

art interrupted

by Jeremy Shere

**The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection
Of an Historic Cold War Exhibit**

At IU Art Museum

September 13-December 15, 2013



*'This is what the
COMMUNISTS
and other extremists
want to portray...
that the American
people are despondent,
broken down or of
hideous shape...'*

—Rep. Fred Busbey

O. Louis Guglielmi
American, b. Egypt, 1906-1956
Subway Exit, 1946
Oil on canvas
Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art,
Auburn University; Advancing American
Art Collection
1948.1.17

This September, the Indiana University Art Museum will host “Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy,” an exhibition featuring American paintings first assembled in the mid-1940s as part of America’s Cold War cultural battle with the Soviet Union. The exhibition was designed to tour on three continents, but only months after being commissioned, it was abruptly shut down amid rabid controversy.

While the show features many high-quality works by well-known artists, including Stuart Davis, Georgia O’Keeffe,

and Edward Hopper, the story of the exhibit’s rise, fall, and recent resurrection is as compelling as the art itself.

“The most interesting part of the exhibit for me is the intersection of art and politics,” says Jenny McComas, IU Art Museum’s Class of 1949 Curator of Western Art After 1800. “As the United States emerged from World War II as a world power and entered the early stages of struggle against the Soviet Union and against communism generally, the exhibition fell victim to America’s changing conception of itself.”

Anton Refregier
American, b. *Russia*, 1905-1979
End of the Conference, 1945
 Oil on canvas
 Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The
 University of Oklahoma; purchase,
 U.S. State Department Collection
 1948.1730

*'If that's
 ART,
 then I'm a
 HOTTENTOT.'*

—President Harry S. Truman



(left)
 Morris Kantor
American, b. *Russia*, 1896-1974
Afternoon, n.d.
 Oil on canvas
 Fred Jones Jr. Museum of
 Art, University of Oklahoma;
 purchased with funds from the
 Museum Association, U.S. State
 Department Collection, 2012
 2012.007.001

(below)
 O. Louis Guglielmi
American, b. *Egypt*, 1906-1956
Tenements, 1939
 Oil on canvas
 Georgia Museum of Art, University
 of Georgia; University purchase
 GMOA 1948.197

The Rise: Advancing American Art

The story begins in 1946 when, having emerged victorious from the Second World War, the United States began looking at itself in a new light as not only an industrial and military superpower but also as a nation with a robust cultural heritage. To prove to the world that American art rivaled that of any other country, and that American artists enjoyed an enviable degree of expressive freedom—especially in contradistinction to the Kremlin-enforced socialist-realist style—the State Department appointed visual-arts specialist Joseph LeRoy Davidson to curate a program, titled “Advancing American Art,” to feature the very best contemporary American painters. The plan was to send the exhibit on a tour of Latin America, Asia, and Europe.

What the State Department did not know, or perhaps did not see as significant, was Davidson’s ideological penchant for promoting abstractionism over regionalism (a traditional

style featuring rural scenes from the American heartland championed by such artists as Thomas Hart Benton). “It was a moment of change in American art, when forward-looking artists were moving away from realist styles and toward abstraction,” McComas says. “In its mix of geometric abstraction and 1930s-era social realism, the exhibition reflects this transition.”

The Fall: Conservative Outcry

Amassing 79 oil paintings at a cost of \$49,912, the State Department sent the exhibit to New York, Paris, Prague, and Latin America. Before long, though, conservative politicians and traditional-minded art critics began to cry foul, accusing many of the artists and their works of promoting anti-American values.

Prompting the conservative attack was a general distrust and misunderstanding of art forms—primarily social realism and abstractionism—that questioned the status quo in art and society and that were often associated with





Karl Zerbe
American, b. Germany, 1903-1972
Around the Lighthouse, n.d.
Encaustic on canvas
Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art, Auburn University; Advancing American Art Collection
1948.1.35



(left)
Abraham Rattner
American, 1893-1978
The Yellow Table, 1945
Oil on canvas
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma; purchase, U.S. State Department Collection
1948.1729

(below)
Byron Browne
American, 1907-1961
Still Life in Red, Yellow, and Green, 1945
Oil on canvas
Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art, Auburn University; Advancing American Art Collection
1948.1.4
Courtesy of Stephen Bernard Browne



‘Only in a DEMOCRACY, where the full development of the INDIVIDUAL is not only permitted but fostered, could such an exhibition be assembled.’

—William Benton, assistant secretary of state for public affairs

subversive politics. Even the liberal *New York Times* questioned Davidson’s curatorial judgment, complaining that the works were weighted too heavily in favor of “radical developments” such as “extreme expressionism, fantasy, surrealism, and abstraction.”

Also fueling conservative ire was the fact that many of the artists were immigrants, such as Egyptian-born O. Louis Guglielmi and Lithuanian-born Jew Ben Shahn, and minorities, including African American artists Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence. In the early years of the Cold War, conservative American politicians eyed both groups with suspicion.

“It was one of the many waves of the culture wars that marked the twentieth century,” says IU Art

Museum Director Adelheid Gealt. “Immigrant artists, who were largely responsible for introducing European modernism into the American art scene, were often attacked as being anti-American. It’s ironic that the U.S. Congress labeled the work in ‘Advancing American Art’ as anti-American in much the same way that the Nazis banned works that did not meet their approval.”

Even President Harry S. Truman got into the act, describing such modern art as “merely the vaporings of half-baked, lazy people.”

Bowing to conservative pressure, the State Department killed the program in 1947, fired Davidson, and sold the works at auction, mainly to the University of Oklahoma, Auburn University,

and the University of Georgia, for a profit of about \$5,000.

Those who protested the demise of the program included a large contingent of American artists who convened an “Artists’ Action Meeting” at which they characterized the cancellation of “Advancing American Art” as “a step backward in our cultural relations with other countries.”

The Resurrection: Art Interrupted

In 2011, curators from art museums at the above-mentioned universities collaborated in reuniting all but ten of the original paintings, as well as a group of watercolors also part of “Advancing American Art” that had been intended for an unrealized exhibition tour of the

“Art Interrupted” was organized by the Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art at Auburn University, the Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia, and the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma with funding provided by the Henry Luce Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. The presentation of the exhibition in Bloomington was made possible by the Class of 1949 Endowment for the Curator of Western Art after 1800 and the Indiana University Art Museum’s ARC Fund. Additional support was provided by a challenge grant generously issued by David Jacobs and matched by the IU Art Museum National Advisory Board.

Far East. The first exhibition of the collection took place in fall of 2012 at Auburn University.

For McComas, “Art Interrupted” is worth seeing for a number of reasons. For one, she says, it speaks to the diversity of the American art scene in the early post-war period. “When you think

about American art of the 1940s, abstract expressionism comes first to mind, but there was really a great variety of styles and ideas at play, and the exhibit does a great job of depicting that.”

Alongside its historical and political importance, for Gealt the exhibit is also alluring for the arresting nature of the

art. “It’s a truly rich visual feast,” she says. “‘Art Interrupted’ is the sort of intellectually, historically, and aesthetically rich show that university art museums do best. We’re very proud to have the exhibit come to IU.”

To learn more about “Art Interrupted,” visit artinterrupted.org. ✨