status and humanizing the past.<sup>15</sup> Without a clear model or precedent to guide them, as Wanda Corn has argued, many artists "felt they had on hand no intellectual understanding of, or visual forms for, a modern national identity."<sup>16</sup> Georgia O'Keeffe famously recalled that at this moment it seemed that all artists in the United States were in search of "the great American thing," but many had trouble deciding just what form such a "thing" should take.<sup>17</sup>

Alfred Haworth Jones and others have argued that the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing economic depression caused American creators to return to a more focused, determined, and reassuring vision of history and life.<sup>18</sup> Depression-era writers and artists alike searched for themes and symbols of Americana that could provide inspiration and direction

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<sup>14</sup> Baigell, *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Haworth Jones, "The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (December 1971): 713-14.

<sup>16</sup> Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xv.

<sup>17</sup> Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), unpaginated.

<sup>18</sup> On the difference between the post-World War I and the post-stock market crash generations' understanding of "usable past," see Jones, "The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era," 710-24.

for the nation's recovery. They sought validation and aimed to forge connections between the present and the past. In 1941 John Dos Passos explained this affirmative turn toward American history, writing, "We need to know what kind of firm ground other men, belonging to generations before us, have found to stand on."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the most canonical answer to Dos Passos' question exists in the work of such Regionalist painters as Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood. Observed broadly, their art mythologized the rural Midwest; they painted fertile fields, quaint families, and classic folk songs as a means of remembering and holding fast to the traditions of which they (and the rest of the nation) could be proud. By the 1930s such nationalistic artistic efforts were termed "American Scene" painting, a strain of art that scholars typically associate with nostalgia, optimism, and national pride.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the term American Scene also encompasses the work of the Social Realists, including such artists as Ben Shahn and Philip Evergood, whose work was more overtly political, and often agitated for marked social change. Thus, a sensitive understanding of American Scene painting takes into account its pursuit of various degrees of artistic realism, national themes and subject matter, and does not ignore the fact that many artists—Social Realists *and* Regionalists—imbued their works with a complicated attitude toward the history and culture of the United States that was not blindly idealistic.

Americans-at-large and American artists in particular united under a banner of national feeling and an urgent sense of uncertainty about the future that caused them to look not only for a usable past, but also for a usable present, as well. To be "usable" the narratives

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<sup>19</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On: Some Examples from the History of a Political Creed* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1941), 3.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent summary of the growth of nationalism in 1920s and 1930s American art, on which my discussion is based, see Baigell, *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America*, 60-79. See also, Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930's* (New York: Praeger, 1974), passim.

and symbols that artists employed needed, as John Dos Passos stated, to provide “answers to the riddles of today.”<sup>21</sup> Writers contributed to the mission as well, which had, as Alfred Kazin explained, “at its center...a devotion to the heroic example.”<sup>22</sup> Just as American Scene painters’ visions of America’s prosperity simultaneously exposed and critiqued the nation’s flaws, the usable heroes that American artists located and depicted are not overly idealized. Contrary to what the term “hero” typically connotes, American heroes of this period are not romanticized icons of triumph. Rather, the heroic figures that emerged in American art of the 1930s and 1940s are admirable individuals caught in a web of cultural complexities and struggles that makes their victory over hardship problematic, uncertain and, sometimes, unlikely. Such heroes manifest hope for a brighter future, but they do not embody a sense of certainty that such a positive future is imminent. Heroes are found throughout American realism of this period—in the work of Regionalists, Social Realists, and artists who are not commonly grouped under either term, but who created figural American paintings (and photographs) that attempt to capture the present or recreate the recent national past.

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<sup>21</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On: Some Examples from the History of a Political Creed*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1982, originally published in 1942), 487.

## Toward a Definition of Modern Heroism

“It seems that a society will sculpt its pantheon of heroes whenever the need arises, and it will do so out of whatever material is at hand, however blemished the marble or knotted the timber.”

-Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*<sup>23</sup>

Surveying the array of cultural commentary on the character of American heroes up to mid-century, one finds that in the hands of a talented hero-creator anyone can become heroic. Heroes could be made of presidents like Washington and Lincoln, pioneers and explorers from John Smith to Daniel Boone, and military men.<sup>24</sup> As the *New Republic*'s managing editor Bruce Bliven wrote in his 1932 essay, “Worshipping the Hero,” “the world needs giants” and one could find them on the television, the radio, and in the guise of a financier like John D. Rockefeller who countered his reputation as a “malevolent robber baron of oil into a gentle, almost entirely saintly, old man who gives away dimes, plays golf, and lives on crackers and milk.”<sup>25</sup> Such heroes did not emerge fully formed like Athena from Zeus' head. Rather, artists and writers constructed these heroic characters deliberately. The cultivation and discussion of cultural heroes in the 1930s and 1940s became a national pastime.

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<sup>23</sup> Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 59.

<sup>24</sup> These men are among the subjects of such mid-century heroic studies as Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America, a Chronicle of Hero-Worship* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1941) and Marshall Fishwick, *American Heroes: Myth and Reality* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1954).

<sup>25</sup> Bruce Bliven, “Worshipping the American Hero,” in *America as Americans See It*, ed. Fred J. Ringel (New York: The Literary Guild, 1932), 129 and 127.

The hero counts among his essential qualities a sense of duty, a governing morality, and an ambition and idealism for improving some aspect of that national experience.<sup>26</sup> The American hero is representative of a significant subset of the population that reveres him.<sup>27</sup> As Dixon Wecter explained,

In a democracy, where the favorite should rightly be the people's choice—and not the elect of hereditary honors or of a myth-making 'party' leadership—he is an index to the collective mind and heart. His deeds and qualities are those which millions endorse....The hero is he whom every American should wish to be.<sup>28</sup>

Embedded in this notion of popular endorsement is a large dose of relatability. As Daniel Boorstin explained,

Our most admired national heroes...are generally supposed to possess the "common touch." We revere them, not because they possess charisma, divine favor, a grace or talent granted them by God, but because they embody popular virtues. We admire them, not because they reveal God, but because they reveal and elevate ourselves.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, heroic characters in American culture act as distillations of beliefs and agendas shared if not by all Americans, by at least a significant contingent of people.

Both Wecter's and Boorstin's interpretations of the hero in American life are grounded in the definition of heroism offered by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the 1840s Emerson articulated a belief in the hero as one who represents the ideals, thoughts, and facts

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<sup>26</sup> Such qualities run rampant in the writings of Sidney Hook, Dixon Wecter, and Marshall Fishwick, the three most prominent American scholars of heroism in the early to mid-twentieth century. See Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (New York: The John Day Company, 1943); Wecter, *The Hero in America, a Chronicle of Hero-Worship*; Fishwick, *American Heroes: Myth and Reality*. Other important chronicles of heroism include Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956, originally published in 1936) and Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, originally published in 1949).

<sup>27</sup> Here I use the masculine pronoun deliberately, as the heroic definition applies to male characters most readily. Chapter Five explains some of the challenges involved in creating female heroes.

<sup>28</sup> Wecter, *The Hero in America, a Chronicle of Hero-Worship*, 488.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987, originally published in 1962), 50.

of their age. They are idols to their contemporaries and comport themselves with dignity and authority, while employing reason to guide their morality. Emerson explained the appeal of his hero, writing,

We love to associate with heroic persons, since our receptivity is unlimited; and, with the great, our thoughts and manners easily become great. We are all wise in capacity, though so few in energy. There needs but one wise man in a company, and all are wise, so rapid is the contagion. Great men are thus a collyrium to clear our eyes from egotism, and enable us to see other people and their works.<sup>30</sup>

Emerson was undoubtedly the most prominent American theorist of the hero in the nineteenth century. His ideas respond to those of the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, and in turn influenced the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Both Carlyle and Nietzsche felt that decisiveness and sheer ability to command an audience's attention would suffice to make a "great man" into a hero or, in Nietzsche's terminology, an *Übermensch*.<sup>31</sup> Whereas Carlyle's and Nietzsche's heroes dominate those they lead, Emerson's heroes improve their world by raising moral standards and fostering a sense of community wherein people can perceive each other's contributions.

In the 1930s and 1940s the concept of heroism and its relationship to democracy was of paramount importance as competing anti-democratic heroes were developing at home and abroad. Theater historian Eric Bentley and others investigated the historiography of heroism and its applications in the twentieth century by both fascist and democratic regimes.<sup>32</sup> Both Carlyle and Nietzsche were critical of democracy and, consequently, in the twentieth century

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<sup>30</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits, Representative Men & Other Essays* (London and New York: J.M. Dent; E.P. Dutton, 1932), 168.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841), passim. The book was a collection of lectures Carlyle gave in 1840. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Alexander Tille (New York: Macmillan, 1896), passim.

<sup>32</sup> Eric Russell Bentley, *A Century of Hero-Worship* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1944), 7-8 and passim.



their writings became fodder for Hitler's Nazi reign and other fascist political systems. In contrast, Emerson's ideals represent an American attempt to reconcile individual greatness and leadership with the needs of a society. Emerson valued, more than Carlyle or Nietzsche, the hero's symbolism of broad consensus more than his own charisma. Emerson's hero more closely relates to the motto on the Seal of the United States, *E pluribus unum*, which is Latin for "out of many, one." This popular endorsement and sanction is the essence of ideal leadership in a democracy and it is this aspect of the American hero that is central to this study of heroes in visual culture of the 1930s and 1940s.

### **Toward a Definition of Heroic Modernism**

Historically scholars have interpreted realism in American art as conservative, traditional, anti-European, and therefore anti-modern.<sup>33</sup> Thus, realism may seem like an unlikely context in which to find a new strain of modernism, the study of which tends to grapple with issues of aesthetic innovation and degrees of abstraction. However, as Daniel Joseph Singal has argued, American modernism "represents an attempt to restore a sense of order to human experience under the often chaotic conditions of twentieth-century existence."<sup>34</sup> The premise of this dissertation is grounded in the idea that the interpretation of American heroism found in the arts of the 1930s and 1940s is one of several modernisms at work in the United States in the early twentieth century. My thinking is guided by the

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<sup>33</sup> As one example, see the discussion of Thomas Hart Benton's critical reception in Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9-10. Doss, of course, argues against such a limited interpretation of Benton's work.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Joseph Singal, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 8. This essay was anthologized in Daniel Joseph Singal, ed. *Modernist Culture in America* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), 1-27.

principle, again articulated by Singal, that “[Modernism] offers a demanding, and at times even heroic, vision of life that most of its adherents may in fact have fallen short of, but which they have used to guide themselves by nonetheless.”<sup>35</sup> Heroic figures in American art of this period represent the pluralistic attitudes toward change and progress, including efforts aimed at combating economic depression, class conflict, war, racism, and gender prejudice.

### Dissertation Overview

Although the American hero as a cultural, historical, or literary trope has been the focus of numerous studies, the topic has received somewhat scant attention from art historians.<sup>36</sup> This dissertation seeks to correct that neglect by offering a series of case studies of canonical heroic types from 1930s and 1940s American visual culture. The chapters that follow are by no means an exhaustive account of the various heroes that emerged in the early

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<sup>35</sup> Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 16.

<sup>36</sup> The best examples of art historical studies of heroism focus on the nineteenth century, including Elizabeth Johns, *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983) and Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). Outside of art history, in addition to the books cited above by Gerald W. Johnson, Eric Bentley, Sidney Hook, Marshall Fishwick, and Dixon Wecter, see Theodore L. Gross, *The Heroic Ideal in American Literature* (New York: The Free Press, 1971); Ray Broadus Browne and Marshall Fishwick, *The Hero in Transition* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983); Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert, eds., *Heroes in a Global World* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2008); Josef Früchtl, *Impertinent Self: A Heroic History of Modernity*, trans. Sarah L. Kirkby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Mike Alford, *Heroes and Villains* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Todd M. Lieber, *Endless Experiments: Essays on the Heroic Experience in American Romanticism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973); Theodore L. Gross, *Representative Men: Cult Heroes of Our Time* (New York: Free Press, 1970); Ray Broadus Browne, Marshall Fishwick, and Michael T. Marsden, eds., *Heroes of Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972); Marston La France, ed. *Patterns of Commitment in American Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, in association with Carleton University, 1967); Mark Gerzon, *Choice of Heroes: The Changing Faces of American Manhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982); Theodore P. Greene, *America's Heroes: The Changing Models of Success in American Magazines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

twentieth century; I selected artists and images based on their prominence within the field of American art and each image's ability to communicate visually its subject's potential "greatness." Central criteria for the visual representation of heroism include prominent positioning of the heroic figure, the individual's active pose, and/or an expression that exudes confidence or sincerity. Allusions to art historical tropes and sources, along with references to Christian iconography, often contribute to the heroicization of an individual within an image. Whereas the selected images may appear to foster or perpetuate stereotypes, the images I discuss disrupt and complicate definitions of classic American types in ways that are sometimes subtle and other times more central. My research process varies with each image, but always begins with close visual analysis, turning to social and political context, investigation of the artist's biography and issues of patronage and audience. I analyze the images within the context of popular culture, as well.

I selected the heroic images for each of the five chapters that follow specifically because their protagonists display energy, confidence, physicality, and/or capacity for perseverance that would have made them admirable to contemporary viewers. Inasmuch as the works I discuss represent a faith in the hero and a potentially optimistic worldview, they also follow Boorstin's command that one should "be sophisticated about the hero" and "doubt his essential greatness."<sup>37</sup> Each of the core images discussed depicts a person who appears extraordinary—in political power, physical strength, adherence to an ideal, or sacrifice for the greater good. However, these figures are not without their flaws and complications, and many find themselves in tragic situations. The artists' conceptions of heroism that follow reflect Boorstin's essential skepticism; the works manifest their creators' uncertainties, insecurities, anxieties, and sometimes their playful sense of humor. I try to follow the same program that

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<sup>37</sup> Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 50.

Boorstin suggested, writing cautiously about “greatness” and acknowledging the complexities of both creating heroic figures and interpreting them.

I have chosen images that reflect the breadth of styles that fall under the rubric of American realism, from Florine Stettheimer’s decorative urban pageant *Cathedrals of Wall Street* (1938-40) to Philip Evergood’s radical and expressionist *American Tragedy* (1937) to John Steuart Curry’s Midwestern agrarian *Our Good Earth* (1942). These images represent the diverse culture and geography of America as they take us to New York’s Wall Street, Chicago’s Republic Steel mill, and a Midwestern wheat field. Palmer Hayden’s John Henry series (1944-47) leads us through the railroad tunnels of West Virginia, while Aaron Douglas’ *Harriet Tubman* (1931) takes us to the finest school for African American women in 1930s North Carolina. We go, as Dorothea Lange did in the 1930s, to the migrant farm camps of California and find our way back to the aviation factory where Norman Rockwell’s *Rosie the Riveter* worked during World War II.

Chapter One focuses on Florine Stettheimer’s *Cathedrals of Wall Street* (1938-40), a lavish display of the artist’s admiration for current president Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the “Father of His Country,” George Washington. Painted at the end of a decade of Washington mania, and commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his inauguration, *Cathedrals of Wall Street* recovers the pomp and festivity of a New York parade. Stettheimer, like many of her contemporaries, including Miguel Covarrubias, Edward P. Buyck, and Henry Salem Hubbell, analogized the past heroism of Washington with the present potential of Roosevelt. Seeing FDR as the heir to the Founding Fathers’ legacy of national service, responsible governance, and unavailing patriotism, was an effective public relations strategy and one that found visual form in various paintings, prints, and memorabilia.

Chapter Two considers Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy* (1937), in which a virile, athletic worker and father-to-be defends the rights of his family and fellow union members. Scholars often discuss this image in light of Evergood's participation in such union protests as the WPA 219 strike of 1936 and as a response to the widely reported Chicago Memorial Day Massacre of 1937. I expand such an interpretation, arguing that Evergood's depiction of police brutality resonates with contemporary images of fascist aggression in Europe. Thus, *American Tragedy* manifests Evergood's fierce opposition to the menacing rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany and the concurrent atrocities committed by Francisco Franco in Spain. This interpretation broadens the painting's sphere of significance beyond the plight of American labor unions and inaugurates Evergood's American worker as a global antifascist hero, as well.

In Chapter Three I look at the heroic farmer, a descendant of the Jeffersonian yeoman as the ideal American citizen. In John Steuart Curry's *Our Good Earth* (1942), a farmer stands tall as a triumphant survivor of the Dust Bowl and as a symbol of rural America. This composition appeared in several forms; Curry made studies in charcoal and watercolor, an oil and tempera painting, and a series of lithographs. Curry intended *Our Good Earth* to function as government propaganda supporting the war efforts abroad and war bonds posters featuring the image were issued with the subtitle "Keep it Ours." Yet, even as the *Our Good Earth* posters encouraged people to invest in the war overseas, the paintings, studies, and lithographs manifested Curry's belief that the laboring farmer was just as much a war hero as those soldiers fighting in Europe and in the Pacific. *Our Good Earth* also testifies to the anxiety felt by Curry and his colleague Thomas Hart Benton as the Regionalist heyday was drawing to a close.

Chapter Four considers Palmer Hayden's series of paintings depicting the folk hero John Henry, the legendary hammer-wielding railroad man. Like other New Negro artists and writers, Hayden strove to express the pride he felt for his African American identity. His John Henry series represents the life and death of the black man who challenged the steam drill that had been invented to replace human labor in railroad construction. Though Henry proved himself to be better and faster at drilling holes, he died in the process, thus becoming a martyr to modernization. Prevailing scholarship understands this series as a metaphor for the civil rights struggles of African Americans, but Henry was not just a black hero. Hayden deliberately translated the folk song he had known from his youth in Virginia into a series of twelve paintings (plus two thematically-related works) that functioned as a story of America's national heritage, inclusive of African Americans. In so doing, Hayden canonized a black hero who could be admired by Americans of diverse racial backgrounds. Though Hayden's John Henry series was widely exhibited in the 1950s and is considered among his finest artistic accomplishments, no scholar has published a comprehensive history and interpretation of these remarkable images.

The word hero comes from the Greek *heros* or superior man. Thus, searching for heroic women can be something of an oxymoronic enterprise. There were certainly legendary women, and admirable female characters in the visual culture of the 1930s and 1940s. Chapter Five considers three of them that span three significant moments in American history. Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936) encapsulates the tribulations and perseverance of Dust Bowl mothers; Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter* (1943) canonizes women workers during World War II in a humorous, but complicated manner; Aaron Douglas' *Harriet Tubman* (1931) depicts the historical figure as a modern 1930s contributor to the plight of racial equality. Lange's, Rockwell's, and Douglas' images pay tribute to the sacrifices that

women made in order to serve the causes of economic and familial survival, wartime mobilization, and civil rights. But these images were produced during a time of great disorganization and disunity within the women's movement over what path to take after gaining suffrage in 1920, how to balance work and family, and the problem of fighting for both racial and gender equality. Because the womanhood of the characters that Lange, Rockwell, and Douglas constructed is central to my interpretation of their cultural and historical significance, I feel the gendered term heroine is most appropriate.

Studying American heroism led me to consider issues of national politics, international relations, and the histories of labor, agriculture, race, and gender. To navigate these historical and intellectual realms in a meaningful way, I have tried to let the objects of my investigation—the paintings by Stettheimer, Evergood, Curry, Hayden, Rockwell, and Douglas, and Lange's photograph—chart my course. In the chapters that follow I aim to contextualize each hero (or heroine) in a manner that contributes not only to the study of each artist's career and American art history, but to the interdisciplinary discourse on leadership, patriotism, and national identity, as well.

## Chapter One: Two Saints on One Canvas: Florine Stettheimer's *Cathedrals of Wall Street*

In Florine Stettheimer's *Cathedrals of Wall Street* (1938-40, Fig. 1-1) a medallion portrait of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt hovers within the stage-like portico of the New York Stock Exchange.<sup>1</sup> Amid a festival of patriotic fanfare featuring American flags, a marching band, a chorus and dance troupe, Grace Moore singing "The Star-Spangled Banner," and a Salvation Army pianist playing "God Bless America," the cacophony of admiration is palpable.<sup>2</sup> Celebrants in the foreground include Eleanor Roosevelt dressed in blue, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, American Legionnaire Michael Ericson, Civil War veteran Michael J. Sullivan, Stettheimer's friend and artist Claggett Wilson dressed in his Marine uniform, and a Native American in full regalia.<sup>3</sup> Gold leaf abounds throughout the picture, surrounding Roosevelt's head, covering the columns and much of the pediment, and showering down like party streamers around the president in a manner that recalls Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. In this image, Stettheimer celebrates Roosevelt's popularity and canonizes him even before his death in a Neo-Baroque display of opulence. Painted at the end of a decade dominated by economic depression, *Cathedrals of Wall Street* reads as a summary celebration of Roosevelt's success and triumph during his first two terms as president.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the painting is typically dated 1939 due to the inclusion of that date on the painting beneath Roosevelt's head, Stettheimer probably worked on the painting from 1938 into 1940. See Barbara J. Bloemink, *The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 216-17. See also Linda Nochlin, "Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive," *Art in America* 68, no. 7 (September 1980): 75.

<sup>2</sup> The title of the sheet music resting on the piano is visible; Stettheimer wrote in her diary that Moore would be singing the national anthem. Nochlin, "Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive," 76.

<sup>3</sup> Characters are identified in several sources, the earliest list appearing in Parker Tyler, *Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art* (New York: Farrar, 1963), 137.



*Cathedrals of Wall Street* was the third in Stettheimer's series of four *Cathedrals* paintings. Stettheimer initiated the series in 1929 with an homage to film and popular entertainment, *Cathedrals of Broadway* (Fig. 1-2). With a stage and screen at the center and the names and marquee of prominent Manhattan movie houses filling the composition, Broadway is a sight of revelry and merriment. Stettheimer, her sister Stella, and her nephew Walter enter a theater at the lower left corner and prepare to be dazzled by the new "talkies." The second *Cathedrals* painting, *Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* (1931, Fig. 1-3), is also tied to a specific geographic location in New York City, but the social world is markedly different. Fifth Avenue, according to Stettheimer's paintbrush, is a bastion of love, marriage, and shopping. As the bride and groom emerge from the site of their nuptials they are greeted by well-wishers and a photographer. Textual references to the locations of their romantic dates (Delmonico's) and lavish shopping trips (B. Altman and Tiffany & Co.) hover in the sky. The fourth *Cathedrals* painting, which Stettheimer began in 1942 and left unfinished at the time of her death in 1944, *Cathedrals of Art* (Fig. 1-4), responds to New York's museums, galleries, critics, and creators. Stettheimer fused the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art into one architectural scape in which the politics, commerce, and competitions of the art world are enacted. As the *Cathedrals* paintings attest, artifice and celebration were major aspects of Stettheimer's life and run rampant throughout her oeuvre. These three works are sites of worship for the artist, her contemporaries, and for the viewer, and they are also rife with complications, rivalries, ironies, and jokes.

Stettheimer's style and subject matter in the *Cathedrals* series is unabashedly theatrical, and the series relates closely to the set and costume design Stettheimer did for the

Virgil Thomson-Gertrude Stein production, *Four Saints in Three Acts*.<sup>4</sup> First presented in 1934 at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, *Four Saints* was subsequently restaged on Broadway. The opera was dedicated to various “saints” (closer to twenty than four), mobilized historical and religious motifs, and featured Gertrude Stein’s convoluted dialogue, which ultimately baffled the audience. The show itself received mixed reviews, but critics fawned over Stettheimer’s use of white light and draped cellophane to create an ethereal, magical scene (Fig. 1-5). This signature light-filled environment that Stettheimer was so adept at creating on stage, recurred in the *Cathedrals* series and in her own living quarters where she also hung cellophane and emphasized white and gold (Fig. 1-6).

Born to a wealthy family in Rochester, New York in 1871, Stettheimer studied with Kenyon Cox at the Art Students League in the 1890s. From 1906 to 1914, she traveled in Europe with her mother and sisters Carrie and Ettie, visiting museums in Italy, France, and Switzerland, and studying art in Germany, until the eruption of World War I drove the women back to New York City permanently. Upon her return, Stettheimer developed her signature style of brightly colored paintings with thick, impasto surfaces; her paintings resemble cake icing in their use of white and jewelry cases in their display of gold.<sup>5</sup> Stettheimer lived with her mother and sisters in a grand apartment in Alwyn Court, at the corner of 58th Street and 7th Avenue near Central Park, until her mother’s death in 1935. Her sister Carrie played hostess at the Stettheimer “salons” which welcomed such prominent artists, critics, and writers of the day as Marcel Duchamp, Henry McBride, and Carl Van Vechten. Such fêtes

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<sup>4</sup> For information on *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and Stettheimer’s contributions, see Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York: Random House, 1998), passim. See also: Tyler, *Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art*, 59-61, and Bloemink, *The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer*, 187-97.

<sup>5</sup> Parker Tyler also noted that Stettheimer’s *Cathedrals* paintings possess the “literal dimensions of many jewelry-displays.” Tyler, *Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art*, 152.

were fodder for Stettheimer's paintings, including *Soirée* (1917-19, Fig. 1-7) in which gaiety and leisure take the fore. After Stettheimer moved in 1935 into her own apartment in the Beaux Arts Building near Bryant Park, she observed from her windows the sorts of parades and festivals that crept into her subject matter.<sup>6</sup> Stettheimer never married and, because of the family's sizable wealth, did not need to sell her paintings to make a living. Thus, she imbued them with her personal sensibility and affinity for the decorative as she reflected on her upper-class milieu.

Stettheimer's festive works of the 1930s mask the realities of economic hardship that the United States, along with the rest of the industrialized world, weathered during the Great Depression. What began in 1929 as a stock market panic escalated to catastrophic proportions by 1932. By that year nearly one in four (approximately twelve million) workers were unemployed. That fact, combined with the paltry \$41.7 billion national income that amounted to less than half of what it had been before Black Tuesday, created an economic sinkhole from which America desperately needed extraction.<sup>7</sup> Rivaling the seminal years of nationhood under George Washington and the Civil War that defined Abraham Lincoln's presidency, the Great Depression demanded a strong and heroic president. Franklin Delano Roosevelt would fill this need and rise to heroic dimensions over the course of the decade.

Nineteen thirty-two was an election year and according to public opinion, the quagmire in which the country found itself was largely President Herbert Hoover's fault. Many people, and presumably those living in so-called "Hooverville" shantytowns, came to

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<sup>6</sup> For biographical information see Tyler, *Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art* and Bloemink, *The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer*. See also Robert McDaniel's chronology in Elizabeth Sussman, *Florine Stettheimer: Still Lifes, Portraits and Pageants, 1910 to 1942* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), 248.

view his willingness to give financial aid to banks, but not to the hungry and unemployed citizenry, as symptoms of a stubborn lack of compassion.<sup>8</sup> To be fair, Hoover expected Americans would provide for one another during this time of hardship through private philanthropy. He was leery of disrupting the spirit of self-reliance that he believed was inherently American by implementing governmental handouts.<sup>9</sup> But to those who could not rely on their own devices or on the charity of their neighbors, his seemingly passive response to the crisis meant that “the Great Engineer” had become a great disappointment. As historian Robert McElvaine explained, “The probability of a Republican victory in 1932 was better than that of being dealt a royal straight flush in five-card-stud poker, but only marginally so.”<sup>10</sup>

At the start of the United States presidential election season in June 1932, the editors of the popular magazine *Vanity Fair* ran an article entitled, “Wanted: A Dictator!” Decrying the special interests and “chatterboxes” that they believed filled Congress, as well as the weakened state of Herbert Hoover’s presidency in both power and perception, the article advocated an emergency response to the economic crisis in which the nation was embroiled.<sup>11</sup> The *Vanity Fair* editors’ solution was to replace the “pitiful” politicians in Congress and in the White House with a single man endowed with authoritarian powers who would take action to end the national disaster. In their search for a creative solution, the editors looked to Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany for models of effective leadership and proposed a true reinvention of the power structure in Washington as the only means to alleviate the despair

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<sup>8</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The Nineteen-Thirties in America, September 3, 1929-September 3, 1939* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 28-31.

<sup>9</sup> Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-41* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 51-60. Alonzo L. Hamby, *For the Survival of Democracy: Franklin Roosevelt and the World Crisis of the 1930s* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 84-90.

<sup>10</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-41*, 121.

<sup>11</sup> “Wanted: A Dictator!” *Vanity Fair* 38, no. 4 (June 1932): 32, 66.

that pervaded the nation. As the editors and illustrators of *Vanity Fair* were skilled satirists and humorists, in addition to being adept political commentators, we should take their advocacy of totalitarian rule with a grain of salt. However, this article and others like it grew from a serious lack of faith in the existing leadership in Washington and an intense thirst for a regime change. Thus in 1932, Democratic candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt defeated the Republican incumbent Herbert Hoover in an Electoral College rout of 472 votes to Hoover's 59. Roosevelt officially became the thirty-second President of the United States on March 4, 1933. Despite the landslide victory that brought Roosevelt to the White House, the election was more a rejection of Hoover's agenda than it was a mandate for Roosevelt's.<sup>12</sup> Because Hoover left the White House amid such dissatisfaction with his leadership, his were not the shoes that Roosevelt was to fill in 1933. Rather, another historical presidential model would become the standard by which Roosevelt was judged.

As Hoover's presidential reputation was in decline during the 1932 election cycle, another chief executive's star was on the rise. The nation celebrated George Washington's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday during this year of unprecedented economic disaster. Americans across the country enjoyed an impressive array of theater, oratory, and merchandising that occurred in shops, on the streets, and in art exhibitions beginning on Washington's official birthday (February 22) and lasting through Thanksgiving.<sup>13</sup> As art critic Edward Alden Jewell

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<sup>12</sup> Roosevelt won the 1932 election carrying 42 (of 48) states, 472 electoral votes and 58% of the vote. Hamby, *For the Survival of Democracy: Franklin Roosevelt and the World Crisis of the 1930s*, 108. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 102-03.

<sup>13</sup> Karal Ann Marling, "Of Cherry Trees and Ladies' Teas: Grant Wood Looks at Colonial America," in *The Colonial Revival in America*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 303.

observed, New York was “deluged by Washingtoniana.”<sup>14</sup> A host of souvenirs including Staffordshire pottery, glassware, ice cream molds, fans, flags, posters, busts, and plaques, all of which featured Washington’s visage, inundated not just New York, but the entire country.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. Mint issued the first Washington quarter in 1932. Stamps ranging in value from one half cent to ten cents bore likenesses of Washington. This was also the year that every public school classroom and many other public buildings in America began displaying a reproduction of Gilbert Stuart’s Athenaeum portrait of Washington.<sup>16</sup> Americans had officially celebrated Washington’s Birthday since 1857 and it had been a federal holiday since 1880. However, the bicentennial of his birth in 1932 was an unparalleled commemoration that made Washington omnipresent in visual culture.<sup>17</sup>

Along with parades and pageants held in Washington’s honor, the memorabilia that pervaded America in 1932 was one means of fulfilling Van Wyck Brooks’ 1918 directive that artists and writers “discover” or “invent” a “usable past.”<sup>18</sup> As *The Nation*’s drama critic Joseph Wood Krutch elaborated, “A ‘usable past’ is not something which is discovered but something which is created—chiefly for the purpose of enriching or serving the present.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Alden Jewell, “City Is Deluged by Washingtoniana,” *The New York Times*, 21 February 1932. Jewell also reported on exhibitions of Washington-related art at such venues as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Centre, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the National Sculpture Society, the Macy Galleries, the Old Print Shop, the Ehrich Gallery, Arnold Constable’s, and Knoedler’s. See Jewell, “Art’s Tribute to Washington,” *The New York Times*, 8 February 1932; Jewell, “Exhibitions of Washingtoniana,” *The New York Times*, 22 February 1932.

<sup>15</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 336-45.

<sup>16</sup> Marling, “Of Cherry Trees and Ladies’ Teas: Grant Wood Looks at Colonial America,” 304.

<sup>17</sup> Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood, the Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Published for the Minneapolis Institute of Arts by Yale University Press, 1983), 98.

<sup>18</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial* 64 (11 April 1918): 337-41.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, “The Usable Past,” *The Nation* 138, no. 3580 (February 14, 1934): 191-92.

Throughout American history Washington has proven to be one of the most versatile and “usable” American heroes as his reputation and persona mutated according to the public’s tastes. But in the 1920s and 1930s, learning about and paying tribute to George Washington became a national pastime akin to playing baseball and eating apple pie. This was also a period of colonial revival, during which Americans enacted their patriotism by building houses that resembled Washington’s Mount Vernon, reading children’s books about the founding fathers, creating monuments like the Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC, and restoring such living history communities as Colonial Williamsburg. Americans of the 1920s and 1930s manifested their nostalgia for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in myriad ways.<sup>20</sup>

Although fascination with colonial history in general and George Washington in particular was rampant during the 1920s and 1930s, during the 1920s colonial biographers and historians took great pains to “debunk” the mythic tales that bolstered Washington’s reputation as an impeccable standard of morality in order to discover the “real” man. Parson Weems’ long told story of little George’s absolute inability to lie after chopping down one of his father’s beloved cherry trees was dismissed by one writer as “pernicious drivel” that “only those who willfully prefer to deceive themselves need waste time over.”<sup>21</sup> The Washington of the 1920s told dirty jokes as he and his men crossed the Delaware and harbored a secret love for his best friend’s wife, Sally Fairfax, two stories that the debunking historians documented

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<sup>20</sup> See the various essays from Winterthur Museum symposiums held in 1981 and 1982 in Alan Axelrod, ed. *The Colonial Revival in America* (New York: Norton, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> William Roscoe Thayer, *George Washington* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), vii. Quoted in Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986*, 309.

by delving deeply into Washington's personal correspondence for evidence.<sup>22</sup> As Joseph Wood Krutch argued, "The past we believe in is the past which justifies today."<sup>23</sup> Thus, Roaring Twenties biographers created a Washington who would feel at home in that decade; they read and constructed his biography to fit the jovial, decadently entertaining, and economically prosperous climate of the era, a practice that amounted to a humanization of Washington that reinforced his celebrity even as it undermined his heroic greatness.

By the 1930s, as we have seen, these common and humble aspects of Washington's biography were reburied under a plethora of tributes and memorabilia that sought to restore Washington to the pedestal of virtue he had previously enjoyed. After the stock market crashed it seemed that Americans could no longer afford to humanize their historical heroes. They required presidential symbols of righteousness, action, and perseverance that were extraordinary, not average, to sustain them through hardship. Literary historian Alfred Kazin astutely observed that, "Where the generation of the twenties wanted to revenge themselves on their fathers, the generation of the thirties needed the comfort of their grandfathers."<sup>24</sup> In the early 1930s, artists, writers, and orators revamped Washington's image as a prototype for active, authoritative leadership largely because of the perceived inadequacy of the existing regime. Whether it was the military hero on the cover of *Collier's* magazine (Fig. 1-8) or the cherry tree myth transformed into Washingtonian bicentennial quilt patterns (Fig. 1-9), by 1932 the iconic, honorable George Washington was making a comeback and his prestige continued to rise throughout the decade.

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<sup>22</sup> Eugene E. Prussing, *George Washington in Love and Otherwise* (Chicago: Pascal Covici, 1925), 3-33.

<sup>23</sup> Krutch, "The Usable Past," 191-92.

<sup>24</sup> Alfred Kazin, "What Have the 30's Done to Our Literature?" *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 31 December 1939.



On February 22, 1939, near the end of a decade of Washington mania, Florine Stettheimer recorded in her diary, “Washington’s birthday—I put lots of gold on Washington.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, George Washington looms large in Stettheimer’s *Cathedrals of Wall Street*. Sculpted, gilded, and towering in profile on the right side of the composition, Washington oversees the festivities. Stettheimer dated her painting 1939 on the stage, which was a year filled with profuse celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Washington’s inauguration as the first American president, including an eight-day reenactment of the journey from Mount Vernon to the steps of the Federal Hall where Washington took his first oath of office in 1789. That year, New York also played host to the World’s Fair, which honored both the “World of Tomorrow” and the world of Washington.<sup>26</sup> The fair grounds in Flushing, Queens were marked by not only the futuristic Trylon and Perisphere structures, but also by a giant Washington head sculpted by James Earle Fraser (Fig. 1-10) and a sixty-five-foot plaster recreation of the John Quincy Adams Ward statue of George Washington which had stood on Wall Street since 1883 (Figs. 1-11 and 1-12).<sup>27</sup> Stettheimer painted the original Ward statue into *Cathedrals of Wall Street* (covered in gold) and this majestic portrait of Washington joins with the medallion of FDR and the federal eagle atop the stock exchange to form what Linda Nochlin has called the “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of a patriotic Trinity.”<sup>28</sup>

Stettheimer undertook extensive research to lend her image the credibility that convinces viewers that this painting records an actual event. Nonetheless, astute observers will recognize that *Cathedrals of Wall Street* is an amalgamation of various events that Stettheimer witnessed firsthand or observed in newspapers, magazines, and photographs.

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<sup>25</sup> Tyler, *Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art*, 105.

<sup>26</sup> Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986*, 366-68.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 98, 366-67.

<sup>28</sup> Nochlin, “Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive,” 75.

Nochlin identified a photograph from the April 30, 1938 issue of *The New York Times* capturing “A Patriotic Ceremony in Wall Street” that closely resembles the scene Stettheimer painted with throngs filling the street, flags, and musicians (Fig. 1-13).<sup>29</sup> The event being celebrated that day was the 149th anniversary of George Washington’s inauguration and a similar festival occurred one year later on the 150th anniversary, replete with bands, uniformed officers, celebrity singers, and civic dignitaries.<sup>30</sup> Other ceremonies, including those commemorating Flag Day in New York in June 1938 featured members of the Salvation Army and the Indian Confederation of America.<sup>31</sup> Stettheimer pestered her friend Carl Van Vechten, asking him to introduce her to Eleanor Roosevelt so that she could accurately depict her in the image. The fact that he was not acquainted with the First Lady quieted Stettheimer little.<sup>32</sup> Stettheimer obtained actual ticker tape so that she could realistically paint the coding on the streamer that waves beneath Roosevelt’s medallion, visited the Stock Exchange, and corresponded with the Navy about proper uniform regalia.<sup>33</sup> She also ventured downtown to visit a real Salvation Army “Glory Hole” thrift store, an experience she adapted with her inclusion of a street preacher and a “Glory Hole” with bonneted Salvation Army lasses on the left side of *Cathedrals of Wall Street*.<sup>34</sup> Filtered through Stettheimer’s imagination, such details came to represent any number of New York displays of patriotic fanfare.

*Cathedrals of Wall Street* is Stettheimer’s personal tribute to the Father of His (and her) Country. She depicted herself in the lower right corner of the image, having just

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>30</sup> “Inauguration Day Observed at Fête,” *The New York Times*, 30 April 1938; “Washington Fête Set for Treasury Steps,” *The New York Times*, 28 April 1939; and “Washington Fêtes Staged in Wall St.,” *The New York Times*, 1 May 1939.

<sup>31</sup> “Patriotic Groups to Mark Flag Day,” *The New York Times*, 12 June 1938.

<sup>32</sup> Bloemink, *The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer*, 218.

<sup>33</sup> Tyler, *Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art*, 144.

<sup>34</sup> Bloemink, *The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer*, 214.

presented Washington with a patriotic bouquet of red, white, and blue flowers befitting the national hero. In her Beaux Arts apartment and studio she kept a “patriotic room” of images of the first president, including busts, photographs, her own paintings, and other Washington memorabilia.<sup>35</sup> Stettheimer’s personal affinity for both Washington and Roosevelt was well known and lavish. A lifelong Democrat, Stettheimer’s anticipation of the 1940 election was marked with such a fervor for FDR that when she heard her friends Henry McBride and Claggett Wilson intended to vote for Wendell Willkie, she recorded the remark “oh-horrors!” in her diary, and showed them *Cathedrals of Wall Street*, in which Wilson appears as a supporting character, in an attempt to change their minds. On the morning after Election Day that year, Stettheimer awoke to a phone call confirming Roosevelt’s third presidential victory, an event that pleased her greatly.<sup>36</sup> In combining her affection and admiration for both Washington and Roosevelt in a single painting, Stettheimer was not only professing her own political and patriotic loyalties, but she was also joining with a host of other cultural commentators, artists, and political strategists who forged a symbolic bond between the two presidents that reinforced the greatness of both during the decade in which Washington and Roosevelt’s heroism was most thoroughly articulated.

Portraitists who professed a belief in Roosevelt’s leadership capacity made the analogy between the gentleman from Hyde Park and the general from Mount Vernon visible in their work. Edward P. Buyck, a painter of modest talent from FDR’s home state of New York, encoded his optimism for Roosevelt’s tenure in a portrait he presented to the new president in March 1933 (Fig. 1-14). Apparently this artist was, like Stettheimer, a great fan of both the original and the newly elected presidents. Regarding his inspiration for the

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<sup>35</sup> Tyler, *Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art*, 172; Bloemink, *The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer*, 178.

<sup>36</sup> Tyler, *Florine Stettheimer: A Life in Art*, 185.

juxtaposition, Buyck stated that Roosevelt reminded him of Washington, and that “[Roosevelt’s] going to be a great president.”<sup>37</sup> Presidents current and past both bear stern expressions that signify an appropriate reverence for their duties and call attention to the role of careful thought in presidential decision-making. Roosevelt proudly wears his Phi Beta Kappa pin on his lapel and holds documents in his right hand, showing that he is a well-equipped leader of the “Brain Trust,” as his cabinet became known.<sup>38</sup> This portrait pairs the symbol of Washington as a stoic ideal frozen in marble with Roosevelt’s flesh-and-blood capacity for adeptly responding to the mental challenges that the office of the presidency posed.

Another portrait (Fig. 1-15) presented as a gift to Roosevelt by painter Henry Salem Hubbell in 1939 shows the president’s role as an orator. In Hubbell’s image, Roosevelt addresses the House of Representatives. Hubbell has taken significant liberties with the architecture of the space in order to juxtapose FDR and John Vanderlyn’s 1834 portrait of Washington (Fig. 1-16), which hung in the House chamber to the left of the speaker’s lectern. In a photograph taken while Roosevelt addressed a joint session of Congress in 1942 (Fig. 1-17), one can see the lengths to which Hubbell manipulated the layout of the room to make his symbolic connection between Roosevelt and his exemplary predecessor. Again Washington presides over Roosevelt, authorizing his presidency as a proper continuation of Washington’s legacy.

In March of 1933, *Vanity Fair* commemorated Roosevelt’s inauguration with a special “Moving day at the White House” retrospective of similar inaugural “revolutions.” Roosevelt joined the magazine’s illustrious legion of honorees, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson,

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in David Meschutt, “Portraits of Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” *American Art Journal* 18, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 13.

<sup>38</sup> Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933*, 395.

Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson, each of whom had also had the distinct pleasure of defeating one-term incumbents. Joining the text was a two-page panorama of the festivities as illustrated by the magazine's staff artist Miguel Covarrubias (Fig. 1-18). Boldly colored and in a linear figurative style, Covarrubias' image shows a beaming Roosevelt taking the oath of office from the mustachioed Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes. Against the backdrop of the U.S. Capitol, FDR is joined on stage by his wife Eleanor, Vice President John Nance Garner, and the begrudging evacuees of Washington politics, President and Mrs. Hoover and Vice President Charles Curtis. The foreground is filled with members of the press, foreign dignitaries, senators, governors, financiers, and advisors. Beneath two trumpeting angels and preparing to don the laurel wreath of victory, Roosevelt is the heir apparent to the presidential throne.

Covarrubias employed his artistic license to adjust the landscape of Washington, DC, in order to include Washington among Roosevelt's inaugural retinue. Given the vantage point that Covarrubias selected for this ceremony, which took place on the east façade of the Capitol, the Washington Monument should be situated behind and hidden by building's dome. Yet, transplanted to the north lawn, the obelisk is roughly as tall as the figures on the platform. It functions as a surrogate for the original Commander-in-Chief and commands an entourage of soldiers standing at attention.<sup>39</sup> Washington's metaphorical presence in this scene allows him to participate in the proceedings, approve of Roosevelt's impending reign, and set a benchmark for the newly inaugurated president's performance. As one would expect from a caricaturist of his caliber, Covarrubias parodies an idea that was in place by 1933 and recurred throughout Roosevelt's terms as president: Washington was the first and the best

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<sup>39</sup> When this image was reproduced in *Vanity Fair*, it was difficult to tell if the soldiers were facing forward, looking toward the ceremony (and out toward the viewer), or facing the rear, looking at the Washington Monument.

Commander-in-Chief and many Americans hoped that Roosevelt might live up to his revered predecessor's standards.

President Roosevelt was not ignorant of Washington's legacy as the archetype of the perfect leader and the high standard that public opinion had set for him. For the rest of the decade, as he attempted to alleviate the nation's social and financial woes, Roosevelt often cited Washington's policies in order to validate his own and took many opportunities to share Washington's limelight. Indeed, Roosevelt utilized this aspect of America's usable past to his advantage. He visited Washington's grave at Mount Vernon often.<sup>40</sup> Each time, Roosevelt made a speech that tied his administration's policies to those of the premier president in an effort to demonstrate to the American public that, as he said, "[the country was] getting back to the traditions and ideals of George Washington."<sup>41</sup> When an important piece of New Deal farm assistance legislation was threatened in Congress, Mount Vernon was used as a platform to announce Roosevelt's belief that despite the differences between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, Washington would have wholeheartedly supported Roosevelt's plan.<sup>42</sup>

The analogy between the two men was not lost on Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland, which honored Roosevelt by bestowing upon him an honorary doctorate. He was the first president since the institution's namesake to receive the award and the first president since 1789 to visit the college. Roosevelt received a copy of Washington's diploma and used his acceptance speech, to no one's surprise, to argue that the cooperation

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<sup>40</sup> These visits were reported as newsworthy events and most often occurred on Washington's birthday. See "Roosevelt Visits Washington's Tomb," *The New York Times*, 23 February 1934; "Roosevelt Visits Washington's Tomb," *The New York Times*, 23 February 1935; and "Roosevelt Visits Washington's Tomb," *The New York Times*, 23 February 1937.

<sup>41</sup> "Roosevelt Visits Washington's Tomb," *The New York Times*, 23 February 1934.

<sup>42</sup> Roosevelt's speech argued, "[Washington's] actions indicate that he would have supported farmers in programs of the type [the Roosevelt administration has] adopted." "President Renews Plea for Farm Aid," *The New York Times*, 18 November 1937.

among citizens upon which the New Deal programs were firmly rooted could be traced to Washington's rhetoric.<sup>43</sup> In 1935, reporter Jay Franklin complimented Roosevelt for coming "as close to being a 'complete man' as the . . . versatile 'founding fathers,'" which of course included Washington.<sup>44</sup> Invoking Washington was a way to signal success and Roosevelt's advisors and supporters alike mastered that public relations tool.

Mobilizing Washington as a presidential guiding force was not unique to Roosevelt; this rhetorical and political strategy had been popular in the nineteenth century as well. As early as 1920 when he first ran for the presidency, Hoover recognized the political efficacy of forging a symbolic link between his career and that of the best-known Founding Father during the post-World War I usable past era. At Hoover's prodding, biographer Eugene Prussing crafted a narrative about Washington that deliberately corresponded to the candidate's personal history remarkably well. In a 1920 essay he conceived on the topic of Washington as "The Engineer," Prussing argued that Washington's career as a surveyor and plantation owner was the eighteenth century equivalent of civil engineering, thus linking the first president's occupation with that of Hoover, who was a very successful mining engineer. The implication was that this similarity in their chosen fields made Hoover's experience a sufficient prerequisite for high political office because in Prussing's estimation Washington had been similarly prepared. In 1925, Prussing published a more complete book-length discussion of Washington's life that included two chapters dealing with his engineering prowess and two on Washington as a "Captain of Industry." Both attributions were perhaps an historical and rhetorical stretch, but Prussing based his new mythologies on careful consideration of

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<sup>43</sup> "Roosevelt Urges Cooperative Spirit as of Pioneer Days," *The New York Times*, 22 October 1933.

<sup>44</sup> Jay Franklin, "'Wottaman' In the White House," *Vanity Fair* 45, no. 3 (November 1935): 67.

Washington's personal correspondence, thereby lending the weight of fact and research to his argument.<sup>45</sup> The connections between Hoover and Washington were rare and tenuous; Hoover's political operatives never succeeded in connecting him with Washington or any other Founding Father in a manner as persuasive as Roosevelt's.

Roosevelt's critics invoked Washington's legacy to demonstrate moments of FDR's transgression. During Roosevelt's 1937 attempt to enlarge the Supreme Court to make room for a majority of justices who would support the New Deal, the president of the American Bar Association quoted from Washington's 1797 farewell address in an effort to expose Roosevelt's tactics as "usurpation" of the Constitution.<sup>46</sup> In 1940 during the early stages of World War II, North Dakota's Republican Senator Gerald P. Nye virulently denounced Roosevelt's foreign policy in a speech almost entirely founded on Nye's reading of Washington's original political intent. Nye argued at length:

Certainly Washington did not mean that in times like this we should be deriding or making faces at one group in Europe and beating the tom-toms for another.... Assuredly Washington did not mean that we should be repealing embargoes to aid one side and injure another engaging in foreign conflict. Certainly Washington was not proposing in his farewell address loans of money to one side engaging in war.... Definitely...it does not fall to Americans to assume that Washington meant that we should be dispatching emissaries...to nose into foreign affairs that are absolutely not associated to our affairs.... I fail to find in Washington's language any advice to any American leader to rise and condemn the form or style of an existing foreign government.<sup>47</sup>

Nye and others also used Washington as an example to deride Roosevelt's bid for an unprecedented third term. When a report surfaced years before after Roosevelt's second successful presidential election in 1936 that he would retire after his second term, his judgment was praised for following the model of the humble, Cincinnatus-like Washington

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<sup>45</sup> Such research was based on probing Washington's personal papers and letters. See Prussing, *George Washington in Love and Otherwise*, 3-33.

<sup>46</sup> "Says Washington Warned on Court," *The New York Times*, 23 February 1937.

<sup>47</sup> "Senator Nye Asks Bar to Third Term," *The New York Times*, 22 February 1940.



who voluntarily stepped down after he had served eight years despite his popularity and success.<sup>48</sup> However, when Roosevelt decided to run again in 1940, his opposition mobilized Washington's precedent to castigate Roosevelt's seemingly dangerous thirst for fame and power.

Analogies linking Roosevelt with Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln also proliferated throughout his presidency. In his second Fireside Chat delivered in 1934, Roosevelt counted Lincoln among the supporters of the New Deal programs when he said the two men shared a belief that "the legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done but cannot do at all or cannot do so well for themselves."<sup>49</sup> Prints depicted him as one of "The Greatest Presidents God Ever Created" along with Washington and Lincoln and pictured the three men together as icons of strength and leadership in the wake of Pearl Harbor (Figs. 1-19 and 1-20). A 1930s commemorative clock placed FDR at the helm of a ship with Washington and Lincoln backing him up (Fig. 1-21). At his second inaugural in 1937, Roosevelt watched the parade from a replica of Andrew Jackson's home, The Hermitage, on the south lawn of the White House. Roosevelt presided over the installation of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial on the bank of the Tidal Basin in Washington as well as the unveiling of Jefferson's monumental head at Mount Rushmore.<sup>50</sup> Roosevelt and his advocates recognized the efficacy of such partnerships, but the union of Washington and Roosevelt proved to be the most useful in the construction of FDR's heroism.

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<sup>48</sup> "Roosevelt to Quit in 1940, Creel Says," *The New York Times*, 30 November 1936.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Alfred Haworth Jones, *Roosevelt's Image Brokers: Poets, Playwrights, and the Use of the Lincoln Symbol* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications and Kennikat Press, 1974), 65-66.

<sup>50</sup> Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986*, 366.

There were challenges with this heroic Washington-Roosevelt alliance, however, as artists faced the dilemma of how best to portray Roosevelt given his physical limitations. George Washington's heroic presence as an American political and military leader is inextricably tied to his athletic frame and posture. Indeed, as art historian Sally Stein has argued, "the body [is] the most familiar measure of political fitness."<sup>51</sup> Works by such artists as Charles Willson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, and John Trumbull constructed an historical iconography of him standing erect in an authoritative manner. Jean-Antoine Houdon's canonical portrayal of Washington recalls classical statues of emperors while Henry Kirke Brown's found his antecedent in the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. Roosevelt, having contracted poliomyelitis in 1921 at the age of 39, was unable to stand or walk unaided for a significant portion of his adult life, including the twelve years he served as president. Roosevelt utilized a wheelchair, canes, leg braces, and the assistance of other people to move from place to place. As Stein has argued, though the president and the press made certain efforts to minimize the public's perception of Roosevelt's physical disability, the American people were well aware of the president's physical condition.<sup>52</sup> In the tradition of visual heroism, Roosevelt's practical means of sitting often and standing only with some sort of assistance were anathema. To overcome this visual hurdle of Roosevelt's partial immobility, artists employed three strategies: outright falsification of Roosevelt's physical capacity, preference for seated or leaning postures, and the "hovering head" motif common to bust portraits and coinage.

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<sup>51</sup> Sally Stein, "The President's Two Bodies: Stagings and Restagings of the New Deal Body Politic," in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 285.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-86. Stein's essay first appeared in the March 2004 issue of *American Art*.

Cartoons and caricatures, placing Roosevelt in an imagined, hyperbolic, or satirical context, most often ignored the reality of the president's disability. In Covarrubias' *Vanity Fair* inaugural spread, Roosevelt stands proud, strong, and unassisted. His good posture and tilted head allow him to stand slightly taller than the Washington monument, signifying the optimism for Roosevelt's success that Covarrubias imbedded in this otherwise humorous image. In his inaugural speech, Roosevelt also attempted to revise any perception that he was inactive, invoking a compelling metaphor for the fear he pledged to combat, calling it an "unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."<sup>53</sup>

Roosevelt's use of the phrase "convert retreat into advance" is not surprising given his new duties as Commander-in-Chief, but the evocative word "paralyzes" is a fascinating choice. Though he was not fully mobile, from his first day in office Roosevelt was arguably the most politically active (or activist) leader that the United States has ever had. *The New York Times'* front page the day after Roosevelt's inauguration was filled with references to the actions he had taken immediately, in stark contrast to Hoover's Depression era policy of patience and staying the course.<sup>54</sup> Illustrations commenting on FDR's interest in the "forgotten man" and his attempts to lift the nation out of depression in which he stands, strides, and balances unaided similarly belie Roosevelt's actual physical hindrances (Figs. 1-22 and 1-23).

As we have seen, admiring portraitists including Buyck and Hubbell portrayed Roosevelt him seated or leaning against something sturdy. Similarly, Douglas Chandor's

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<sup>53</sup> Statement from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address, reprinted in Robert S. McElvaine, *The Depression and New Deal: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 42.

<sup>54</sup> The front page of *The New York Times* on March 5, 1933 read "Roosevelt Inaugurated, Acts to End the National Banking Crisis Quickly; Will Ask War-Time Powers If Needed." The subtitles of this main story emphasized his actions, as well, in such phrases as "Ready to Call Congress," "President Probably Will Summon Extra Session for Wednesday," and "Works on Legislation," "Cabinet Ordered to Meet." In contrast, the paper reported that Hoover "Spends Evening in Seclusion."

standing portrait of Roosevelt (Fig. 1-24) shows Roosevelt leaning on a chair. Such images reflect the traditional means of portraying a political leader as a statesman and orator and place the cerebral nature of Roosevelt's heroic leadership at the fore. Such portrait poses carry greater significance when applied to Roosevelt because they carefully circumvent the reality of his physical limitations. In 1945 Chandor painted Roosevelt's portrait (Fig. 1-25), which shows the president in a seated position and only portrays Roosevelt from the mid-torso up. Initially a study for a larger figural grouping commemorating the Yalta Conference that was to depict Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin, as well, Chandor's portrait emphasizes the sort of intellectual leadership that Roosevelt practiced during World War II and focuses on Roosevelt's hands as markers of his wartime service. In various pictorial vignettes at the bottom of the canvas, Roosevelt's hands hold a cigarette, spectacles, and a pencil. Each prop shows how Roosevelt might have passed time in diplomatic conferences and the episodes signify the various moments of tension and patience that might occur in international negotiations. This image highlights Roosevelt's active participation in peace talks and wartime diplomacy as key aspects of his successful leadership.

In images introduced above (Figs. 1-14 and 1-15), both Buyck and Hubbell carefully balance their depictions of Roosevelt and Washington so that Washington's physical presence does not overwhelm Roosevelt's. In Buyck's painting, Washington is only represented by Jean-Antoine Houdon's portrait bust, whereas Roosevelt, though seated, commands far more of the pictorial space with his body. His stern expression is directed toward the viewer and matches the viewer's gaze. The Washington bust models the practice of looking to Roosevelt, literally and figuratively, as a person of power. This portrait emphasizes intellectual competence and authority, not physical activity. Hubbell, in pairing a standing portrait of Washington with the standing figure of Roosevelt, cleverly alluded to the first president by

picturing the lower left corner of Vanderlyn's painting. In that segment, Washington clearly leans on a table and touches a written document, just as Roosevelt does on his lectern. If the viewer saw the entirety of Vanderlyn's image, Washington's body would appear confident in its standing pose. However, Hubbell included only the corner of the painting, which shows Washington's hand resting on the table for support. This cropping links Washington's posture with Roosevelt's and provides greater similarities between their physical capacities than were actually present. Both Hubbell and Buyck designed compositions that show Roosevelt in realistic physical situations, and in positions that are not uncommon in presidential or leadership portraiture. The significance of these portraits rests in the way they ally the two presidents, and carefully obscure the differences between Roosevelt's physical capacity and Washington's.

The third strategy for the depiction of Roosevelt is the "hovering head" motif in which Roosevelt's head becomes symbolic of his person, a synecdoche for the entirety of his cultural meaning. Various Walker Evans photographs from the era show instances when Roosevelt's visage decorated private homes and public spaces. (Figs. 1-26 and 1-27) Often when Roosevelt gave a speech behind a large lectern or rode through town in an open-top car, the recording image represents little more of him than his head and upper chest. This is the version of Roosevelt that the public grew accustomed to seeing. (Figs. 1-28 and 1-29) An Alfred Eisenstadt photograph from the 1939 World's Fair in New York shows a bronze bust of FDR floating on a minimalist pedestal as a towering structure is built in the background (Fig. 1-30). Ben Shahn's poster for the National Citizens Political Action Committee used a profile view of Roosevelt's face with the words "Our Friend" and outstretched hands of varied ethnicities to express gratitude and support for the president (Fig. 1-31). Shahn also included Roosevelt in his mural at the Jersey Homesteads (1937, Fig. 1-32) in the form of a

poster titled “A Gallant Leader.” Such images show how Roosevelt’s face became the operative visual signifier of his identity and leadership rather than his body.

Of course, Stettheimer represented her hero, Roosevelt, in the hovering head style in *Cathedrals of Wall Street*. Like other images cited above, here Roosevelt is physically absent in the painting, but he is acknowledged nonetheless. Stettheimer mobilizes this depiction to great effect, and it manifests the complexities of both her style of cultural commentary and FDR’s leadership persona. First, two other bodies stand in visually for Roosevelt, representing him in a way that he does not or could not represent himself. Washington, in the form of the golden statue, signifies the active presidential leadership in body that FDR achieved politically. Additionally, Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the president and the nation’s First Lady, stands as FDR’s surrogate in the painting, as she did so often in life. These two figures overcome FDR’s absence and physical disability. Second, the manner in which Roosevelt’s head levitates over the stage in *Cathedrals of Wall Street* recalls another popular image from 1939: the Wizard of Oz. In a still from the film, *The Wizard of Oz* (Fig. 1-33), which was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, the Wizard hovers on a stage, amid tapering, light-filled green shards akin to the gold streamers that accentuate Roosevelt’s visage. As Roosevelt is physically absent from the stage in Stettheimer’s *Cathedrals of Wall Street*, in *The Wizard of Oz*, the Wizard hides off camera behind a curtain, his physicality too humble to command such fantastic attention. Like the Wizard, who projected his voice remotely, Roosevelt transmitted his voice via radio throughout the nation. Both were powerful leaders who commanded attention symbolically. Neither needed to be physically present to be authoritative, which makes their leadership that much more impressive.

Francis MacDonnell has argued that the 1939 movie version of *The Wizard of Oz* was an allegory for FDR’s New Deal and that the principal creative architect of the film, E.Y.

Harburg, analogized Roosevelt's leadership style with that of the Wizard as an affectionate satire.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Stettheimer's allusion to *The Wizard of Oz* humorously acknowledges Americans' habitual celebration of their leaders. She certainly participated in such festivals, parades, and phenomena, and favored exaggeration in her own adoration of Roosevelt and Washington. In other ways, Stettheimer injected wit and irony into *Cathedrals of Wall Street*, just as she did throughout the rest of the series of *Cathedrals* paintings. She wryly includes many of the standard sights and sounds of a Manhattan fête, but by combining them into one hyperbolic parade, she renders joy comically. Take, for instance, Stettheimer's inclusion of sound in the image. A Salvation Army pianist plays "God Bless America" while Grace Moore sings the "Star Spangled Banner." A marching band, complete with drums and trumpets enters and, faintly in the background, a tiny blue conductor leans out from his balcony (the box labeled 1939) to conduct a chorus of singers. Above this din, the soapbox preacher aims to make his message of repentance heard, a ubiquitous element of city life that was no doubt tiresome to many who witnessed it. With all of this noise, it is no wonder that Eleanor Roosevelt and her followers in the foreground are frozen in place, stunned, perhaps, by the lavish nature of the aural display. Add to this at least nine American flags, plus several others, flowers, gold, an eagle, the Statue of Liberty, and the scene becomes an embarrassment of nationalistic riches.

If we believe, as argued above, that *Cathedrals of Wall Street* is a testament to FDR's triumph over the Great Depression, then why is his portrait medallion inscribed with the figure "19,000,000,000," the commonly known estimate of the national debt when Roosevelt took office in 1932? Far from triumphing over that woeful number, Roosevelt suffered still

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<sup>55</sup> Francis MacDonnell, "The Emerald City Was the New Deal: E.Y. Harburg and the Wonderful Wizard of Oz," *Journal of American Culture* 13 (Winter 1990): 71-75.

from a post-New Deal debt of approximately \$40,440,000,000 in 1939. Furthermore, of the gruff businessmen whom Stettheimer squeezed into the pediment of the Stock Exchange, Bernard Baruch, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and J.P. Morgan, only Baruch was an ally of the president. J.P. Morgan outwardly opposed Roosevelt; he and Rockefeller were part of the banking elite that many of Roosevelt's policies in the 1930s sought to regulate. The profusion of gold may be seen as a tribute, but it may also reference Roosevelt's controversial abandonment of the gold standard with regard to American currency. All of these ironic clashes are playful allusions to contemporary rivalries and political sticking points, and they show us that Stettheimer, though she adored Roosevelt, was not blind in her admiration. She pays tribute to him with his flaws and problems in tow, which is how the country treated him during the 1930s, as well.

Two events of 1932, the presidential contest between Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt and the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth, defined the standards for of heroic politicians that would dominate the decade. Because of Washington's status as a cultural hero, which only increased due to the events surrounding the bicentennial of his birth in 1932, and the relative disgrace that forced Hoover out of office that same year, Washington's presidential legacy was one important symbolic standard against which Roosevelt was measured in the 1930s. Roosevelt's proactive response to the crisis of confidence that had taken hold in American life made him an instantly worthy successor. In his inaugural address, Roosevelt responded to Americans' desire for bold redirection by pledging to employ "broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency" as if it were a foreign military attack.<sup>56</sup> Roosevelt's adage, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," virtually instantaneously gave Americans the hope for the future they had been

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<sup>56</sup> McElvaine, *The Depression and New Deal: A History in Documents*, 45.



wanting. Though not technically the dictator that *Vanity Fair* desired in 1932, Roosevelt had proven creative and effective in alleviating some of the burden of the Depression. His leadership powers rivaled in scope and imagination those of Washington, which is likely why his opponents warned him of surpassing the force and longevity of the first president when he embarked on a third term.

During a decade in which the American people yearned for strong leaders and looked to patriotic, heroic figures as models for perseverance through difficult times, Roosevelt's and Washington's reputations soared, both independently and in conjunction with one another. For those who considered themselves "New Dealers," including Stettheimer, President Roosevelt had earned his prominent place at Washington's festival on the stock market's stage-like portico through his resourceful leadership during the Great Depression. Stettheimer and the other artists cited above who portrayed both men together made the analogy between their leadership uniquely and effectively. Such images show that Washington's legacy remained a vital aspect of the usable past and had a significant bearing upon Roosevelt's public persona in the 1930s.

## Chapter Two: “Our Workers are Heroes”: Philip Evergood’s *American Tragedy*

“We live in a world of conflicting forces. On one hand we see  
gluttony and self-aggrandizement, and on the other self-  
abnegation, sacrifice, generosity and heroism, in different  
members of the same human race.”

-Philip Evergood, 1946<sup>1</sup>

In visual culture of the 1920s and 1930s the American worker traditionally embodies masculinity and physical strength.<sup>2</sup> In images like Max Kalish’s *New Power* (c. late 1920s, Fig. 2-1) the worker derives much of his potency from his labor with difficult-to-manage tools like the drill; his sinuous and bulging muscles enable him to control it.<sup>3</sup> Harry Sternberg’s *Riveter* (1935, Fig. 2-2) daringly balances high amongst the skyscrapers on nothing more than an I-beam; his bravado on the job establishes his value as a worker.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the stock market crash and as labor unions became more politically active and powerful, this worker’s significance evolved. In the hands of certain artists, he became an instrument in the

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Evergood, “Statement,” in *20 Years, Evergood* (New York: ACA Gallery, 1946), 25.

<sup>2</sup> I have found studies by Barbara Melosh, Jonathan Weinberg, and Melissa Dabakis to be particularly instructive on this topic. Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 83-109. Jonathan Weinberg, “I Want Muscle: Male Desire and the Image of the Worker in American Art of the 1930s,” in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 2006), 115-34. Melissa Dabakis, *Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture: Monuments, Manliness, and the Work Ethic, 1880-1935* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 174-211.

<sup>3</sup> Dabakis, *Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture: Monuments, Manliness, and the Work Ethic, 1880-1935*, 177.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Langa has argued that such skyscraper construction workers, frequently seen in visual culture of this period, were “heroes of mythic character.” See Helen Langa, “Strength, Stress, and Solidarity: Imag(in)ing American Labor in the Depression Era,” *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 13, no. 1 (1996): 7.

communist-inspired revolt against the premises of capitalism. He not only used his strength in the construction sites, steel mills, mines, and countless other factories of the United States. His worth was not limited to his ability to do work. Rather, the worker of the 1930s often appears as a stern-faced, contemplative individual. Works like Julius Bloch's *The Striker* (1934, Fig. 2-3) and Elizabeth Olds' *Miner Joe* (c. 1937-42, Fig. 2-4) identify this worker by his serious and pensive expression rather than by the implements he uses on the job.

This Depression-era worker acted as an individual on behalf of his community to agitate for greater pay and self-determination in the workplace. Willing to sacrifice himself for the larger ideological good, as art historian Erika Doss has explained, the worker's cultural value came from his "action and autonomy."<sup>5</sup> He represented himself at union meetings, exercised his right to free speech at protests, and when necessary used his physical power to overcome violently those who would seek to deny him those rights. Alice Neel's *Pat Whalen* (1935, Fig. 2-5), Hugo Gellert's *Primary Accumulation 19* (1933, Fig. 2-6), and Joe Jones' *We Demand* (1934, Fig. 2-7) embody this trope. A reader of the *Daily Worker*, a spokesman at a rally, and a leader at the head of a picket, respectively, these men add clenched fists to their furrowed brows, showing they have the mental resolve as well as the physical potential to foster change.

Philip Evergood cast the worker as a hero in *American Tragedy* (1937, Fig. 2-8). The carrot-orange-haired worker in the foreground of the tumultuous tableau plants his feet and extends his muscular arm in an attempt to halt the onrush of policemen. This man and his strong-willed, potentially pugilistic female companion are the only two in a group of civilians who have not yet been trampled, beaten, or shot. They are the only two who courageously

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<sup>5</sup> Erika Doss, "Toward an Iconography of American Labor: Work, Workers, and the Work Ethic in American Art, 1930-1945," *Design Issues* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 53.

confront their uniformed opponents. Using only their fists and a single tree branch, they are outmatched by the policemen's nightsticks and pistols. Given their steadfast poses and stern, committed stares, along with their prominence in the composition, they are the hero and heroine of this riotous scene.

Though the heroic couple faces several aggressors at once, their chief threat comes from the one brute who lunges ahead of the rest. He points a gun at the woman's pregnant belly and aims his stick at the man. These three figures exchange looks charged with animosity, a mood that echoes in the contemptuous gazes of two officers nearby who survey the scene with clenched jaws and pursed lips. If this were a play, this trio would be the lead actors; they are responsible for capturing the viewers' attention and conveying the story. Indeed, it appears that the essence of the confusing mob scene distills into this threesome; they freeze in a climactic, two-against-one trinity.

Four vignettes of wounded or dead figures bracket the three principal characters in the foreground. On the left, a bullet strikes the woman in pink in the back. On the right, a dark-haired man recoils from the menace and pain of a raised nightstick. Two men lie wounded and possibly dead in the lower left corner. Another man on the right, recently struck by the policeman's blunt and phallic weapon, clutches his chest. Streams of crimson blood stain his clothing and he falls in a physically awkward but formally graceful arc. He will eventually come to rest on the ground to serve as a symmetrical counterpart to the other two prone figures, one of which holds an American flag. That flag lies desecrated in dirt and blood. Its red stripes that typically symbolize righteous, patriotic blood spilt in national defense seem to drip and run off the fabric once again. Like parentheses around a bit of text, these four episodes surround the chaotic cluster of bodies, holding it together as a great narrative episode.

The stakes of the contest in *American Tragedy* are extremely high as the action freezes at the pinnacle of combative tension. Evergood's title indicates that this is a scene of national importance. Accordingly, his civilian couple represents that fundamental element of American culture, the family unit. As father and mother-to-be, they are responsible for the next generation. Their contrapposto stances, in concert with their unyielding expressions and clenched fists, indicate their intention to protect the future of their family and defend their fallen friends at the protest. To yield even a little turf would send them backpedaling; they would trample the flag and further tarnish the ideals of the nation. But to resist will not be easy; the officer appears to be mid-stride, running toward them, and therefore has energy and momentum (plus his weapons) on his side. The battle is not yet won or lost, but these figures appear to be the last resort. As *American Tragedy* laments the sad state of affairs and inspires sympathy and sorrow for the victims, it also incites action. Evergood's painting urgently calls for reinforcements to stabilize the couple's precarious position. Though they face almost certain defeat, they are heroic because do not waver in their commitment to their cause.

Evergood's harsh color and deliberately crude paint handling heighten the drama of *American Tragedy*. The yellow ground in the center anchors the acerbic composition and clashes with the vibrant blue sky and red walls in the rear. Those two dominant background hues reappear in the foreground creating a compositional flattening and a symbolic correspondence between the action and the location. The upper third of the composition resembles a stage set more than an actual landscape, and provides the stilled and quiet counterpoint to the violent spectacle in the foreground. Patches of brown and gray tarnish, smudge, and make tactile the figures; they seem dirty, sweaty, and abused. Evergood's brushwork appears spontaneous and immediate. In his use of distinct but inconsistent black marks to outline forms and figures, Evergood stays true to his artistic roots as a draftsman by

drawing expressively in paint. The cacophony of color and form makes the couple's situation more vivid and their actions more courageous.

In composition and in expressive effect Evergood's work recalls several other linchpins of art historical theatricality. The emphatic halting gesture of the heroic man in the foreground of *American Tragedy* resembles that of Hersilia, the daughter of a Sabine and the wife of Romulus, in Jacques-Louis David's *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799, Fig. 2-9).<sup>6</sup> Both figures effectively arrest the chaotic and violent sequences. Evergood's policemen's clubs send our attention darting around the composition in a manner akin to the pikes and swords in Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* (c. 1438-40, Fig. 2-10). From Perugino's *Delivery of the Keys to St. Peter* (1481, Fig. 2-11), Evergood seems to have derived the tripartite architectural background and the middle ground of vague, diminutive figures, which almost function as part of the setting rather than part of the action. In all of these antecedent works, the dominant figure, the leader in command of the scene, anchors the left side of the composition.

Evergood was a well-traveled student of art history. Born in 1901 to an artist father and a wealthy, British mother, Evergood spent his teenage years in England. He attended the prestigious school for boys, Eton College, Cambridge University, and studied languages and mathematics in Belgium. He also spent much of his time during the 1910s visiting various European museums, absorbing the work of the Old Masters.<sup>7</sup> Owing in large part to these formative years studying such artists as Michelangelo, El Greco, and Dürer, Evergood's early

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that one source for the heroic man in *American Tragedy* is the heroic woman from David's painting. Perhaps here, as in his acknowledgement of the courageous participation of women at the Memorial Day Massacre, which I discuss below, Evergood manifests a progressive attitude toward women's contributions to social progress.

<sup>7</sup> For biographical information, see John I. H. Baur, *Philip Evergood* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975), passim.

career was full of overtly religious and classicized subject matter as in *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1929, Fig. 2-12) and *Centaur and Men* (1926-27, Fig. 2-13). However, after his return to the United States in 1931 he immersed himself in the New York art scene. In Evergood's more mature paintings of the 1930s and later, he incorporated his knowledge of past art to aggrandize contemporary events. Evergood portrayed, for example, a mother holding her son in front of a cruciform post in *Madonna of the Mines* (1932, revised 1944, Fig. 2-14). As the child plays with a toy train marked "coal" the title foreshadows his future work and death in the mines and his mother's resulting sorrow. Similarly, Evergood employs art historical allusions in *American Tragedy* in order to elevate his contemporary pictorial tale to the status of canonically revered history or religious painting.

Indeed, Evergood painted recent history in *American Tragedy*. He based his composition in part on a highly reported event of 1937 known as the Memorial Day Massacre.<sup>8</sup> Workers at the South Chicago Republic Steel plant had been striking since May 26 for the right to unionize and demonstrate.<sup>9</sup> On Memorial Day (May 30), their families and other local sympathizers joined them for a picnic and a rally. When the crowd marched on the plant in order to establish a picket, the police, on orders from the plant's administration, tried to force them to disperse. The scene turned into a battle involving guns, clubs, and tear gas on one side and sticks, rocks, and fists on the other. Ten workers died and nearly 100 protesters

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 35. Patricia Hills, "Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy*: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," *Arts Magazine* 54 (February 1980): 138.

<sup>9</sup> John Baur and Evergood both erroneously remembered this protest to have taken place in Gary, Indiana, which was another of Republic Steel's towns. John I. H. Baur, *Philip Evergood* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Praeger, 1960), 52. Forrest Selvig, "Interview with Philip Evergood," (Washington, DC: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1968), unpaginated. Baur corrected this in his lengthier 1975 monograph. Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 35.

were wounded. The event is now hailed among the most significant impetuses in the development of powerful labor unions.<sup>10</sup>

Evergood was one of several artists, writers, and filmmakers who responded to the Memorial Day Massacre. Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand's pro-union film *Native Land* (1942) ends with an account of the Chicago protest and a dramatized funeral for one of the men killed.<sup>11</sup> Inspired by his firsthand experience of the protest, Meyer Levin published accounts of the experience in various publications, including *The Nation*.<sup>12</sup> Levin also fictionalized (and heroicized) the lives of those killed in the 1940 novel *Citizens*.<sup>13</sup> Archibald MacLeish pondered the event in his 1937 epic poem, *Land of the Free*:

Maybe we were endowed by our creator  
with certain inalienable rights including  
The right to assemble in peace and petition.  
Maybe.  
But try it in South Chicago Memorial Day  
With the mick police on the prairie in front of the factory  
Gunning you down from behind and for what? For liberty?<sup>14</sup>

Bernece Berkman's painting *Current News* (1937, Fig. 2-15) shows people huddled over newspapers with the words "steel," "strike," and the abbreviation "C.I.O."<sup>15</sup> They read about

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<sup>10</sup> For a good summary of the event and its historiography, see Carol Quirke, "Reframing Chicago's Memorial Day Massacre, May 30, 1937," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (March 2008): 129-57.

<sup>11</sup> Leo Hurwitz, Paul Strand, and David Wolff, *Native Land*, directed by Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand (New York: Frontier Films, 1942).

<sup>12</sup> Meyer Levin, "Slaughter in Chicago," *The Nation* (12 June 1937): 670-71.

<sup>13</sup> Levin's text includes a description of the protest itself. Meyer Levin, *Citizens* (New York: Viking Press, 1940), 48-89.

<sup>14</sup> MacLeish's poem is a literary response to a series of contemporary photographs, including one of the Memorial Day Massacre. He uses a racial slur in the poem describing the police as Irish "micks," which does not find expression in Evergood's painting. Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 10.

<sup>15</sup> I wonder if Minna Citron's painting and prints entitled *Strike News* (1937) also relate to this event. In both the painted and print compositions workers huddle around a newspaper. In the prints the newspapers read "STRIKE CLOSES MILL" and "CIO." The painting is now in the Wolfsonian Collection in Miami Beach, Florida. Erika Doss briefly mentions the work in



the confrontation on the streets near the Chicago plant. Berkman does not visualize the event itself; she does not give faces and gestures to the oppressors or victims. Nonetheless, her work, with its Cubist-derived angularity and expressionist distortions of anatomy, manifests the anger that many sympathizers, including these artists, felt in the wake of the massacre.<sup>16</sup>

Like the figures in Berkman's painting, Evergood learned of the Chicago massacre by reading newspapers, as he lived hundreds of miles away in New York City. He channeled his own outrage into the relatively modest in size (29 ½ x 39 ½ inches), but thematically epic *American Tragedy*. A newspaper article by Meyer Levin, preserved in Evergood's archive, describes some of the victims: a man with an ax in his skull, a young boy shot in the leg, and another man who, according to Levin, bled to death after being arrested rather than taken to a hospital.<sup>17</sup> Like Levin, Evergood renders the violence in great detail. He depicts a foreground man and woman with whom to relate and several other wounded or dying figures that make the policemen's brutality more real. Such humanization of the conflict in prose or in paint captures our attention and casts the workers as martyrs to their cause.

Evergood's inclusion of a heroine, a woman participant in the resistance (not just a witness) at the strike, is atypical of labor imagery in the 1930s. Helen Langa observed that "no prints portraying celebratory female figures that might represent women's heroic

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"Looking at Labor: Images of Work in 1930s American Art," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002): 242.

<sup>16</sup> Now in a private collection, this painting was shown at the Terra Museum in Chicago in 2004. See Elizabeth Kennedy et al., *Chicago Modern, 1893-1945: Pursuit of the New* (Chicago: Terra Museum of American Art, Terra Foundation for the Arts: Distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 2004), 91.

<sup>17</sup> The news clipping is now among the Philip Evergood Papers, 1910-1970, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. It is reproduced legibly in Patricia Hills, "Art and Politics in the Popular Front: The Union Work and Social Realism of Philip Evergood," in Anreus, Linden, and Weinberg, *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, 194.

contributions to either economic recovery or family survival” exist.<sup>18</sup> More often paintings and prints emphasized the masculine hero acting in concert with his fellow workers and cast women (when they are depicted at all) as helpless victims.<sup>19</sup> As Sharon Hartman Strom explained, “the image of the woman standing behind her man and his job became a sentimental theme in union rhetoric.”<sup>20</sup>

Consistent with the period emphasis on traditional women’s roles as homemakers, not workers, the woman in *American Tragedy*, is a wife and mother.<sup>21</sup> She embodies the standard gender roles promoted within unionized families; she stands at her husband’s side, and in turn, he protects her. Yet, Evergood also pushed the boundaries of the symbol of the subordinate, domestic woman by making his heroine an aggressive, committed union advocate in her own right. Evergood likely drew inspiration from the heroic female attendees at the Memorial Day Massacre and similar historical events. The woman in *American Tragedy* signifies other loyal, supportive women who participated in union auxiliaries. These women prepared food for the male union leaders and workers, attended meetings and protests, and were often at the fore of pickets.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, accounts of the Memorial Day Massacre indicate that such cooperative women were on the front lines of the strike, and suffered police

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<sup>18</sup> Langa, “Strength, Stress, and Solidarity: Imag(in)ing American Labor in the Depression Era,” 12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>20</sup> Strom continued to note, “the working woman was conspicuously absent.” Sharon Hartman Strom, “Challenging ‘Woman’s Place’: Feminism, the Left, and Industrial Unionism in the 1930s,” *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 365. I examine this problematic issue of women as heroic wives, mothers, and laborers in Chapter Five.

<sup>21</sup> This emphasis on the home and family as traditional women’s spheres was especially pronounced during the late 1930s Communist Popular Front, which prioritized other political issues ahead of feminism and was openly hostile towards the women’s movement at times. We will return to the significance of the Popular Front ideology on *American Tragedy* later in this chapter. See Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> Strom, “Challenging ‘Woman’s Place’: Feminism, the Left, and Industrial Unionism in the 1930s,” 365.

brutality along with male workers.<sup>23</sup> The heroic woman in Evergood's painting signifies both the traditional woman's role as mother and wife, while simultaneously transgressing such norms to actively and courageously fight for the rights of unions and workers. The diverse contributions she makes to her family and to American labor mirror the historical circumstances of women who participated in the Memorial Day Massacre and other union protests.

Scholars of Evergood's work often compare the finished painting with photographs that accompanied Meyer Levin's narrative (Fig. 2-16). There they locate the source for such figures as the black man lying on the ground and the policeman on the right who has his back to the viewer and his stick raised. In addition to the textual and photographic accounts of the Chicago strike, Evergood certainly drew upon some of his own experiences to create *American Tragedy*. In December 1936, months before (reading about) the Memorial Day Massacre, Evergood was one of hundreds of artists who staged a protest at the WPA office in New York City. Attempting a sit-down strike, the artists banded together inside the building to express their opposition to recent New Deal cutbacks. When police arrived they beat and dragged the protesters, of whom 219 were arrested. Consequently, the event is known as the 219 Strike.<sup>24</sup> Evergood recalled, "My nose was broken, blood was pouring out of my eyes, my ear was all torn down, my overcoat had been taken and the collar ripped off, and they hardly recognized me when I was pushed out by the police."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For discussions of women's participation in the Memorial Day Massacre, see Levin, "Slaughter in Chicago," 670-71; Hills, "Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy*: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," 140; Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*, 14 and 234, fn. 42; Quirke, "Reframing Chicago's Memorial Day Massacre, May 30, 1937," 137-39 and passim.

<sup>24</sup> Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 34.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Hills, "Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy*: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," 140.

Art historian Patricia Hills uses this remembrance to suggest that Evergood painted his self-portrait in *American Tragedy*; she speculates that the curiously floating torso and head near the center of the painting may be the artist's self image. Hills further wonders whether the heroic worker in the foreground is a stand-in for the leader of the WPA strikes, a sculptor named Paul Block.<sup>26</sup> Evergood admired him for being "really brave" and "really courageous." When police tried to drag him out of the building, Evergood recalled that Block "stuck his chin right out and put his arms right around that post and they had to beat him insensible to get him out of there."<sup>27</sup> Though Block had brown hair, the steadfast hero of *American Tragedy* resonates with the way Evergood remembered Block. Whether Evergood is the bloody figure at the center of his painting or not, his participation in protests certainly led him to empathize with the victims at Republic Steel and his expressionist style of painting registers his perspective. As Evergood claimed, "I don't think that anybody who hasn't been really beaten up by the police badly, as I have, could have painted an *American Tragedy*."<sup>28</sup>

Evergood's support of labor unions extended beyond his participation in the 219 Strike and his interest in the Chicago massacre. In September 1937, Evergood became president of the New York Artists' Union and served what contemporary art critic Elizabeth McCausland called an "energetic term."<sup>29</sup> Under Evergood's leadership the Artists' Union became a full-fledged local chapter of the United Office and Professional Workers of America

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Block's leadership is also discussed in Gerald M. Monroe, "Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression," *Archives of American Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1974): 8.

<sup>27</sup> This statement comes from an interview with Evergood conducted by John Baur. Quoted in Hills, "Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy*: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," 140.

<sup>28</sup> Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 35.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth McCausland, "The Plastic Organization of Philip Evergood," *Parnassus* 11, no. 3 (March 1939): 20.

(UOPWA).<sup>30</sup> For artists who sympathized with the plight of organized labor and who earned the so-called “plumber’s wage” on the WPA, it was quite a victory to count themselves as part of this coalition of workers. All of these activities put Evergood in touch with leftist causes and suited his inclination to use his art as a means of social commentary and change.

That Evergood conflated the Memorial Day Massacre with the 219 Strike in his conception of *American Tragedy* is the dominant interpretation of the painting.<sup>31</sup> Yet we must caution ourselves against letting our understanding of this image end with the specific labor strikes in Chicago and New York. For all of its documentary allusions, *American Tragedy* is not simple reportage. Evergood based small parts of his composition on photographic evidence and invented many others. While the round-faced man at the center does resemble Evergood, he also appears in the painting *Street Corner* (1936, Fig. 2-17) smoking a cigarette. So does the hero of the steel strike in *American Tragedy* appear in *Street Corner*, although this time he is a miner on his way home from a long day of work. We see them recurring because the figures in each work are types. They signify various individuals, all subsumed by the potentially violent climate of the 1930s labor movement, including but certainly not limited to steel workers, miners, and artists.

Evergood’s perspective in *American Tragedy* further registers his engagement with the communist support of organized labor. Though taciturn about his communist connections later in life, after brushes with Red-scare-style prejudice in the 1940s and 1950s, during the

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<sup>30</sup> The transformation of the Artists’ Union into United American Artists, Local 60 of the UOPWA was announced in December 1937 and became official in January 1938. See Monroe, “Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression,” 9.

<sup>31</sup> These canonical interpretations include those of Patricia Hills and John I. H. Baur. Hills, “Philip Evergood’s *American Tragedy*: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger,” 138-42. Hills, “Art and Politics in the Popular Front: The Union Work and Social Realism of Philip Evergood,” 181-200. Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 35.

1930s Evergood traveled in communist circles.<sup>32</sup> According to Helen Sloan (wife of artist John Sloan), Evergood was more than happy to flash his Communist Party membership card to anyone who asked.<sup>33</sup> He exhibited at such radical venues as the John Reed Club and the A.C.A. Gallery and published statements in the communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*.<sup>34</sup> His art appeared in that journal, as well; *American Tragedy* illustrated a 1940 rave review of his one-man show.<sup>35</sup> In a letter to friend, fellow artist, and Communist Party member Harry Gottlieb, Evergood applauded Gottlieb's dedication to the "economic and cultural fronts" and considered him one among many "fellow unionites [sic] and comrades" who are dedicated to the plight of "the workers and their undiluted red blood."<sup>36</sup> For Evergood the support of labor was part of being a dedicated communist.

*American Tragedy* is Evergood's most overt contribution to the communists' visual tradition. His courageous, athletic worker with clenched fists in *American Tragedy* derives from a communist symbol. This mighty worker type appears in innumerable popular images including Hugo Gellert's illustrations for the book *Karl Marx' 'Capital' in Lithographs (The*

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<sup>32</sup> In her 1980 essay on *American Tragedy*, Patricia Hills begins to restore this aspect of Evergood's biography, which had been neglected by the artist and previous art historians. She continues to explore Evergood's communist ties in subsequent scholarship. Hills, "Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy*: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," 141-42. Hills, "Art and Politics in the Popular Front: The Union Work and Social Realism of Philip Evergood," 181-200, 329-30.

<sup>33</sup> Hills, "Art and Politics in the Popular Front: The Union Work and Social Realism of Philip Evergood," 329.

<sup>34</sup> Philip Evergood, "For and Agin': Should Art Prettify Heroes?" *Daily Worker*, 2 November 1942.

<sup>35</sup> Oliver F. Mason, "Evergood Exhibit at the A.C.A. Gallery," *Daily Worker*, 26 March 1940.

<sup>36</sup> On Gottlieb's Communist Party membership, see Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 113. Evergood's letter is preserved in the Philip Evergood Papers, 1910-1970, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Reel 1345, frames 1034-35.

*Working Day 34*, 1933, Fig. 2-18).<sup>37</sup> The Artists' Union also used the clenched fist as its logo in the 1930s (Fig. 2-19).<sup>38</sup> A worker's fist symbolized his strength and capacity for violence to further social change; this is part of what made him heroic. As Evergood argued, "Even heroes in this time have to be violent and destructive. To get rid of snakes one kills them."<sup>39</sup> However, in Evergood's hands the hero appears more natural and human than the exaggerated caricatures appearing elsewhere. His hero more readily invites the viewer's empathetic identification and the violence he threatens seems provoked, even justified, as a means of defense.

Evergood's title harkens back to Theodore Dreiser's 1925 novel, *An American Tragedy*, another story in which the protagonist finds himself compelled to commit violence.<sup>40</sup> Dreiser's three-part epic, a "communist literary icon," concerns the life of Clyde Griffiths.<sup>41</sup> A humble and poor Midwesterner, Griffiths' desire for wealth and status propels him into a series of untoward situations until he is ultimately sentenced to death for the murder of his pregnant girlfriend. Dreiser based his plot on a 1906 murder case involving a man named Chester Gillette.<sup>42</sup> In his fictionalization, Dreiser casts Griffiths as a tragic hero; he even considered naming the book after such a Greek tragic hero as Icarus, the boy whose

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<sup>37</sup> Gellert, along with William Gropper, was particularly adept at conveying the capacity for revolt in the ideal, communist worker. Jeff Kisseloff, *Hugo Gellert: Catalogue of Prints and Drawings* (New York: Mary Ryan Gallery, 1986), 16-20. See the entire series of lithographs in Karl Marx, et al., *Karl Marx' 'Capital' in Lithographs* (New York: R. Long & R.R. Smith, 1934).

<sup>38</sup> Virginia Carol Hagelstein Marquardt, *Art and Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 235.

<sup>39</sup> Evergood, "For and Agin': Should Art Prettify Heroes?"

<sup>40</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*, 2 vols. (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925).

<sup>41</sup> Art historian Andrew Hemingway mentions the connection between Evergood's painting and Dreiser's book but dismisses it. See Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 142.

<sup>42</sup> Richard R. Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey, 1908-1945*, vol. 2 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990), 225.

wish to soar high on wax and feather wings caused his unfortunate fatal fall.<sup>43</sup> Icarus' death resulted from his poor choice, one made out of ambition and curiosity, at a crucial moment.<sup>44</sup> It would be a gross understatement to say that Griffiths, too, made a flawed decision when he overturned the boat in which he and his girlfriend were floating and then did nothing to save her as she drowned in a New York lake. Nonetheless, this appears to be Griffiths' most pivotal tragic moment. As the book proceeds to recount his arrest, trial, and execution, we readers find ourselves pitying Griffiths despite his violent actions. His low economic status denied him access to resources that might have provided other options in his predicament, including adequate contraception, an abortion for his girlfriend, or more dedicated and thorough legal defense. Ultimately, too, we feel sorry for Griffiths because his hope for a more prosperous life had roots in the American dream.<sup>45</sup>

Evergood's original title *American Tragedy* probably included the article "An" which subsequent art historians have curiously dropped. Evergood so referred to the painting in a conversation with John Baur and, in a 1940 exhibition review, Edward Alden Jewell wrote about the work calling it *An American Tragedy*.<sup>46</sup> The title also appeared that way when the image was reproduced in a 1940 issue of the *Daily Worker*.<sup>47</sup> The wording is not just a

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<sup>43</sup> Other Greek-inspired titles he considered included Orion and Xion. Ibid., 235.

<sup>44</sup> According to Aristotle, the tragic hero must go from "good fortune to bad fortune, not because of wickedness but because of a great mistake." Aristotle, *On Poetics*, trans. Seth Benardete and Michael Davis (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>45</sup> Again, this concept relates the story to Aristotelian tragic heroes; the Greek philosopher explains that a tragedy must "be imitative of fearful and pitiable things." Thus, the audience will pity the poor soul and fear that such a seemingly random or senseless mistake could strike them. Ibid., 32.

<sup>46</sup> In a statement to John Baur, Evergood referred to his painting as "An American Tragedy," but when that phrase was printed in Baur's 1975 book, the "An" was lowercase and not italicized, making it separate from the title. Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 35. Edward Alden Jewell, "Philip Evergood Shows Paintings," *The New York Times*, 27 March 1940.

<sup>47</sup> As mentioned above, the painting illustrated a glowing review of Evergood's one-man show. See Mason, "Evergood Exhibit at the A.C.A. Gallery."



semantic issue, as the title of Dreiser's book was well known and the text is considered his most overt anti-capitalist novel. Nonetheless, with or without the "An," the similarity between Evergood's and Dreiser's titles would make the painting immediately resonant with leftist audiences as analogous statements. Dreiser's resonance with communist sympathizers exceeded the perspective he articulated in *An American Tragedy*. By the 1930s Dreiser himself was touted as a communist icon and an advocate on behalf of American labor. At a 1931 meeting in his home he professed, "The time is ripe for American intellectuals to render some service to the American worker."<sup>48</sup> He made good on that statement by raising funds for and awareness of the interests of organized labor. Dreiser had traveled to the Soviet Union where his books were extremely popular, and was often invited to write for the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses*. The Communist Party USA (CPUSA) sent Dreiser to such sites of labor unrest as Harlan, Kentucky, where miners were fighting for their safety, compensation, and autonomy in the workplace.<sup>49</sup> For Evergood to allude to Dreiser's most famous novel in his painting's title not only links the two artistic products, but also connects Evergood's painting to Dreiser's legacy of activism and support on behalf of workers, and communists' lionization of Dreiser, in turn.<sup>50</sup>

While the narratives of Evergood's painting and Dreiser's novel differ greatly, their messages relate to one another, as both protagonists are tragic heroes of the modern era.<sup>51</sup> Contrary to the Greek dramatic trope in which the hero's demise results from flaws in his

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<sup>48</sup> Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey, 1908-1945*, 345-48.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>50</sup> Ultimately Dreiser questioned Soviet communism's applicability to the American situation; he hoped for a homegrown system instead. The nuances of his political philosophy are much discussed by historians now, but in 1930s American leftist circles, he was considered a friend to communists, i.e. a fellow traveler, despite his apparent ambivalence. *Ibid.*, 349-64.

<sup>51</sup> In the novel Griffiths' lost hat, one much like the hat in the foreground of Evergood's painting, is one piece of evidence upon which his prosecution relies.

character or his foolish aspirations, Dreiser makes it clear that the trappings of the capitalist economic system set in motion a “chain of circumstances” that lead Griffiths to make his ultimately tragic decision.<sup>52</sup> Evergood’s hero is also led by his desire for autonomy in the workplace and greater prosperity into the violent situation that plays on the canvas. Both men’s aspirations are understandably rooted in the American promise of upward mobility. In each work, capitalism is the economic and social force that creates desire and limits the working class individuals from attaining their goals. For Evergood and Dreiser, the flawed system itself is an American tragedy.<sup>53</sup>

Though the policemen’s aggressive actions and expressions make them appear personally dedicated to suppressing the demonstration in *American Tragedy*, the cops are also pawns in the capitalist game. The plant’s administration compelled the police to suppress the picket; the police act on behalf of capitalist industry. Evergood conveys this through formal repetition of shapes and colors from the background to the foreground. The distant blue sky recurs in the policemen’s uniforms. Evergood reimagines the mill’s smokestacks as billy clubs and pistols. The industrial exhaust that is not emitted by the plant instead spews forth in the crowd as puffs of tear gas.<sup>54</sup> The policemen act in this scene as mercenaries, hired men doing a dirty job that lacks redeeming virtue. They do not defend themselves, their rights, or

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<sup>52</sup> Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey, 1908-1945*, 231.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Denning asserts that Evergood’s *Dance Marathon* (1934) also critiques capitalism’s creation of desire and consumption much like Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*. He writes, “the dance marathon becomes an allegory of an American capitalism in which endless, repetitive amusement and entertainment is oppressive, consuming the dreams of its youth, turning dance into wage slavery.” Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 183.

<sup>54</sup> An investigation of the Memorial Day Massacre determined that the clubs and tear gas were not issued by the police but by Republic Steel itself. Eyewitness Sam Evett explains this in his statement in a film directed by Michael Rabiger, *The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937*, (Illinois Labor History Society, 1980s).

any other just cause. While the policemen do not function as heroes, they are still a major part of the tragedy of this scene.

While most leftists praised *American Tragedy* for its form and message, one communist critic of Evergood's painting derided his choice of the "industrial background in bright vermilion" as "a little hard to take."<sup>55</sup> Using the communist signature color for the capitalist monument was perhaps a risky choice for Evergood. But he was compelled to select that hue because he aimed for "vulgarity of color" and "violence of color" to exacerbate the terror of the scene.<sup>56</sup> He was successful; the crimson walls surrounding the factory buildings liquefy into pools of blood in the foreground. One can read the rhyming of red in two ways. Either the workers owe their spilt blood to industry or industry is built with the blood of its workers. In both cases the blame falls on the capitalist institution. According to anti-capitalists, the only way to prevent these sorts of tragedies—those that pit man against man and pregnant woman—is to overturn the system of business and society. This is precisely what *American Tragedy* advocates.

The causes Evergood addressed in this and other paintings were aspects of the era's expansive ideological contest between the political right and the political left. The way Evergood has separated the combatants' territory in *American Tragedy* is telling: the police began the confrontation with control of the right side and the civilians' home turf was on the left. This face-off becomes a larger allegory of that debate as the battle lines are drawn like

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<sup>55</sup> Roy King, "New Evergood Works Unique in U.S. Art," *Daily Worker*, 31 March 1940. Emily Genauer, Elizabeth McCausland, and Oliver Mason wrote positive reviews. Emily Genauer, "Evergood Works among New Displays," *New York World-Telegram*, 30 March 1940; Elizabeth McCausland, "Exhibitions in New York," *Parnassus* 12, no. 4 (April 1940): 37; Mason, "Evergood Exhibit at the A.C.A. Gallery." Andrew Hemingway discusses these various responses to the painting. See Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956*, 143-44.

<sup>56</sup> Selvig, "Interview with Philip Evergood," unpaginated.

the political spectrum. Evergood strove for universality in his art. “I don’t paint to put over topical ideas,” he said. “I feel very conscious when I develop a theme that it must have universal connotations before I want to put it down in paint.”<sup>57</sup> So while *American Tragedy* has ties to specific events in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere (as we will soon see), the combination of these various political references allows the painting to operate as a broader social and political statement.

Evergood’s engagement with leftist causes was not limited to the communist support of labor unions and criticism of capitalism. Indeed, it is possible to find other (but still related) levels of meaning in *American Tragedy*. “I’m a dyed-in-the-wool revolutionary,” Evergood said, and he used his platform as an artist to speak out against racism, war, and fascism, as well.<sup>58</sup> These forces are precisely what motivated American communists in the late 1930s during the period from 1935 to 1939, known as the Popular Front. Historians of this era tend to focus on the Popular Front perspective that the most pressing threat to the communist program was not bourgeois capitalism and class inequality, but fascist suppression and violence. Accordingly, the proletarian revolution shifted to the back burner as attention turned toward such violent dictators as Adolf Hitler and Francisco Franco. Popular Front leaders, along with visual artists and writers and other cultural workers, mobilized their art as weapons against the rise of fascist regimes.<sup>59</sup> Patricia Hills has observed that *American Tragedy* is a

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<sup>57</sup> Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 50.

<sup>58</sup> Evergood, letter to Alice Jerome, November 3, 1965, quoted in Kendall Taylor, “The Philip Evergood Papers,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 18, no. 3 (1978): 7.

<sup>59</sup> In 1937 the Popular Front was known in the United States as the Democratic Front, signifying its cooperation with FDR’s administration and its dedication to the preservation, not the overthrow, of American democracy. Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956*, 103-05. Michael Denning argues that the Popular Front in America was not limited to Communist Party members. It was “more a historical bloc than a party . . . a broad and tenuous left-wing alliance of fractions of the subaltern

“radically revolutionary” labor painting featuring a racially integrated workforce, and explains that it is uncommon to see such concerns in Popular Front imagery.<sup>60</sup> For Hills, Evergood’s apparent divergence from the party’s instructions to foreground the message of anti-fascism results from his “compelling...desire to paint what he felt.”<sup>61</sup> Hills accurately characterized Evergood as a very independent painter, not one who pandered to any prevailing ideology, Popular Front or otherwise. Yet, to see the goals of anti-fascism and labor organizing as mutually exclusive obscures the ongoing unification of those parallel agendas during the Popular Front era. *American Tragedy* functions not only in the context of anti-capitalism and organized labor, but also as a visual metaphor for worldwide struggles against racism and fascism. Thus, in painting *American Tragedy* Evergood acted as an independently minded revolutionary artist whose work addressed multiple political concerns and contributed to the Popular Front agenda by analogizing the struggles against capitalism and racism with the ideological and actual war against fascism abroad.<sup>62</sup>

Historian Michael Denning reminds us that though the Popular Front targeted fascism as its chief enemy, this was not the only goal of the cultural and political movement in America. He argues, “the Popular Front combined three distinctive political tendencies: a social democratic laborism based on a militant industrial unionism; an anti-racist ethnic pluralism imagining the United States as a ‘nation of nations’; and an anti-fascist politics of

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classes.” Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, 4-6.

<sup>60</sup> Hills, “Art and Politics in the Popular Front: The Union Work and Social Realism of Philip Evergood,” 193.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>62</sup> Denning refers to Evergood (along with William Gropper, Jacob Lawrence, and Ben Shahn) as a “Popular Front artist.” Herman Baron’s A.C.A. Gallery, which represented Evergood from 1937 on was an important forum for such political art. Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, 93. Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 29.

international solidarity.”<sup>63</sup> As explained above, Evergood mobilized his faith in labor unions and authorized militant violence in extreme circumstances. Furthermore, Evergood’s *American Tragedy* is a sophisticated evocation of the Popular Front agenda of anti-racism and anti-fascism. In this painting, Evergood shows how class strife and violence at home unite people of various ethnicities and relates to the threats of dictatorial regimes around the world.

Evergood emphasized diversity in *American Tragedy* by placing figures of various ethnic origins in the foreground of the painting. The African American man who clenches the American flag lies in close proximity to a wounded white man; their heads almost rest on each other’s shoulders. These two figures mirror one another compositionally. Their bodies fit together like puzzle pieces, signifying a kind of interracial brotherhood among the fallen comrades. John Steuart Curry’s Kansas Statehouse mural, *The Tragic Prelude* (1937-42), also features two bodies, one confederate and one union soldier, lying on the ground in a similar arrangement in front of a decidedly heroic John Brown. Hugo Gellert manifested the same sort of solidarity in *The Working Day* 37 (1933, Fig. 2-20), one of his illustrations for the book *Karl Marx’ ‘Capital’ in Lithographs*, which shows a black worker and a white worker trustingly standing back-to-back.<sup>64</sup> James Guy’s *Workers* (1938, Fig. 2-21) collages black and white faces; the workers’ intertwined black and white fingers underscore the cooperation

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<sup>63</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, 125.

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Weinberg has discussed this image, as well. He cited the caption that accompanied it when it was published in a November 1932 issue of *New Masses*, which emphasized the need for white and black workers to collaborate in their struggle: “Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself when labor with a black skin is branded.” *New Masses* 8 (November 1932): 26. Later in his essay Weinberg argued that the back-to-back figures manifest “less an ideal of racial harmony than a dangerous dynamic of attraction and aversion.” Still, I argue, as has Helen Langa, that we can see them as comrades who trust one another enough to stand this way in order to guard against other more dangerous enemies. Weinberg, “I Want Muscle: Male Desire and the Image of the Worker in American Art of the 1930s,” 116-24. Langa, “Strength, Stress, and Solidarity: Imag(in)ing American Labor in the Depression Era,” 7.

among the races that the Popular Front advocated.<sup>65</sup> Guy's woman and child with their two tone visages symbolize a similar sort of ethnic partnership as Evergood implies with his Latina heroine who carries her white partner's child. Together they form an interracial couple, soon to be a family of three.<sup>66</sup> The melting pot of individuals in the foreground of this painting shows how the labor revolution crossed ethnic boundaries. Implicitly, Evergood's diverse group of workers stands for an America in which all races live, work, and protest together without prejudice.<sup>67</sup> The cooperation among the various individuals in *American Tragedy* embodies a philosophy of anti-racism.

Evergood encodes his anti-fascist statement in the formal organization of *American Tragedy*. Indeed, if we look closely we will see another right wing force besides capitalism overwhelming the civilians in *American Tragedy*. The merciless, gun-wielding cop in the foreground not only points his pistol directly at the woman's pregnant belly, but also travels with a gang of others who are ready to back him up. This policeman is part of a conglomeration of bodies that fuse together to form a super-human, multi-armed monster of aggression. It is hard to tell which hands belong to which body. In addition to main officer's pistol in his left hand we see another hand poking out from his torso that holds a nightstick ready to jab the civilian man in the armpit. Another three-hour shift of the clock leads us to the clenched fist above the officer's head. This fist, which also holds a nightstick, threatens to bear down on the civilian. This arm could also plausibly belong to that first officer and creates a strong diagonal line that points aggressively toward the woman. Finally, these three

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<sup>65</sup> Doss, "Looking at Labor: Images of Work in 1930s American Art," 245.

<sup>66</sup> Patricia Hills and Andrew Hemingway have identified the woman's ethnicity as Hispanic or Latina, respectively. Hills, "Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy*: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," 140. Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956*, 143.

<sup>67</sup> Hills, "Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy*: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," 141.

appendages compositionally connect to the flexed arm of the officer who turns away from us and stands back-to-back with his brawny, three-armed partner. This compositional fusion of arms, sticks, and a gun is a dynamo of brutality. The energy of this formation, both kinetic and potential, seems endless. Such a revolving quartet of appendages bears a strong resemblance to a swastika (See Fig. 2-22).

In the 1930s as now, people understood the swastika specifically as the symbol of Hitler's Nazi party. However, as Helen Langa has shown, "Leftist cartoonists used the swastika not just to represent Nazi Germany but also to suggest the undermining of American democratic ideals by right wing fascist values."<sup>68</sup> William Gropper mastered this version of the swastika's meaning in illustrations he made for the *New Masses*, for example, *Rot Front*, 1933 (Fig. 2-23) or *Untitled*, 1934 (Fig. 2-24). Inscribing the swastika on Hitler's armband, belt buckle, and flag, Gropper joins Hitler with the more universal figure of a top-hatted capitalist. Their opponents are a collective of Soviet (or Soviet-supported) workers in one work and the ubiquitous fist of solidarity in the other.

Leftists considered any instance of power run amok, repressive conservatism, or unjust or random acts of violence a fascist threat. The Memorial Day Massacre and other episodes of labor-related violence fell under that category. Indeed, the narrator in Hurwitz and Strand's *Native Land* calls the violence at the Chicago Memorial Day Massacre "an act of fascists."<sup>69</sup> In his autobiography, Meyer Levin recalled, "One could have called the strike a showdown between communist and fascist forces."<sup>70</sup> On a more allegorical level, Sinclair Lewis' 1935

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<sup>68</sup> Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York*, 175.

<sup>69</sup> Hurwitz, Strand, and Wolff, *Native Land*. References to fascism in are rampant in the *Daily Worker's* coverage of the Memorial Day Massacre, too. For example, see "Chicago C.P. Urges City-Wide Protest: Childs Declares Mayor Kelly Regime Fascist Like and Urges Demand for Removal, Indictment of Commissioner," *Daily Worker*, 31 May 1937.

<sup>70</sup> Meyer Levin, *In Search* (New York: Horizon Press, 1950), 102.



novel *It Can't Happen Here* dramatized and satirized American's blind faith in elected leaders as a practice that could result in a dictatorship.<sup>71</sup> During a time of crisis voters eschew democratic values and elect a strong, persuasive, but ultimately fascist president.<sup>72</sup> Werner Drewes symbolized that fear in *Distorted Swastika* (1934, Fig. 2-25), a linocut from a portfolio bearing the same title as Lewis' novel.<sup>73</sup> Even Franklin Roosevelt's administration did not escape fascist charges during times when he was seen as too supportive of conservative interests. A cartoon entitled *Adam n' Eve* from the John Reed Club journal *Leftward* (1933, Fig. 2-26) connects the New Deal with fascism, religion, capitalism, and imperialism.<sup>74</sup> The actualities of fascist aggression taking place abroad (in Germany and elsewhere) undoubtedly stirred these fears at home. Leftists corralled the forces they believed capable of evil under the term fascism or the symbol of a swastika, preferring bold, dramatic statements to those that were judicious in their specificity.

*Workers Unite* (1933, Fig. 2-27), an anonymous cartoon from *Leftward*, shows a swastika atop a windmill-turned-pagoda.<sup>75</sup> Its architecture references Emperor Hirohito's Japan and its spinning arms signify the most specific meaning of the swastika, the German socialist party (the Nazis), and carries broader references to institutions like banks, armies,

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<sup>71</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1935). The novel was extremely popular and was produced as a play by the Federal Theater Project in several cities in 1936.

<sup>72</sup> The novel's president uses the ship's steering wheel as his symbol. His adviser favors it because it relates (in his estimation) to the shape of not only the swastika, but also the three Ks of the Ku Klux Klan. *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>73</sup> Frances K. Pohl, *In the Eye of the Storm: An Art of Conscience, 1930-1970* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1995), 56. This print was also included in *America Today*, a 1936 American Artists' Congress exhibition. See plate 88 in *America Today: A Book of 100 Prints Chosen and Exhibited by the American Artists' Congress* (New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1936).

<sup>74</sup> C.E.M., *Adam n' Eve* was printed in *Leftward* 3 (July 1933). Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 16-17.

<sup>75</sup> Anonymous, *Workers Unite*, *Leftward* 3 (April 1933). Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 9-14.

and churches. Like the cluster of policemen in *American Tragedy*, the arms of this windmill have a kind of unconscious, irrational momentum. Even though both images are hopeful in their own right, the united workers are successfully overpowering their foe in the 1933 image. In contrast, Evergood's civilian couple in *American Tragedy* ultimately faces such great odds that victory for them is not assured, perhaps suggesting the greater uncertainty over the fight against Hitler and other fascists in 1937, and the growing need for support for the leftist agenda. As Michael Denning has observed, *American Tragedy* is not blindly optimistic; it shows "the martyrs, the losses, the betrayals, the disinherited."<sup>76</sup>

Whether or not Evergood intended or people actually recognized the policemen as a sort of swastika, the officers' overbearing, out-of-control aggression resonates with contemporary antifascist fears. Their clubs resemble the sticks of the fasces, the historical symbol of a bundle of reeds from which the word fascism derives, come unleashed. None of these allusions are as overt in Evergood's painting as they would be in a Gropper or Gellert cartoon, but just because they are subtle, does not necessarily mean they are toothless or ineffective. True, some viewers preferred the obvious reference to a social or political ill. One *Daily Worker* reader even complained, "Evergood's symbolism seems to me very vague in most instances. Avoiding obviousness and overstatement is good; it is an important part of art. But why symbolize so obscurely that one has to look desperately in the catalog for (and not find) an adequate explanation?"<sup>77</sup> That concerned reader was probably accustomed to the legible cartoons in the pages of his communist newspaper. But what Evergood sought to do in paint was very different from what others set out to accomplish in print. Newspaper

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<sup>76</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, 135-36.

<sup>77</sup> This letter to the editor was sent to Evergood, who drafted a response. Both statements were printed together. See Evergood, "For and Agin': Should Art Prettify Heroes?"

caricatures must be immediate and timely, whereas successful paintings tend to strive for wider applicability. As was the challenge for social realist artists, Evergood was always trying to toe the line between art and propaganda. Latent symbolism in this painting defends it against the charge of being cartoonish.

In response to charges that he was painting propaganda, which was a common insult hurled at social realists of the time, Evergood compared himself to the canonically respected Francisco Goya, writing, “Mine is social painting. Goya’s is no less social than mine. And even if you like Goya better, you will have to concede after careful comparison that my work is no nearer to the cartoon or to politics than his.”<sup>78</sup> Evergood definitely looked to Goya’s *Third of May, 1808* (1814, Fig. 2-28) for dramatic pictorial devices that served him well in *American Tragedy*. Goya’s painting shows an heroic martyr who faces certain death with courage and dedication to his cause. Wearing a white shirt that sets him apart from his compatriots and surrounded by bloody ground and dying people, Goya’s Spanish victim has much in common with Evergood’s American one. The antagonistic infantry in Goya’s work, with their guns and bayonets, fuse together to form a kind of militaristic monster like the pinwheel of arms and clubs on the right side of Evergood’s painting.

Of course, both Goya’s and Evergood’s works concern politics and both artists use expressive brushstroke and an idiosyncratic figural style. But Evergood’s mention of Goya gives us a sense of how he wanted to position himself as an artist. He hoped that his painting would, like Goya’s, stem from current events and simultaneously transcend the context of his day. Both artists give visual form to a type of heroism relevant for subsequent generations. Just as we understand the heroism of Goya’s martyr in part through his crucifixion pose, so

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<sup>78</sup> Philip Evergood, “Sure, I’m a Social Painter,” *Magazine of Art* 36 (November 1943): 259.

does Evergood adopt the shape of the swastika and use it not as an overt symbol, but as a means of what Elizabeth McCausland called “plastic organization.”<sup>79</sup>

Evergood cited Goya and used the swastika more explicitly in a later painting that conveys his sympathy for victims of World War II. *Epitaph* (c. 1953-55, Fig. 2-29) shows a legion of Nazi soldiers firing their guns, including updated twentieth-century weapons, at a group of writhing victims.<sup>80</sup> Though Evergood said he dedicated this painting broadly to the “unbreakable will of the oppressed peoples of the world,” lacking a dominant heroic martyr this composition conveys no sense of optimism for the future.<sup>81</sup> The closest Evergood comes to creating such a character is the lunging man who pushes his fist toward the executioners or the standing woman who raises her arms near the wall. Neither figure makes an actual stand against his or her foes. For that reason, they are far more hopeless than the couple in *American Tragedy*. In contrast, *American Tragedy* compels action; it appears as though there may still be time to join the workers in their fight and turn the tide of the conflict. We are more likely to feel anguish, sorrow, and regret for past events as we contemplate *Epitaph*. Its mournful title denotes the finality of death. The scene in *Epitaph* is more specific and less timeless. The swastika Evergood cleverly encodes in the evil policemen in *American Tragedy* when used in *Epitaph* explicitly dates and identifies the soldiers as 1940s Nazis. *Epitaph* thus reads as a lament for atrocities past, while *American Tragedy* has the potential to be revived and reinterpreted by future generations of activists.

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<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth McCausland praised Evergood’s talent for complex compositions in McCausland, “The Plastic Organization of Philip Evergood,” 19-21.

<sup>80</sup> Kendall Taylor, *Philip Evergood: Never Separate from the Heart* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press; Associated University Presses, 1987), 156-57.

<sup>81</sup> Evergood, letter to Paul Skoorka, April 1963, quoted in *ibid.*

*American Tragedy* is not as exclusively national as the title might indicate; it serves as a testament against atrocities that tragically seem to recur on many fronts.<sup>82</sup> In addition to the threats at home and Hitler's rise in Germany, perhaps the most urgent war was actually taking place in Spain. In 1937, Spain was one year into a civil war that began as a coup led by General Francisco Franco (with aid from Hitler) against the Republican government, which the communist Popular Front supported. American communists vigorously opposed Franco's rebellion and many joined the Loyalist cause. The sculptor Paul Block, Evergood's friend and the hero of the 219 Strike, served in Spain as the commander of the Third Company of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. He died in battle during the spring of 1937.<sup>83</sup> Evergood had supported the Spanish Republican cause from the beginning in his own way, too, by donating paintings to raise money for the war. Evergood remembered, "I saw the menace of Fascism even at the time of the Spanish Civil War—and hated it and said so in my paintings and on the platform."<sup>84</sup> Evergood's first antifascist painting, completed in 1936 and entitled *All in a Day's Work* (1936, Fig. 2-30), shows a long row of dead Republicans on the right, while a pair of Moorish mercenaries callously play cards on the left.<sup>85</sup> *All in a Day's Work* is antiwar, antifascist, and anti-capitalist, as well, in its depiction of hired militants who are less committed to their cause or to common decency than to earning a wage.

Certainly the most striking fascist crime of 1937 was the Nazi bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica at Franco's behest. As the Chicago massacre took place only a month after the bombing of Guernica, one wonders how often leftists linked the two highly publicized

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<sup>82</sup> Because of its associations with Dreiser's title, the title *American Tragedy* or *An American Tragedy* probably has more to do with communism than nationalism, though it was wise for an artist to appeal to both fronts in the 1930s.

<sup>83</sup> Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 35. Gerald Monroe describes Block's death as a "hero's death." Monroe, "Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression," 8.

<sup>84</sup> Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 46.

<sup>85</sup> Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 153-54.

tragedies in their minds in the context of the rapidly growing international fascist menace. Surveying the *Daily Worker* in 1937, for instance, one sees headlines describing American labor violence and the Spanish Civil War coexisting in the paper's unrelenting herald of fascist threats.<sup>86</sup> (Fig. 2-31) The two political fronts overlap in an uncanny coincidence as the Memorial Day Massacre occurred at the beginning of a weeklong publicity and fundraising campaign called "Aid to Loyalist Spain" week.<sup>87</sup> At the very least, for leftists the brutality in Chicago and the ongoing horrors in Spain were part and parcel of the same worldwide struggles against which antifascists railed.

Given his support of the Spanish Republic, and his tendency to survey newspapers and magazines for the latest political events and inspiration, Evergood must have been struck by the random brutality of the Guernica bombings. It is rather surprising, then, that he made no known drawings or paintings that directly respond to it. Evergood's friend and fellow antifascist, Anton Refregier, painted a horrific vision of the Nazi attack simply titled *Guernica* (1937, Fig. 2-32). This work features Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco in an airplane with angular wings and limbs that are reminiscent of the branches of a swastika, as well.<sup>88</sup> Of course the more famous *Guernica* is Pablo Picasso's mural for the Spanish Republic's World's Fair pavilion (1937, Fig. 2-33). A rapid response to that tragic April occurrence, Picasso's work was shown in Paris in July 1937, and was discussed immediately among

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<sup>86</sup> Labor disputes, protests, and strikes appear alongside reports from the Spanish front constantly in the spring and summer issues of the *Daily Worker*. See especially the April, May, and June issues dating from the time of the Guernica bombing through the Chicago strike. The front page of June 1, 1937 reported on the dead pickets from Chicago alongside the reports of the Nazi bombing of the Southern Spanish town of Almeria, an event that echoed the destruction of Guernica. See "Union to Ask Chicago Cops Indicted for Murders: 5th Steel Picket Dies in Hospital," *Daily Worker*, 1 June 1937; "5 Nazi Warships Bomb Spanish Town," *Daily Worker*, 1 June 1937.

<sup>87</sup> "National Rallies for Spain Week," *Daily Worker*, 31 May 1937.

<sup>88</sup> Patricia Hills, *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Painting of the 1930s* (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 1983), 75.

leftists and Spanish Republican sympathizers, not to mention Picasso enthusiasts. By the time *Life* magazine ran a reproduction of the mural in its July 26, 1937 issue the public was already well aware of *Guernica*.<sup>89</sup> Certainly Evergood saw the work when it came to New York in May 1939, and just as assuredly he was already convinced of its political and artistic significance.<sup>90</sup>

The formal and compositional similarities between *American Tragedy* and Picasso's *Guernica* are striking.<sup>91</sup> Both works move, like Goya's *Third of May, 1808*, from right to left in a kind of narrative sequence. As did Evergood and Goya, Picasso depicted both the righteous and the wrong in his painting.<sup>92</sup> The wailing woman and the mother with her dead child are martyrs to the Republican cause, while the bull might symbolize evil in general and Franco in particular. Evergood's woman in pink with her arms raised, fallen figures, and perhaps even the policeman's bullish visage in *American Tragedy* have counterparts in Picasso's work. Perhaps the falling victim on the right is even a portrait of Picasso himself, linking the labor protestors in Evergood's image to those who spoke in support of the Spanish Republican cause. (See Fig. 2-34) These speculations are intriguing, and even without evidence of Evergood's intent to quote directly from Picasso both works speak to the universal horrors of oppression and violence and to the intense ideological wars being fought

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<sup>89</sup> "Spain's Picasso Paints Bombing of Guernica for Paris Exposition," *Life*, 26 July 1937, 64.

<sup>90</sup> Evergood was active in the American Artists' Congress, which assisted in coordinating *Guernica*'s exhibition at the Valentine Gallery in New York City even before it made it to the Museum of Modern Art in 1939. Gijss van Hensbergen, *Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), 105-09.

<sup>91</sup> Patricia Hills observed the same in a brief footnote, but said she had no space in which to elaborate in that particular essay. See Hills, "Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy*: The Poetics of Ugliness, the Politics of Anger," 142, fn. 29.

<sup>92</sup> Picasso counted Goya as one of his artistic mentors, too, and *Guernica* reflects the formal influence of *Third of May, 1808*. Francisco Calvo Serraller, Carmen Giménez, and Jorge Semprún, *Picasso: Tradition and Avant-Garde* (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2006), 70.

during this year, this decade, and the next. Those who knew of the various incarnations of fascist violence in 1937 would see *American Tragedy* as not only relevant to the plight of American labor, but also as a synecdoche, an image of a single battle in a larger war between the fascists on the rise and those who hoped, even if in vain, to stop them.

Throughout this chapter I have used the date of 1937 for Evergood's *American Tragedy*. The consensus among art historians today is that this is the correct date. However, it is not written on the surface of the painting itself. John Baur, eminent scholar and personal friend of Evergood, dated the painting 1936 in his 1975 monograph. The 1936 date seems illogical; it may even be a typographical error.<sup>93</sup> The formal links between photographs of the May 1937 massacre and the finished painting establish its completion in the summer of 1937 at the earliest. But the fact that the date has not been secure leads me to wonder when Evergood actually finished the painting. To my knowledge it was not shown until the spring of 1940 when it was included in Evergood's one-man exhibition at the A.C.A. Gallery in New York and reproduced in the *Daily Worker*.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps Evergood reworked the composition, as he often did with other works. If so, he could have incorporated deliberate allusions to Picasso's *Guernica*, newly arrived on American shores. For Evergood to have alluded to such a contemporary source as *Guernica* enlivens and expands the political significance of *American Tragedy* as a comment on the Spanish Civil War.

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<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Baur discusses the Chicago strike as inspiration for the painting, despite the caption dating the work to 1936. Baur, *Philip Evergood* (1975), 35.

<sup>94</sup> At least, it did not make an impression on critics until 1940, when, for instance, Edward Alden Jewell commented on it. Jewell, "Philip Evergood Shows Paintings," 25. Evergood's first one-man at A.C.A. was in 1938, and it is unlikely that he would have shown the same painting in successive exhibitions at the same venue. David Shapiro, "Philip Evergood: Chronology," in *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, ed. David Shapiro (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), 150. Mason, "Evergood Exhibit at the A.C.A. Gallery."



Even though his works were firmly rooted in the politics of his day, Evergood took his own artistic liberties to invent characters and synthesize experiences to form compositions that are applicable to a wide range of historical events. *American Tragedy* does not illustrate the Chicago Memorial Day Massacre and it is not only inflected by Evergood's experience at the WPA 219 strike. Evergood's painting also represents his opposition to the concurrent atrocities committed by the fascist Franco in Spain and the menacing rise of Hitler and the Nazi party. This painting speaks to the broader conflict that pitted leftists, communists, and antifascists against right wing fascist values and actions. Evergood was very comfortable placing himself on the former side of that war, and used his paintings, writings, and speeches to contribute to the leftist effort in the 1930s.

Socially committed art often laments past tragedies, in the hope that remembering evil will prevent it in the future. This is the logic behind war memorials—to pay tribute to the fallen, lest history repeat itself. *American Tragedy* functions that way and it does so imaginatively. Evergood invented his hero and heroine, as much as he invented their foe. He imagined the garish colors of the painting as all photographic evidence from which he might have drawn in the 1930s was in black and white. He designed the composition, alluding to art historical sources from Paolo Uccello to Picasso and to the swastika's terrifying momentum. Perhaps the most creative aspect of the image is the climactic moment it depicts. Though all of the civilians in the background have abandoned their resistance in favor of self-preservation, the couple at the front holds strong. They are undistracted by the evacuation of their compatriots; they remain steadfast and committed. The hero's strong arm reaches out emphatically to draw a line between victory and defeat. His elbow is the axis upon which all of the action turns; it is the last resort, the last hope for the civilians. Even as he acknowledges the sad outcomes for many participants in the protest, Evergood pays tribute to the couple's

courage and optimistically allows us to remember them at their best. “Our workers are heroes,” Evergood asserted.<sup>95</sup> Though *American Tragedy* is not triumphant, it is as hopeful and heroic as a tragedy could be.

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<sup>95</sup> Philip Evergood, “For and Agin’: Should Art Prettify Heroes?”

### Chapter Three: The Hero of the Harvest: John Steuart Curry's *Our Good Earth*

“The farmer stands well on the world. Plain in manners as in dress, he would not shine in palaces; he is absolutely unknown and inadmissible therein. . . the drawing-room heroes put down beside him would shrivel in his presence; he solid and unexpressive, they expressed to gold-leaf. . . . He is. . . really a piece of the old Nature.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Farming*<sup>1</sup>

John Steuart Curry's *Our Good Earth* (Fig. 3-1) epitomizes the strength and fortitude that Americans of his generation had come to admire in their farmers. Tall, rugged, and stern, Curry's farmer is rooted; he derives his power from the earth. With his legs planted in the wheat field, he is, as Emerson described him, “a piece of the old Nature.” Indeed, Curry's farmer's lineage dates back to the nation's founding when Thomas Jefferson wrote extensively on the merits of an agrarian society to the success of a democracy. “Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens,” Jefferson wrote. “They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century farmers remained essential to the national mythology, the cultivation of land being a noble and necessary pursuit. Even in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, which inaugurated a period of technological innovation that forever changed the nature of American farming, President Theodore Roosevelt maintained, “Nothing is more important to this country than the

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Illustrated by John Steuart Curry* (New York: Illustrated Modern Library, 1944), 557.

<sup>2</sup> From a letter to John Jay, 23 August 1785. Quoted in A. Whitney Griswold, *Farming and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 31.

perpetuation of our system of medium-sized farms worked by their owners.”<sup>3</sup> When Curry created his agrarian hero in 1942 the yeoman farmer—the common man working the land—had long been an essential national symbol promoted in American literary and political culture.<sup>4</sup>

In American visual culture prior to the 1930s, the heroism of Jeffersonian and Emersonian agrarianism did not translate into individualized iconic farmers in the vein of Curry’s *Our Good Earth*. In the nineteenth century, images of farmers tended toward the anecdotal and showed the farm itself as a quaint, pastoral place. Popular Currier & Ives lithographs emphasized and ennobled the homestead including the farmhouse, fields, and animals. The farmer himself is dwarfed in such images as *American Homestead Summer* (1868, Fig. 3-2) and Fanny Palmer’s *American Farm Scene #1: Spring* (1853, Fig. 3-3); he is important, yet subordinate to the larger notion of the farm as a location that was representative of the nation. In genre paintings by William Sidney Mount and others, the farmer’s existence was used often to playful comic effect. Mount’s *Bargaining for a Horse* (1835, Fig. 3-4), for example, lampoons the contrast between city folk and country folk as we witness a business transaction between a pencil-pushing, top-hat-wearing urbanite and a whittling, country bumpkin farmer.<sup>5</sup> In such imagery the farmer appears as a classic American type, but he is not aggrandized to the point of heroism.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Ronald Jager, *The Fate of Family Farming: Variations on an American Idea* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2004), x.

<sup>4</sup> On the recurrence of the yeoman farmer trope in American art and literature, see Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 12-14.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Johns argues that the humor in this painting results from the fact that each man tries slyly to best the other on the sale of the horse. The more serious political commentary lies in the realization that neither farmer seems engaged in the production of goods or materials, and, therefore, both place a higher premium on the more ephemeral rewards of monetary success than the solid work ethic of the yeoman farmer. This, Johns explains, can be

The economic and environmental disasters that threatened the perpetuation of the farmer's way of life starting in 1920 changed the artistic perception of the American farmer dramatically. Whereas the period from 1897 to 1918 had brought unparalleled economic and production successes to American farms, with crop and land prices soaring due to expanded trade markets and the international demands for foodstuffs during World War I, as wartime need diminished, American farmers saw both their profits and the value of their assets fall dramatically.<sup>6</sup> This economic downturn was compounded by the stock market crash in 1929 and the widespread drought that brought dust storms to the Midwest in the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> All of these factors made farming incredibly difficult between the World Wars.

The crises of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression brought the struggles of the American farmer to the fore of national consciousness in the 1930s. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal activism in agriculture validated that segment of the economy and society, showing how integral and essential the work of farmers was for the survival of the nation. Roosevelt's programs shone a light on the farmer in an unprecedented manner (especially in contrast to the hands-off approach of Herbert Hoover) and focused the attention of documentary photographers, socioeconomic researchers, and government relief advocates on the plight of the embattled American farmer as an individual. Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographs such as Arthur Rothstein's *Farmer and Sons Walking in the Face of a Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma* (1936, Fig. 3-5) elicited both astonishment and pity over

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understood as a critique of the spoils system in politics in which favors were traded for support. Ibid., 29.

<sup>6</sup> Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 100-01.

<sup>7</sup> The Dust Bowl storms hit the hardest in 1935 and 1936. For more information see R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 2-3. As David Danbom has explained, "In the 1940s the rains came back." David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, 2nd. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 228.

the ecological disaster the farmer faced. Evans' photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (published in 1941) similarly recorded destitute rural families and, with sensitive portraits of familial patriarch Floyd Burroughs (Fig. 3-6), lionized the perseverance and strength that characterized such American folk. The exigencies of the FSA's goal to convince the public and lawmakers that the rural individuals affected by the Great Depression needed and deserved economic aid led to the heroization of the era's victims as emblems of the noble poor.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, farmers and their farms came to embody the decade and identify the period in American history.

Midwestern Regionalist painters, unhindered by the gritty realities that documentary photographers found in the drought-stricken 1930s, but similarly led by their sympathy with the plight of the downtrodden farmers, often showed farms and farmers in times of plenty. Images like Thomas Hart Benton's *Cradling Wheat* (1938, Fig. 3-7), Grant Wood's *Fall Plowing* (1931, Fig. 3-8), and Curry's *Kansas Cornfield* (1933, Fig. 3-9) are understood typically as exaggerated, if not wholly fictitious, visualizations of the fecundity of the prairie during the depression decade. As Elizabeth Broun has explained, these Regionalists' works are "generally considered escapist and nostalgic—a backwards look at an idealized agrarian past full of sentiment or a shield raised against harsh realities."<sup>9</sup> But such images were also optimistic and predictive of a future for which Americans hoped, one that meant a return to a sort of golden age of American agriculture akin to the period before 1920 when farm production and wealth reached an apex.<sup>10</sup> These Midwestern Regionalists faithfully hailed the farm, most often the family farm, as a slice of Americana, a bit of the "usable past" that so

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<sup>8</sup> This argument is elaborated in Chapter 5, on images of heroic women and Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Broun, "Thomas Hart Benton: A Politician in Art," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 59.

<sup>10</sup> Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, 161.

preoccupied artists, poets, novelists, and historians in the 1920s and 1930s. The Regionalists bolstered the idea of the heroic American farmer during a time when his way of life was threatened most dramatically. Instead of picturing the farmer as a tragic hero and the farm as an ennobled but disintegrating landscape, Curry's, Benton's, and Wood's works pay homage to the rural people and the fruited plains of their home states in the Midwest.

Painted in 1942, *Our Good Earth* represents a Midwestern family's triumph over the hardships of the previous ruinous two decades. The wheat grows tall and golden, and the house, windmill, and barn in the background are intact. The daughter and son who flank the farmer further attest to the man's perseverance and survival over the Dust Bowl; they are the human equivalents of the seeds he sowed during planting time, and they are poised to ripen and mature just like the wheat itself. Such a vision of the prosperous farm was not falsely conceived in 1942 as the American farmer's ecological and economical realities were much improved over the previous decades. World War II had revitalized international markets for grains, as well as other essential crops. Farmers who had been subject to government relief programs that encouraged them to abstain from farming large portions of their land in order to limit supply and drive commodities prices up were now at liberty to produce as much as their land would allow. The farmer in *Our Good Earth*, whose flat, Midwestern wheat field stretches to infinity, is doing just that.

Although the farm family in *Our Good Earth* is experiencing a level of prosperity that had long been impossible, the painting is not entirely tranquil and pastoral. A new menace looms and has drawn the father-son-daughter trio out of their home to inspect. The gusty wind rips through the scene threatens to blow the children down. The daughter extends her arms for balance and her hair sweeps over her head, rhyming with the three strands of wheat that her father clenches in his right fist. In his other hand, the farmer holds fast to his son who gazes

into the distance. The son's expression is one of curiosity, whereas the farmer's face registers his concern; he worries that the problem that brews afar will affect him, his family, and his farm.

"I do try to depict the American farmers' incessant struggle against the forces of nature," Curry said.<sup>11</sup> He did so most dramatically in such works as *Tornado* (1929, Fig. 3-10) and *The Mississippi* (1935, Fig. 3-11), images that represent devastating weather phenomena and the tactics that families employed to survive them. In *Our Good Earth*, Curry uses weather as a metaphor for historical crisis and change. While the sky is blue with fluffy white clouds, the dangerous wind that has summoned the father and his two children outdoors foreshadows an ominous tempest brewing in the distance. Curry had analogized weather and war previously in his 1941 painting, *The Light of the World* (Fig. 3-12) or, as Curry preferred to call it, *America Facing the Storm*.<sup>12</sup> Completed only a couple of months before the attack on Pearl Harbor and coincidentally reproduced in the December 1941 issue of *Esquire*, the painting depicts a storm over the Atlantic Ocean on the right side of the canvas.<sup>13</sup> In *Our Good Earth* the wind carries similar connotations to the storm in *The Light of the World*, and predicts the war's eventual impact on the Midwest. Though it does not depict a battle, soldiers, or death explicitly, like *The Light of the World*, *Our Good Earth* is a war picture.

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<sup>11</sup> "New U.W. Artist Arrives," *Madison Capital Times*, 4 December 1936. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 3 Folder 22.

<sup>12</sup> Robert L. Gambone, *Art and Popular Religion in Evangelical America, 1915-1940* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 213-19.

<sup>13</sup> "The Light of the World," *Esquire* 15 (December 1941): 100. Its original title was *America Facing the Storm*, which Curry mentioned he preferred in a letter to Estelle Mandel of AAA dated 14 October 1941. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 38. On the significance of that painting to the war, see Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 114-15.



## A “War Picture”<sup>14</sup>

Curry painted *Our Good Earth* as government-sponsored war propaganda. He did not shy away from that charged term, but embraced it as he hoped to do his part as an artist to support America’s effort in World War II.<sup>15</sup> When Curry’s dealer and the director of Associated American Artists (AAA) Reeves Lewenthal asked him for a design, Lewenthal gave Curry extensive and enthusiastic direction:

Here is what you must paint—and paint like you have never painted before in your career....a symbolic subject as forceful, as heroic, and as breathtaking as your “John Brown”! A painting that will be so thunderous that it will stop people cold—cause them to think—or admire and respect those participants in the various branches of our services. Perhaps you can do a heroic figure of a soldier guarding over or fighting for the preservation of all those benefits and advantages we enjoy in our democracy; or perhaps, could be fighting for the preservation of our peaceful, fertile, [sic] farmlands...or, perhaps, shadows of our former hero soldiers can drift off into the distance....you might do a nurse—or a flyer—or a marine—or a sailor—in some symbolic composition.<sup>16</sup>

Curry responded eagerly to this request by Lewenthal that he create a “standard bearer of the Second World War” and the two corresponded regularly about ways in which Curry might contribute to the war effort through his art. Early in the conception of the image that would be known ultimately as *Our Good Earth*, Curry considered painting a portrait of famed General

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<sup>14</sup> The developing painting was so-called in a letter from Reeves Lewenthal to John Steuart Curry, 28 February 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Series 3 Box 1 Folder 39. Curry also called it a “war painting” once it was finished. Curry to Lewenthal, 2 May 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Series 3 Box 1 Folder 40.

<sup>15</sup> Curry wrote, “I of course would be more than pleased to have my work used for propaganda or in any way that would help, and will not question the money matter.” Curry to Lewenthal, 2 July 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Series 3 Box 1 Folder 40.

<sup>16</sup> Lewenthal to Curry, 6 February 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 39.

Douglas MacArthur.<sup>17</sup> He traveled to an air training field to witness the military in action and hoped for inspiration on that subject, as well.<sup>18</sup> But Lewenthal sent him an idea for a painting called “Long May it Wave,” featuring a farmer standing in a field of wheat, which Curry eventually pursued.<sup>19</sup> When the painting was complete Curry expressed his satisfaction and noted the collaboration that had led to the final image, writing, “I feel I did a good job on it, but it was also a good idea you gave me.”<sup>20</sup>

Curry finished the painting in April 1942 and later that year it was used for a war bonds poster (Fig. 3-13) under the official title *Our Good Earth*, carrying the subtitle *Keep it Ours*.<sup>21</sup> The earlier title *Long May It Wave* hovered over the wheat field in a brochure advertisement (Fig. 3-14) designed to encourage farmers to purchase bonds. In an *Art News* review that was otherwise caustically critical of the AAA’s coordination of and potential

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<sup>17</sup> Lewenthal to Curry, 12 February 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 39.

<sup>18</sup> Curry to Lewenthal, 2 March 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 39.

<sup>19</sup> Lewenthal to Curry, 28 February 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 39.

<sup>20</sup> Curry to Lewenthal, 14 May 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 40.

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the painting at the University of Wisconsin’s Chazen Museum of Art (signed 1942, but often incorrectly dated 1940-41) and the many war bonds posters and brochures that were disseminated, Curry also executed a watercolor (1942, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Fig. 3-39), a drawing (1942, Kansas State University’s Beach Museum, Fig. 3-40), and two lithographic stones. The first he deemed inferior, and I believe the lithograph at the Figge Museum of Art in Davenport, Iowa was pulled from this stone. The second stone resulted in an edition of 250 prints issued by AAA in 1942 (Fig. 3-41). In books and articles this lithograph is given a possible date of 1938, but none of these sources substantiate that idea. The extensive communications I cite from the Curry papers proves that date to be erroneous. Curry conceived this design originally and uniquely in the late winter to early spring of 1942 in collaboration with Reeves Lewenthal. Curry executed each of the various incarnations of *Our Good Earth* in 1942. Versions are misdated in (at least) the following publications: Joseph S. Czestochowski, “John Steuart Curry’s Lithographs: A Portrait of Rural America,” *American Art Journal* 9, no. 2 (November 1977): 80. Patricia A. Junker, ed., *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, in association with the Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1998), 70, 145. Gambone, *Art and Popular Religion in Evangelical America, 1915-1940*, 220.

profiting from what the reviewer generally considered to be mediocre attempts at government propaganda, the reviewer praised Curry's *Our Good Earth*. The reviewer said that Curry's painting, which had been on display at the AAA's New York gallery in September 1942, was among those that "seem to us to meet the requirements of special sectors of the population. [Curry's *Our Good Earth*] should strike a note in the rural districts where several hundred thousand copies are being distributed."<sup>22</sup> Curry was "elated" when he received a letter of thanks from the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury reporting that the pamphlet reached three million farmers, while the poster was "most effective" and "widely praised" as a "real contribution."<sup>23</sup>

Born in Dunavant, Kansas in 1897, Curry is known as the painter of Kansas, "her Homer," as art critic Edward Alden Jewell put it.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, *Our Good Earth* reads as an homage to the sort of family farm on which Curry was reared and addresses the people of the rural Midwest directly. Even more than *Tragic Prelude*, Curry's painting of John Brown which Lewenthal encouraged him to emulate, *Our Good Earth*'s composition recalls Curry's tribute to his father, *The Stockman* (1929, Fig. 3-15), in which Smith Curry stands unwavering in the foreground amid a crowd of obedient cows, horses, and pigs. By the time he completed *Our Good Earth*, Curry had been away from the family farm for twenty-six years, having left at the age of nineteen to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and to work as an illustrator and artist on the East Coast. Since 1936, Curry had lived in Madison, Wisconsin as

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<sup>22</sup> "The Poster Front," *Art News* 41, no. 10 (October 1-14, 1942): 30.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Morgenthau, Jr. to Curry, 7 October 1942, and Curry to Lewenthal, 10 October 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 41.

<sup>24</sup> Jewell was referring to Winslow Homer, the American painter most famous for his Maine landscapes and seascapes, not Homer, the ancient Greek poet. However, with Curry's interest in epic themes, the latter comparison might fit as well. Edward Alden Jewell, "Kansas Has Found Her Homer," *The New York Times*, 7 December 1930.

the University's and America's first artist-in-residence. The most remarkable fact surrounding Curry's illustrious appointment, apart from its very existence, was that he was directly affiliated with the College of Agriculture and his purpose was to "pioneer in the field of cultural growth for rural men and women."<sup>25</sup> The Dean of the College of Agriculture, Chris L. Christensen, hoped that "the atmosphere and spirit of farm life will be recreated and preserved on his canvases."<sup>26</sup> Curry pursued that purpose with vigor in Wisconsin, even painting a tribute to his employer and friend in the portrait *Chris L. Christensen* (1941, Fig. 3-16). Like *The Stockman* and *Our Good Earth*, this work features a dignified man amid the natural fruits of his labor. In this case, Christensen strides through one of the experimental fields of corn that the University used in its research.

Curry's model for the farmer in *Our Good Earth* was an employee of the University of Wisconsin, Malcolm Ross, Sr. The children in the painting were not Ross' and did not pose with him; they are stock characters. Technically speaking, the field of wheat did not belong to Ross either. It was another of the experimental agricultural tracts on the edge of campus in an area known as Eagle Heights.<sup>27</sup> As a farm foreman, Ross maintained this field, lived nearby, and wore overalls to work, as does the character in Curry's painting. According to Ross' son Malcolm Jr., Ross and Curry were friends, often taking walks out into the University fields on the weekends.<sup>28</sup> Though Ross posed for Curry, the artist took decided liberties with his figure,

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<sup>25</sup> Morris H. Rubin, "Impatient to Feel Spring and the State's Soil, Curry Comes to Campus," *Madison Wisconsin State Journal*, 4 December 1936.

<sup>26</sup> Chris L. Christensen statement dated 4 December 1936. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 3 Folder 21.

<sup>27</sup> Eagle Heights is now the site of a University housing complex amid a larger residential area of Madison.

<sup>28</sup> Interview conducted by Maria Saffiotti Dale with Malcolm Ross, Jr., Waunakee, Wisconsin, 13 February 2002. Notes preserved in Chazen Museum of Art curatorial file, Madison, Wisconsin.

making Ross increasingly burly and stern as the image evolved through watercolor and drawing stages. By the time this hero appeared in the finished painting, he had assumed the proportions and muscular physique that articulates much of his power.<sup>29</sup>

### **Wheat as a Weapon**

Curry's choice to set the farmer and his children in a wheat field in *Our Good Earth* may seem incidental. Fields of wheat were readily available to him in Wisconsin, were part of his iconography already, and were obviously characteristic of the landscape of the larger Midwest. Wheat had also been a symbol of the United States for generations. The "amber waves of grain" so celebrated in the poem and song *America the Beautiful* continued to symbolize for many the heartland of this country and the nation's democratic ideals. Other contemporary artists mobilized the symbol including James Earl Fraser, whose decorations for the National Archives building in Washington, DC feature wheat as a symbol of the legacy of the nation and the preservation of American history. In the sculpture *Heritage* (1935, Fig. 3-17) a seated allegorical figure holds a sheaf of wheat and in the medallion decorating the frieze of the building (1935, Fig. 3-18), the symbol for the Department of Agriculture is a figure with a sickle and wheat.<sup>30</sup> Wheat stood for the United States, rivaling the other canonical crop, corn, and far surpassing the more regionally specific crops, tobacco and cotton, as the chief agrarian product of the nation.<sup>31</sup> *Our Good Earth's* original title, *Long May it Wave*, comes from the second stanza of Francis Scott Key's "The Star Spangled

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<sup>29</sup> Amanda Henry, "Model for the Working Man," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 4 March 2002.

<sup>30</sup> James M. Goode, *The Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C.: A Comprehensive Historical Guide* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974), 151-52.

<sup>31</sup> On Curry, corn, and cotton see Charles C. Eldredge, "Prairie Prodigal: John Steuart Curry and Kansas," in Junker, *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*, 100-06.

Banner” and appeared on a Flag Day poster in 1943.<sup>32</sup> The phrase’s application to Curry’s image likened the rippling wheat field in which the family stands to the American flag itself.<sup>33</sup> In this context, the farmer truly is a “standard bearer,” holding wheat, a symbol of the Midwest and of the nation, as a surrogate for the Stars and Stripes.

Curry’s use of wheat as the setting and prop within *Our Good Earth* invites comparison with other historical examples of wheat as an allusion to war in American culture. In Winslow Homer’s *A Veteran in a New Field* (1865, Fig. 3-19) wheat is the home, the point of origin, to which Homer’s former Civil War soldier returns at the close of the conflict. Homer’s protagonist is a Cincinnatus-type figure, a farmer who responds to the emergency call of conflict and transforms his plow into a sword. He recalls the Roman consul, Cincinnatus, who became dictator during a crisis and later resigned his political position to return to his humble farm. Cincinnatus had been a model for American Revolutionaries like George Washington, who famously and selflessly served as a general and later as president, but resigned at the end of his second four-year term against offers to rule indefinitely. Washington and others were members of the Society of Cincinnatus and maintained that their proper place was at home on their farms, not in positions of political power and war administration. Likewise, in Homer’s image the soldier has cast off his weaponry, which lies in the foreground, and has again assumed the tool of his agricultural trade, the scythe.

What appears in Homer’s painting to be a return to normalcy, however, retains the allusion to the man’s violent acts as a soldier during the war; the harvesting of wheat signifies

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<sup>32</sup> *Long May It Wave* was also the title of a 1914 comedic film in which a couple watches a play wherein all problems are solved by waving an American flag. Sadly, the husband later discovers that those curative properties do not apply to marital disputes.

<sup>33</sup> See the various correspondence between Lewenthal and Curry during the Spring and Summer of 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 39 and 40.

the reaping of death.<sup>34</sup> The new field that this veteran tends is marred by the memory of violence during the war, of the killing of fellow Americans. The felled stalks of wheat function as fallen soldiers and markers of American tragedy. The Civil War photographs of Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and particularly Timothy O’Sullivan’s *Harvest of Death* (negative 1863, printed by Gardner, 1866, Fig. 3-20) show us how American wheat fields became scenes of devastating violence. In this context George Inness’ optimistically titled, post-Civil War painting *Peace and Plenty* (1865, Fig. 3-21) likewise makes an eerie visual analogy between fallen soldiers or gravestones and sheaves of wheat. In such imagery, wheat functions as a kind of *memento mori*, a reminder that military conflict comes with a great cost to human life.

While the harvest of wheat as a metaphor for death had been a recurring theme in American war imagery of the nineteenth century, in *Our Good Earth* the national crop signifies an American terrain worth defending. Curry’s design is about keeping “it”—the land, the crop, the way of life—“ours” and not allowing death and destruction to invade American wheat fields of the 1940s, as it had done during the Civil War and, in a different manner, during the Dust Bowl. The farmer is intent on harvesting his crop, and there is no indication that he would leave his family and his farm to do battle in Europe or any other field of war. Curry’s farmer is not rushing off to don a uniform and grab a gun. Instead, he clutches the wheat as if it were a weapon. In fact, as the war surged, wheat became increasingly

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<sup>34</sup> On the allusions to death, war, and harvest in this Winslow Homer painting, see Christopher Kent Wilson, “Winslow Homer’s *The Veteran in a New Field*: A Study of the Harvest Metaphor and Popular Culture,” *American Art Journal* 17, no. 4 (Autumn 1985): 3-27; Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., “A Harvest of Death: *The Veteran in a New Field*,” in *Winslow Homer: Paintings of the Civil War*, ed. Marc Simpson (San Francisco: Bedford Arts for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1988), 82-101; Nancy Rash, “A Note on Winslow Homer’s *Veteran in a New Field* and *Union Victory*,” *American Art* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 88-93.

essential to the war effort. Starting in 1940, the market for American farm products, especially grains, expanded greatly in response to both domestic and international demand.<sup>35</sup> As European farms and fields gave way to scenes of battle and destruction, provisions had to be imported. The Lend-Lease Act of 1940 facilitated the exportation of U.S. foodstuffs to Allied forces abroad and after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 the U.S. Government began purchasing its own stockpiles of food. Both developments kept demand and prices high and stable. American farmers were encouraged to produce as much as their land and resources would allow; Congress passed legislation in May 1941 that led to a fifty percent rise in the price of wheat and caused production to soar proportionately.<sup>36</sup> Growing wheat during World War II was both a patriotic and a profitable pursuit.

Wheat was one crop that Hitler's Germany desperately lacked. A report in the January 9, 1939 issue of *Life* on the vulnerability of Romania to a Nazi invasion explained that the small eastern European nation had two things that the Germans needed: oil and wheat. Despite Romania's small population, which was approximately one sixth of Germany's, it produced nearly as much wheat. The article describes Romania's wheat harvest as "its gold" and its expansive fields as "irresistible bait to Nazi Germany."<sup>37</sup> As a staple food, wheat was an essential wartime commodity and if America could produce it in abundance, then a great victory was within reach.

The depleted work force on American farms due to the increase in urban industrial jobs and military deployment posed a significant challenge to agrarian wartime mobilization. New government agencies like the U.S. Crop Corps and the Women's Land Army were

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<sup>35</sup> Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis*, 124.

<sup>36</sup> John T. Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1975), 212-14. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, 231.

<sup>37</sup> "Rumania: Its People Await Hitler's Drive," *Life*, 9 January 1939, 40-49.



formed to counteract the exodus of farm workers and ensure that ripe foodstuffs did not languish in the fields. Their causes were promoted overtly in such government-issued posters as *Help Harvest* and *Harvest War Crops* (Figs. 3-22 and 3-23) in a manner akin to those advertisements encouraging the work of coal miners and munitions manufacturers. While Curry's *Our Good Earth* poster ostensibly promoted war bonds, it also advocated for the patriotic service of farmers whose products fed troops and allies. Instead of instructing viewers to "buy war bonds," the poster could have easily said, "harvest your grain." Curry's image appealed to Midwesterners because it paid tribute to their way of life and their consistent contributions to the provisions of the nation, which were rendered even more necessary during wartime.

### **A War Picture from an Anti-War Artist**

*Our Good Earth* was not Curry's first artistic statement on war, but it was his most optimistic to date. In previous decades and in previous paintings, he tended toward pacifism and opposed the nation's entrance into foreign military conflicts.<sup>38</sup> In 1926, Curry had made elegiac sketches at American World War I military cemeteries in France.<sup>39</sup> He spent twelve years, from 1928 to 1940, painting *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* (Fig. 3-24). This belated pictorial response to the funeral for a boyhood friend who died in World War I, painted on the eve of a second Great War, reminds viewers of the inherent tragedy and sacrifice of war as well as the mundane, ubiquitous nature of such an event once the conflict

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<sup>38</sup> M. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 83-84.

<sup>39</sup> Laurence E. Schmeckebier, *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America* (New York: American Artists Group, 1943), 50, 254.

begins.<sup>40</sup> *Parade to War* (1938, Fig. 3-25), with its grotesque legion of soldiers marching to their certain deaths, overtly manifests Curry's antiwar perspective at a time when fascist aggression was on the rise in Europe and Japan, but had not yet breached America's borders.

None of these earlier works expresses a belief in the heroism of the soldier who sacrifices himself for patriotic duty. As he painted such works, Curry worried that another massive war would disrupt the Midwestern way of life, effectively halting the progress that had been made since the Great Depression.<sup>41</sup> As early as 1938 Curry expressed his belief that a military conflict would erupt imminently. Curry spent the summer of that year traveling in Europe, through Italy and Germany, and he purportedly became very agitated about the climate he witnessed in Germany, believing that war was growing increasingly probable.<sup>42</sup> Curry's friend and biographer Laurence Schmeckebier recalls him saying, "Give us ten years and if we can escape the paralyzing hand of war we will accomplish something."<sup>43</sup> Curry shared his concern with Benton; both believed that the Regionalist heyday would come to an end should attention turn to foreign events.<sup>44</sup> As we have seen, as late as the fall of 1941, Curry expressed his sense of dread in *The Light of the World*, a work that does not inspire action, defense, and readiness on America's part, but depicts a group of curious onlookers hoping the storm will turn in another direction or dissipate. In another painting of 1941, *Leaving the Farm for Army Training Camp* (Fig. 3-26), Curry portrays a young farmer

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<sup>40</sup> Robert L. Gambone, "The Use of Religious Motifs in Curry's Art," in Junker, *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*, 145.

<sup>41</sup> Patricia Junker, "Twilight of Americanism's Golden Age: Curry's Wisconsin Years, 1936-46," in Junker, *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*, 206.

<sup>42</sup> Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy*, 84-85.

<sup>43</sup> Laurence E. Schmeckebier, "John Steuart Curry: A Retrospective Exhibition," *College Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1957): 57.

<sup>44</sup> Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 264.

surveying his land as he departs for war. No one sees him off, and we cannot envision his future glories on the battlefield. All Curry offers is a vision of the man's past and a parcel of land to which he is unlikely to return. The sun shines on the farm in the background, but the man prepares to stride off-canvas, into a dark and stormy future.<sup>45</sup>

Curry held his isolationist perspective in common with a majority of people in the Midwest in the 1930s. For those who had spent the better part of the decade fighting economic and environmental conditions at home, the prospect of diverting the nation's resources away from the recovery from the Great Depression and toward a surge in military preparedness elicited great trepidation. With the benefit of hindsight, today we understand that the war actually improved the United States' economy, but contemporaries in the 1930s were wary of the distraction from domestic affairs and the repercussions of another Great War's end.<sup>46</sup> Even in 1938 after Hitler's Germany had invaded Austria, people of the Great Plains overwhelmingly agreed that neutrality was the proper political response. Not until December 7, 1941, when the United States came under attack at Pearl Harbor, did the conservative, isolationist tide change in the Midwest. After the Japanese attacked, not surprisingly, the entire nation rallied behind the military response.<sup>47</sup> Curry's perspective followed this same course. While his paintings *Parade to War* and *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* focus on the losses of war and its futile tragedies, and *The Light of the World* is marked by fear and uncertainty, after 1941 Curry was committed to supporting the United States in World War II. In his letters to Reeves Lewenthal regarding his paintings

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<sup>45</sup> Now in the collection of the New Britain Museum of Art, the painting was donated by filmmaker Pare Lorentz in 1962.

<sup>46</sup> As noted above, post-World War I demobilization hurt the United States economy greatly, especially when farm prices devolved. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis*, 100-01.

<sup>47</sup> R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1-13.

for the government's propaganda programs, he expressed a wholehearted desire to mobilize his talents. Though artists were not usually well paid for their paintings and poster designs, Curry eschewed any concern for financial compensation, demonstrating his willingness to contribute in whatever way he could.<sup>48</sup>

*Our Good Earth* was Curry's first, but not his last foray into government-sponsored war propaganda. Shortly after he had completed that painting, an official request from the Office of War Information came directly to him, asking for another poster design.<sup>49</sup> As Curry contemplated this next project, Lewenthal told him, "The whole idea to be conveyed in this picture is briefly this—that the farmers of the Nation will be enslaved if we are defeated and come under the Nazi yoke."<sup>50</sup> In his response, Curry became rather indignant as he defended the service of farmers during wartime. He reminded Lewenthal, "Farmers are exerting all-out effort and working 70 and 80 hours a week. There is no problem as we see it out here in getting farmers to work as hard as they can, for they are now doing exactly this."<sup>51</sup> Curry did not want to paint a bloody war scene or a caricature of the evils of defeat in order to promote wartime patriotism. Other artists threatened the safety of the home front in such posters as *Don't Let That Shadow Touch Them* and *Deliver Us from Evil* (Figs. 3-27 and 3-28). But Curry argued, "It seems very doubtful whether it is strategic or desirable to use fear as the motive in picturing them the needs of the war program....Can't your Writers' War Board

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<sup>48</sup> See for example Curry to Lewenthal, 2 July 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 40.

<sup>49</sup> Letter dated 29 June 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 40.

<sup>50</sup> Lewenthal to Curry, 5 October 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 41.

<sup>51</sup> Curry to Lewenthal, 7 October 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 41.

develop a theme more positive?”<sup>52</sup> Curry’s “more positive” pictorial statement served to acknowledge and praise the farmers for their continuing efforts and to liken their labor to the activities of soldiers abroad in the painting and poster *The Farm is a Battleground, Too*. (1943, Figs. 3-29 and 3-30).

In *The Farm is a Battleground, Too* Curry returned to a composition that he had exhibited at the 1942 Wisconsin State Fair. The larger work, a 17 x 37 foot mural that is now lost (see study, Fig. 3-31), was titled *Wisconsin Agriculture Leads to Victory* and affirms not only farm life in general but of Curry’s adopted state in particular.<sup>53</sup> Featuring a gigantic pitchfork-holding farmer who resembles the man in *Our Good Earth*, this mural visually connects his activities with infantry on the front lines of World War II. Tractors and tanks roll through the landscape in the background on their respective missions, recalling a scene from Pare Lorentz’s *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936).<sup>54</sup> The sheer size of the figures in Curry’s painting inspires awe in the viewer. In a photograph of Curry at work on scaffolding in front of the canvas (Fig. 3-32), his body extends roughly from the farmer’s elbow to his forehead. We can imagine how overwhelming it was to stand before the finished product, to be dwarfed by the farmers and soldiers, and to feel pride in the Midwest’s contributions to the national mobilization.

Perhaps what Curry resisted as he created his versions of propaganda was what his Regionalist colleague Thomas Hart Benton was painting in such works as *The Year of Peril* series (1941). Benton’s bombastic response to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor incites

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> John O. Holzhueter, “John Steuart Curry: A Populist Artist from Kansas Embraces Progressivism,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 84, no. 1 (2000): 15-19.

<sup>54</sup> Lorentz’s film argues that tractors (and other industrialized farming practices) created the conditions that led to the Dust Bowl, making them ushers of epic destruction akin to tanks of World War I. Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 96.

fear in its picturing of the Axis powers (Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan) as ogres on rampages against the United States. The figures are grotesque caricatures of the enemies of the nation, and Benton hoped his works would mobilize Midwesterners to join in the war effort to combat fascism abroad before it reached American shores. When these paintings were shown in New York in 1942, however, they met with harsh criticism and surprised reactions to their unabashed brutality and exaggerated, distorted forms. These images went beyond reflecting realistically on the aggression of war and went too far, it seems, into the realm of cartoon.<sup>55</sup> As Curry positioned his propaganda art in 1942, he must have considered the reception of Benton's series, and wanted to avoid any such scandal around his own work. Comparing *Our Good Earth* with Benton's *The Sowers* (Fig. 3-33) from *The Year of Peril* illustrates the distance between the two strategies. Both paintings are set in a landscape, but Benton's is war ravaged and filled with death. Curry's field on the other hand appears fertile and relatively tranquil. While Curry's farmer's expression manifests his anxiety over the war, his domestic landscape is a space far removed from the surreal horrors of Benton's imagination or the actualities of war. Unlike Benton, Curry maintained an idyllic dignity in his propaganda pictures of this year, preferring to praise the efforts of Midwestern farmers rather than goad or scare them into advancing the war effort. Curry remained closer to the pastoral patterns of his entire oeuvre, whereas Benton, enraged by the events of the war, adopted a new, experimental, more virulent, and ultimately derided approach.

In *Our Good Earth*, *Wisconsin Agriculture Leads to Victory*, and *The Farm is a Battleground, Too* we see farmers who are poised to defend their way of life and their nation using the tools and skills they employ in their fields. Curry emphasizes the domestic

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<sup>55</sup> Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*, 282-300.

contribution to the war effort as being as important as military engagement. He seeks to combat the tendency that Jean-Henri Fabre also lamented:

History celebrates the battlefields whereon we meet our death, but scorns to speak of the plowed fields whereby we thrive. It knows the names of the kings' bastards but cannot tell us the origin of wheat. This is the way of human folly.<sup>56</sup>

Curry maintained his commitment to the authenticity of Midwestern agricultural life; he resisted any proposal that might treat farmers as pawns who could be manipulated to serve any propagandistic purpose without regard for the realities of their work. When Lewenthal suggested to Curry that he turn the pitchfork in *The Farm is a Battleground, Too* so that it would rhyme visually with the guns the soldiers carried, Curry detested that idea.<sup>57</sup> He explained to Lewenthal, "Farming is a skilled trade, or profession, and if you were to show a mechanic swinging his tools around in a wild manner it would give a strange impression...it would detract." Curry even consulted a few of his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin's College of Agriculture who agreed that to show a pitchfork in such a position would be absurd.<sup>58</sup> The resulting message is that the farmer could be a soldier for the Allied cause without leaving his fields or changing his lifestyle. His patriotic duty was not newly mobilized. His battle was not fought against enemy soldiers. Rather, his task was to maintain the home front, to feed the troops, and to sustain the virtuous agrarian way of life so essential to the definition of America, as he had always done.

While Curry did come to support the United States participation in World War II after Pearl Harbor, his change of heart did not amount to an about-face. In images of 1942, Curry

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Lewenthal to Curry, 17 October 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 41.

<sup>58</sup> Curry to Lewenthal, 19 October 1942. John Steuart Curry and Curry Family Papers, 1900-1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 1 Folder 41.

always placed the heroism of the farmer ahead of the virtue of the soldier, and in that stance, remained true to his own brand of Regionalist patriotism. In the correspondence between Lewenthal and Curry over the design for *Our Good Earth*, Lewenthal, as noted above, encouraged Curry to paint soldiers or sailors. Both backed away, however, turning to a subject that would resonate with the rural audience for the *Our Good Earth* posters: a farmer whose work on the home front is essential to the war effort. In *Wisconsin Agriculture Leads to Victory* and the smaller *The Farm is a Battlefield, Too*, the farmer leads the charge in his simple overalls and takes visual precedence over any of the uniformed soldiers in the background. The titles of those works assert that the labor occurring at home among the pitchforks and tractors on the Midwestern landscape is urgent and critical to victory. Furthermore, these images plead with the viewer to remember that everything the United States does in World War II must be in the name of the core national values typified by the rural Midwest.

Such allegiance to the Midwest drew harsh criticism upon Curry and other Regionalist painters beginning in the 1930s and continuing throughout the war. Artist Stuart Davis, art dealer and writer Samuel Kootz, and others accused the Regionalists of being dangerously nationalistic and sympathetic to fascism.<sup>59</sup> Art historian H.W. Janson lambasted the Regionalists for their purported abhorrence of anything foreign and the resemblance between

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<sup>59</sup> For a detailed analysis of such charges in the 1930s and 1940s, see James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 69-89. See also Marion F. Deshmukh, "Cultural Migration: Artists and Visual Representation between Americans and Germans During the 1930s and 1940s," in *Transatlantic Images and Perceptions: Germany and America since 1776*, ed. David E. Barclay and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (Washington, DC and New York: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1997), 269-71.



their art and that of Nazi Germany.<sup>60</sup> More recently, Bram Dijkstra attempted to “confront the troubling connections that did, and continue to, exist between regionalism and the conventions of Nazi [art.]” Comparing Curry’s *Bathers* (1928, Fig. 3-34) with Arthur Kampf’s *Venus and Adonis* (1939, Fig. 3-35), Dijkstra found “very little effective difference between the [two works’] ideological implications.”<sup>61</sup> Because Curry’s fair-skinned Midwestern farm boys playfully frolicking in an unapologetic display of masculinity resemble the Aryan ideals that Hitler espoused, Dijkstra asserted that Curry’s art embodies, however unintentionally, a similar belief in the superiority of whiteness. One could make a similar analysis of the “Nordic” family in *Our Good Earth*, but such an interpretation fails when one considers the roots of both Kampf and Curry’s compositions, in classical and Renaissance figure studies. Owing to Hitler’s admiration for the artistic and genetic ideals depicted in Greek, Roman, and Italian art, Kampf’s painting is an overt reinterpretation of Titian’s *Venus and Adonis* (c. 1555-1560), which was in turn an homage to classical mythology. As Robert Gambone has identified, both Curry’s *Bathers* and *Our Good Earth* have their own sources in the sixteenth-century: Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel *ignudi* and Albrecht Durer’s *Adam and Eve* (1504).<sup>62</sup> One cannot justifiably claim that any art that recalls such venerated sources be categorically labeled sympathetic to or an embodiment of Nazi Aryan ideals.

Furthermore, the quintessential Hitlerian hero was not the farmer, but the soldier.

When the farmer was heroized in Nazi art it was as a peasant, as a quaint ancestor of a more modern and triumphant German people. In such works as Oskar Martin-Amorbach’s *Out to*

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<sup>60</sup> Janson named Benton and Wood as the chief representatives and defenders of the xenophobic Regionalist impulses, but he did not exempt Curry from the essential ideology he identified. H.W. Janson, “Benton and Wood: Champions of Regionalism,” *The Magazine of Art* 39, no. 5 (May 1946): 184-86.

<sup>61</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change, 1920-1950* (New York: H.N. Abrams, in association with the Columbus Museum of Art, 2003), 53.

<sup>62</sup> Gambone, “The Use of Religious Motifs in Curry’s Art,” 143-46.

*Harvest* (1938, Fig. 3-36), farmers were romanticized and antiquated, heroes of the past, not heroes of the present. For Nazis of the 1940s, the hero who commanded the most attention was undoubtedly the warrior who sacrificed himself for the good of the nation and the race. As Frederic Spotts explained, “Hitler had no interest whatever in agriculture but ...as an opportunity to foster the party’s ‘blood and soil’ ideology.”<sup>63</sup> In such sculptures as *Comradeship* (c. 1940, Fig. 3-37) and *Sacrifice* (date unknown, Fig. 3-38), favored Nazi artist Arno Breker “exalted warfare...as noble and heroic,” often to the point of death.<sup>64</sup> The Third Reich’s Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels announced, “the most noble consecration and the ultimate glorification [of Nazi ideals is] through the fighting, dying, and victory of the German soldier.”<sup>65</sup> Such warrior-heroes of the Third Reich were often modeled after Greek and Roman motifs, ensuring that their symbolism appeared timeless and historically credible. Curry’s contemporary farmer, while not a pacifist per se, appears unwilling to go to war, and demonstrates his patriotism on his own terms. Rather than a blind follower of hawkish nationalism, Curry’s war hero is full of ambivalence about the reality of combat. His patriotism is nuanced and complicated, something that Nazi propaganda would never allow.<sup>66</sup>

## **A Postwar Picture**

Apart from the context surrounding *Our Good Earth*’s creation and dissemination as a war picture, what might *Our Good Earth* signify? In what other ways was American farm life

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<sup>63</sup> Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 2003), 101.

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Petropoulos, “From Seduction to Denial: Arno Breker’s Engagement with National Socialism,” in *Art, Culture, and Media under the Third Reich*, ed. Richard A. Etlin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 211.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *Das Reich*, June 9, 1940, quoted in Jay W. Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 202.

<sup>66</sup> Baird explained that, “Loyalty, honor, unconditional obedience, and readiness for self-sacrifice were the hallmarks of [the Nazi] ethos.” *Ibid.*, 212.

in flux? In addition to the upheaval of a financial depression, an era of ecological catastrophe, and a war that paradoxically returned prosperity to American farming, all of which we have seen were already at play in this image, another revolution had been underway in U.S. agriculture since the start of the century. The family farm that Curry lionized in *Our Good Earth* had been changing drastically, with the numbers of family farms decreasing and the sizes of those farms increasing. New methods of industrialization including the use of tractors, sophisticated breeds of plants, and highly effective fertilizers were making it possible for fewer people to work larger and larger tracts of land.<sup>67</sup> A diminishing need for human labor combined with the lure of the city to reduce the rural farm population.<sup>68</sup>

Throughout American history up to 1920, the farmer had always been the norm, but from that year on, a majority of Americans lived in cities.<sup>69</sup> Hereafter, the farmer was becoming a curiosity; he was transforming from mainstream to myth, from reality to legend. The Dust Bowl and Great Depression further placed the American farmer in crisis as his land and his way of life seemed poised to disappear. These factors, compounded by advances in farming technology and increasing urbanization of the country, continued to undermine the farmer's cultural dominance. Thus, in 1942, *Our Good Earth* might also function as a lamentation for the loss of that quaint old standard which most Americans admired. The farmer's tight hold on his son, who is admittedly too young to make an actual departure, may be a way of symbolically shielding him from the temptation to join the military or move to a city to start a new and urban life, two very compelling prospects. Of course, this elegy to the family farm is tempered by the fact that Curry worked for the University of Wisconsin, one of the foremost sites for technological and genetic innovation that caused a revolution in the

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<sup>67</sup> Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, 187-97.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-45.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

field of agriculture, and he had left home to live in cities (or at least not on a farm) for nearly all of his adult life. Nonetheless, the evolution in the tradition of American farming to which Curry's family and his art had been tethered for so long, was likely bittersweet and unsettling.

In *Our Good Earth*, the farmer's body turns toward the lower left hand corner of the image, but his head faces the right, giving the viewer a sense that he is cognizant of both west and east, both past and future. His body is firmly planted in the present, the middle of the composition, and, as was typical in Regionalist art, in the middle of the United States. *Our Good Earth* is a complicated image, with a hero who acknowledges the challenges of the past, present, and future. Curry heroicizes the American farmer for his perseverance through the 1930s, his contributions to the war effort, and for his role in the rapidly changing agrarian culture of the postwar era. It is an image laden with ambivalence about war and trepidation about the future, sentiments that were held by many in the American Midwest, not least the artist himself.

## Chapter Four: Palmer Hayden's John Henry Series: Inventing a Black, American Hero

“John Henry, then, is a hero indeed. With his hammer and his determination to prove his superiority over a machine, he made a name for himself in folk history. His superstrength, his grit, his endurance, and his martyrdom appeal to something fundamental in the heart of the common man.”

-Benjamin A. Botkin, 1944<sup>1</sup>

Palmer Hayden's *His Hammer in His Hand* (c. 1947, Fig. 4-1) depicts the legendary folk hero and railroad man John Henry, who carries at the back of his neck the tool of both his glory and his demise, a steel-driving hammer. Gazing to the left side of the composition, Henry surveys a wooded, hilly terrain punctuated by a winding river. He strides confidently along a stretch of railroad that begins in the tunnel in the background and widens toward the foreground into the viewers' space. Henry wears blue work pants, a wide black belt, and two leather cuffs around his wrists. He is shirtless, revealing to the viewer his dark skin and muscular physique. While he dons the proper garb and carries the tool he needs to do his job, his smile expresses a sense of happiness and satisfaction, as if he has already completed his tasks. Indeed, there are no signs of ongoing construction and the railroad track looks finished and operable. This image is one of fourteen that Hayden made of John Henry during the 1940s, each depicting a scene from the life and death of the cultural icon and one of the artist's personal heroes.

John Henry ranks alongside Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill as one of America's best known folk figures. While the details of his life vary and the reality of his existence is

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin A. Botkin, ed. *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the People* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1944), 231.

debated, the prevailing legend casts Henry as an African American man whose skill, strength, and confidence with a hammer at railroad construction led him to challenge a newly invented steam drill. Both Henry and the steam drill were capable of creating deep holes in a mountain into which explosives would be placed to blast through the dense mountain rock. The race to see which was faster at drilling holes, the man or the machine, ended in what folk music historian Norm Cohen has called a “Pyrrhic victory” for Henry; he won the contest, but ultimately he lost his life.<sup>2</sup>

The John Henry legend has been popularized through numerous tunes and various lyrics; both work songs and ballads recount his impressive life and death. Work songs were often used to set the rhythm and pace for such strenuous manual labor as laying railroad tracks.<sup>3</sup> Their lyrics are repetitious and sometimes involve call-and-response patterns like songs sung by chain gangs or military formations. (“Ol’ John Henry—heh! Ol’ John Henry—heh! Died wid de hammer—heh! Died wid de hammer—heh! In his han’—heh! In his han’—heh!”<sup>4</sup>) The John Henry ballads are somewhat more varied in their lyrics and in the way they employ rhyme. The ballads tend to cover Henry’s entire life, whereas work songs often remain fixed on one episode. Hayden’s John Henry series relates to the legend broadly, as told in work songs and stories, but the paintings’ titles and content align specifically with the more elaborate narrative commonly recounted in the ballads.

Palmer Hayden was born in Widewater, Virginia in 1890 into an African American family that had been drawn to the area, like many other residents, by the construction of the

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<sup>2</sup> Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>4</sup> Guy B. Johnson, *John Henry, Tracking Down a Negro Legend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929), 78.

railroad that ran along the Potomac River.<sup>5</sup> Hayden's father led hunting and fishing trips and was known for telling stories of his heroic feats, including a claim that he once killed a bear with his bare hands. Hayden moved to Washington, DC at the age of sixteen where he worked as a roustabout for the Ringling Brothers Circus. Having sketched since he was four years old, Hayden made drawings of circus scenes during his off hours and designed posters and advertisements, as well. From 1912 to 1920, Hayden served with the Army in the Philippines and with the 10th Cavalry at West Point, New York. In the early 1920s he worked as a letter carrier and as a janitor, while simultaneously taking art classes at Columbia University. Hayden solicited instruction and advice from Victor Perard, an art instructor at the Cooper Institute (known now as The Cooper Union) who was one of his janitorial clients; he also worked and studied with Asa Randall at the Commonwealth Art Colony in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, during the summers of 1925 and 1926. Hayden's early paintings depict marine scenes and he won the inaugural and prestigious Harmon Foundation prize in 1926 for a work called *The Schooners*.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, Hayden set off for Paris with financial support from his patron, Alice M. Dike. He stayed for five years, returning to New York in 1932.<sup>7</sup>

In Paris, Hayden met many of his contemporaries including Aaron Douglas, Meta Warrick Fuller, Hale Woodruff, Countee Cullen, and, notably, the African American elder painter, Henry Ossawa Tanner. He became a part of a coterie of promising young black artists

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Hanks, "Journey from the Crossroads: Palmer Hayden's Right Turn," *International Review of African American Art* 16, no. 1 (1999): 30-41. Janet A. Payne, "Palmer Hayden Comes Home: Discovering a Native Son," *International Review of African American Art* 16, no. 1 (1999): 42-43.

<sup>6</sup> Gary A. Reynolds, Beryl J. Wright, and David C. Driskell, *Against the Odds: African American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark, NJ: Newark Museum, 1989), 64.

<sup>7</sup> For biographical information, see Allan M. Gordon, *Echoes of Our Past: The Narrative Artistry of Palmer C. Hayden* (Los Angeles: The Museum of African American Art, 1988), especially 11-14. See also James Adams, Camille Billops, and James V. Hatch, "Palmer Hayden, Painter, May 14, 1972," *Artist and Influence* 13 (1994): 90-105.

and witnessed the fascination that the French had with African American culture at a time when Josephine Baker was among the most popular acts in town. Theresa Leininger-Miller argued that Hayden's time in Paris, where "the French valorized black culture, albeit in a vague and superficial way," caused him to turn to portraying African American life, particularly John Henry.<sup>8</sup> While abroad Hayden made one image of Henry (now lost), but he had sketched Henry previously, during his youth. Hayden recalled, "I [had] been hearing that song all my life and I always loved it."<sup>9</sup> Hayden remembered that the "ballad [was] sung by older boys or men at work," and he probably also heard versions from his father, a legendary storyteller in his own right, and his brother, a skilled banjo player.<sup>10</sup> When he returned to New York, the Great Depression was underway and by 1934 Hayden was working on the WPA in the easel division, making paintings of New York Harbor. It was after his tenure with the WPA ended, Hayden said, that he turned to folk subject matter and decided the time was right for an entire series of works depicting John Henry.<sup>11</sup>

Hayden's time in France might have propelled him to think more intently about portraying his own race, but his motivation to depict John Henry owes as much to the flourishing of nationalism during the WPA years, the revival of American folk culture of the

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<sup>8</sup> Theresa A. Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Adams, Billops, and Hatch, "Palmer Hayden, Painter, May 14, 1972," 101. Nora Holt's article, "Painter Palmer Hayden Symbolizes John Henry," appeared in an unidentifiable New York newspaper, 1 February 1947. Clipping found in Palmer C. Hayden papers, 1920-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 4 Box 2 Folder 6. See also Hanks, "Journey from the Crossroads: Palmer Hayden's Right Turn," 30-41. Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1934*, 245.

<sup>10</sup> Palmer Hayden, "The Ballad of John Henry in Paintings by Palmer Hayden," Exhibition brochure (New York: Argent Galleries, 1947), unpaginated. Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1934*, 97.

<sup>11</sup> Adams, Billops, and Hatch, "Palmer Hayden, Painter, May 14, 1972," 101-102.



interwar period, and to a renewed sense of patriotism during World War II. After leaving the WPA because his 1940 marriage made him ineligible for relief work, Hayden found himself compelled to paint “folk life, just as I remembered out of my experiences as a child and growing up in Virginia.”<sup>12</sup> In the John Henry series Hayden created a multidimensional black hero with broad appeal who could function as an icon of strength and service for all Americans.

As Hayden began to design his series of paintings of Henry in the 1940s, he embarked on a course of research with the help of his wife. Miriam Hayden later recalled:

It was shortly after our marriage in 1940 that my husband and I began talking about what he had been thinking of for a long time. He was fascinated by the [John Henry] story and wanted to be the one to immortalize it in paintings. As neither of us knew where the “Big Bend Tunnel” was, I researched the legend in the Art and Drama department of the New York Public Library. There I was fortunate to find a copy of a carefully written, scholarly study of the legend written by a professor of English at West Virginia University, Louis W. Chappell. After delightedly reading the book, Palmer wrote to the author who responded with an encouraging letter and a gift of a copy of the book, which was titled *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study*. A little later Palmer traveled to Morgantown for an interview with Professor Chappell.<sup>13</sup>

A key goal of Chappell’s book was proving that Big Bend Tunnel, a stretch of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad between the towns of Hinton and Talcott, West Virginia, was the site of the drilling contest and the origin for the Henry legend. Using extensive archival research and the oral histories of those who claimed to know Henry, Chappell placed the drilling contest between Henry and the steam drill between 1870 and 1873, the years of the construction of Big Bend Tunnel. He dated the invention of the legend of John Henry (including work songs and ballads) to the 1870s, as well.<sup>14</sup> After reading Chappell’s book and corresponding with

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>13</sup> Archie Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 61.

<sup>14</sup> Louis W. Chappell, *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968, reprint of original 1933 edition), 39.

him about such details as how Henry's hammer should be portrayed and what his "woman" looked like, Hayden actually traveled to West Virginia two times.<sup>15</sup>

Palmer and Miriam Hayden "decided to visit the John Henry country" for the first time in May 1944.<sup>16</sup> Hayden recalled,

My wife had a car and we drove down to West Virginia to see the location of this John Henry legend. We went to Talcott, right to where the old Big Bend Tunnel was supposed to have been and where John Henry was supposed to have worked. We stayed down there for two or three days and looked around. I wanted to get some atmosphere.<sup>17</sup>

While they were there, Miriam remembered,

We drove around the countryside...fascinated to see the local people: Indians, blacks, and what looked like red-haired Scotch Irish—as Professor Chappell had described them—walking down the country road on which we were driving. Our several days in that vicinity gave the artist time to absorb the atmosphere, do any sketching he wished, and prepare for putting his impressions on canvas.<sup>18</sup>

Hayden used a combination of trains and buses to visit Big Bend again on a second trip in 1945. He also went to Morgantown where he interviewed Professor Chappell in person.<sup>19</sup>

While the credibility of Chappell's sources, as well as his ultimate conclusion that John Henry lived and worked at Big Bend, have been called into question by subsequent historians, Chappell's work was the most current that Hayden could access and it made a significant impact on him.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the artist found it remarkably rewarding to find evidence that the

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<sup>15</sup> Chappell, letter to Hayden, 8 April 1944. Palmer C. Hayden Papers, 1920-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 3 Box 2 Folder 5.

<sup>16</sup> Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Adams, Billops, and Hatch, "Palmer Hayden, Painter, May 14, 1972," 97.

<sup>18</sup> Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes*, 61-62.

<sup>19</sup> Palmer Hayden diary entry, May 9-12, 1945. Palmer C. Hayden Papers, 1920-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 2 Box 1 Folder 4.

<sup>20</sup> Norm Cohen doubts Chappell's conclusions in Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 67.

hero he had known in his imagination since his boyhood was a bona fide historical figure when others, including notably Carl Sandburg, believed him to be fiction.<sup>21</sup>

Hayden exhibited eleven of the twelve paintings in his John Henry series at New York's Argent Galleries in January of 1947 under the series title "The Ballad of John Henry."<sup>22</sup> The list of paintings in the Argent brochure represents one possible order to the series, and it is the order used in the discussion below.<sup>23</sup> Yet, just as there is no single fixed version of the ballad—some stanzas within the ballad are interchangeable, and in different versions the order of events and certain details might change—so may Hayden's works be arranged in various sequences. Alan Lomax noted, "John Henry is seldom sung by Negro folk singers as a connected narrative but occurs, rather, as a loose collection of stanzas, from which one may infer the story."<sup>24</sup> Part of the wonder of the John Henry ballad is that as an element of folklore it is constantly evolving. As Benjamin Botkin observed, "You want to tell it again in your own way, because it is anybody's property."<sup>25</sup>

Hayden adapted the John Henry legend to his own particular vision while still taking care to ensure that "each [painting] was based on one of those old lines from the ballad."<sup>26</sup> Whether the lyrics Hayden used were those he learned as an adolescent, those he gleaned

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<sup>21</sup> Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1927), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Hayden also painted two additional related works: *Big Bend Tunnel* (1944-45) and *It's Wrote on the Rock* (n.d.), both of which are in the collection of the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles, California.

<sup>23</sup> The order printed here was used in a later exhibition catalogue issued for a show of the paintings at Fisk University in Nashville. David C. Driskell, *Palmer Hayden: The John Henry Series and Paintings Reflecting the Theme of Afro-American Folklore* (Nashville, TN: Fisk University Art Gallery, 1970), unpaginated.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1960), 552.

<sup>25</sup> Botkin, ed. *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the People*, xxii.

<sup>26</sup> Adams, Billops, and Hatch, "Palmer Hayden, Painter, May 14, 1972," 97.

from Chappell's book, or some amalgamation of the stanzas he preferred, we do not know. In any case, Hayden's Henry paintings cover Henry's life from childhood to death, and each canvas represents one of the most important moments of Henry's life. The events Hayden depicted recur in lyrics from different sources, giving the series a broad appeal. Viewers can relate to and appreciate the epic story told in paint regardless of what version of the ballad they might know.

Hayden's John Henry series has never been analyzed fully. No art historian has published a detailed account of the iconography and formal characteristics of each painting or discussed how the paintings relate to the lyrics of the ballad. Only Allan Gordon has reproduced the series in its entirety in a 1988 catalogue for the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles (which owns the entire series). Gordon does not justify the order of the paintings he reproduces and while his discussion of the series is sound, it is also brief.<sup>27</sup> This dearth of thorough scholarship on the John Henry series is not surprising, as scholarship on Palmer Hayden's career is sparse. I offer such a discussion below to introduce the works individually, and to examine how they relate to one another and to the Ballad of John Henry. Whenever possible I have chosen to use lyrics that Hayden himself quoted or those that are printed in Chappell's text (because Hayden consulted that resource) to guide a review of the series.

The first work in Hayden's series, *When John Henry was a Baby* (Fig. 4-2), depicts the moment of premonition, often the first stanza of the ballad, when Henry told his mother that his destiny was to work and die as a steel-driving man:

John Henry was a li'l baby,  
Sittin' on his mama's knee,  
Said, 'De Big Bend Tunnel,

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<sup>27</sup> Gordon, *Echoes of Our Past: The Narrative Artistry of Palmer C. Hayden*, 22-26.

Gonna cause the death of me.<sup>28</sup>

Despite its somber message, the mood of Hayden's painting is uplifting in its use of bright shades of blue, red, and yellow throughout in combination with bold patterns in such elements as the raccoon's tail and the checkered sheet on the clothesline. In a playful detail, Hayden echoes the loving duo of mother and son in the red and blue hen and the yellow chick who occupy the left foreground; their feathers are the same colors as the garments worn by Henry and his mother. In this work Hayden introduces the distinctive tuft of hair that he uses to signify Henry throughout the series and locates Big Bend Tunnel in a landscape that resembles the Appalachian Mountains of southeastern West Virginia. Hayden presents this element as part of Henry's imagination by cleverly separating the tunnel from the Henry homestead using the curved edge of the white sheet, which he continues toward the left edge of the painting with a flourish of light brown paint.

The second painting in the series leaps forward to Henry's adulthood. In *He Laid Down His Hammer and Cried* (Fig. 4-3) Henry sits upon three railroad ties and sheds tears over the enormity of his work and the gravity of his fatal destiny. The moment occurs in the ballad, as well:

John Henry went up on the mountain,  
He came down on the side;  
The rock was so tall, John Henry was so small,  
That he laid down his hammer and he cried, 'Lawd, Lawd.'<sup>29</sup>

Henry rests in the foreground of Hayden's painting wiping his face with a handkerchief while fellow workers in the background quietly observe his emotional outpouring. This sorrowful image is followed by a far more lighthearted one depicting John Henry's beautiful woman on

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<sup>28</sup> Hayden either sang or recited this stanza in a 1972 interview. Adams, Billops, and Hatch, "Palmer Hayden, Painter, May 14, 1972," 97.

<sup>29</sup> Chappell, *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study*, 104.

a visit to the tunnel (Fig. 4-4). The title, *The Dress She Wore Was Blue*, hovers at the bottom of the canvas. While her presence in the painting provides a chromatic burst in the dark tunnel, she does not distract Henry who hammers away on the right.

The next three paintings in the series, *John Henry Was the Best in the Land*, *Where'd You Git Them Hightop Shoes*, and *His Hammer in the Wind* (Figs. 4-5, 4-6, 4-7), are all jubilant celebrations of Henry's well-known and much-appreciated prowess with the hammer. In the first of these images, Henry demonstrates his skill using two hammers at the same time in front of a throng of onlookers, including a queen.<sup>30</sup> A stanza from the version of the ballad included in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* resembles this work more closely than any in Chappell's book:

One day his captain told him,  
How he had bet a man  
That John Henry would beat his steam-drill down,  
Cause John Henry was the best in the land,  
John Henry was the best in the land.<sup>31</sup>

The next title, *Where'd You Git Them Hightop Shoes*, does not occur precisely in any version of the ballad's lyrics that I have located, leading me to think that Hayden relied at least in part on the song he knew from his youth. The closest stanza in Chappell's book says,

'Where did you get them red-top shoes,  
And the dress you wear so fine?'  
'I got my dress from a railroad man,  
And my shoes from a driver in the mines.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The identity of this monarch remains a mystery to me. She could be a beauty queen, a carnival queen, or an English queen. At least one version of the ballad places Queen Elizabeth II at Henry's grave. Though she had red hair, coiffed similar to the woman in this painting at times, she was not crowned until 1952. Richard M. Dorson, "The Ballad of John Henry, c. 1872," in *An American Primer*, ed. Daniel J. Boorstin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 445.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 45.

<sup>32</sup> Chappell, *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study*, 126.

This painting shows Henry's woman seated in the foreground of a rousing celebration. Indeed, she wears flashy red boots and plays the banjo. Around her people clap, drink, and dance as John Henry stands in the background over her left shoulder. He has changed from his typical work clothes into something finer and wears a huge grin on his face. He might be indistinguishable from the other figures if not for his signature tuft of hair that is most pronounced as his head is in profile.

Whereas Henry merely watches the revelry in *Where'd you Git Them Hightop Shoes*, in *His Hammer in the Wind*, Hayden portrays Henry dancing and gleeful. In the ballad, this episode serves to prove Henry's confidence and status as a kind of savior:

The white folks all got scared,  
Thought Big Bend was a-fallin' in'  
John Henry hollered out with a very loud shout,  
'It's my hammer a-fallin' in the wind, O Lord,  
It's my hammer a-fallin' in the wind.'<sup>33</sup>

In these lyrics, as people worry that the tunnel is in jeopardy and danger is afoot, Henry reassures them that he is in control. In Hayden's painting Henry clearly revels in his command of the hammer, using a heavy tool as his dancing prop. While the two white figures on the right side of the composition look up at the tunnel ceiling with grave concern, Henry playfully waves his hammer around, and his assistants who hold the drilling spike in the lower left corner laugh at the foolishness of the white people's worry. This painting, and the two before it convince us that Henry's work comes rather easily to him, that he is living the life of a veritable celebrity, and shows how he might be driven to challenge the steam drill to see which was the king of the steel-drivers. Each of these three works evokes the elation within the song before Henry's life takes a more serious path toward contest, victory, and death.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 121.

The tone of the series turns more somber in the next painting. In *A Man Ain't Nothing But A Man* (Fig. 4-8) we see Henry explaining to his foreman his belief in his ability to do hard labor and to complete a tough job on his own, using his masculine strength and hammer as his tools, rather than steam and technology. In the ballad, such a scene plays like this:

John Henry said to the captain,  
'A man ain't nothing but a man,  
And before I let that steam drill beat me down  
I die with the hammer in my hand.'<sup>34</sup>

Embodying that determination, Henry points to the tunnel while his boss looks somewhat skeptical. In the canvas that follows, *John Henry on the Right, Steam Drill on the Left* (Fig. 4-9), Henry wages war against the steam drill. As he is hard at work, the viewer sees Henry only from behind. This image shows the most dramatic racial contrast in the entire series, as Henry and his assistant are both black, while the operators of the steam drill are white.

Some versions of the ballad celebrate Henry's victory in the contest, but somewhat surprisingly, Hayden did not paint such a scene. Instead the next painting in the series, *Died wid His Hammer in His Hand* (Fig. 4-10), presents Henry lying on the ground with his arms extended in a crucifixion pose. Such a phrase often occurs in the ballad as a prediction, as in the stanza quoted above. But occasionally, the singer would repeat the phrase in the past tense as in the following excerpt:

Some said he come from Columbus,  
Others said he come from Cain,  
But he give in his name as an East Virginia man,  
And he died with his hammer in his hand, God knows,  
And he died with his hammer in his hand.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 110.



The final two paintings that Hayden exhibited at the Argent Galleries deal with the aftermath of Henry's death. *Goin' Where Her Man Fell Dead* (Fig. 4-11) shows Henry's woman making her way to the scene of the fatal contest whereas *There Lies That Steel Drivin' Man* (Fig. 4-12) resolves the story by depicting Henry's funeral. Such titles occur in the following ballad lyrics:

John Henry had a little woman,  
She always dressed in red.  
Came running down the track and she never looked back,  
Saying, 'I am going where my man fell dead.'<sup>36</sup>

They took John Henry to his father's house,  
And they buried him in the sand;  
All of his friends marched around him and cried,  
'There lies that steel-driving man.'<sup>37</sup>

True to the lyrics, in *Goin' Where Her Man Fell Dead* Henry's woman wears red and heads into the tunnel to witness the site of her love's demise. She hunches over in mourning and her right arm appears flexed at the elbow, as if she has brought her hand to her face to wipe away tears. Her skirt's layers mimic the horizontal railroad ties and in concert with the diagonals of the tracks, the trails of animals and people, and the power lines at the right, our gaze is drawn to the black hole that is the tunnel. Henry's woman holds the hand of a young flour sack-clad girl and apart from a blue dog, they are the only two figures who head toward the tragic scene. All of the other onlookers pour out of the tunnel: men on the right, donkeys and horses on the left, all bowing their heads in respect. Ominous smoke flows from the tunnel, a storm forms in the distant sky, and nine black birds line up on the power lines to salute the procession. This canvas bears a remarkable similarity to Dorothea Lange's *Toward Los Angeles* (1937, Fig. 4-13) of two men trudging away from the viewer on a California highway. The

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 126.

billboard's suggestion, "Next time try the train. Relax." in Lange's photograph seems as ridiculous when directed toward the men as it would in reference to the figures in Hayden's painting. In both images the railroad eases no suffering.

A congregation of mourners crowds around Henry's grave in Hayden's *There Lies That Steel Drivin' Man*, which is marked by a cross, flowers, and his hammer and is just outside Big Bend Tunnel. Henry's foreman presides over the funeral, having taken off his black hat to gesture toward the fresh grave. The attendees are predominantly black, but, in addition to the foreman, there are roughly six other white people in the crowd. The diversity of this crowd is on par with that depicted in *Where'd You Git Them Hightop Shoes*, though the emotional tenor is opposite.

The one painting that was not included in Hayden's show at the Argent Galleries, but subsequently has been considered part of the John Henry series, *His Hammer in His Hand* (Fig. 4-1), is in many ways the most heroic image of the lot. This is the smallest painting in the series at 27 x 33 inches, whereas the rest of the works are closer to 30 x 40 inches, and it is the most visually simplified. There are no crowds of people and very few props or accessories accompany Henry. It is just the man, his tool, and the tunnel, and the story here is told with impressive economy. It is unclear as to where this painting should fit into the series' sequence. It could be an introductory image, setting the tone for the entire series. It could also fit in elsewhere within the series, as a kind of pictorial version of a chorus that reinforces Henry's dedication to his occupation and identification with his standard tool, before, during, and after the steel driving contest. Indeed, phrases akin to "his hammer in his hand" recur throughout the ballad's lyrics, appearing when Henry first embarks on his railroad occupation, when he commits to competition between man and machine, and after his death, as in the following stanzas:

On Monday morning bright and soon,  
John Henry left his old old home  
To travel the wide world around,  
With a ten-pound hammer in his hand, Lord, Lord,  
With a ten-pound hammer in his hand.

He walked up to the foreman on the road,  
Says, 'Captain, I'm a steel-driving man:  
I can drive more steel than any man in your crew;  
I will die with a hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord,  
I will die with a hammer in my hand.'<sup>38</sup>

John Henry told the people,  
'You know that I am a man.  
I can beat all the traps that have ever been made,  
Or I'll die with a hammer in my hand,  
Die with a hammer in my hand.'<sup>39</sup>

I prefer to think of *His Hammer in His Hand* as an overarching image, one that manifests Henry as a folk hero in his death whose legacy and significance lives on in the legend, if not in the body of the man. Just as the phrase "his hammer in his hand" functions as a refrain throughout the ballad, this painting could easily stand on its own as a visual distillation of the entire legend of John Henry. *His Hammer in His Hand* refines the legend of John Henry into one summary, optimistic picture showing Henry standing erect, strong, confident, and happy.

Hayden was not the first person to portray John Henry. The hero experienced a great surge in popularity as part of the widespread folklore revival of the 1920s and 1930s in America.<sup>40</sup> Interest in Henry and other figures and events (both apocryphal and historical) from American days-gone-by was part of the widespread impulse between the world wars to

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>40</sup> Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. and Claudine Weatherford, "Modernism, Edith Halpert, Holger Cahill, and the Fine Art Meaning of American Folk Art," in *Folk Roots, New Roots: Folklore in American Life*, ed. Jane S. Becker and Barbara Franco (Lexington, MA: Museum of Our National Heritage, 1988), 141-66. In addition to those already cited, evidence of such a revival of John Henry appears in Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological study of rural Florida. See Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1935), 80-81.

cultivate Van Wyck Brooks' "usable past."<sup>41</sup> Writers, artists, and historians self-consciously incorporated images and tales of American traditions as an antidote to the uncertainty after World War I and the crisis of the Great Depression. The dramatic John Henry story was a perfect target for such explorations because of its great versatility. Palmer Hayden came late to this American impulse to recover a national folk history, but Hayden's series of paintings remains the most thorough exploration of the Henry legend in art.

The story of John Henry can signify many different things to many different people, and scholars and artists of all sorts sought, in these tumultuous decades, to make Henry's legend relevant for their era. Scott Reynolds Nelson has argued that somewhere along the way revivalists even altered the John Henry song from its original roots as a morose dirge about evil bosses and hard work to a "fast and chirpy country song."<sup>42</sup> Scholarly works on the historiography of the legend, novels and stories geared toward adults and children, poems, plays, prints, and various renditions of the song emerged in the cultural sphere, articulating new and varied heroisms for Henry. The song appeared in some of the most important folklore anthologies including Carl Sandburg's seminal collection, *The American Songbag* (1927), and John A. and Allan Lomax's *American Ballads and Folksongs* (1934) and *Our Singing Country* (1941). Whereas previously John Henry's story had been spread only by word-of-mouth, during the interwar period the hero was being canonized officially as a part of the American pantheon. Textual and visual articulations of John Henry's greatness were in the

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<sup>41</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial* 64 (11 April 1918): 337-41.

<sup>42</sup> Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30-31. Richard Dorson notes that a mention in a 1909 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* "declared the ballad to be sad, tearful, and sweet" as well. Richard M. Dorson, "The Career of 'John Henry,'" in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 569.

process of being established as the years wore on, and in the 1940s Hayden was a major contributor to this phenomenon.

Prior to Hayden's series, Henry's likeness appeared most often in illustrations in books recounting his legendary feats. Frank Shay's *Here's Audacity!* (1930) regales its readers with tales of such American legends as Casey Jones, Paul Bunyan, and, of course, John Henry. Eben Given's single illustration (Fig. 4-14) shows Henry as a stoic middle-aged black man, and while Shay's narrative situates Henry at Big Bend Tunnel in the mountains of West Virginia, Given surprisingly set him against an urban industrial backdrop that could have come from a Charles Sheeler painting or an Aaron Douglas illustration. With chimneys pouring smoke behind him, Given's Henry stares out with all the sternness that one expects from the hero, but he has none of the accoutrements of his trade. Apart from his race and his expression, Given's Henry seems disconnected from his legend, making one wonder if Given repurposed an image he had made for another story or perhaps misunderstood Henry's steel-driving occupation as that of one who works in a steel factory rather than on a railroad. Folklorist Archie Green was similarly puzzled by Given's depiction, but noted that his illustration was seminal, "the opening link in a long visual chain shaped over a span of decades" of Henry images.<sup>43</sup>

The second and more widely distributed visual articulation of John Henry appeared in Roark Bradford's novel *John Henry* (1931). The novel varies the Henry legend significantly by setting the story deeper in the American South against a backdrop of riverboats and cotton fields. For much of the story Henry is more of a loafer and a ruffian than a heroic worker, and when he does eventually work the railroad, he lays track instead of creating holes for

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<sup>43</sup> Archie Green, "John Henry Depicted," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 14 (1978): 127.

explosives. In Bradford's imagination the legendary hammering contest takes place between Henry and another black man named Sam, and while Henry wins the contest, Sam wins the love of Henry's woman. J.J. Lankes' twenty-six woodcuts anecdotally relate to Bradford's story, and we see Henry as a baby and as an adult, picking and carrying cotton, and hammering railroad ties. But none of these small woodcuts convince the viewer of Henry's great physical stature or moral character. In *The Birth of John Henry* the baby fills his crib, appearing larger than life, but in a way that registers more comical than impressive. In other images, Henry's facial expression is either imperceptible because of the thickness of line and ink or verges on minstrel-style caricature of dark skin and white teeth and eyes. While this book represents the first major entry of John Henry into mainstream popular culture, neither Bradford's story nor Lankes' woodcuts foster admiration for a great hero.

James Daugherty was the first illustrator whose images convey the might of a man who would challenge a steam drill and win. Daugherty was practiced in the art of heroic illustration, having contributed images for Stuart Edward White's 1922 book *Daniel Boone, Wilderness Scout*. His three expressive images in the 1936 book *Their Weight in Wildcats*, a compilation of stories of frontier heroes previously published, succinctly show Henry's toil, exertion, and demise. With jagged lines and swirling scenes, Daugherty breathes life into and gives depth to the hero who had appeared two-dimensional in Lankes' and Given's images. The full-page climactic image (Fig. 4-15) shows Henry with hammer raised, poised to strike a post that surges in the foreground as if on fire, while the atmosphere and earth lurches and undulates from the power of his swing. Such a dramatic depiction of Henry at work is entirely without precedent.

Fred Becker worked for the WPA printmaking division in New York City from 1935 to 1939 when he executed his John Henry series consisting of nine scratchboard prints and

wood engravings.<sup>44</sup> Prompted by Roark Bradford's novel and J.J. Lankes' woodcuts, Becker departed significantly in story and in style to develop images that are best described as jazz-influenced surrealism.<sup>45</sup> The most imaginative is *John Henry's Hand* (1936, Fig. 4-16) in which the hero's might translates into a sixth finger and the railroad tracks he helped to build resemble a "lifeline and loveline" as if Becker was designing a "palmist's chart of the folk hero's hand."<sup>46</sup> Hammers dance at the fatty base of Henry's thumb and the entire image has a kind of exquisite corpse, dream-induced quality. For Becker to abstract Henry's story so fantastically required an assumption on the artist's part that the viewing public would recognize the tracks, the hammers, the natural elements like flowers and trees, and the girth of the hand itself as symbols from Henry's legend. The public encountered this wood engraving in 1936 in two places: the lobby of Orson Welles' all-black, WPA Theater Project performance of "Macbeth" and at the Museum of Modern Art's momentous *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition. The MoMA show was probably John Henry's first appearance in an art museum.<sup>47</sup> Another work, *John Henry's Funeral* (1938, Fig. 4-17), shows the hero hovering above his coffin wearing wings and playing a harp as a jazz band literally trumpets (and trombones, and drums) his apotheosis. Becker's visionary approach to the John Henry legend illustrates yet another way in which the hero became a part of popular and visual culture and reveals him to be a religious and even mystical in his heroic dimensions.

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<sup>44</sup> Archie Green, "Fred Becker's John Henry," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 15, no. 53 (1979): 30-31.

<sup>45</sup> Fred Becker, "The WPA Federal Art Project, New York City: A Reminiscence," *The Massachusetts Review* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 77.

<sup>46</sup> James Wechsler, "Fred Becker and Experimental Printmaking," *Print Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1993): 376.

<sup>47</sup> Green, "Fred Becker's John Henry," 31.

In 1945, contemporary with Hayden's John Henry paintings, William Gropper portrayed Henry as part of his series *American Folk Heroes* (Fig. 4-18).<sup>48</sup> Gropper's Henry appears larger-than-life and exceeds the limits of canvas' borders as he mightily raises his hammer over head. While it is significant that Gropper included Henry in his pictorial anthology of legendary Americans (with Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, Finn MacCool, and others), Gropper's allegiance to the factual basis of Henry's legend was, in comparison to Hayden's, rather diluted. In Gropper's 1945 image, the hero hammers railroad ties (not holes for explosives) and Big Bend Tunnel is nowhere to be found. In Gropper's subsequent folklore map from 1946 (Fig. 4-19) Henry is situated in Alabama, three states away from his native West Virginia. For Gropper, like the other artists who depicted Henry before him, Henry was a fictional folkloric character, and the specificity of what he did and where he did it is less of a concern.

As we have seen, Hayden, more than any other artist, went to great lengths to anchor his Henry epic in historical facts. He emphasized the elements of the Henry story that show him as a real person who was extraordinarily talented and dedicated to his craft, but who also could feel, fail, and (perhaps most importantly) was basically the same size as everyone else. Hayden's approach was similar to that of his mentor Louis Chappell, who wrote about Henry as "a human being, superior of course but not without the common frailties of mankind."<sup>49</sup> Hayden asserted emphatically that Henry was not simply "the Negro counterpart of the mythical Paul Bunyan, but did live and work in the Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia" and

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<sup>48</sup> The location of this painting is presently unknown; however, the Smithsonian American Art Museum owns a lithograph of the image.

<sup>49</sup> Chappell, *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study*, 20.



both Hayden and Chappell agreed that Henry was not “made up of the whole cloth.”<sup>50</sup> It was imperative for Hayden that Henry be seen as a credible historical figure, and not as a black version of a white character designed to appeal to a minority. To view him as the “black Paul Bunyan” was to diminish his power as an individualized hero.<sup>51</sup> Hayden’s goal was to offer a historical, African American hero who could stand on his own reputation, rather than functioning simply as a racialized translation of a dominant, mainstream white hero.

One analogy that reinforces Henry’s heroism occurs when Hayden casts Henry as a kind of black, American, Christ-like martyr. The ballad itself reinforces such a metaphor in such lines as “They took John Henry to his father’s house, And they buried him in the sand,” which alludes to the way Jesus referred to houses of worship as his “father’s house” in the Bible.<sup>52</sup> The Christian allusions begin in *When John Henry was a Baby*. Henry’s apparent knowledge of his eventual death at the tunnel mirrors Jesus’ awareness that he is to be a martyred savior. The pose of the two figures in Hayden’s image resembles medieval Virgin-and-child sculptures. The configuration of mother and child in Hayden’s work also recalls altarpieces designed by such artists as Giotto and Cimabue. In such works typically the Madonna wears red and blue, while an overall proliferation of gold, including gold haloes, establishes both figures’ divine significance. In *When John Henry was a Baby*, the child wears gold britches, and the sunflowers over the figures’ heads mimic the appearance of majestic

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<sup>50</sup> Hayden, “The Ballad of John Henry in Paintings by Palmer Hayden,” unpaginated; Chappell, *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study*, 92.

<sup>51</sup> The comparison between Henry and Bunyan was often made in popular literature and in the press. Dorson, “The Ballad of John Henry, c. 1872,” 442-43. At least one critic used that phrase in a review of Hayden’s series, which must have irked him considerably. Howard Devree, “By Groups and Singly,” *The New York Times*, 26 January 1947.

<sup>52</sup> Chappell, *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study*, 126. Jesus uses the phrase “my father’s house” in such Bible passages as Luke 2:49, Luke 16:27, John 2:16, and John 14:2.

haloes. Baby John Henry also holds his hammer the way the infant Jesus often holds a cross, both equipped with the prophetic symbols of their destinies.

In *He Laid Down His Hammer and Cried*, John Henry acts in a manner that recalls Jesus' response when he discovered that Lazarus had died. In John 11:35, the Bible states "Jesus wept," a gesture that proved that Jesus was a mortal man. His tears showed that he was capable of sorrow, compassion, and uncertainty. These traits are equally crucial to the story of John Henry. In each narrative—that of Jesus' life and of Henry's—the heroes are shown to be both human and divinely ordained as martyrs. They are shown to have enormous capabilities, as when Jesus performed the miracles of walking on water, turning water into wine, and turning a few loaves of bread and fish into a feast for many. In *John Henry Was the Best in the Land*, Henry performs his own version of a miracle, displaying his unparalleled skills for an astonished crowd. Often Jesus would have to reassure his disciples who were skeptical of his capabilities that he was in control. Henry does the same thing in *His Hammer in the Wind*. When people fear that the tunnel may be caving in, Henry dances around gleefully, and quells their fears: "It's my hammer a-fallin' in the wind."<sup>53</sup>

In death and afterlife John Henry's story parallels that of Jesus. In *Died wid His Hammer in His Hand* Henry lies with his arms outstretched in a crucifixion pose, and is surrounded by mourners reminiscent of Deposition scenes from the life of Jesus. In *His Hammer in His Hand*, the manner in which Henry grips his hammer, while balancing it at the back of his neck evokes the image of a crucified Jesus, as well. Many inhabitants of the Big Bend Tunnel region believed that Henry's spirit remained in the tunnel, a belief recorded in Chappell's book, and something that Hayden could have heard during one of his trips to West

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 121.

Virginia.<sup>54</sup> The artist rendered such a concept in the painting *Big Bend Tunnel* (1944-45, Fig. 4-20). In this image, one of the two related works not officially counted as part of the John Henry series, a quartet of laborers gather to speak of the steel driving man who appears as an enshrouded apparition floating above the tunnel entrance.<sup>55</sup> The tunnel here recalls Jesus' tomb, from which the stone was rolled away on the day of resurrection, and the men bear witness to Henry's rebirth. In *Goin' Where Her Man Fell Dead*, Henry's woman goes to discover the site of his death and his symbolic tomb like a reinterpreted Mary Magdalene. While she is unnamed in Hayden's paintings, in some versions of the song Henry's woman was known as Mary Magdalene.<sup>56</sup>

Associations between John Henry and Jesus make the former's legend universally appealing and comprehensible as an abiding tale of martyrdom.<sup>57</sup> Conversely, in subtle ways Hayden linked himself to the steel-driving man in his paintings, making the story particular and personal. When Hayden first exhibited his epic series of John Henry paintings at New York's Argent Galleries in 1947 he explained that the story "appealed to me chiefly because it told in sober words and tune the life and tragic death of a powerful and popular working man who belonged to my section of the country and to my own race."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, they did share

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 13-15.

<sup>55</sup> The other related work not considered part of the series is *It's Wrote on the Rock* (n.d.), also in the collection of the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles. It depicts a landscape through which a train barrels as an African American man points out a large stone commemorative marker to an African American couple who appear to be tourists.

<sup>56</sup> Dorson, "The Career of 'John Henry.'" 576.

<sup>57</sup> While conflating John Henry and Jesus broadens the appeal of the black hero, it also makes Jesus' story more racially relevant for African Americans, which is an equally significant political gesture. On the meaning of images of a black Jesus in this period, see Kymberly N. Pinder, "Our Father, God; Our Brother, Christ: Or Are We Bastard Kin?" *African American Review* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 223-33.

<sup>58</sup> In the exhibition publication Hayden also credits Chappell's book with providing him with "these facts which have been most helpful in my painting the story." See Hayden, "The Ballad of John Henry in Paintings by Palmer Hayden," unpaginated.

several traits. Both were African American men born in the Virginias. Henry was in a relationship with a white woman, and Hayden's wife Miriam, who assisted him in the creation of this series, was also white. In a photograph that accompanied a 1947 review of the John Henry series (Fig. 4-21), we see that Hayden sports a similar haircut to Henry's. The author of that review, Nora Holt, likened Hayden's early employment as a circus roustabout to Henry's toil on the railroads, writing that Hayden was "driving tent stakes—strong and powerful just like John Henry."<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Hayden's work for Ringling Brothers and his service in the military gave him credentials as a laborer. More recently, Lowery Stokes Sims noticed "the artist's empathetic and vicarious participation in the sheer physicality of the action portrayed."<sup>60</sup> Hayden envisioned his personal hero, John Henry, in his own image, and the autobiographical overtones update Henry, bringing him into Hayden's era and making him not only a hero of the past but of the present as well.

Hayden saw a bit of himself in Henry, and in his appearance and in his deeds, Henry also resembled many other contemporary African American figures whose reputations loomed large in the 1940s. Among those to whom Henry was compared are boxers Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, world heavyweight champions from 1908 to 1915 and 1937 to 1949, respectively. Just as Henry had battled against a steam drill, on one level a symbol of white society, Johnson and Louis both had famous fights against white opponents, and the leap from steel-driving man to "real prize-fighter" was not very long.<sup>61</sup> As Lawrence Levine has explained, all three of these men were defined by the ways in which their individual displays

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<sup>59</sup> Holt, "Painter Palmer Hayden Symbolizes John Henry." Clipping found in Palmer C. Hayden papers, 1920-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Series 4 Box 2 Folder 6.

<sup>60</sup> Lowery Stokes Sims, *The Many Facets of Palmer Hayden* (New York: Just Above Midtown Gallery, 1977), unpaginated.

<sup>61</sup> Botkin, ed. *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the People*, 232.

of strength and courage gave hope and encouragement to their entire race during moments of great social strife and revolution.<sup>62</sup> Joe Louis appears with John Henry in James Daugherty's frontispiece (Fig. 4-22) for Irwin Shapiro's 1945 book *John Henry and the Double Jointed Steam-Drill*. It is possible that viewers of Hayden's Henry series perceived a linkage between Henry and both boxers, as well.<sup>63</sup>

In the frontispiece for Shapiro's book, Daugherty also surrounds Henry with more recently popularized black heroes: George Washington Carver, Paul Robeson, Marion Anderson, and Richard Wright. Paul Robeson is an obvious choice because he often performed the ballad and portrayed Henry in the stage adaptation of Roark Bradford's novel. For many, including Hayden, the twentieth-century hero of the stage was identified with the nineteenth-century hero of the hammer. Bradford enthused in *Collier's* that, "Paul Robeson is John Henry, and John Henry is Paul Robeson and you can't stop him!"<sup>64</sup> In common parlance, John Henry's name could be invoked whenever one spoke of someone who was, as Bradford described Henry, "among other things, the best."<sup>65</sup> According to Daugherty's image, John Henry's legacy begat some of the greatest African Americans of the early twentieth century from musician-performers Robeson and Anderson to scientist-educators like Carver, as well as such famed novelists as Wright. Henry is also flanked by a black soldier and a mother-and-child duo, representing the families separated by patriotic necessity during World War II, and bringing Daugherty's image of black heroism into the context of national political events as well.

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<sup>62</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 429-30.

<sup>63</sup> Green, "John Henry Depicted," 129.

<sup>64</sup> Roark Bradford, "Paul Robeson Is John Henry," *Collier's* 105 (13 January 1940): 45.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Booker T. Washington appears at the bottom of Daugherty's illustration, referencing one half of a highly charged dichotomy that Henry's story symbolized for many. Henry was compared not only to Washington, but also to his ideological rival in many respects, W.E.B. Du Bois. In his cooperation with the white leadership of the tunnel, Henry can be seen as an icon of dignity and patience, like Washington. Or, in his aggression and power he can be a symbol of action, as Du Bois' philosophy was commonly understood.<sup>66</sup> Alan Dundes offered his own insights on those polar interpretations:

It is possible, though by no means easily demonstrable, that the story of John Henry allays the stereotypic white fears of the "bad nigger," that is, the rough, tough, aggressive militant who refuses to "stay in his place." Rather, John Henry is the strong, loyal, gentle Uncle Tom worker, the ideal "good nigger," whose total strength is devoted to doing the white man's assigned job. John Henry, strong as he is, constitutes no threat or danger to the white captain. In fact, his very death in the performance of his "duty" provides a final proof that he is harmless.<sup>67</sup>

Marshall Fishwick countered that argument, explaining that Henry had more in common with Du Bois because he "refused to demur; he defied. He did not depend on cunning but strength to win his battles. And he died with his hammer in his hand."<sup>68</sup> Fishwick further saw a connection between the nineteenth-century hero (Henry) and the contemporary leader (Du Bois) because "both Du Bois and his followers insisted on seeing him as almost a mythical figure[, which] reflects, either consciously or unconsciously, aspects of the John Henry saga."<sup>69</sup> Thus, the John Henry story begs the question: Should the African American hero avoid confrontation while striving for success or agitate for rights and autonomy using every

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<sup>66</sup> Lawrence Levine describes the differences between Joe Louis and Jack Johnson in somewhat similar terms; Louis tended to abide by "society's official moral code" whereas Johnson flouted it. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 420.

<sup>67</sup> Alan Dundes, ed. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, 568-69.

<sup>68</sup> Marshall Fishwick, "Uncle Remus vs. John Henry: Folk Tension," *Western Folklore* 20, no. 2 (April 1961): 80.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84.

fiber of his being? Because Henry is ultimately both tragic in his death and triumphant in his spirit and potential afterlife in his legend (and in Hayden's series), he could represent either of these strategies, depending on the preferences or biases of the viewer.<sup>70</sup> The story, its legacy, and Hayden's paintings open these interpretative doors to contemporary 1940s viewers and subsequent viewers, as well.

Conceptual alliances between John Henry and twentieth-century African Americans including Hayden, Washington and Du Bois, and Louis and Johnson served to modernize the hero in the public's imagination. Such connections, while not explicit in Hayden's paintings could certainly be inferred. What is more evident from close visual scrutiny is that there is a contrast between the manner in which Hayden portrayed Henry and the appearance of other black figures within his compositions. Hayden was known to utilize a faux naïve figural style, in which foreheads, lips, skin color, and other features appear exaggerated and resemble derogatory caricatures of African American people. Some critics appreciated (or at least had no trouble with) this approach, while others derided it and took offense. Alain Locke praised Hayden's works in this manner as "vigorously naïve racial interpretations," but James Porter thought Hayden was aiming for satire and denounced his work as "ill-advised if not altogether tasteless....like one of those ludicrous billboards...[used] to advertise the blackface minstrels."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Brett Williams also refuses to choose between Washington and Du Bois in her assessment of Henry's significance. Brett Williams, *John Henry, a Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 67.

<sup>71</sup> Alain Locke, "Advance on the Art Front," *Opportunity* 17, no. 5 (May 1939): 136. James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (New York: Arno Press, 1969, reprint of original 1943 edition), 110. For the most recent examination of the meaning of caricature in Hayden's art, see Phoebe Wolfskill, "Caricature and the New Negro in the Work of Archibald Motley, Jr. and Palmer Hayden," *Art Bulletin* 91, no. 3 (September 2009): 348. See also, John Ott, "Labored Stereotypes: Palmer Hayden's *The Janitor Who Paints*," *American Art* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 102-15.

Hayden employed a version of this style in the John Henry series, which was appropriate because he was painting a folk subject. Deliberate use of dialect in the titles and stereotypical features anchors his scene in the 1870s of John Henry's time and provides a link to the past. However, Henry, in such works as *His Hammer in His Hand, A Man Ain't Nothin' But a Man, He Laid Down His Hammer and Cried*, and *Died wid His Hammer in His Hand* appears to be far more sensitively and naturalistically rendered than other African Americans within the series. The distance between the deceased Henry's features in the last work or in *A Man Ain't Nothin' But a Man* and those of his assistant during the contest in *John Henry on the Right, Steam Drill on the Left* is marked. With his mouth and eyes closed, and the color drained from his face in *Died wid His Hammer in His Hand*, Henry appears more like that "natural man" he claimed to be, whereas his assistant bears the marks of caricature: round cheeks, large white teeth, and fat red lips. In *John Henry on the Right, Steam Drill on the Left*, Henry's assistant almost guffaws with delight while Henry does his work. While Hayden's treatment of Henry is somewhat varied within the series, he does set Henry apart at particularly heroic moments (contest, death, afterlife) from other characters in the scenes, allowing the viewer to understand Henry as a figure capable of transcending racism and oppression.

It is clear from these associations between John Henry and various twentieth-century black leaders, artists, entertainers, and athletes that the steel-driving man was a black hero. He represented excellence in the African American community. He "symbolized the strength, dignity, and courage many Negroes were able to manifest in spite of their confined situation."<sup>72</sup> Yet, we must not allow that racial interpretation of his heroism to stunt the

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<sup>72</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 400.



development of a wider view of Henry's significance. Du Bois famously explained the struggle of the state of "double consciousness" in which African Americans experience their blackness and their nationality as "two warring ideals in one dark body."<sup>73</sup> Mary Ann Calo has shown how art criticism of the interwar period often reinforced that separatism, marginalizing so-called "Negro art" and excluding it from the broader classification of "American art."<sup>74</sup> Even in recent years, historians often have limited themselves to contextualizing work by African Americans in terms of race when the added dimension of nationality would yield far greater understanding.

In spite of the biased criticism they often received, African American thinkers, writers, and artists in the 1930s and 1940s strove to contribute to the developing national culture with their work. Alain Locke, who had advocated for racially specific art in the 1920s, changed his mind. As Phoebe Wolfskill has explained, "by the 1930s, [Locke] had shifted his focus from racial uniqueness to the importance of black participation in a larger national culture."<sup>75</sup> The idea of a "black aesthetic," so pervasive in the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and early 1930s, had developed into an impulse on the part of African American artists to emphasize their Americanness in their work in new ways. For some the impetus for this new nationalism came from the ideals of the Communist Popular Front of the late 1930s, which abhorred racial discrimination. For others celebrating Americanism was about promoting,

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<sup>73</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage, 1990, reprint of the 1903 edition), 8.

<sup>74</sup> See Mary Ann Calo, *Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920-40* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), *passim*.

<sup>75</sup> Wolfskill, "Caricature and the New Negro in the Work of Archibald Motley, Jr. and Palmer Hayden," 349.

expanding, and exercising the benefits of democracy and the aspirations of equal civil rights against a backdrop of right wing oppression around the globe.<sup>76</sup>

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, in his John Henry series, Hayden expressed both the black and the American sides of his hero. Hayden further tried to reconcile the two sides in order to create a national hero who was also a proud, black historical figure. Doing so was a means of negating the cultural separatism that Hayden felt was nonsensical, while not obliterating the uniqueness of black culture. Having been born in America to American parents, Hayden had always felt a profound connection to his nation. He had served his country during World War I, albeit as part of the segregated U.S. Army. Hayden's contributions to a self-consciously "American art" were somewhat belated within his career (he was 54 when he began the John Henry series) and in the context of the art world, as the American Scene movement with its focus on national traditions and folklore reached its apex in the 1930s. Yet, historically, for Hayden to begin painting an icon of Americana in 1944 was still timely. American patriotism remained at high volume during the last years of World War II. Moreover, among African American artists the construction of a new national history that was inclusive of blacks remained central. Jacob Lawrence completed various series in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s including *The Life of Frederick Douglass* (1939), *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (1940), *The Migration of the Negro* (1941), *The Life of John Brown* (1941), and *Struggle...From the History of the American People* (1955-56). Both Hayden in his John Henry series and Lawrence in his various narrative sequences of paintings sought to visualize African Americans' contributions to the creation of American democracy.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Dudley Randall, "The Black Aesthetic in the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed., Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 224-29.

<sup>77</sup> Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois, *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), passim.

Though he came to the practice of painting African American life and folklore somewhat late in his career, after successes with marine paintings, Harmon Foundation awards, study in Paris, and work on the WPA, Hayden was clear in the motivations for his shift in subject matter. He believed staunchly in the history of the “Negro race in the United States,” a community which developed from slavery and should be seen as a contributor throughout American history. He did not like the term “black” because he felt the word was stripped of its historical specificity, and he felt virtually no ties to Africa because, as he said, “I feel that I came from America and my grandparents were slaves, and I don’t know how much contact we had with Africa.”<sup>78</sup> Hayden’s mobilization of folklore in the John Henry series was the best way for him to assert the “Negro” (as he preferred) presence in American art. He saw flaws in the way white artists portrayed African American subjects in art: “I don’t like the way white painters do it. I don’t think they see exactly all of the differences that there are in the Negro or Black people. You know, some of the painters like [Thomas Hart] Benton ... do Negroes and they all looked the same.”<sup>79</sup> As Benton had done with folkloric subjects like *The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley* (1934) and with nationalist series like *America Today* (1930-31), which were easily accepted as estimations of America’s worth and traditions, Hayden hoped to do in his John Henry series. However, as an African American artist, making a contribution to a national discourse was a challenging prospect.

Hayden’s nationalism figures into his works in both obvious and subtle ways. Every painting in Hayden’s John Henry series employs the patriotic colors red, white, and blue. Henry almost always wears some combination of those three hues, as do his mother, his woman, and his foreman. Henry wears red, white, and blue when he is at work, showing that

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<sup>78</sup> Adams, Billops, and Hatch, “Palmer Hayden, Painter, May 14, 1972,” 97-98.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

he is laboring for America. The only exceptions to this uniform are when he is a child dressed in gold and in *Where'd You Git Them High Top Shoes*, in which he looks like he is off duty and out on the town in his civilian clothes. Hayden's use of red, white, and blue to mark an individual, in this case a black, working class man, whose citizenship was second class, recalls the manner in which George Caleb Bingham identified Missouri riverboat workers in such works as *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846) as participants in the making of America by dressing them in a patriotic palette.

In the 1947 Argent Galleries brochure, Hayden attributed a layer of significance to his works that went beyond Henry and his deeds. He wrote that his "epic also...dramatizes the beginning of the movement of the Negro from agricultural into industrial labor, and the practical use of machinery in place of hand labor in the development of industrial America."<sup>80</sup> This rather dispassionate statement of facts is curious given the fact that typically Henry is sung and talked about with great emotion and hyperbolic praise. (It also resembles the kind of self-assured verbiage that Benton might use to describe one of his *America Today* panels.) It is also surprising that Hayden celebrates the replacement of manual labor with machines in this passage, because an enormous part of Henry's valor lies in his opposition to that very occurrence. As Norm Cohen has explained,

John Henry is the hero representing resistance to technological innovations that threaten unemployment to those with the traditional manual skills. And since the lowest manual laborers were the blacks, the industrial revolution threatened them more than any other class. John Henry is therefore a black hero, the pride of his fellow Afro-Americans, who resists another advance in white domination.<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, according to H. Nigel Thomas, Henry's triumph over "white intelligence and capitalist indifference" fulfilled the African American community's need for "mythic figures

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<sup>80</sup> Hayden, "The Ballad of John Henry in Paintings by Palmer Hayden," unpaginated.

<sup>81</sup> Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 74.

to accomplish for them what they in actuality were not permitted to do—defend themselves and their loved ones against indignity.”<sup>82</sup> On another painter’s canvas, Henry could have been a far more charged and contentious anti-capitalist, racial hero. For Hayden to downplay Henry’s function as a black resister to technological revolution led by white Americans allows viewers to see him as complicit in the advancement of history. Hayden’s Henry is therefore a participant in the making of modern America, not a hinderance. He is not an antiquated relic of the past century, but instead deserves to be counted among the nation’s contemporary heroes. In this way Hayden positioned his John Henry series to appeal to a majority of Americans, and to the national history of labor and industry, not simply to rural, black folklore.

To create John Henry, the American hero, Hayden had to navigate carefully the racial divide within the legend. Throughout the series, we see moments of interracial collaboration and an overall peaceful coexistence among blacks and whites. In *John Henry on the Right, Steam Drill on the Left* there is a clear division between Henry and his assistant and the two white workers who operate the steam drill, but this image does not depict a racial conflict and in the crowd of onlookers, the races congenially intermingle. In *Died wid His Hammer in His Hand* and *There Lies that Steel Drivin’ Man*, the congregations are also racially diverse as everyone in the area flocks to witness and pay their respects for the deceased, including his competitors from the previous image. The fact that John Henry and his woman are of different races might offend those who saw interracial relationships as abhorrent miscegenation. However, for Hayden, who was also part of an interracial couple, this likely element of the Henry legend embodied the cooperation and racial harmony that befits a national hero. In

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<sup>82</sup> H. Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 57.

*John Henry Was the Best in the Land*, the hero impresses a diverse population, black and white, young and old, wealthy and working class, all of whom are amazed at his performance. In the right background we see the most distinguished member of the audience, a woman in a covered carriage who wears a fur-trimmed coat and a gold crown and observes the scene with delight. In Hayden's works Henry is a hero to all, and the paintings model for viewers the way to appreciate him as an American hero.

Hayden's portrayal of black and white supporters of John Henry is unique among depictions of African American heroism of this era. More commonly artists, like Aaron Douglas in such images as *Harriet Tubman* (discussed in Chapter Five), would show African American heroic figures with their African American devotees. Even though Tubman was admired by many Americans of diverse racial backgrounds, Douglas highlights her as a black hero in order to promote her status within the African American community. An image like Douglas' does not preclude Tubman from being appreciated by people outside of the African American community, but such an occurrence is not inscribed on the canvas. The John Henry story provided Hayden with the opportunity to create a new conception of black heroism, one that is overtly inclusive and national. In 1927 Guy B. Johnson implored painters, sculptors, poets, and playwrights to take up the subject of John Henry in their work, asserting that John Henry "deserves a very high rank, not only in Negro folklore, but in American folklore in general."<sup>83</sup> Twenty years later it was Palmer Hayden, more than any other visual artist, who heeded that call.

From the first time Hayden exhibited his John Henry series in 1947 until his death in 1973, he pursued a national forum and a national importance for these works. He sought

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<sup>83</sup> Guy B. Johnson, "John Henry: A Negro Legend," in *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea*, ed. Charles S. Johnson (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971, reprint of the 1927 edition), 47.

(albeit unsuccessfully) to place the entire series in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>84</sup> By demonstrating on canvas that John Henry was a strong, capable African American man who actually worked in the American railroad industry in the nineteenth century, Palmer Hayden paid tribute to a personal, regional, racial, and national hero. The thoroughness of his research and the comprehensive nature of his series reveal Henry to be a vital individual and a worthy American icon. He is not simply the “black Paul Bunyan,” but is a well-rounded figure in his own right. While the circumstances of his existence are debated vigorously to this day, and historians might never agree whether he should be considered a historical or mythical folkloric character, for Hayden in the 1940s Henry was a reality, and the artist did his part to ensure the security of Henry’s place in American visual culture and in the annals of American heroism.

Hayden positioned Henry as an American hero who, by virtue of his race, participated in the hard labor that ushered in the industrial age. Hayden’s Henry is not a pre-modern, nostalgic relic because his struggle manifested in the 1940s as the struggle for racial equality. Henry’s stature reminds viewers of contemporary African Americans who are working toward that goal in the arts, in the military, and in popular culture. In the 1930s and 1940s, Americans of varying racial or ethnic backgrounds understood John Henry as a hero because he embodied the possibility of greatness for which all “common men” yearn.

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<sup>84</sup> Gordon, *Echoes of Our Past: The Narrative Artistry of Palmer C. Hayden*, 25.

## Chapter Five: The Burdens of Womanhood: American Heroines of the 1930s and 1940s

The first four chapters of this dissertation have concerned male heroes, but artists during the 1930s and 1940s also mobilized historical, contemporary, and fictional women to serve as the symbolic saviors of families, communities, and national interests. Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936, Fig. 5-1) functioned as the epitome of maternal sacrifice, reinforcing the image of the agrarian American family as it was being devastated during the Great Depression. Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter* (1943, Fig. 5-2) distilled the thousands of women working in industry during World War II into one legendary character on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Aaron Douglas designed his mural, *Harriet Tubman* (1931, Fig. 5-3), to inspire the women of Bennett College to contribute to the struggle for equal civil rights during the New Negro era. This chapter looks at these three disparate iconic figures from the period in an effort to determine if they are heroic, and if so, how and why. The heroism of the women in these works is problematic due to the restricted nature of women's status as cultural leaders in the United States. Searching for heroic female figures is challenging, therefore, and assessing their significance is even more so.

This chapter returns to issues of labor, agriculture, and race, which were central to the discussions of male heroes in the second, third, and fourth chapters.<sup>1</sup> These images are grouped together, in deviation from the format of the other chapters as case studies of a single artist's work, not because they are unworthy of such sustained art historical attention.

Considering these distinct approaches to the creation of heroic female characters together

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<sup>1</sup> The images discussed in this chapter are not organized in the same thematic sequence as the previous chapters. Instead, their order conforms to the trajectory of my argument about the problems at the core of heroic images of women in this period.



allows us to understand some of the limitations, contradictions, and obstacles that complicate our understanding of women as national symbols in the 1930s and 1940s.

One such obstacle to women's symbolic status was the disorganization of the women's movement itself. After winning suffrage with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, the women's movement divided into factions. Conflicts between the League of Women Voters and the National Woman's Party over such issues as the Equal Rights Amendment and the role of protective legislation in the path to gender equality undermined any coherent feminist agenda.<sup>2</sup> This lack of focus was compounded by such pressing cultural crises as economic depression, global war, and racism, exigencies that highlighted rather than masked the differences in women's experiences based on economic, social, and racial identifiers. Women no longer acted or voted as a "monolithic 'bloc'" in the sphere of politics.<sup>3</sup> No central definition of gender emancipation existed and no single set of political priorities could be established and worked toward. Consequently, no dominant view of women's ideal heroic traits could be created from the perspective of the women's movement. Thus, the popular American heroine of this period is a paradox; she is continually mobilized to serve the needs of other populations—her class, her nation, her race—while her own demands for gender equality are repeatedly undermined and disregarded.

Historians Lois Scharf and Joan Jensen have called the period between the two world wars the "decades of discontent" in terms of women's social and political status and the progress of the feminist agenda. They have explained,

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<sup>2</sup> William H. Chafe, "World War II as a Pivotal Experience for American Women," in *Women and War: The Changing Status of American Women from the 1930s to the 1950s*, eds. Maria Diedrich and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung (New York: Berg, 1990), 29.

<sup>3</sup> William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 28 and *passim*.

[Discontent arose] not because women as individuals were failures during that time. Never before had so many individual women accomplished so much... There was discontent because of the great contradictions that clashed in the background of the historical stage upon which these women performed so brilliantly.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, women were exercising their newly acquired voting rights, entering the workforce in record numbers, and defining their own personal destinies in unprecedented measure. Yet, the heroic American woman as an ideal appeared in contexts that reflected the social limitations of her gender and often reinforced retrograde stereotypes with which later generations of feminists would grapple. Whereas the images discussed below are not feminist images, they nevertheless represent various attempts to depict, applaud, and promote women's heroic efforts during crises. They also show some of the ways in which women's efforts were hindered and circumscribed, which left their agency in American society stunted. Indeed, the great contradictions that Scharf and Jensen lament are embedded in Lange's, Rockwell's, and Douglas' imagery.

### **Migrant Mother**

Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* does not depict a victorious individual, but one whose trials are ongoing. The 1936 photograph captures a "hungry and desperate" woman, Florence Thompson, whose identity went unrecorded until an Associated Press reporter rediscovered her in 1978.<sup>5</sup> Lange met Thompson as she visited California migrant farm

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<sup>4</sup> Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, eds., *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothea Lange, "The Assignment I'll Never Forget: *Migrant Mother*," *Popular Photography* 46, no. 2 (February 1960): 42 and 126. "Can't Get a Penny: Famed Photo's Subject Feels She's Exploited," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 November 1978. In this article, Thompson complains that she never received recognition or compensation for the use of her image. Her bitterness threatens to undercut the lasting heroism of the image. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 62.

workers' camps under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration (RA), which would become the Farm Securities Administration (FSA) in December 1936. Lange was one of the "sociologists with cameras," as Ansel Adams termed them.<sup>6</sup> Her charge was to investigate and capture the conditions of the rural poor in order to gain and legitimize government assistance for those populations.<sup>7</sup>

In February of 1936, Lange had finished a winter's worth of photography work and was driving home when she "barely saw a crude sign" pointing toward a pea picker's camp. She recalled driving past and ignoring it for twenty miles before turning back. When she arrived at the camp, Lange photographed the first family she came across. Its matriarch, a 32-year-old mother of seven, had sold her tires for food.<sup>8</sup> Lange's series of five photographs of the woman (with as many as four of her children) traces the progression of the encounter between photographer and subject.<sup>9</sup> As Lange shot, she moved closer and closer to Thompson and her family, with the series culminating in the close-range, epic cluster of figures we recognize as an emblem of the age. The fact that Lange did not ask for or record the woman's identity when she met her shows that this photograph was intended to represent the hardships of not one family or one woman, but those of the vast population of Dust Bowl victims among whom Lange had traveled and worked; anonymity was typical of FSA photographs' subjects.

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<sup>6</sup> Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy C. Wood, *In This Proud Land: America, 1935-1943, as Seen in the FSA Photographs* (New York: Galahad Books, 1973), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Lange's official FSA title was "photographer-investigator," a title not given to any other photographer. Karin E. Becker, *Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 53.

<sup>8</sup> Lange, "The Assignment I'll Never Forget: *Migrant Mother*," 42 and 126.

<sup>9</sup> James Curtis explains that Lange actually took six photographs in this session, but only submitted five to the FSA. He speculates that she withheld the first image she took because it was intended as a test shot, and consequently was a "chaotic" composition. Scholars often are unaware of or forget to acknowledge the sixth image. I acknowledge it here, but base the rest of my discussion of the series on the five images that Lange sent to the FSA. See James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 49-50.

From the start, *Migrant Mother* was a broad statement about the conditions that displaced farm families faced during the Great Depression.<sup>10</sup> After this exposure, Lange recalled being satisfied with her work at the migrant camp, and not feeling any need to continue shooting, because she knew she “had recorded the essence of [her] assignment.”<sup>11</sup>

Many viewers resist the notion that *Migrant Mother* is heroic, because it bears witness to a moment of hardship and tragedy. However, accounts of the photograph from 1936 to the present consistently comment on the ubiquity of the image and the grand emotional impact that it has on viewers. Roy Stryker, head of the FSA, called the photograph “*the picture of Farm Security*” and the woman it depicts “immortal.”<sup>12</sup> More recently, Wendy Kozol called the mother and her facial features heroic.<sup>13</sup> *Migrant Mother* embodies the concept of the noble poor, a person whose subsistence through poverty makes her worthy of both admiration and sympathy.<sup>14</sup> As Andrea Fisher argued, *Migrant Mother* “incite[s] our shared humanity” and emblemizes the “dogged heroism of those surviving at the lowest level.”<sup>15</sup> Such attention and acclaim, both emphatic and long lasting, confirms what Lange felt she had achieved when she took the photograph. Yet for all of its widespread appeal, *Migrant Mother* remains a complicated image, fraught with tensions and contradictions, surface meaning and subtexts. To understand *Migrant Mother* we must examine the qualities of the heroine depicted, the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>11</sup> Lange, “The Assignment I’ll Never Forget: *Migrant Mother*,” 126.

<sup>12</sup> Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land: America, 1935-1943, as Seen in the FSA Photographs*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Wendy Kozol, “Madonnas of the Fields: Photography, Gender, and 1930s Farm Relief,” *Genders* 2 (Summer 1988): 20.

<sup>14</sup> Such a reaction to Lange’s photograph parallels the “demand...for empathic response to the inner humanity of the subjects” that Alan Trachtenberg observed in Lewis Hine’s social activist photography. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 205.

<sup>15</sup> Andrea Fisher, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Women: Women Photographers for the US Government, 1935 to 1944* (New York: Pandora Press, 1987), 151 and 153.

reasons that such qualities were embraced so completely in the 1930s, and investigate how this particular brand of heroine compares with women's experiences during the Great Depression.

As noted above, the heroine of *Migrant Mother* is not yet (or assuredly) triumphant over her tribulations, yet she is courageous. As Stryker said, "She has all of the suffering of mankind in her but all of the perseverance too. A restraint and a strange courage."<sup>16</sup> She does not stand in defiance of her unseen foes of poverty, hunger, and drought. Rather, she huddles under a meager shelter, clutching her infant and supporting two other children. Her posture might be read as weak or fearful, and indeed in the first photograph in the series (Fig. 5-4), the woman recoils under her tent flaps as if startled by or leery of Lange's presence. Whereas her pose is awkward in the first photograph, by the fifth, final, and most famous image, her fear or unease has dissipated somewhat. As Lange moved slowly toward the mother, she gave the mother directions as to how to comport herself and allowed the woman to acclimate to the presence of a photographer.<sup>17</sup> In that last frame, the mother's worry is traced in the lines on her face and in her expression. The way her right hand tugs at the skin on her jaw conveys the sense of desperation. Still, the mother emits a sense of strength; her outward gaze communicates her desire to persevere. The contrast between the mother's gaze and the manner in which her children hide their faces in her neck dramatizes the mother's fortitude. Those children and the infant who sleeps peacefully in the protective cradle of the mother's arms, depend completely upon their mother; she is their leader, their savior, and their

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<sup>16</sup> Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land: America, 1935-1943, as Seen in the FSA Photographs*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> In my description of the first and fifth (final) images, I am relying on the trajectory of the series of five images that Lange submitted to the FSA. As noted above, there was an additional photograph, which Lange took first but which did not become part of the official FSA series. See Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*, 49-50.

protector within this image. Whereas the children are unable or unwilling to deal with the harsh reality of their life at this moment, their mother stares into the distance, as if contemplating and planning their survival.

Despite Lange's account of *Migrant Mother's* serendipitous creation, her artistry plays an integral part in making the photograph such a compelling visual articulation of female heroism. Because Lange took this photograph at such close range, the image contains a multitude of textures and details. From the hair to the wrinkled skin to the weaves of the rugged garments and the gingham plaid of the mother's blouse, the viewer can lose herself in the subtleties of pattern and tonal variation. Tracing creases in fabric and the complexities of arms, fingers, and necks consumes the viewer and demands prolonged attention. Additionally, as Linda Morris explained, Lange's choice of camera contributed to the heroicization of her subjects. Using a Rolleiflex camera, which she held at waist level, Lange's lens "literally 'looked up' at the people she photographed." Morris continued, "As she photographed people, she stood before them in a position of humility—her head bowed, with no intrusive gaze focused upon them."<sup>18</sup> This is surely why *Migrant Mother*, a photograph of a seated woman, has such authority over the viewer. The woman fills the picture plane; leaning forward, she has an uncommon, forceful, almost towering presence.

Lange carefully posed the sitters in *Migrant Mother* to achieve the heroic figural grouping. She directed the mother and her children into the canonical triangular composition that reinforces the hieratic importance of the central figure.<sup>19</sup> Both the title and the image communicate the concept that the Migrant Mother is the main subject, and her children are her props, signifying her status and occupation in life. Like so many other depictions of

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<sup>18</sup> Linda A. Morris, "A Woman of Our Generation," in *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life*, ed. Elizabeth Partridge (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 22.

<sup>19</sup> Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*, 49.

mothers throughout art history, including the goddess Pax (also recognized to be Tellus Mater or Mother Earth) who cares for two infants in the *Allegory of Peace* panel from the Ara Pacis (13-9 BCE, Fig. 5-5), Raphael's *Madonna del Granduca* (1505-06, Fig. 5-6), and Lewis Hine's *A Madonna of the Tenements* (c. 1906-17, Fig. 5-7), Lange designed the Migrant Mother to be someone viewers can revere. By crowding her with offspring, the photograph emphasizes her maternal gifts, despite the obvious challenges of her situation. Even though feeding, clothing, and sheltering her family must be difficult, the Migrant Mother is, as Judith Fryer Davidov writes, "a visual and literal sign of nurturance and sustenance."<sup>20</sup> On a fundamental level, *Migrant Mother* is a reverberation of one of the oldest and most recognizable tropes in art history, and a "paean to enduring motherhood."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, this photograph is often dubbed *Migrant Madonna*.<sup>22</sup>

In another Depression-era photograph, *Woman of the High Plains, Texas Panhandle* (1938, Fig. 5-8), Lange again captured the most dire emotional and physical consequences of the era. A single, gaunt figure wearing a frayed sack dress stands before a distant dried-out field. Though she is tall and dominates the picture plane, her gestures are those of lamentation and grief. *Woman of the High Plains* lacks any traces of motherhood or domesticity; the woman is isolated in the composition. She reacts as though mistakes have already been made and appears to have lost the will to continue her struggle. Indeed, the full title of this photograph includes a fatalistic quote attributed to the woman, "If You Die, You're Dead, That's All." In contrast, *Migrant Mother*, with her penetrating stare and accompanied by her reasons for persisting (her children), retains a sense of hope and possibility for the future. She

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Fryer Davidov, *Women's Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 238.

<sup>21</sup> Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 30.

<sup>22</sup> Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*, 55.

is bearing her burdens, doing her duty, and filling a vital role by raising the next generation of Americans, the future after the Great Depression.

The significance of *Migrant Mother* lies not only in what it shows, but also in what it omits. As in other New Deal public art, *Migrant Mother* pays tribute to the domestic, passive mother, not the working woman.<sup>23</sup> Though the number of married women who worked reached unprecedented heights in the 1930s because of financial need, as male workers' wages were reduced and jobs were eliminated, overwhelmingly, Americans believed that women were best suited to roles as homemakers and mothers. The financial need for women to work to support their ailing families aroused a tremendous sense of anxiety about any increase in women's roles as outside-the-home providers. Eleanor Roosevelt protested: "If a woman wants to work and keep her home, let me beg you, Mr. Man, to help her and not hold her back," though both men and women feared the familial repercussions of working women.<sup>24</sup> Those who worked during the 1930s were accused of neglecting their domestic responsibilities. Perhaps even worse, such working women were criticized for taking jobs away from capable men, thereby undermining men's roles as patriarchal providers.<sup>25</sup> As Barbara Melosh has explained, "female independence threatened an embattled masculinity."<sup>26</sup> Americans preferred to think of women as homemakers during the Depression, even when the family was destitute, because such an image offered reassurance that the economic and environmental crisis had not totally disrupted the structure of the American family.

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<sup>23</sup> Barbara Melosh, "Manly Work: Public Art and Masculinity in Depression America," in *Gender and American History since 1890*, ed. Barbara Melosh (New York: Routledge, 1993), 178.

<sup>24</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *It's Up to the Women* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1933), 150.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 27.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 30.



The alterations painter Ward Lockwood made to his mural *Opening the West* for the Post Office Department Building (now Federal Building) in Washington, DC (1937) exemplify the preference for images of traditional nurturing motherhood over active working women. In the sketch for this mural (Fig. 5-9), Lockwood placed a strong pioneer woman at center swinging an ax, but in the completed image (Fig. 5-10), the woman has donned her bonnet and meekly trails after her protective husband. Another of Lockwood's murals in the same building, *Settling the West* (Fig. 5-11), anchors a Raphaelesque Madonna in the foreground as no fewer than eight men (and a chicken) busy themselves around her. (The only figure that is as restful as this cherished mother is the Native American person whose back is turned toward the viewer in the lower right corner, an element that carries cultural importance too weighty to discuss here.)<sup>27</sup> Though Lockwood's subject matter is ostensibly the pioneer past, contemporary viewers would have had no trouble seeing such images as correlative to 1930s rural families. Contemporary viewers would have associated Lockwood's image particularly with migrant farm workers who had been driven west by dust storms, such as those Lange found at the pea picker's camp. Like Lockwood's images, Lange's *Migrant Mother* falls in line with and heroizes the majority sentiment in favor of women's traditional and stabilizing domestic roles in the Great Depression.

This does not mean, however, that Lange and other photographers and artists never depicted active, working women. Indeed, Lange took photographs of Depression-era women that do not carry any visual signifiers of those women's roles as wives or mothers. In *Rural Rehabilitation Client, Tulare County, California* (1938, Fig. 5-12) a woman grins, squints into the sun, and leans confidently on a yard post. Wearing utilitarian coveralls, this woman appears to be capable of working on and tending to her own property. Her expression, pose,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 45-47.

and setting articulate her independence and confidence. Yet, in the 1930s such an image was unfit for the sort of universal, heroic status that *Migrant Mother* achieved because it does not correspond to the dominant conception of motherhood and domesticity that most Americans expected from women of the era. Interestingly, the caption tells us that she is a wife and the mother of eleven children, filling the blanks left by the image and rendering her more culturally acceptable and relatable. Though she was a wife and mother in reality, the woman who appears in the photograph, *Rural Rehabilitation Client*, is not a socially reaffirming maternal figure in the manner of *Migrant Mother*. Part of *Migrant Mother*'s strength as an heroic image is that she did not overstep the boundaries of her femininity and role as a caretaker for her children.<sup>28</sup> Even though she is homeless, and living in a tent, the Migrant Mother still epitomizes motherhood. She provides extraordinary emotional support for her children and patiently waits for assistance.

The provider of the Migrant Mother's assistance is unseen, but implied by her outward, searching gaze. Though there is no internal photographic evidence of a husband or father, viewers might imagine such a masculine and paternal presence as the subject of Migrant Mother's stare. To portray an unemployed father would undermine any sense of hope in the image, but his invisibility within the picture renders it possible to assume he is off working or at least looking for work. Barbara Melosh has shown how "public art bracketed the shame of unemployment by putting it out of sight." Normally, in painting and sculpture, Melosh explains, unemployment would be replaced by the more optimistic and "enduring ideal of manly labor."<sup>29</sup> Such an image was not available to Lange on that afternoon in the pea picker's camp, but her photograph cleverly circumvents the reality of unemployment

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<sup>28</sup> Kozol, "Madonnas of the Fields: Photography, Gender, and 1930s Farm Relief," 8-9.

<sup>29</sup> Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater*, 96.

nonetheless by allowing for the possibility of an off-camera presence of help. What is more, if a viewer chooses to read the mother and brood as abandoned by their husband and father, a savior in the form New Deal relief programs can fill that void.

The implicit existence of the redeeming benevolent assistance is crucial to the optimism of the image. In fact, as noted above, Lange designed this photograph to garner the support and aid that the Migrant Mother and her family needs. When two of Lange's *Migrant Mother* photographs appeared in the March 10, 1936 issue of *The San Francisco News* under the headline "Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squalor," they embodied sorrow and tragedy. This story was a cry for help and the photographs communicated the urgency. The next day the paper printed the version of *Migrant Mother* that was about to become canonical, and the headline wondered, "What Does the 'New Deal' Mean To This Mother and Her Children?" As if in response, the story below reported that, "1800 Ragged Harvesters Get First Square Meal." The answer was, unequivocally, that if the father and husband was in crisis, the federal government would step in as the masculine, paternalistic force that would rescue the Migrant Mother and her family. This was Lange's goal as a government photographer: to demonstrate through images that the poor people she encountered in such camps deserved the assistance that the American people and its leaders could provide through New Deal relief programs.

*Migrant Mother* encodes the social pressure on women in the 1930s to function as mothers—icons of the traditional family. Lange's photograph constructs the Migrant Mother as a Madonna to her brood. She epitomizes the notion of the noble poor, a meaning that was vital to the work of FSA photography as its primary mission was to elicit sympathy from the

public and from political leaders in order to justify New Deal relief programs.<sup>30</sup> The image allows viewers to believe that the mother is destitute through no fault of her own and does everything in her power to care for her children. She is not taking a job from a man or aspiring to what her contemporaries would have considered to be a masculine social status. According to Lange's photograph, even in a crisis the Migrant Mother contents herself to care for her children in what meager domestic setting they had, and to be cared for by the government. Ultimately, the Migrant Mother is heroic because she does not do anything. She waits patiently, and therefore symbolizes the unrelenting endurance of the farm family during a crisis that threatened to disrupt the existence of such a significant social unit.

*Migrant Mother* is a photograph of an ambivalent heroine—one who is both vulnerable and brave. She is caught in the middle of a survival story and the American audience for *Migrant Mother* took great satisfaction in pitying and admiring her. As the nation recovered from the Great Depression and victory over the Dust Bowl was won, *Migrant Mother*'s heroism only intensified; Americans could see the woman in this photograph as a victor and cite her hardships among the many things that the nation conquered in the 1930s.

### **Rosie the Riveter**

As Andrea Fisher has written, "To represent the 'reality' of the government's benevolence towards its stricken poor, it called forth the fiction of woman as mother. To articulate the 'truth' of a united nation returning to prosperity, it called forth the positive image of the energetic young girl."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as the United States entered World War II,

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<sup>30</sup> This pattern held true in other RA/FSA photography as well. See Kozol, "Madonnas of the Fields: Photography, Gender, and 1930s Farm Relief," 1-23.

<sup>31</sup> Fisher, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Women: Women Photographers for the US Government, 1935 to 1944*, 137.

images such as Lange's *Migrant Mother* gave way to a new sort of heroine. Rosie the Riveter, a cultural icon born in the popular sphere who took visual form in government propaganda and in the popular press, recast the heroic American woman by substituting labor in a factory for the labor of motherhood. Rosie typically wore the garb appropriate to her industrial job and possessed the strength, stamina, and energy necessary to the war effort.

Historically, Rosie the Riveter represented the multitudes of American women who filled jobs left vacant when American soldiers went abroad to fight in World War II. Often, these women are remembered for their work in heavy industry, manufacturing planes and weapons for the war effort. Many women also worked in offices and in lighter industries to fulfill vacancies and augment their family income. Though Wendy the Welder and other characters with less alliterative names joined Rosie in this nationalistic effort, Rosie the Riveter was the overarching moniker used to identify women laborers during World War II, regardless of their actual occupation. These women were expected to contribute to the nation's productivity and economy during the war with the understanding that they held their jobs, according to common parlance, only "for the duration."<sup>32</sup>

Rosie the Riveter made her debut in a 1942 song written by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb and recorded by the The Four Vagabonds.<sup>33</sup> Announcing that "She's making history, working for victory" and "There's something true about, red, white, and blue about," the song's jaunty tune set the tone for countless magazine and newspaper articles and photographs, posters and advertisements, and a film that encouraged and lauded the service of

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<sup>32</sup> For the best sources on the history of women's labor during World War II, see Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). See also Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 43.

Rosies around the country. While we in the twenty-first century typically think of J. Howard Miller's *We Can Do It!* poster for the Westinghouse War Production Co-ordinating Committee (1942, Fig. 5-13) as the iconic image associated with Rosie's legend, James Kimble and Lester Olson have argued that the Westinghouse poster had a very limited audience in the 1940s; it was seen only by the workers at Westinghouse factories.<sup>34</sup> Thus, it was Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* cover of May 29, 1943 (Fig. 5-14) that established Rosie's visual iconography.

Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter* features a muscular, redheaded woman dressed in overalls. She epitomizes patriotism, sitting before an undulating American flag. The red, white, and blue of the stars and stripes echo in the red of her hair and socks, the blue of her garments, and the white of her skin. In Rosie's lap lies a rivet gun, which she could use to fasten the exterior shells of airplanes at her aviation plant job. Rosie sits tall and erect atop a stone pedestal, and fills the composition with her presence. Her feet rest on a copy of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, symbolically trampling the ideals of the Nazi leader. Adorning her overalls are pins for blood donation, victory, and excellence in war production, showing that she is part of a collective American effort. Rosie's nonchalant gaze dismisses any sense of fear, stress, or pressure she might have felt due to her new wartime occupation. Rockwell's Rosie is a strong, patriotic worker who exudes confidence.

As a widely popular illustrator for the *Saturday Evening Post* from 1916 to 1963, Norman Rockwell had both the platform and the artistic license to create a heroic model for the women of World War II. His magazine covers established a visual library of wholesome American types, filled with prosperity and patriotism. Rockwell demonstrated his ability to be

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<sup>34</sup> James J. Kimble and Lester C. Olson, "Visual Rhetoric Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 535-36.

sincere and serious in *The Four Freedoms* series (Figs. 5-15, 5-16, 5-17, 5-18), showing Americans liberated from want and fear and enjoying their rights to free speech and worship. Rockwell was also an adept humorist; he flexed his funny muscle in images of Willie Gillis, a boy-ish soldier who came of age during the war and entertained audiences as he was tempted by girls and taunted by superior officers (Figs. 5-19 and 5-20). Rockwell professed that he was making images of America at its best, remembering,

I unconsciously decided that, even if it wasn't an ideal world, it should be and so [I] painted only the ideal aspects of it—pictures in which there were no drunken slatterns or self-centered mothers, in which on the contrary, there were only Foxy Grandpas who played baseball with the kids and boys fished from logs and got up circuses in the back yard. If there was sadness in this created world of mine, it was a pleasant sadness. If there were problems, they were humorous problems. The people in my pictures aren't mentally ill or deformed. The situations they get into are commonplace, everyday situations, not the agonizing crises and tangles of life.<sup>35</sup>

However, idealization is never so simple, and when it came to *Rosie the Riveter*, Rockwell's icon of working women in World War II, he mobilized a complex set of props, visual sources, and cultural anxieties. What resulted is a humorous image of patriotic women workers that derives from and sends mixed messages about the status of women both during and after the war.<sup>36</sup>

One of the ways in which Rockwell pokes fun at the Rosie character is by appropriating the visual language of magazine advertisements. Striking a pose, with her fiery red hair, and plump pouty lips, Rockwell's Rosie resembles the make-up advertisements that

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<sup>35</sup> Norman Rockwell, as told to Thomas Rockwell, *Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), 44. Also quoted in Karal Ann Marling, *Norman Rockwell* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1997), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Melissa Dabakis, "Gendered Labor: Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter* and the Discourses of Wartime Womanhood," in Melosh, *Gender and American History since 1890*, 183.

circulated during the war.<sup>37</sup> Pond's, Jergens, Revlon, and Elizabeth Arden, among others, targeted women war workers in industry and in such military divisions as the Women's Army Corps (WAC). Advertisements by such brands promoted feminine beauty products like lotion, lipstick, hair dye, and home permanents as essentials that would, as one Elizabeth Arden ad explained, "glamourize utility" (Fig. 5-21). These products promised to keep young and beautiful American working girls from becoming unattractive and mannish during the crisis.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, while Rosie's dirt-smudged cheek records her hard work, with her compact and her kerchief in her pocket Rosie can freshen up at a moment's notice.

Rockwell's Rosie also holds her sandwich in such a way as to illustrate how delicious and fortifying it could be, the way a model in a food advertisement might hold her product. Magazine spreads promoting Hormel's Spam, Nabisco Ritz crackers, Heinz condensed soup (Fig. 5-22), and Grape-Nuts cereals all featured female war workers as spokesmodels during the war.<sup>39</sup> Keeping the girls nourished and alert on the job was a major theme in such promotions, which functioned to endorse not only the product, but the women at work as well. The obvious and self-conscious manner in which Rockwell's Rosie displays her gustatory and cosmetic props acknowledges and parodies her exploitation as a capitalist marketing tool, which reminded viewers that her innate domestic role as a shopper and cook was not lost.

Resting upon her elevated perch, Rockwell's Rosie turns her head away from the viewer and wears a coy and flirtatious expression. Rosie bears a resemblance to another famous female character-type of the 1940s that was often pictured in a state of repose, the pin-

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<sup>37</sup> Dabakis, "Gendered Labor: Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter* and the Discourses of Wartime Womanhood," 190-191.

<sup>38</sup> Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II*, 113.

<sup>39</sup> F. Marie Valgos, "Selling Rosie the Riveter: How Advertisements in *Ladies' Home Journal* Sold American Women Their Role During World War II," *The Berkeley McNair Journal* 2 (Summer 1994): 203-04.



up. Maria Buszek has argued that the World War II pin-up, particularly in its most famous incarnation, Alberto Vargas' "Varga girls" in *Esquire* magazine (Fig. 5-23), represents a "sexual ideal in which the independence, self-esteem, and ambition that the nation sought to groom in female workers spilled over into their sexual identities as well."<sup>40</sup> Buszek calls the pin-up woman "both a tantalizing and a wholesome ideal" and a "modern war goddess." Such women would decorate the bunks, barracks, and bombers of American military men, providing entertainment and inspiration for the fighting overseas. A clever 1944 OWI poster by Cy Hungerford titled *Their Real Pin-Up Girl* (Fig. 5-24) makes overt the association between sexy bombshells and the women who manufactured them. Three thumbs up (or two thumbs and a couple of winks) to Rosie for doing her part and staying sexy all at the same time. If Rockwell's Rosie's sexual charm escapes us within the painting, we need only to observe the serendipitous interaction between the girl and the layout of the *Saturday Evening Post* cover on which she appeared. A graphic teaser for a new series of stories called "Heart on Her Sleeve" hovers near Rosie's sleeve. She glances in the direction of that text, a casual (and almost certainly unplanned) reminder that although she is burly and scuffed, she is still a sweetheart at her core with romance on her mind.

Whereas Rockwell included such incidental feminine details as the make-up compact in Rosie's pocket and her playfully alluring expression, they stand in contrast to Rosie's potentially masculine traits. Her physique is so burly that, without the slight cinching at her waist and the subtle curve of her breasts, her body could easily pass for a man's. Melissa Dabakis has explained that Rockwell's Rosie also flirts with "potentially subversive signs of cross-dressing." The conflict between the masculine and the feminine in Rockwell's Rosie,

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<sup>40</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 186.

Dabakis argued, marks “resistance as well as submission, empowerment as well as containment.”<sup>41</sup> Rosie’s entrance into the male sphere of labor could indicate her wider participation in American culture and the evolution of her social and political status. However, such a reading is problematic because interpreting female equality in terms of women’s resemblance to men only reinforces their subordinate status.

Rockwell’s Rosie embodies physical characteristics of heroic masculinity because a visual language articulating heroic feminine labor was not established in visual culture. Further, Rosie’s masculine physique has cultural referents in art history and in the contemporary sphere. Rockwell used Michelangelo’s *Prophet Isaiah* from the Sistine Chapel (Fig. 5-25) as his template for Rosie’s figure; Rosie and Isaiah share a robust musculature and contorted pose, and both of their heads are topped with a gold halo.<sup>42</sup> Turning Rosie into a hallowed figure showers praise and admiration upon her. Yet, modeling her on a male symbol of divinity exposes her figure to distortions that make her less conventionally beautiful. Mary Doyle Keefe, the young girl who posed for Rockwell’s Rosie painting, recalled that the artist called her to apologize for making her “such a large woman.” When asked if she had Rosie’s husky figure, Keefe quickly and simply stated, “No, I certainly didn’t.”<sup>43</sup>

Though Mary Doyle Keefe’s body might not have resembled Rockwell’s Rosie’s, other contemporary women did, most notably bodybuilder Abbye Stockton (Fig. 5-26). Stockton performed daring and impressive physical feats on Santa Monica and Venice,

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<sup>41</sup> Dabakis, “Gendered Labor: Norman Rockwell’s *Rosie the Riveter* and the Discourses of Wartime Womanhood,” 196.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Marling, *Norman Rockwell*, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Eileen Hurst, “Interview with Mary Doyle Keefe,” 29 February 2008, Mary Doyle Keefe Papers, VHP2008/25, Veterans History Project, Central Connecticut State University, Center for Public Policy and Social Research, New Britain, CT.

California, beaches, beginning in the late 1930s.<sup>44</sup> Her hair, make-up, and two-piece bathing suit were unmistakably feminine, but her bulging muscles and incredible strength astonished crowds. As a bodybuilder Stockton was a new type of woman, in a manner akin to Rosie the Riveter, whose work and physical power transgressed normative gender roles. Allusions to Michelangelo's imagery and to 1940s women bodybuilders pull Rockwell's Rosie in different symbolic directions. Historical, religious iconography exists at one end, while contemporary, popular culture occupies the other. Such blurred distinctions between high art and common culture, along with the confusion of typical gender distinctions create humor within Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter*. Yet, the clashing of contexts and referents also reinforces what Dabakis has termed an "uneasy tension" inherent in Rockwell's Rosie character.<sup>45</sup>

Although Rockwell surrounds Rosie with the trappings of labor, in fact, Rockwell's Rosie is not working, but is resting on her lunch break. The unused rivet gun on her lap signals her occupation, but has no function during lunchtime and is rather out of place. Rosie at leisure stands in sharp contrast to Ben Shahn's *The Riveter* (1938, Fig. 5-27) and Harry Sternberg's *Riveter* (1935, Fig. 2-2), in which male workers activate their props to build something useful. Dabakis interprets the rivet gun as a flaccid phallus; it alludes to a sort of masculine power, but because Rosie "does not handle it[, it] thus reveals no agency."<sup>46</sup> Whereas Rosie's antecedent, Isaiah, clutches a book at his hip and gestures to the cherubs on his shoulder indicating his awareness of God's promise of salvation, Rosie holds fast to her lunchbox and prepares to indulge in a hearty sandwich. Isaiah's activity is lofty; Rosie's

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<sup>44</sup> Jan Todd, "Bring on the Amazons: An Evolutionary History," in *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, eds. Joanna Frueh, Laurie Fierstein, and Judith Stein (New York: Rizzoli, 2000), 54-57.

<sup>45</sup> Dabakis, "Gendered Labor: Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter* and the Discourses of Wartime Womanhood," 201.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

pursuit is mundane in comparison. Atop her head Rosie wears a mask and goggles, unnecessary redundancies that give her the appearance of being over accessorized. Rockwell playfully undermines Rosie's authenticity as a wartime worker by substituting leisure for labor, and giving her superfluous headgear.

Certain advertisements and posters, including the Office of War Information's "Women in the War: We Can't Win without Them" (Fig. 5-28), hailed the opportunities and accomplishments of women willing to work. However, other incarnations of the Rosie trope were less flattering. Many propagandists went to great lengths to ensure that women's emergency powers and increased responsibilities did not carry over into expanded equality in the postwar era. The OWI poster "Good Work, Sister" (Fig. 5-29) sums up the general attitude of Americans toward women's capability with the phrase "We never figured you could do a man-size job." At once complimentary and condescending, such a statement acknowledges women's contributions while assigning them to an inferior position in the labor force. When patient pleas failed to rouse women from the domestic spaces to which they had long been relegated, other advertisements took a more vicious tone, ridiculing women for wanting equality, but not rushing to find jobs outside the home. Copy proposed for one poster read, "Are you so blinded by 'woman's rights' that you have forgotten that nothing but WORK ever earned them? Are you being old-fashioned and getting by just being a 'good wife and mother?'"<sup>47</sup> Clearly, the crisis of war brought on a major shift in the idealization of the American woman and the issue of women's rights was incredibly threatening to the existing social order. Still, the notion that being *just* a good familial, maternal figure could be so demonized is astonishing. Another propaganda campaign message read, "Any strong, able-

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted from the OWI Womanpower campaign archive (Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD) in Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 97.

bodied woman who is not *completely occupied* with a job and a home—is going to be considered a ‘slacker’ just as much as the man who avoids the draft.”<sup>48</sup> The messages here indicate that if women desired greater agency and civil rights during World War II, then they would have to work for them both at home and in the factory. Yet, even if women made such dual contributions, there was no guarantee that the promise of gender equality would be fulfilled.

As Maureen Honey has written, “The role allocated to women in wartime propaganda...was a complicated mixture of strength and dependence, competence and vulnerability, egalitarianism and conservatism.”<sup>49</sup> For all of Rosie’s saintliness, strength, and capability, she is domesticated through allusions to the typically feminine world of consumption and romance. She embodies a plethora of contradictions and operates as a humorous, parodic, and stereotypical symbol. While Rockwell’s goal was likely to delight the readers of the *Saturday Evening Post*, who had come to rely on his images for a lighthearted moment of comedy, *Rosie the Riveter* also embodies many of the weighty demands placed on women workers during World War II. These hardworking women were expected to be the attractive and selfless mothers, wives, and girlfriends that kept the homes and the home front intact for the men who were serving abroad. Many of them were also expected to abandon their jobs and new economic autonomy once the war ended.

Rockwell joked again on the September 4, 1943 *Saturday Evening Post* cover, *Rosie to the Rescue* (Fig. 5-30). In the intervening four months Rosie has cast off her utilitarian overalls and donned a stars-and-stripes get-up in the manner of Uncle Sam. Aunt Rosie is a one-woman-band of occupations, carrying the accoutrements of a milkman (or milkwoman),

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II*, 7.

mechanic, victory gardener, telephone operator, janitor, and others. Over the summer Rosie has slimmed down, dropped her flirty glance, and, as if her boss caught her languishing on that lunch break in May, this Rosie is on the move. Both of Rockwell's Rosie images call attention to the absurdity of so many responsibilities and acknowledge the reality that a "real" Rosie could never sustain such an overburdened cultural role.

In his portrayal of *Rosie the Riveter*, Rockwell mobilized a complex set of props, visual sources, and cultural anxieties that shows how vital women workers were, while simultaneously making clear that their entrance into the masculine space of industry fulfilled only a temporary, emergency need. As he did in many of his *Saturday Evening Post* covers, Rockwell used humor as a vehicle for cultural commentary. In the case of Rosie, the humor is layered; Rosie embodies a multitude of cultural references. Unpacking each of them takes time, and the inconsistencies within Rosie's persona amount to a tempered heroism. Rosie contributes to the war effort, and Americans value her labor, but her expanded cultural responsibilities are not designed to endure.

### **Harriet Tubman**

Aaron Douglas' *Harriet Tubman* is a special case of heroic womanhood in this period. Although it predates *Migrant Mother* and *Rosie the Riveter*, this painting manifests a more progressive attitude toward the role of women as leaders of social change. *Harriet Tubman* features an historical figure, updated and made relevant to the contemporary African American civil rights struggles of the New Negro era. At the same time, as we will see, *Harriet Tubman* highlights the failure of the post-suffrage women's movement to articulate and maintain a racially inclusive agenda aimed at gender equality.

*Harriet Tubman* spreads a message of optimism and the importance of education and progress in the African American community that was appropriate for the painting's intended audience. Douglas painted *Harriet Tubman* on commission from Alfred Stern of Chicago, son-in-law of the noted philanthropist and Harlem Renaissance patron Julius Rosenwald, for Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, North Carolina.<sup>50</sup> Founded in 1873 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, Bennett College was initially a coeducational seminary and a training institute for teachers.<sup>51</sup> In 1926, however, the school transitioned into a junior college for African American women and the 1929-30 school year was its first as a four-year college offering Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees to its graduates.<sup>52</sup> This painting, created as Bennett College was emerging as a citadel for black women's education, celebrates black pride, and announces the need to persevere through hardship to reach one's goals. When it was unveiled in 1931, *Harriet Tubman* must have been understood as a tribute to the establishment of Bennett College for Women and as a heroic model to which the students should aspire.

The narrative in *Harriet Tubman* begins at the left among the palm fronds of tropical Africa where two figures stand erect, carrying bundles on their heads. These individuals are laboring under their own agency; their loads are not crippling. They function in sharp contrast to the two who begin the uphill ascent; having shifted their burdens to their backs they bend beneath the oppression of American slavery. The three figures to Tubman's left have fallen to

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<sup>50</sup> Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 116.

<sup>51</sup> Known first as Bennett Seminary, the school was named for Lyman Bennett, a New York businessman who donated \$10,000 to the institution. Bennett Seminary became Bennett College in 1887. See Sarah Cardwell, "'I, Too, Am America': The Founding of Bennett College for Women and the Implications of a Progressive Education for Black Women" (M.A. thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2008), 14-16.

<sup>52</sup> Nadine Sherri Lockwood, "Bennett College for Women, 1926-1966" (Ph.D. diss., SUNY-Buffalo, 2004), 184-91.

their knees, writhing in agony. With shackled and clasped hands, they beg for mercy, recalling the abolitionist tracts captioned “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” (Fig. 5-31), which were widely circulated in the nineteenth century. There is a cinematic quality to this sequence; we witness the passage of time and the advance of history from life in Africa to slavery in the American South, which culminates in Tubman’s exhilarating moment of liberation.

This trail of individuals who were taken from Africa and enslaved in the United States before the Civil War references the evolution of Tubman’s own life, from her birth into slavery in Maryland around 1822 to her escape in 1849.<sup>53</sup> In Douglas’ painting, Tubman celebrates her freedom, posing mid-stride atop a hill with her arms raised, having just broken the chains of bondage that once confined her. The chains themselves dance in the air with a buoyancy that conveys the spirit of this heroic image. With her face and torso, Tubman turns back, acknowledging her past and encouraging those still seeking freedom, as she did as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. At the same time, Tubman’s legs point her towards a better future on the right side of the composition.

Douglas divided this composition using an arabesque stream of smoke, which pours from a cannon positioned beneath Tubman’s feet. The smoke marks a revolutionary and dramatic historical shift as the people on the right side of the composition occupy a magnolia-covered hill in the American South of the present 1930s. These figures bear witness to Tubman’s achievements and symbolize the progress that Tubman’s legacy inspires.<sup>54</sup> Flanked

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<sup>53</sup> Historians have debated the exact date of Tubman’s birth, but Kate Larson’s 2004 book is the most meticulously researched and represents the most current biographical information. Larson established that Tubman was probably born in either February or early March 1822. She fled slavery in the late fall of 1849 and died on March 10, 1913. Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine, 2004), xvi, 310-04.

<sup>54</sup> On Bennett College’s campus, the magnolia trees are dedicated to individuals that the college wishes to honor. The trees, along with the chapel spire and the campus bell are



by a rural worker on the left and a reclining man on the right who looks to a far brighter future among the distant urban skyscrapers, a woman and two children bridge the gap between troubled past and successful future.

The pose of the woman hovering over the rural farm worker resembles that of educator and activist Booker T. Washington in Charles Keck's 1922 sculpture, *Lifting the Veil of Ignorance* (Fig. 5-32). The woman appears more educated and more urban than the man; she extends her hand in a gesture of openness and assistance. The two children trailing after her, one of whom is reading a book, further cast the woman in the role of teacher and mentor. While Tubman herself is the chief heroic figure, in these three figures we see the importance of education to the success of the African American community and another set of role models for the women of Bennett College.

In concert with the sequence of figures on the left side of the canvas, the right side completes an historical narrative that begins with the inception of slavery and ends in 1931. The space of the painting collapses life in Africa and life in America during and after slavery, conceptually and visually linking Tubman's time as an activist in the nineteenth century to the New Negro Era of the early twentieth century. Tubman is the axis upon which the story turns and her body occupies a liminal space between two worlds. Striding toward the peak of the hill her feet are on African ground, while two magnolia leaves, symbols of the American South, frame her head from above. Tubman towers over a spent cannon, which, along with the circular flash of light that echoes synaesthetically in the surrounding space, encodes the revolutionary spirit and historical shift that Tubman embodies. She inspires a diverse cast of

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featured on commemorative plates, as well. Linda Beatrice Brown, *The Long Walk: The Story of the Presidency of Willa B. Player at Bennett College* (Greensboro, NC: Bennett College Women's Leadership Institute, 1998), 31, 34.

people on the right, from farm workers to students of all ages and both genders, who look toward a new ideal of urban, educated life for African Americans.

As the leading artist of the ongoing Harlem Renaissance, Douglas was accustomed to fostering black pride through his art. Douglas was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1899 and studied art at the Detroit Museum of Art and the University of Nebraska before taking a teaching job at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri in 1923. Douglas witnessed the emergence of the New Negro Movement from afar until, in 1925, he decided to travel to New York to see the surge of African American creativity firsthand. What was supposed to be a brief layover on his way to Paris to study art became a life-changing decision, and Douglas quickly became involved in the circles of such luminaries as W.E.B. Du Bois of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.), Charles S. Johnson of the National Urban League, and Alain Locke, editor of *The New Negro*. Douglas contributed several illustrations to *The New Negro*, and was influenced by its principal artist, Winold Reiss, whose blending of modernist abstraction and African influence became fodder for Douglas' mature style. Douglas' opportunities soared thereafter and he went on to illustrate regularly the two major monthly publications of the Harlem Renaissance, the Urban League's *Opportunity* magazine and the N.A.A.C.P.'s *The Crisis*.

Douglas developed an iconography of the ideal African American during his early years in Harlem, designing covers for magazines and dust jackets for books by fellow New Negro pioneers. Douglas' ideal African American is a multifaceted individual, embodying physical strength, a dedicated work ethic, cognizance of his or her African roots, and a fashionable modernism. Douglas' cover design for the inaugural (and only) issue of the artist-run *FIRE!!* magazine (Fig. 5-33, 1926) portrayed a black face in profile that resembles a Kuba Bwom mask (from present-day Democratic Republic of Congo) with its bulbous forehead,

sharp nose, and pronounced lips.<sup>55</sup> Layered over the cheek of the mask is a sphinx, further reinforcing the journal's tribute to African culture and giving the viewer a second symbol of African royalty. Both the mask and the sphinx are stoic and stern, exuding pride and strength. Douglas' February 1926 Industrial Issue of *Opportunity* (Fig. 5-34) shows two black steel workers standing jauntily, with bent legs, and rendered in a kind of modernist angularity that conveys their energy and physical capacity. They are surrounded by Art Deco patterning that makes their task appear contemporary, even as their activity harkens to the traditionally revered craft of iron work in Africa. Douglas brought labor, strength, and African features into a modern urban setting in his cover for *The American Negro* (Fig. 5-35, 1928). In this image, a black man with mask-like features stands as tall and appears as sturdy as the dynamic skyscrapers behind him as he surveys the industry of a new era to which he contributes.<sup>56</sup>

Douglas also lionized education, ambition, and optimism in various works, including his mural cycle at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Executed in 1930, shortly before Douglas painted Bennett's *Harriet Tubman*, the Fisk murals were Douglas' most complete cycle to date and offer insight into his increasingly complex conception of black heroism. Painted on various walls throughout the university's Cravath Library, Douglas' murals show the evolution of black people from their origins in Africa, through slavery in America, and predict a brighter future based upon education at such institutions as Fisk. The mural section entitled *Negro Labor* (Fig. 5-36) pictures a line of figures dragging, carrying, and bowing under the weight of heavy loads as they make their way toward a burst of light; they proceed

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<sup>55</sup> Monica Blackmun Visoná et al., *A History of Art in Africa* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 404.

<sup>56</sup> Richard J. Powell, "The Aaron Douglas Effect," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 64.

toward what art historian Amy Kirschke has called “a giant star of emancipation” and finally unto “the light of education” which Douglas depicts as Fisk’s own Jubilee Hall.<sup>57</sup> In the *Negro in America* panel (Fig. 5-37), Fisk’s graduates continue to study, poring over a microscope, consulting a globe, and gesturing as if teaching and directing projects in the world. In these murals and in subsequent works such as *Aspiration* (1936) and *Building More Stately Mansions* (1944) Douglas continued to express a faith in the betterment of African Americans through education.

Each of these aspects of Douglas’ ideal occurs in *Harriet Tubman*. From the physical toil and psychological hardship of slavery Tubman emerges as a strong, victorious figure capable of ascending the hill of freedom. Her visage and twisted pose are both reminiscent of Egyptian art, analogizing her greatness and that of the pharaohs and queens of that significant African civilization. She is aware of her past but strides toward and inspires the future of the race, the members of which revere her even as they work, study, and dream of modern, urban vistas.

Douglas takes artistic license with his depiction of Tubman; she bears little resemblance to the actual historical figure, whose image was known chiefly through photographs and a widely circulated woodcut (Fig. 5-38) of her wearing modest clothing and a stern expression. It was this later print, from circa 1863-68, that would serve as William H. Johnson’s starting point for a more militant, haggard, though patriotic Tubman in his 1945 painting. (Fig. 5-39) In contrast, Douglas’ Tubman is younger, more slender, and more fashionable, energetic, and modern than she typically appeared in visual culture. The prismatic treatment of space and light is modernist, dynamic, and has the rhythmic spirit of

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<sup>57</sup> For images of these murals, see Amy Helene Kirschke, “The Fisk Murals Revealed: Memories of Africa, Hope for the Future,” in Earle, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, 118.

jazz music.<sup>58</sup> Standing in the spotlight with her hip jutting out and her arms raised, Douglas' Tubman resembles a performer on stage in the vein of Josephine Baker (Fig. 5-40) more than she resembles her own historical antecedent. In this composition Douglas makes Tubman not only the political and social inspiration for Bennett College women, but someone whose modern style resonated with their 1930s moment as well.

The January 1932 issue of *The Crisis* announced the completion of Douglas' new painting and included a reproduction. The artist explained his selection of Harriet Tubman as the subject and the future people she would motivate:

I used Harriet Tubman to idealize a superior type of Negro womanhood....I depict her as a heroic leader breaking the shackles of bondage and pressing on toward a new day....The group of figures to the right of the center symbolizes the newly liberated people as laborers and heads of families. The last figure symbolizes the dreamer who looks out towards higher and nobler vistas, the modern city, for his race. He represents the preachers, teachers, artists, and musicians of the group....<sup>59</sup>

What is interesting is that even though this painting hung in a prominent institution of higher education for women, Douglas identifies the man at the right edge of the composition as the most symbolic of Tubman's successors. That man, Douglas asserts, is the preacher, teacher, artist, and musician. Though Tubman was a woman, and Douglas designed this painting for a women's college, the message here emphasizes racial improvement over gender equality.

Douglas believed that Tubman would serve as a useful and heroic inspiration to contemporary black people and fashioned the heir to her legacy as a black male leader looking toward a still better future for their race.

Douglas' conception of Harriet Tubman as a heroine whose primary legacy was one of race progress is fitting given Tubman's abolitionist activism. This attitude also reveals the fact

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<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of Douglas' use of jazz motifs as modern, revolutionary, and American, see Donna Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City: Jazz and Cultural Identity in American Art, 1910-1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 115-46.

<sup>59</sup> "The Aaron Douglas Fresco of Harriet Tubman," *The Crisis* 41, no. 1 (January 1932): 449.

that, as Rosalyn Terborg-Penn has argued, “Black feminists could not overlook the reality of racism and class conflict as determining factors in the lives of women of their race.”<sup>60</sup> Mary Church Terrell lamented, “A white woman has only one handicap to overcome—that of sex. I have two—both sex and race. I belong to the only group in this country which has two such huge obstacles to surmount.”<sup>61</sup> Black women had never been fully accepted into the women’s rights movement; they needed to uplift the status of their race before they could tackle the problem of gender prejudice. Therefore, focusing on racial empowerment was a strategic choice for African American women. Douglas, like the majority of the African American community, promoted in his art the notion that a woman could be an heroic figure to her race. *Harriet Tubman* shows that for a black woman to succeed, she had to combat first the evils of racism in American society; she had to serve black women *and* black men.

This image of a certain kind of ideal womanhood as offered by Douglas in *Harriet Tubman*, was part of the broader discourse of racial uplift that pervaded African American thought during the early twentieth century. Various cultural leaders rallied for a class of educated black women who would serve not only themselves and their families, but who would, as activist and first president of the National Association of Colored Women Mary Church Terrell stated, “do more than other women.” In a 1916 speech in Charleston, South Carolina Terrell explained the particular responsibility of the educated black woman: “Those of us fortunate enough to have education must share it with the less fortunate of our race. We must go into our communities and improve them; we must go out into the nation and change

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<sup>60</sup> Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “Discontented Black Feminists: Prelude and Postscript to the Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment,” in Scharf and Jensen, *Decades of Discontent: The Women’s Movement, 1920-1940*, 261. See also Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s*, 61.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington, DC: Ransdell, 1940), introduction page 1.

it. Above all, we must organize ourselves as Negro women work together.”<sup>62</sup> Terrell cited Harriet Tubman as a model for this type of activism; she was one of the historic black women who “knew how to carry [her] burden in the heat of the day.” Terrell demanded to know from her audience who would do the same in her own time.<sup>63</sup> Her rhetoric was part of a widespread and effective mobilization of black women, using Tubman as a model for the struggles of the twentieth century.<sup>64</sup>

The potential for racial advancement in the twentieth century was often loaded onto women’s shoulders. W.E.B. Du Bois explained, in his 1920 essay “The Damnation of Women,” that if African Americans are to achieve equal status in American society, it would be because of the service, leadership, and endurance of black women. Encouraging black women to become active in the racial struggle, he called them “pillars” who “really count” and lauded their “toil” over many generations. Du Bois mentioned Harriet Tubman by name, and argued that women’s status was higher within the African American community than in the broader national culture. As he wrote, “To no modern race does its women mean so much as to the Negro.”<sup>65</sup> Du Bois’ passionate essay espoused what historian Kevin Gaines has called an “incipient feminism;” the duties that Du Bois ascribes to black women serve not only their gender, but more importantly and more imminently, their race.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Deborah G. White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 21-22.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>64</sup> Historian Deborah White has called this ideology “feminist,” noting that although African American women activists of this moment did not use the term, their notions of responsibility and progress nonetheless fit its meaning. *Ibid.*, 36 and 271.

<sup>65</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Damnation of Women,” in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 173.

<sup>66</sup> Kevin Gaines, “W.E.B. Du Bois,” in *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Cary D. Wintz (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2007), 332.

Elise Johnson McDougald similarly placed faith in black women's abilities to lead their race toward success in the twentieth century. In her essay "The Task of Negro Womanhood," McDougald wrote,

We find the Negro woman, figuratively struck in the face daily by contempt from the world about her. Within her soul, she knows little of peace and happiness. But through it all, she is courageously standing erect, developing within herself the moral strength to rise above and conquer false attitudes. She is maintaining her natural beauty and charm and improving her mind and opportunity. She is measuring up to the needs of her family, community and race, and radiating a hope throughout the land.<sup>67</sup>

Alluding to the prejudice that black woman encountered, including such gender-specific "charges of promiscuity, mannishness, and ignorance," McDougald praises women's abilities to persevere and contribute to society.<sup>68</sup> Taken together with Mary Church Terrell's statements, McDougald's and Du Bois' essays further construct a picture of black womanhood in the 1920s and 1930s that amounts to a type of heroicization of the African American woman as a mother, scholar, and leader.

As the chief artist of the New Negro Movement Douglas participated in the visual articulation of this conception of black womanhood even prior to painting *Harriet Tubman*. Douglas' September 1927 *The Crisis* cover (Fig. 5-41), entitled "The Burden of Black Womanhood," is his earliest and most overt statement on the role of women in the black community. The cover shows a stylized figure, whose face is vaguely African or mask-like, and whose body is muscular and strong. The woman stands confidently, looks upward, and with two raised, bent arms holds a giant orb above her head. The orb presumably symbolizes "The World," the whole of black experience, and the many ways in which African American

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<sup>67</sup> Elise Johnson McDougald, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925, reprinted 1992), 382.

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth L. Ihle, *Black Women in Higher Education: An Anthology of Essays, Studies, and Documents* (New York: Garland, 1992), 169.



women contribute to the ongoing civil rights struggle.<sup>69</sup> In this early image, Douglas offers a precedent for Harriet Tubman and an idol for black women all over the country who wish to contribute to the New Negro Movement.

This trope of black women's heroism resonated with Douglas' fellow artists, as well. Roscoe C. Wright's January 1928 cover of *The Crisis* (Fig. 5-42), called "Black Womanhood," resembles Douglas' "The Burden of Black Womanhood" and anticipated Douglas' *Harriet Tubman*. This cover shows, in a modernist style and in black, white, and shades of gray, a woman who has cast off her chains and who spreads her arms to the sky. With reminders of Africa—palm trees, grass huts, and pyramids—behind her, she exalts her newfound freedom. It appears as if the world she had supported in Douglas' 1927 *The Crisis* cover is now at her disposal. Of course, the realities of racial improvement during the intervening few months did not match the optimism of this image, but as a New Year's cover, Wright's work announces a resolution toward the creation of a better tomorrow.<sup>70</sup>

All of these ideas about the heroic nature of African American womanhood relate to the mission of Bennett College for Women, the home of Douglas' *Harriet Tubman* since its creation. The school was founded on land purchased by freed slaves with the hope that "the ravages of slavery and the Civil War could be overcome with knowledge and education."<sup>71</sup> In Bennett College vernacular, the path toward graduation and success is known as the "long walk," a walk not unlike the one Tubman has completed to reach the apex of the hill in

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<sup>69</sup> Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 143.

<sup>70</sup> In her discussion of this image, Kirschke indicates that Wright was working "under Douglas' direction" when he created this cover. I assume she means Douglas had some influence over Wright as he was *The Crisis*' art editor. It does appear that Wright's style, in addition to his subject, in this image was heavily influenced by Douglas. *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, *The Long Walk: The Story of the Presidency of Willa B. Player at Bennett College*, 14.

Douglas' painting. It is possible to see in the fashionable Tubman that Douglas painted a visual metaphor for all Bennett women. She is a woman who is of her time, but cognizant of her community's history and challenges. It is significant that Harriet Tubman was known as the "Black Moses," not the "Female Moses." She is accomplished and worthy of admiration and she will be a beacon of racial empowerment. Such a heroine serves to prioritize the struggle for racial equality ahead of the faltering goals of the women's movement, from which many black women were excluded.

## **Conclusion**

*Migrant Mother*, *Rosie the Riveter*, and *Harriet Tubman* were among the most heroic images of women made in the 1930s and 1940s, but their heroic status was carefully delineated and circumscribed by the structures of society's gender roles and the political conflicts that constrained the women's movement. The great expectations placed on heroic women compelled their service to other, more pressing crises and disregarded the aspirations of feminism. In the face of such calamitous situations as economic depression, war, or racial inequality, women were expected to table the concern for women's rights in service of broader, more imminent causes. Eleanor Roosevelt entreated women to this effect at the depths of the Great Depression and her statement rings true for each of the heroines discussed in this chapter:

We are going through a great crisis in this country and ...the women have a big part to play if we are coming through it successfully. There have been other great crises in our country and I think if we read our history carefully, we will find that the success of our nation in meeting them was very largely due to the women in those trying times. Upon them fell a far heavier burden and responsibility than any of us realize.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Roosevelt, *It's Up to the Women*, vii.

The burdens of womanhood during the 1930s and 1940s were tremendous and diverse, and function as important factors in understanding the various heroines invented during the era. Each image encodes the tensions and/or anxieties about women's participation in a larger national culture and consequently embody the complexities of American womanhood as that concept evolved.

## **Conclusion: The Heyday of Heroism**

I have based this dissertation on the premise that heroes embody issues of cultural pride and political power. Thus, studying heroic characters in American art affords us an opportunity to begin to understand the ideals and aspirations of broader social groups. Each of the central images discussed in the chapters above is a synecdoche for a larger set of issues relating to American identity, nationalism, and cultural change in the 1930s and 1940s.

The core images in the chapters of this dissertation incorporate various American types—presidents, workers, farmers, mothers, and folk or historical characters. No single narrative or recipe for American heroism exists. Thus, the images I selected perform diverse social and political agendas and multiple strategies for communicating admiration visually. Florine Stettheimer's status as a New York socialite and passionate Democrat gave her a very different set of motivations than John Steuart Curry's background as a Kansas farm boy. Philip Evergood's engagement with labor unions led him to heroicize a contemporary worker, whereas Palmer Hayden's stake in the African American plight for equality drove him to cultivate a folk hero as an American historical icon. Dorothea Lange's mission to garner financial assistance for the rural poor in California, Norman Rockwell's job as a *Saturday Evening Post* cover artist during World War II, and Aaron Douglas' commission to memorialize Harriet Tubman on the wall of an African American women's college led to compelling yet complicated images of heroines. Most of the artists discussed herein depicted personal heroes; the individuals in their images related closely to their social background or political beliefs. Yet, in every case, the hero of the image also embodies a complex brand of patriotism and corresponds to an agenda for social and political progress suggestive of a more widely held viewpoint.

Studying such heroic images allows us to consider the many different constructions of American leadership and national service as an ideal. During decades when Americans both demanded and feared strong leadership, studying symbols of heroism can be a useful point of entry to the nature of social and political change. What has been most interesting as this project as evolved is that images that at first glance evoke classic American types can, after further examination, reveal as much about the controversies, anxieties, and tragedies of the era as they do its triumphs. As explained in the introduction, these works are modernist in their many ideological complexities and in each work's implicit belief that art can (and should) participate in the creation of order out of chaos, confidence amid crisis.

Marshall Fishwick has argued that American heroes “[fight] their way not into an established hagiography, but into a pinwheel.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the pinwheel symbolizes the evolution of a hero's national and cultural significance over the course of time. Once a hero (or heroine) becomes a spoke, the issues that character signifies may change and the strategies for its depiction may evolve, but the hero's (or heroine's) status as an American trope persists. The 1930s and 1940s witnessed the pinnacle of American heroism in the visual arts. These two decades represent the most concerted efforts on the part of American artists to develop a national identity that summarized the past while looking toward the future, and heroic figures loomed large in the popular imagination and in visual culture.

In 1958, social historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. argued that the United States had lost track of its pantheon of heroes. He recalled prior decades when “great men seemed to dominate our lives and shape our destiny.”<sup>74</sup> He asserted that heroes are vital components to any democracy, and that whereas unquestioning worship of them is dangerous, a society

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<sup>73</sup> Fishwick, *American Heroes: Myth and Reality*, 229.

<sup>74</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Decline of Greatness,” 25.

without heroes devolves into one marked by homogeneity and mediocrity. Though the heroic images discussed in this dissertation represent the hardships, challenges, and fears of the 1930s and 1940s, the heroes of these works are neither homogeneous, nor mediocre. Rather, they picture the ideals and hopes of a generation yearning for heroic examples to sustain their faith in themselves and their nation.

## **Figures**

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