

fied. Such works cannot be called art. Neither can they be called good propaganda. There is a relationship between content and art form, which cannot be broken without resulting in artistic aberration.

The radical workers' desire for beauty is already evident. They want art that expresses their world; art which they can use in their struggles. They buy prints even more regularly than the middle-class patrons, as is plainly indicated by the large sales of prints produced by the John Reed Club.

They make demands on the artist to decorate their meeting places. True, they at this time guarantee only the cost of materials and in some cases also the cost of the food for the artist on the job. Revolutionary workers do not support galleries or order portraits of themselves. They do, however, support union halls and club rooms.

The American worker whose artistic diet has been saccharine magazine covers and colored comics is developing a taste for real art with surprising swiftness. The increasing number of artists who have aligned themselves with his interests are showing him that he can use art for his needs. It is amusing to find in revolutionary art that the "man in the street," the "barbarian" in the bourgeois art world, becomes the real guide and critic.

A delegation of clothing workers, examining a John Reed exhibition, grew quite irate about a painting showing them as lifeless, bent creatures ripe for an early grave. "That's not us," they reproached the artist. "We've got life in us. Come and see us on the picket line. The people you have painted look like dope fiends or scabs!"

Of all the schools of art molded by the crisis, the revolutionary school promises most to develop a new art. The New Deal has not produced new art. It fills the stomachs of some artists made empty by the crisis, but the art they produce, as must be plain to everybody, is the old art, and most of it is very poor.

Bourgeois ideology can no longer inspire great creative works. Its "ideals" are so unreal in relation to existing conditions that for the artist to base his work on the former would produce only inanities. Great bourgeois art was created by great individualists. Present social conditions have revealed that individualism is no longer a possibility. The artist today must have a social philosophy in order to produce for a society which evidently belongs to the masses.

And the revolutionary artist is the only one working today equipped with such an outlook which includes the acceptance of class struggle—the process of social change.

## *B. Against Proletarian Art*

BY AARON BERKMAN

**T**HERE was never a time in art history when confusion reigned more than today. Every year a new fad is created. Artists have dug into past histories exhuming cultures from the African savage down through the Italian Rococo pe-

riod. Each artist has taken unto himself the unexpected, reviving idioms long forgotten and making them his own. Picasso, a profound researcher in the field of art, is at one time a Greek classic, at another he strips the great art of the masters down

to its basic structure and creates the cubistic school. Matisse startles us with a revival of the Persian and Oriental. Modigliani found in the art of the African savage a basis for startling creation.

With these as guides each lesser artist strives to do unexpected things, and he who is first in exploiting an old idea in a new garb is well assured of momentary success. It has come to that sorry pass that professional integrity is no longer a virtue in the arts, and in some quarters the cry has become not how well a thing is done but how naïve it is. Imagine saying to an accomplished fiddler, "Your music is so lovely, it is so naïve." This fad has left the skilled artist confused and many have stripped themselves bare of the accomplished techniques of the past and in our complex civilization have tried to maintain the simplicity and naïveté of an untutored mind.

The current art frontiers are bounded on the right wing by the surrealist school, on the left by the revolutionary artists, two extremities reflecting the opposite poles of our social order. Both are removed from reality, and exist in a dream-world of speculation. Surrealism, as a cult of the snobbish élite, disdains contact with everyday life and derives sustenance from the erotic dreams and the sensualities of the decadent; while the revolutionary artists discolor reality to propagate a revolutionary ideology. These latter, since the decline of Hoover prosperity, have grown into a school whose influence upon our cultural development is still a matter of the future.

## II

Revolutionary art in this country is synonymous with the activities of the John Reed Club. This organization, nurturing upon

the social chaos resulting from the depression, has gathered into its fold artists of the Communist faith who propose to drag art into the class struggle. Preaching that all art is propaganda, it has undertaken the strenuous task of creating a "proletarian art" to instruct and incite the workers, with a platform which has officially been summarized as follows:

The conception of art, as an ivory tower affair, is now outgrown, and artists must align themselves with the revolutionary proletariat, looking toward a classless society, toward an infinitely higher culture than capitalism offers—or they must align themselves with the capitalist enemy.

The main purpose is "to make the club a functioning center of proletarian culture, to clarify and elaborate the point of view of proletarian as opposed to bourgeois culture." The enthusiasm with which the artists adopted this platform may be surmised from an early quotation of Mike Gold, who says: "If the artist will give himself to the proletarian cause, he will lose immediately worldly success, but he will be rewarded; the cause will make him a great artist."

Let us examine with what success these revolutionary artists have fulfilled their mission. To do this we must follow the devious path of "proletarian art" from its incipency to its present development.

At the "Independents" of 1930, the revolutionary artists exhibited an enormous picture, coöperatively painted, entitled "An American Landscape," which contained a conglomeration of stock ideas of propagandistic import, such as police clubbing strikers, starving miners, heroic agitators, etc. In fact, all the subject matter which "proletarian art" hopes will distinguish it from all other art was here presented as a catechism for the revolutionary. This artistic effort, done in the spirit of an enor-

mous cartoon, and never taken seriously as an artistic accomplishment, indicated the scope of an art given over entirely to political agitation. Conscious of this danger, the revolutionary artists went to the other extreme in their first important exhibition, "The Social Viewpoint in Art," at the John Reed Club, for which they were severely criticized by the *New Masses*, as follows:

For having invited, in the name of an imaginary front the prominent painters who can only submit tame picturesque cowboys (John Steuart Curry), crapshooters (Thomas Benton), fat shoppers issuing from department stores (Kenneth Hayes Miller). . . . These pictures can only confuse young artists as to the nature of revolutionary art. The exhibit could have included examples of coöperative work by artists, prints, banners, cartoons, posters, signs, illustrations of slogans, historical pictures of the revolutionary tradition in America. . . . Specific tasks, especially co-operative tasks, must be offered the artist. Only in this way will it develop a revolutionary art. The artist left to himself remains a confused individualist!

The voice of the commissariat of fine arts begins to manifest itself. These dictates, and many more, created an atmosphere among the revolutionary artists tolerable only to those of the most fanatical loyalty.

In their fall 1934 exhibit we find the revolutionary artists still hotly in quest of the revolutionary idiom. Through past experience they found obvious satiric propaganda difficult to reconcile with serious artistic work, the newspaper cartoons being the most suitable vehicle for such expression. This has left them in a state of total bewilderment as to the direction they should now follow. This hypothetical proletarian culture, as yet, does not seem to offer sufficient inspiration for a new concept of art. In spite of their contempt for

bourgeois culture they lean heavily upon it for support; instead of now searching for an idiom in the forgotten ages, they have boldly taken unto themselves the techniques of current fashions and have adopted them to their own use. We find exhibited a proletarian "Burial of a Worker," but in the style of Picasso; a "Sweatshop Strike" after Kenneth Hayes Miller; "Starving Derelicts" after Thomas Benton; a crucified "Rouault" worker and surrealist essays into American history. Nowhere do we find a manifestation of that elusive proletarian art of which they speak. And although Benton and Miller were found unworthy of their exhibits, they extol them by imitation.

The psychological aspects of contemporary revolutionary art make an interesting study. The phobia of the defeated, the suffering of the mentally hysterical are its main characteristics. Most of these artists reveal a fanaticism, a morbid revel in human misery, a glut for horror that betrays a fantastic thirst for martyrdom equivalent to the fanaticism of the early Christians who castigated themselves in the name of God and Kingdom Come.

The tragic ending of Diego Rivera's career in this country is a good example of the consequences derived from mixing art with politics. Rivera, condemned by the revolutionary artists as a renegade and counter-revolutionist, an unprincipled demagogue who "accepted commissions from Morrow and the Rockefellers," tried to appease his revolutionary conscience by propagating a revolutionary idea in a citadel of capitalism. A heroic gesture which the revolutionary artists used for their own furtherance. Although they themselves would have ruined Rivera, still they championed his cause "of liberty in art" against the "vandalism of the money barons."

In contrast to Rivera, Orosco, in this

country, has kept aloof from party politics. Although his murals at Dartmouth College (the seat of "bourgeois culture") are steeped in revolutionary ideology, they are accepted both by radicals and conservatives as the greatest murals of our time. The acceptance of his murals by all is due to the fact that his concept is of universal scope and was not created to satisfy the dictates of a fundamentalistic revolutionary hierarchy.

From the activities of the revolutionary artists we can conclude that this cry for proletarian art is a political subterfuge devised by skilled politicians to win over the intellectuals to further the revolutionary cause. However, their blundering actions have estranged many who would otherwise be sympathetic. The true artist will not be regimented. To mix art with politics muddles issues, endangers creative genius, and jeopardizes the cultural heritage of mankind. The great artists of the past, despite political sympathies, and conscious of the inseparable barrier between art and economics, never allowed political dictates to influence their art.

Courbet is a classic example. Although confronted with prison for political convictions, he continued to paint "ivory towered" nudes and landscapes. Rembrandt brought about his own ruin rather than flatter his patrons by changing the "Night Watch" to suit their fancies, and we may mention that although the "Hundred Guilder Print" is a profound work of art reaching the depths of human pathos, it would not adorn the walls of the revolutionary artists because of its religious garb. Goya would not flatter the taste of a commissariat any more than he did that of a king.

The art of these men, motivated through self-will, stands beyond factional disputes and current happenings.

### III

We can conclude from the foregoing that revolutionary art differs from other art not by the newly discovered idiom; rather, through its propagandistic import. It reaches its highest achievement in the satiric political cartoon. Through the pages of the *New Masses* we follow the development of Soglow, Gellert, Gropper, Burck, to a rare degree of excellence. However, in the realms of painting, it is another matter. Here, lost, they follow the path of the cartoon; otherwise, in their effort to reach the masses, they create art of such a low level as to repel the initiated. This conclusion is based upon evidence, rather than upon hypothetical reasoning. This evidence we find in two paintings, "The Sale of the Serf" and "The New Kolkhoz," recently reproduced in the *Moscow News*. These pictures are obviously of such a mediocre level that their refusal would be imperative even in our own National Academy of Design. He who seeks success by catering to authority can manufacture "pot-boilers" given completely to propaganda as easily as he can turn out still lifes, a landscape, or a pretty face.

Potentially, the taste of the worker does not differ from that of the middle class. The worker can be fed propaganda because he has no criteria by which to gauge artistic values. Untampered with, he resorts to the same commonplaces as his imperfect middle-class brethren. In a classless society I am sure the present art created for his delectation would be entirely out of place, if not considered a downright insult. For when in Utopia, who would desire a "Policeman Clubbing a Striker" upon his walls, reminding one of the vulgar days of his early struggles? Whereas, what would be more æsthetic and "aristocratic" than the pleasure derived from a

Matisse painting, that is, if one is sufficiently enlightened! For others, Maxfield Parrish could be revived into the flourishing business he enjoyed in the former days of "middle class taste and culture."

#### IV

The world of art has succumbed more readily to the surrealist than to the proletarian artists. In the final success of surrealism we have a revolution threatening the supremacy of Picasso, with Salvador Dali, king of the "neuroticrats," making a bid for the throne. This remnant of the last days of Parisian rule in the world of art has reached a state of degeneration equivalent to Huysman's "Against the Grain" in literature.

The "neuroticrats," when they gain power, will change the whole world into a surrealistic state of the subconscious, where sensations of the most cosmic nature will be insisted upon, only those of the most delicate sensibilities will be admitted to the royal sanctum, and the vulgar will be exterminated.

To understand the surrealistic movement we must retrace our steps to the healthful art of its true exponents, Chirico and Lurcat. In Chirico we find a nature searching for consolation in nostalgic revivals of Greek classicism, created with the healthful imagery of the Italian steeped with love for early Mediterranean cultures. Lurcat, French to the core, has rekindled in modern art the glowing light of Claude Lorrain and Poussin, reviving the spirit of classic lyricism, also essentially French.

However, the world moves too fast, and surrealism in its present form has developed a neurosis demanding the attentions of the psychiatrist. The vogue for Chirico has passed, while Lurcat has never taken his deserved place, along with Braque, as

first of the French moderns. The symptoms of surrealistic degeneration we find manifested in Pierre Roy (the vogue of last year). In Pierre Roy, as with Dali, surrealism has technically developed a meticulous metallic polish to be envied even by Watrous (late honored president of the Academy). With Roy, surrealism enters the state of Proustian dreams. Adolescent longings, inversive indulgencies, have here developed pictorial psychoneuroses of deep interest to the psychiatrist who finds the process of mental masturbation a wide field for speculation. This art, although introverted, still affords harmless outlet; but in Dali surrealism calls out with the suppressed cry of the mentally sadistic, and the degeneration of surrealism is complete.

In examining the Dali surrealistic world of dreams we find many furnishings from the Freudian antique shop, such as commodes, "projecting objects," and chairs, upon which "indefinable things" happen. . . . In fact, a little fairyland of Bo Peep adventures with the Big Bad Wolf, who will get you if you don't watch out! Cooked up thrills for gaping innocents who seek excitement in erotica, tales of perversion and murder—or anything that is "mysterious." The cult of surrealism has become "the incomprehensible," for to be comprehensible is to be found out.

Dali hides behind this text:

Snapshot Photographs in color of subconscious images, surrealistic, extravagant, paranoiac, hypnagogical, extra-pictorial, phenomenal, super-abundant, super-sensitive, etc. . . . of CONCRETE IRRATIONALITY. . . .

In other words, surrealism's latest exponent is a miniature painter of mediocre dimensions, sterile in content, but fortified by a superb draughtsmanship, who in his pretense at ambiguity, assumes our ignorance of the Freudian premise.

The reverberation of revolution also manifests itself in the field of art criticism, if we can judge from recent reviews. The benign *Herald Tribune*, holding stubbornly to its conservative course, we suddenly find the vanguard of liberals championing Soyer's proletarian picture in the Carnegie show and Curry's "Fugitive," Block's "Lynching," Hoffman's "Mine

Tragedy," and Laning's "On Our Way," in the Whitney Bi-Annual. While the respectable New York *Sun*, reputed upholder of "advanced thought" in art, encourages the appellative "reactionary" for upholding only surrealism and the imported art from Paris. . . .

Which shows what happens in a revolution.



# CALLES AND THE MEXICAN MALAISE

BY ALICE CARMICHAEL

UNDER some palm trees in Cuernavaca sits flexlessly a very wealthy, weary man, who is still allowed to rule Mexico. The highway along which he and some of the pro-consuls of the Revolution have reared their country seats has been rechristened by the irreverent, pawky common people, in a flick of their sardonic, mordant wit, *Avenida Ali Baba*.

The wealthy, weary man will not much longer be allowed to rule Mexico. He is only fifty-five, but he is burned out, caved in, tired beyond surcease. He shows it. His shoulders slump. When he stands one notes that his knees are sprung, angle outward. The stick that he used to bear and swing for modishness now comes into helpful play when he walks. Deep furrows rive his face; the skin sags from his boxy jaws. If you get behind him you may see those recessions of flesh from either flank of the backbone, below the base of the skull, which are sure anatomical signs of senescence. His voice quavers slightly. If he talks too long, it pipes, shrills reedily. He will not receive many visitors. They suck his vitality and irritate him.

From the steadiness and authority of his glance has departed an appreciable amount of its former steely, hard-staring, penetrating, slightly ophidian quality. In it now there is more of slyness, of suspicious speculation, of dubious questing, intimately trenching, perhaps, upon thinly veiled apprehension of something tragic which may impend. It is the look of a relegated oldster

who, in thought and accomplishment, belongs and yields himself to the past; who with little-ease is fretfully and resentfully enduring a dubious and disillusioned present, and the horizon of whose personal future is so straitly drawn in that the dipping of each day's sun induces melancholy musings upon how many more suns it will be given him to watch set and rise. He has a great deal of money. He will die a rich man. He might have been more than that, but he tossed away his chances.

Plutarco Elias Calles, apotheosized by his adulators as *El Gran Jefe del Revolucion*, remains an interesting and important personality. Interesting, because of what he has been, and is; important, because of what will be his influence and that of his works, affirmatively and negatively, for weal or for woe, upon the proximate and future history of his country, after he passes, politically or corporeally.

Calles is being edged toward the wings, nearer and nearer to his final exit from the stage. Unless death scythes him before he can manage his withdrawal in dignified decorum, it cannot be provisioned as a triumphal retirement. For it is written that dictators, unblessed by the fair fortune to yield their ghosts at the flood of their puissance, are hurled from their eminences involuntarily by the propulsion of the same forces by which they erected themselves into dictators. Most of them overstay their markets. Calles appears to have done it. He knows it. His friends and partizans