

The 1930s Have Been Viewed as a Time of Simple-Minded Art. 'Art for the Millions' Shows Just How Dazzlingly Complex It Was

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition shows that meaning of this time period for art was in debate, even as it happened.

Ben Davis, September 19, 2023



Ben Shahn, *Welders* (1943) in "Art for the Millions" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo by Ben Davis.

Does it sound weird to say that "Art for the Millions: American Art in the 1930s" at the Metropolitan Museum is a delightful show? The 1930s are synonymous with hardship. Its art, until quite recently, was generally considered dowdy, unsophisticated.

But this exhibition, curated by Allison Rudnick, is artfully assembled and thought-provoking. It's a useful new chapter in the wider revaluation of the '30s in art in the United States.

The good and the bad of what the 1930s represent is right there in the title of the show: “Art for the Millions.” Artistic populism is the thousand-foot-up view of what the ‘30s stood for in culture. Several generations of post-war U.S. taste-makers defined themselves against this heritage of the 1930s, as they tried to make room within the U.S.’s typically utilitarian and mass-oriented culture for more intellectual and experimental art. On the flip side, when art does look to the ‘30s for inspiration, it is exactly because the era provides models of how it might put itself at the service of “the people,” via agitprop, public works, and documentary.



Installation view of “Art for the Millions” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo by Ben Davis. Both of these takes, however, may yield a somewhat flattened image of the 1930s. As cultural historian Michael Denning writes in *The Cultural Front*, his classic volume about the art movements of this period:

Nothing is more firmly established than the perception that the “thirties” was a time of social realism... Social realism in this sense has come to mean three things: the documentary aesthetic, a rearguard opposition to modernism, and a relatively straightforward representationalism in

the arts. In fact, all three aspects are misunderstood: the documentary aesthetic was actually a central modernist innovation; the cultural front was not characterized by an opposition to modernism; and the crucial aesthetic forms and ideologies of the cultural front were not simple representationalism.

So, what I like most about “Art for the Millions” is pretty elemental: Rudnick’s show makes me think about how much lively formal experiment and aesthetic diversity existed within the 1930s art scrum—not as a dissident impulse, but as integrally connected to attempts to create a popular audience and to convey the realities of social life through art.

The sobriety of *The Soup Kitchen* (ca. 1937) by the painter Norman Lewis (who would go on to greater fame as an abstract artist) certainly fits intuitively with an image of ’30s art. It is a clearly legible statement in support of government poverty relief.



Norman Lewis, *The Soup Kitchen* (ca. 1937) in “Art for the Millions.” Photo by Ben Davis.

But it's also elegantly stylized, and Lewis's design is working with its message: The underlying X-shape conveys the sense of a Works Progress Administration kitchen bringing some order to the chaos of the era. Read left to right, your eye is led upwards, from the sadness of the man hunched over his bowl to the helpful chef serving up a hot meal at the top right; from the need that justifies government action to the reality of that action.

Elizabeth Olds's *Burlesque* (1936) more clearly fuses social commentary with a demotic expressionism. The variegated cartoon grimaces of the dancers' faces, and the repeating, mechanical formation of the chorus line, convey the exhausting *work* of selling sex appeal. The artist's idea is immediately clear; her means veer from plain-spoken realism.



Elizabeth Olds, *Burlesque* (1936) in "Art for the Millions." Photo by Ben Davis.

Don't get me wrong. There are plenty of artworks here that fit the typical image of social realism, from Harry Gottlieb's lithograph *Three Lane Traffic*, showing a turbulent picket line outside of a posh restaurant on a rainswept night, to Riva Helfond's *Curtain Factory* (ca. 1936-39), showing women bowed over their labors in a textile workshop. Even these have a lot of flair.

At the same time, as Denning argues, a lesser-remembered “Proletarian Surrealism” was also a major current of the 1930s. It echoes in Alice Neel’s 1939 portrait of her friend, the poet (and future pulp crime novelest) Kenneth Fearing, who is shown as literally haunted by the demons of the Depression, a skeleton wringing blood out of his heart perched in his open chest. You see it also in Hugo Gellert’s lithographs, made for a 1934 edition of Marx’s *Capital*, where humans are crucified on the gears of an immense machine. You can even sense this impulse in Dox Thrash’s watercolor *Untitled (Strike)*, where a Black union organizer appears transformed into a giant by the force of his rhetoric.



Dox Thrash
American, 1893–1965
Untitled (Strike), ca. 1940
Watercolor
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Museum Purchase

The commanding presence of the union pictured here is indicated by his outstretched arm and raised fist. The crowd is that of a protest against high living costs, World War I, the Scottsboro Boys trial, in which nine young Black men were falsely accused of raping White women in Alabama in 1931. This Thrash, a Black American, is a rare depiction of people of color organizing and participating in a labor strike in the thirties. The size and such imagery is likely in part due to the denial of union membership to workers. Thrash's inclusion of the placard in the Scottsboro Boys demonstrates an interest in fighting both racial and labor discrimination by many activists of the time.

Dox Thrash, *Untitled (Strike)* (ca. 1940) in “Art for the Millions.” Photo by Ben Davis.

Photography came into its own as a medium in the 1930s, and it is naturally in the crusading photojournalism of the day that you come closest to a “realist” documentary aesthetic. But obviously the genius of photographers like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans was not just to *document* protest and poverty. A mythologizing energy charged the facts with symbolism and made them arresting.

This is radiantly self-evident in Lange’s *Demonstration, San Francisco* (1933), where a sharp low-angle image of a May Day protester turns him into a rock-jawed colossus gazing to the future. It’s more subtle in Lange’s *Mexican Migrant Family with Tire Trouble, California* (1936). There, a group of travelers fret over their stranded jalopy— but the detail that stops you is the small girl who stares plaintively out at you, as if asking silently for the viewer’s help.



Hugo Gellert, The Communist Party poster (ca. 1935) in “Art for the Millions.” Photo by Ben Davis.

“Art for the Millions” does contain repeating and repetitive scenes celebrating the exertions of brawny white male laborers—probably the subject matter that comes closest to evoking the cornier clichés of “social realism.” Even here, I think there’s something touching in how aestheticized these proletarian beefcakes are. We are obviously much closer to fantasy than to reality.

Whether we are talking about the industrial Spartacus rallying the masses from the cover of the Communist Party USA’s *Daily Worker* or the supernaturally assured construction workers of James Edmund Allen’s etching *The Builders* (1932), these are not real workers. They represent the promise of bodies transformed by dignified work

and industrial renewal into stylized superhero versions of the working class—in a way, they are the negative images of the desperation and depletion brought by mass unemployment.



James Edmund Allen, *The Builders* (1932) in “Art for the Millions.” Photo by Ben Davis.

“Art for the Millions” contains more things I’d like to talk about, but let me just skip to the third gallery, where the topic shifts to industrial and graphic design. Here, you can trace one of the ambiguities of how New Deal-era political discourse cyphered into culture.

In 1929, Wall Street led the nation into calamity. For huge sections of the population, U.S. capitalism lay discredited. Edmund Wilson recalled:

The stock market crash was to count for us almost like a rending of the earth in preparation for the Day of Judgment... Yet to the writers and artists of my generation who had grown up in the Big Business era and had always resented its barbarism, its crowding

out of everything they cared about, these years were not depressing but stimulating. One couldn't help being exhilarated at the sudden and unexpected collapse of that stupid gigantic fraud. It gave us a new sense of freedom, and it gave us a new sense of power to find ourselves still carrying on while the bankers, for a change, were taking a beating.

Millions upon millions of people were out of work, suffering, betrayed, and angry. In that space, there was bitter, back-against-the-wall protest, but also a lot of dreaming about what a better system might look like. The two fused in powerful ways. One consequential example: In 1934, *The Jungle* author Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California (EPIC) movement came within striking distance of taking the governorship, based on the promise to transform the Golden State into a cooperative economy.

The captains of industry responded to 1930s with bitter resistance—but they also pivoted to adapt some of the crusading popular rhetoric about the promise of a transformed future to their own ends, to deflect and capture its energy. In fact, this was true of Roosevelt's New Deal itself, explicitly an attempt to save capitalism by stabilizing society, and to head off the more radical protest movements (though the business bloc that united to try to sink the New Deal in the 1936 elections refused to see this).

Gellert's illustrations for *Das Kapital* and Charlie Chaplin's all-time masterpiece *Modern Times*—a clip of the 1936 film, showing Chaplin's Little Tramp losing his mind while working an assembly line, is shown in the first gallery—form one pole of the era's ideas of what the machine age represented: workers brutalized by ravaging factories. But the other pole was modernisation-as-deliverance, the promise of a progressive and hygienic new world based on technological advance.



Lester Beall, Rural Electrification Administration posters (1937) in "Art for the Millions." Photo by Ben Davis.

At the Met, the latter spirit resounds in Lester Beall's 1937 posters for FDR's Rural Electrification Administration: clean and geometric primary-color graphics promising running water, radio, electricity, and more. (Even card-carrying Communists were open to the romance of the machine, enchanted by fantastical tales of Stalin's success at vaulting an impoverished rural Russia into a workers' utopia via heavy industry.)

Streamlining was the design gospel of the 1930s. Everyday appliances were kissed with machine-age magic, given the connotation of forward-driving speed. I mentioned that all those heroic images of workers' bodies purified and made powerful radiated hopes of a possible better world. I think the act of reimagining everyday goods, giving them this kind of new futuristic dazzle, tried to capture some of that same energy, making consumerism over as progressive.



“Patriot” radio (ca. 1940) designed by Norman Bel Geddes, Electric Clock (ca. 1933) designed by Gilbert Rohde, and Desk lamp, model no. 114 (1939) designed by Walter Dorwin Teague and Frank Del Guidice, in “Art for the Millions.” Photo by Ben Davis.

“Art for the Millions” ends with artifacts and images related to the 1939 New York World’s Fair, maybe the ultimate example of how Depression-era utopian foment became recoded into marketing. The slogan of that event was “Dawn of a New Day;” it promised to show its millions of visitors a glimpse of the “World of Tomorrow.”

Joseph Binder’s 1939 World’s Fair poster shows the Fair’s twin symbols, a spire and sphere—the so-called Trylon and Perisphere structures. They hearken back to landmarks of visionary architecture like Étienne-Louis Boullée’s Cenotaph for Newton (1784), which sought to convey the grandeur of the Enlightenment, or even the symbolic geometry of Vladimir Tatlin’s homage to the Bolshevik experiment, Monument to the Third International (1919)—though unlike either of these, the Trylon and Perisphere were actually built in Queens (temporarily).

They are depicted in Binder’s poster graphic towering over the earth, dwarfing a tiny modern Manhattan skyline at bottom left. It is as if the promises of a luminous future had already applied a rear-view mirror to the dark realities of the preceding decade.



Joseph Binder, New York World's Fair, The World of Tomorrow poster (1939) in "Art for the Millions." Photo by Ben Davis.

On the actual Fair grounds, within the 180-foot-diameter Perisphere, the central attraction was an immense diorama of something called "Democracity," a vision of a vastly ambitious urban plan formed of a network of interlinked "Centertons" (government centers), "Pleasantvilles" (residential spaces), and "Milltowns" (factory districts). For Depression-wearied audiences, Democracity was a promise of a near-future U.S. society that had solved crime, class struggle, poverty, and pollution through ambitious real estate development. Insisting that it was "not a utopia," its brochure spelled out how such a plan could practically work in detail. "The City of Tomorrow which lies below you is as harmonious as the stars in their courses overhead—No anarchy—destroying the freedom of others—can exist here."

It was quite a pitch—and of course the technocratic renaissance it advertised primarily predicted the banality of mass-produced Levittowns and the suburban flight that would define the complacent '40s and '50s. As for the 1939 World's Fair as a whole, it was mostly a glammed-up product expo for mammoth corporations like GM and Westinghouse; as one account laconically put it, the fair would embody a "general corporate understanding of progress."



Ruth Reeves, Scarves (1938) in “Art for the Millions.” Photo by Ben Davis.

Meanwhile, the Trylon and Perisphere became handy logos to print on merchandise for those looking to take home a memory of the promised “Tomorrow.” At the Met, Ruth Reeves’s silk scarves are shown as an example. Their pattern mingles the futuristic profiles of Trylon and Perisphere with images of the Founding Fathers—sci-fi spectacle harmonized with untroubled patriotism; a better future advertised at a price that was not too unreasonable, either in terms of money or of social strife.

The scarves are lovely. They are also a perfect note to end this show on. They nicely point to how ‘30s aspirations for a more just economic order were spun into promises of ever-“new and improved” stuff, post-World War II—essentially, how the U.S. went from embracing one meaning of the slogan “Art for the Millions” to another.

“Art for the Millions: American Culture and Politics in the 1930s” is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, through December 10, 2023.

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