



# WHAT THE ARTISTS WANT

*Give us a chance to use our skill for the war, they say. Artist as soldier. How Great Britain and the Soviet Union mobilized their artists. What we can do.*

THE Artists League of America has issued a call to the country's artists to participate in a conference in New York City June 13, 14, and 15. The subject of the meeting will be: how can artists join in the war effort, using their skills for victory? The League was formed by an amalgamation of the United American Artists and the American Artists Congress, veteran organizations in anti-fascist struggle.

The artists' problem is not so much whether they can help win the war, but whether they will be permitted to do so. This is the concern of all intellectuals today, and no secondary matters, such as technical and esthetic differences, should obscure the central issue: will the artist, as citizen and craftsman, be allowed to perform his useful and necessary function?

The long history of the enforced alienation of the artist from society need not be gone into here. It must be pointed out, however, that artists as a whole have never accepted their position without reservations. Many struggled openly against a servitude which kept them from the lives and knowledge of the common people. Who can forget the names of Michelangelo, Callot, Rembrandt, David, Goya, Delacroix, Daumier, Courbet? And now today, Picasso, Orozco, Gropper? Yet, never before has the revolt of the artist, the breakaway from isolation and the return to the people, acquired the character and intensity of a mass movement. Fighting alongside the trade unions and other anti-fascist groups and similar organizations, painters, sculptors, and graphic men have made the public use of art a living force for progress in America.

As in the past, the refusal of the artist to conform to the taste and values of official and private art patrons has brought severe economic and even political penalties. The well known artist, George Biddle, in an article published in *Harper's* magazine, September 1941, gives figures for the average annual incomes of artists in various cities: Pittsburgh, \$295; Chicago, \$165; San Francisco, \$510; Cleveland, \$72. This at a time when, as Mr. Biddle states, "there is a greater curiosity about art and a more intelligent interest in it in America today than probably anywhere in Europe during the past 400 years." The supposed "uselessness" of the artist does not spring from his inherent lack of ability to adjust himself to the needs of the people, but to economic circumstances over which he has little control. The unemployed artist, in peace

or war, is no more useless intrinsically than the unemployed patternmaker, millhand, or carpenter.

The artists have a concrete answer for those who cry that they think only of themselves and are not willing to make sacrifices. Almost 100 Negro and white blood donors from the UAA alone have responded to the Red Cross appeal. First aid classes have been organized. Union members are air raid wardens, volunteer firemen, and ambulance drivers. They have done volunteer art work for the war relief agencies, the OCD, and neighborhood defense groups (much of this at their own expense for materials). Many are serving in the Army, Navy, and merchant marine; others are working as machinists in the war industries.

A LITTLE over a month after the attack on Pearl Harbor delegates from twenty-one art societies, representing 10,000 artists, met at the Architectural League of New York to unite in one body for more effective cooperation in winning the war. They formed Artists for Victory, Inc., whose purpose was "to assist artists in utilizing their special qualifications to the best advantage." A questionnaire was broadcast so that some estimate could be made of the abilities of artists, whether for murals, printmaking, poster work, illustration, photography, map-making, or teaching. If little has been accomplished so far, the fault can hardly be attributed to unwillingness on the artists' side.

The blame must rather be placed squarely on the small heads of those same reactionaries whose attacks upon labor are sabotaging the national war effort, who want to set employer against worker, white against Negro, farmer against union man, Protestant against Jew, and handworker against intellectual. They who danced on the floor of Congress whenever a measure to consolidate the cultural gains of our country was killed; they strangled the WPA cultural projects in the name of economy; and they now want to abolish the forty-hour week for some other "noble" reason. They want to prevent the artist from taking his place beside his brother soldier and worker, for this would be another step toward the national unity which they fear.

The effects of the attack on all cultural expression is clearly manifest on the local New York art project. Artists have been forced to abandon their creative work to perform unskilled labor for which no proper equipment has been provided. Many have left statues

uncompleted and murals half finished on the walls of schools and other public buildings. It has become mandatory for every artist on the project to be trained for some industrial job—but at a drop to fifty-two dollars a month, and with no assurance of his getting such a job when he is through learning. Meanwhile, one or two advertising firms have sewed up contracts with the government for work which these and other unemployed artists might do more feelingly and at less cost.

IS THIS the role which the artist must play in the war? Our allies do not think so. Two months after the outbreak of war an Artists Advisory Committee was established in Great Britain, headed by the director of the National Gallery. A list of qualified artists was drawn up. These were to work on commission, recording the events of the war both at home and abroad. Public exhibitions of their work are held.

The British government has bought the work of amateur artists in the Auxiliary Fire Service. The March 2 issue of *Life* reproduced some of these pictures, which illustrate episodes of ARP duty. There have also been poster contests for juvenile artists.

An organized effort has been made to do something about the economic plight of the artist. In October 1939, prominent British artists held the first benefit show to assist younger artists. Similar exhibits have since been held under the auspices of the Institute of Adult Education. The famous CEMA, Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, is subsidized jointly by the government and the Pilgrim Trust to give help to needy artists. The CEMA also organizes exhibits of ancient and modern art and industrial design. More than 250,000 people have attended these shows in industrial areas, where they are held in factory canteens and restaurants. A particularly important exhibit was organized by the Artists International Association in the canteen of the Ministry of Shipping.

In Britain the artists have been employed mainly to record the changing face of their country in wartime. Artists in the Soviet Union are encouraged to engage more actively in the war itself, and their work is treated as an integral part of the military effort. The Trade Union of Art Workers and the Union of Creative Artists have organized workshops for the production of posters and cartoons.



Posters are executed rapidly, following the news. They are exhibited in the now world-famous windows of the Tass news agency and thousands of reproductions by stencil process are distributed throughout the country. A special editorial board has been set up to discuss ideas and gags with the artists. The old postcards with their views of city and country have been replaced by cards with agitational cartoons in bright colors, based upon folklore expressions and humor. Satirical posters directed at the enemy are plastered on every wall in Moscow. All satirical verses, recited and set to music, are illustrated. Groups of artists have gone to the front and held conferences with soldiers and partisans.

Even the normal cultural function of art is not forgotten. When the artists of White Russia were evacuated from their territories overrun by the enemy last summer, they continued their work in other Soviet Republics. No one shouted that they were "boondoggling" or that the government was "mollycoddling" them.

What then can American artists do in this war? The President of the United States has acknowledged the artists' acceptance of their responsibility as citizens. In his address to the nation on April 28, he said, "Our soldiers and sailors are members of well disciplined units. But they are still and forever individuals—free individuals. They are farmers, workers, businessmen, professional men, *artists*, clerks. They are the United States of America." The artists ask for no more than the privilege of assuming their duties, and of using their craft

as one among many weapons to defeat the enemy. They have proposed the unification of all federal agencies dealing with art, such as the Treasury and WPA, and the employment of artists on a non-relief basis. They will do war posters, cartoons, silk screen work and educational displays for the Army, Navy, and government departments, illustrations for government books and pamphlets, murals and heroic sculpture and floats for parades. They can organize exhibits and other cultural entertainment for the camps and service clubs, working with the Morale Division of the Army. They can contribute to the decoration and design of war housing. They can easily be trained for camouflage, photography, map-making, and other technical work. The old outworn distinction between "fine" and "applied" art will be further broken down by the tasks which the artist accepts today.

Even more important for the artist, his work will open to him fields of knowledge from which he has long been barred by the division of labor and social custom. He will go into the laboratory, the factory, the field, and into battle, learning to see in a new way, comprehending the world of science, and making human beings and human relationships once more the subject of his creative labor. He will use all the resources of the recent traditions of painting and sculpture—post-impressionism, expressionism, "abstract" art, surrealism—but he will deepen the aim of art, returning it to the humanistic strivings of the people. As the League states:

"Need creative work motivated by the stormy passions or the tumultuous ideas of this people's war give rise to an art of lesser dimension than that of the landscape, the still life, or the abstraction? Need sculpture of the heroes of Bataan, or paintings of heroes of production be less dignified than a bather of Cezanne or less inspiring than a ballet girl by Degas? The answer has already been given by such great achievements as the 'Guernica' by Picasso, the 'Seventh Symphony' written for the defense of Leningrad by Dmitri Shostakovitch and by the wonderful art of the United Nations. The best contribution that the artists can make collectively to the war will be through art. The nation has need for paintings, sculpture and graphic art about the great realities of the war."

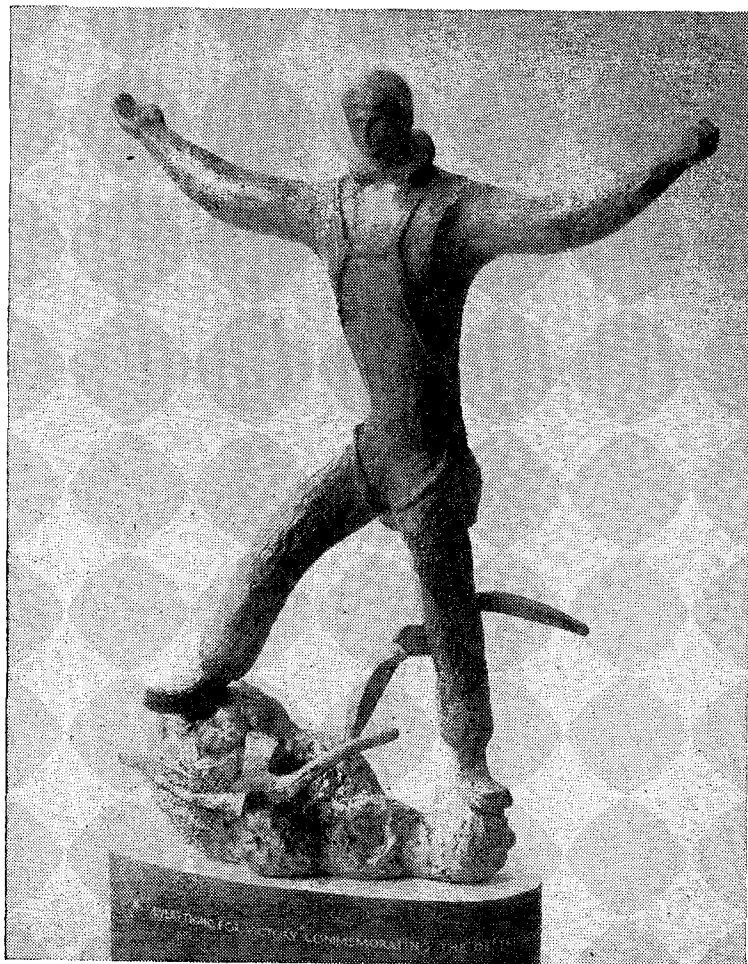
With this statement, American artists announce that they have come of age. Will they be permitted to work for victory?

CHARLES HUMBOLDT.

## Exciting Soviet Film

"Red Tanks" clicks. . . . New Hollywood comedy has ideas.

N EITHER wholly documentary nor wholly fictive, *Red Tanks* may perhaps best be equated with some of our own productions for defense, such as the recent James Stewart short urging boys to join the Air Force. It is the first Soviet film about and for this war which we have seen here, except for newsreels,



From "Artists in the War," on exhibit at the ACA Gallery, 26 W. 8th St., N. Y. C., June 13-July 14.