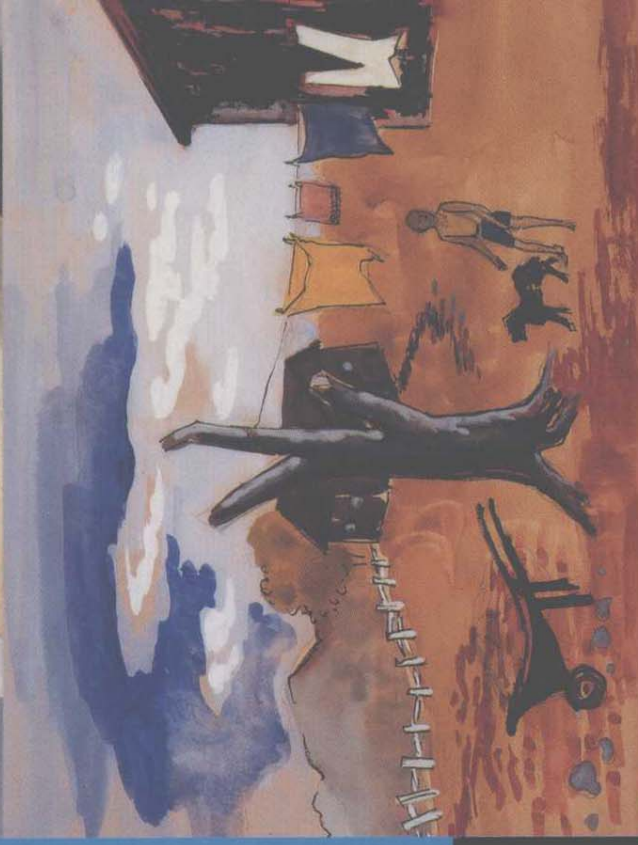




**PAINTING,
POLITICS, AND
CULTURAL
CONFRONTATION
AT MID-CENTURY**



SECOND EDITION



Advancing American Art

INTRODUCTION BY LEON F. LITWACK



TAYLOR D. LITTLETON AND

MALTBY SYKES

ADVANCING AMERICAN ART

PAINTING, POLITICS, AND CULTURAL CONFRONTATION AT MID-CENTURY

with an Introduction by Leon F. Litwack

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PREFACE

The following pages tell the story of an art exhibit called "Advancing American Art" which, for a few months forty years ago, attracted an extraordinary amount of national attention as it temporarily became a center within the whirling vocabulary describing public attitudes toward modern art in the first postwar decade. During the last ten years or so, as our scholarly and cultural interest in the forties has increased, a few abbreviated versions of the story have appeared within larger contexts of discussion, addressing such themes as the Cold War political uses of modern art, the exploitation of American culture as an instrument of State Department diplomacy, and the evolution of governmental policy toward the arts.¹

However, the story of "Advancing American Art" deserves an ampler narration. The premises on which the exhibit was formed for its projected diplomatic tour of Europe and South America and the prudent selection of

the pictures themselves—despite the almost hysterical objections to them at the time—created a collection which seems to represent rather well the array of avant-garde painting being produced in America during the thirties and forties, prior to the advent of the radical Abstract Expressionist mode. The conditions of the curious public sale into which the exhibit was forced by its notoriety allowed a sizable portion of the collection to remain intact and to be transported to the South, bringing with it and sustaining for a new generation of viewers an increasingly valuable image of an important stage in the history of American art. All of the thirty-six paintings purchased by Auburn University in 1948 are reproduced in a final section of this book, with a commentary on each by Professor Maltby Sykes.

The account of this unexpected involvement of Alabama with the New York art scene is itself intriguing,

but even our newly acquired Sun Belt perspective must be startled by the mere facts of the fiscal transaction alone. For it seems incredible that in 1948, a public institution like Auburn University, struggling economically, could have acquired from the government for outlays of one hundred dollars—or even half that—paintings now valued at a quarter of a million dollars each, or could even have secured such lesser bargains as paintings purchased for sixty or one hundred dollars whose values have by now increased by 800, 900, and 1000 percent.

We are now able, of course, to see more clearly the relationship between art and politics during the decades just before and after World War II. We can understand, for example, how the organized Fascist repression of the arts and the violent condemnation of abstract and expressionist painting by the early Hitler regime affected, during the same period, the complex reaction of the American modern-art community to communism. For to many artists—including some of the “Advancing American Art” painters—communism then seemed a force which was politically opposed to such an event as the infamous “Degenerate Art” exhibit sharked up by

the Nazis in 1937.² Expressions of leftist sympathies, either symbolic or overt, obviously had little real significance after the war, especially as official Soviet attitudes toward nonrepresentational and nonpatriotic painting were gradually revealed to be as abusive and malevolent as those prevalent in Nazi Germany. But by then, “communism” had become the new fright-word, and conservative attacks on “subversive” artists and the un-American nature of abstract art in general were a common feature of the emerging hysteria. The present volume attempts in part to define the location of “Advancing American Art” along this irregular continuum, which would end rather remarkably in the fifties with the dynamic transformation of modern art into a Cold War symbol of American freedom of expression.

But the chronicle of this almost forgotten exhibit is less art history than it is the account of an event which tells us something about America after the war, when the first half of the century was drawing to a close. Certainly the meanings and associations which in retrospect seem to cluster around that event are not in themselves fully adequate to explain the confused plurality of American life in the late forties as the nation

sought to reconcile its sacrificial experiences of the Depression and the war with its unsettling role in the new international theater. However, imprinted though some of them are with heated rhetoric and ambivalent motives, these meanings may nevertheless create for us a suggestive addition to our mid-century memory. For a reconsideration of "Advancing American Art" captures a significant transitional moment, defining briefly but clearly the figures of confrontation which affected the shape and folds, so to speak, of the cultural garments

being worn in that critical period of postwar passage. Those figures of confrontation and challenge of American self-conceptions, as Professor Leon Litwack's essay makes clear, would become increasingly visible in the fabrics of the fifties. And, to be sure, they have reappeared in varied patterns of expression to mark the life of subsequent decades, including that in which we live today, over forty years later.

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INTRODUCTION

THE NIFTY FIFTIES

Myth and Reality

Leon F. Litwack

The indispensable strength of this nation remains freedom of expression. If there is reason to be proud of our heritage, it is in the right we exercise to dissent, to say what we please, to write what we please, to sing what we please, to paint what we please. "Advancing American Art" stands very much in that tradition. Throughout our history, the role of the artist, like that of the musician, the philosopher, the novelist, the poet, and the scholar, has often rested on the willingness to be disturbers of the peace, to probe the nation's myths, to expose the contradictions between American ideals and American practices, to force Americans to reexamine assumptions and to see and feel in ways that may be genuinely

disturbing. For this very reason, artistic expression has often led a precarious existence, as in the late 1940s and in the 1950s, when it provoked suspicion, hostility, and outright repression, when dissent itself—both artistic and political—seemed somehow illegitimate, unpatriotic, and un-American.

Few decades in our history are without those picturesque qualities that later generations recall with nostalgia. The memories tend to be highly selective, avoiding the disagreeable and the divisive. The 1950s came to be remembered with fondness some twenty years later by an emotionally exhausted America seeking to recover from the traumatizing experiences of political assassinations,

racial violence, campus disorders, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate revelations of crimes in high places. By the mid-1970s, any distractions, any reassurances were more than welcome, and the fifties provided a useful escape. To think of that decade was to invoke a plethora of clichéd images: ponytails and Hula Hoops, saddle shoes and white bucks, duck tails and tail fins, hot rods and Edsels, Howdy Doody and Mickey Spillane, Davy Crockett and the Playboy Bunny, Milton Berle and Ethel Merman, Norman Vincent Peale, and *Readers's Digest*.

To Americans twenty years later, the fifties seemed comparatively calm, comfortable, and stable. Dwight David Eisenhower, who presided over most of the decade, personified those very qualities. Affectionately called "Ike," flashing his boyish grin, he was in every way comforting and reassuring. It was a unique period of peace and comparatively good times. Eisenhower terminated the war in Korea, he kept the nation at peace, he refused to commit American youths to combat situations (as in Indochina), and his "dynamic conservatism" left intact the bulk of the New Deal and Fair Deal social programs. Over the past quarter of a century, in

scholarly works, as in the periodic polls of historians, the assessment of Eisenhower and his presidency has grown increasingly positive.

"The Nifty Fifties," was how *Life* magazine labeled the decade in 1972 in a special issue of nostalgic recollections, featuring a girl in a Hula Hoop on the cover. In a lengthy article, replete with photographs of the fifties revival underway, the editors eulogized the period: "It's been barely a dozen years since the 50s ended and yet here we are again, awash in the trappings of that sunnier time, paying new attention to the old artifacts and demigods." Even the more sophisticated journals found something reassuring to say about the fifties twenty years later. A writer in *Commentary*, in a piece entitled "In Defense of the Fifties," called the decade "the happiest, most stable, most rational period the Western world has known since 1914."

Whatever the psychological or ideological needs that produced such nostalgia, the perceptions on which it rested verged on sheer fantasy and make-believe. There was no hint of conflict, no awareness of the cultural tensions and hostilities which the "Advancing American Art" episode had revealed only a few years earlier. There

was no suggestion of the contradictions, the hysteria, the fears, the sheer madness that pervaded the decade: the Smith Act trials, the House Un-American Activities Committee, loyalty oaths, the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Emmett Till lynching, rampant careerism and a stifling conformity on college campuses, sexual liberation in the form of the Kinsey report, *Peyton Place*, and *Playboy* magazine. Nothing was said about the patriotic paranoia, the obsession with loyalty, the corruption of culture, the deep and persistent apprehension about the infiltration and betrayal of the nation's major institutions, or the equally pervasive concern about physical survival.

This was the decade in which Americans learned to live with the bomb, and some dug shelters in their backyards and prepared for the worst. In the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953, Americans once again sent their young men abroad to fight and to die, this time for a cause as difficult to understand as the terrain on which the war was fought and the people who were being fought against and defended. Not even a decade had passed since the United States had emerged triumphant from World War II. And even if Americans had

been more skeptical this time around about a war to end all wars, the spectacle of renewed conflict had to be disheartening and troubling. "We were traumatized not only by what we had been through and by the almost unimaginable presence of the bomb," William Styron wrote of postwar America, "but by the realization that the entire mess was not finished after all; there was now the Cold War to face, and its clammy presence oozed into our nights and days. When at last the Korean War arrived, some short five years later, the cosmos seemed so unhinged as to be nearly unsupportable."

With its abundance of natural resources, with its enormous power and monopoly of the atomic bomb, the United States in the aftermath of World War II stood in a position of unassailable superiority. President Harry Truman did not exaggerate when he told the American people, three weeks after the end of the war, that they possessed "the greatest strength and the greatest power which man has ever reached." For Americans, who have tended to think of the future as a constantly improving version of the present, it was a time of self-congratulation and great expectations. The future would be an American future. The twentieth century, said Henry

Luce of *Life* and *Time* magazines, would be the American Century. No less ebullient, liberal columnist Max Lerner proclaimed America "the only fabulous country," and historian Daniel Boorstin was moved to ask, "Why should *we* make a five-year plan for ourselves when God seems to have had a thousand-year plan ready-made for us?"

But within two years, the American people found themselves in a situation for which there were no apparent historical precedents: a Cold War, based on the perceived threat of a monstrous international Communist conspiracy. From its headquarters in Moscow, this conspiracy was said to be bent on world conquest and the subversion and destruction of the American Way of Life. The challenge Americans faced was both formidable and frustrating. In its attempts to reorder the world, the United States came to discover that the influence it could command, based on its superior economic and military power, was far less than it had assumed. The world refused to conform to American ideals and expectations. Nations might be inspired by the American example, they might aspire to the same material plenty, but they were determined to resolve their conflicts and prob-

lems within their own cultures, needs, and aspirations. Accustomed to the role of destiny's elect, however, and in possession of the most lethal of weapons, Americans found it difficult to accept limits to their power and influence.

For the impact it would have on American society, politics, culture, and the economy, the fear of the Soviet Union and Communist aggression and subversion ranks among the most extraordinary and far-reaching developments in American history. It distorted the economy, paralyzed politics, and debased culture—strongly influencing, for example, the recall in 1947 of the State Department art exhibit which is the subject of this book. It eroded the tradition of dissent and critical inquiry. The psychology of the Cold War became so deeply entrenched in Washington, D.C., in the nation's press, in academia, in the churches, in the trade union movement, and in the minds of most Americans that only one point of view survived. To debate the assumptions on which the Cold War was based, to question the constant and inevitable danger of Soviet military and ideological aggression, to challenge the validity of official perceptions of Soviet behavior was to seem indifferent to

national security. Debate was effectively stilled, anti-communism became the definitive test of patriotism and loyalty, and a generation of dissident Americans found themselves excluded from positions of public responsibility and influence.

During World War II, the image of the Soviet Union in the American mind had been transformed from that of an ideological enemy to a sincere and gallant ally. Hollywood in 1943 produced *Mission to Moscow*, a highly favorable view of the Soviet Union based on the book by Joseph Davis, the former ambassador to Moscow. The same kind of win-the-war patriotism induced *Life* magazine, also in 1943, to devote an entire issue to the USSR. Stalin appeared on the cover, and the magazine lavished its praise on the heroic Russian people and the Red Army. But within two years of the end of World War II, the American people were encouraged by various public figures, intellectuals, and the mass media, to transfer their hatred of Hitler's Germany to Stalin's Soviet Union. Based on their deeply rooted fears of socialism and communism and on previous suspicions of the USSR, the American people made the transition with remarkable ease and conviction.

The language employed to describe for Americans the nature of the Red Peril has been compared to the language which religions have evoked in the past for describing the eternal struggle between light and darkness. President Truman articulated the growing confrontation with the Soviet Union in a rhetoric which virtually precluded debate: "We must not be confused about the issue which confronts the world today. . . . It is tyranny or freedom. . . . And even worse, communism denies the very existence of God." The president, along with the media, divided the world, irreconcilably, into camps of good and evil, the godly and the godless, the chosen and the damned, and Soviet communism came to symbolize everything Americans had been taught to fear and despise—the very depository of evil. Once the foreign policy of the United States came to reflect such rhetoric and to rest on such sharp distinctions, any debate concerning its wisdom or rationality became impossible. Henry A. Wallace, former vice-president under Roosevelt, emerged for a brief time as the principal critic of American foreign policy. Although Wallace commanded little support and waged an ineffectual campaign, J. Edgar Hoover still thought it necessary to order his FBI agents

to follow him, to open his mail, and to tap his supporters' telephones.

The actions of the Soviet Union in Europe (especially the 1948 coup in Czechoslovakia) hardened American attitudes. The "loss" of China (as though it was ours to lose), the detonation of the atomic bomb in the USSR, and the Korean War similarly reinforced American concerns. The spectacular revelations about Soviet spy rings, the Rosenberg and Hiss cases, the confessionals before congressional committees confirmed for many Americans the already prevailing suspicion that a group of men and women in this country, many of them in high places, were conspiring to undermine and destroy the nation's institutions. None other than the president himself proclaimed in 1951 that "our homes, our nation, all the things we believe in" were in grave danger, and the Truman administration responded to charges of being "soft on communism" by inaugurating an ambitious federal security program to identify and purge the government of "potential subversives."

Hollywood, too, made the transition, from films depicting a gallant Soviet ally in World War II to films that acknowledged the new set of villains and fed on the

growing fears of internal subversion. The point was made in motion pictures like *The Red Nightmare*, *The Red Menace*, *Invasion USA*, *I Was a Communist for the FBI*, *Red Planet Mars*, *Iron Curtain*, and *My Son John*—films in which innocent Americans found themselves duped by people who looked very much like themselves (and in some instances were neighbors and members of the family) but who in fact were operatives of the Communist conspiracy. Popular fiction was no less reflective of the prevailing mood. Some one million Americans purchased copies of Mickey Spillane's *One Lonely Night*, in which the tough-talking, patriotic hero, Mike Hammer, boasted of his anti-Communist exploits:

"I killed more people tonight than I have fingers on my hands. I shot them in cold blood and enjoyed every minute of it. I pumped slugs in the nastiest bunch of bastards you ever saw. They should have died long ago. . . . They never thought there were people like me in this country. They figured us all to be soft as horse manure and just as stupid."

With equal alacrity, Captain America, the Marvel

comic hero, switched from battling Nazis to exposing Communists: "Beware, commies, spies, traitors, and foreign agents! Captain America, with all loyal, free men behind him, is looking for you, ready to fight until the last one of you is exposed for the yellow scum you are."

The threat of an alien presence within the United States was brought home in such a way that it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between fact and fantasy, between, for example, Hollywood's scenarios of Red subversion and the warning of President Truman's attorney-general, J. Howard McGrath, that Communist conspirators reached into the very fiber of American life: "There are today many Communists in America. They are everywhere—in factories, offices, butcher shops, on street corners, in private business—and each carries in himself the germs of death for society." To any American who managed to see Hollywood's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in 1956, such warnings took on vivid proportions, as the movie showed decent members of the community being converted into zombies.

In a two-page spread in April 1949, featuring fifty individual passport-size photographs, *Life* magazine personalized the Red peril and provided further evidence to

underscore the attorney-general's concern. The photos were of individuals designated by *Life* as "Dupes and Fellow Travelers" of the Communist conspiracy. The accompanying article did not actually claim any of them were Communist party members, but "innocent or not," warned *Life*, "they accomplish quite as much for the Kremlin in their glamorous way as the card holder does in his drab toil." Among those pictured were some of America's leading artists, writers, actors, educators, and musicians, including Charlie Chaplin, Albert Einstein, Dorothy Parker, Norman Mailer, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Langston Hughes, Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, and Mark Van Doren. The principal offense they shared was having lent their names to causes which were deemed unconventional or critical of American foreign policy and American institutions. In *Life*'s assessment, if these individuals were not simply dupes or fellow travelers, they were "Super-Dupes" of the international Communist conspiracy. Such lists prepared the way for the blacklists of screen writers, actors, academics, and artists, many of them forced out of their careers because they were unable to explain their political views and affiliations or refused to

subject themselves to the degrading process of seeking clearance.

Whatever the perceptions, fantasies, and phobias that shaped public attitudes, the evidence suggests no genuine threat existed in these years of a Communist revolution or a military coup within the United States. There was no secret Communist army, above or underground. Nor could anyone prove any overt acts by the Communist party to overthrow the government or any significant party influence on the government's policies—certainly nothing even approaching the influence some people imagined the party had exerted. On the contrary, the Communist party had been reduced to a small and insignificant minority, some 31,000 in 1950, including FBI undercover agents. Much of the party's influence had declined by the end of the 1930s, and many had left the party, including its most illustrious and best known figures. The decline in influence and membership stemmed not from increased anti-Communist vigilance but from disillusionment with the Stalin purges, the Hitler-Stalin pact, and the continuing flip-flops in the party line to conform to Soviet policies. The decline in party influence and membership, however, did not

satisfy federal authorities; on the contrary, it increased the alarm of J. Edgar Hoover, the militant anti-Communist head of the FBI, who suggested that the fewer the number of Communists the greater the danger. In his view, and he successfully conveyed his concern to those in high places—the White House and Congress—the very fact that the Communists had committed no overt acts designed to overthrow the government was a troubling and confirming indication that such action would be taken. That kind of logic was unanswerable, and it effectively paralyzed the few skeptics or critics who still survived.

The crusade for internal security swept the country in the fifties after most of the American left had become either anti-Communist or non-Communist. The most spectacular revelations, then, were not of immediate threats to national security but of political sins committed in previous decades. Repentant ex-Communists who appeared before the various congressional committees, ranging from movie director Elia Kazan to historian Daniel Boorstin, talked of their own involvement in the Communist party and named others who had been involved with them, but almost always in the past—in the

1930s, when the party had been identified with anti-fascism, civil rights, and labor and unemployment struggles, or in the 1940s, after the Soviet Union had become an ally in the war against Nazi Germany. None of the information supplied by these witnesses in the 1950s was necessary to internal security or to the containment of communism. Through various sources, mostly police informers planted in the party, the FBI already knew the names of Communist party members.

When committees like the House Un-American Activities Committee demanded that witnesses name names, they were less interested in the names themselves than in testing the witness's conversion to anti-communism. The decision to resist or cooperate with the committee—that is, whether or not to become an informer—rested on the individual's willingness to risk loss of employment and position in the community. The only way for witnesses to save themselves, to salvage their careers and reputations was to become informers. The only way to clear one's name was to betray one's friends and associates. Complicity in subversion, in the Communist conspiracy was absolved by confession, by a public display of repentance, by becoming a member of

the informer subculture. "The confession in itself is nothing," Leslie Fiedler would write, "but without the confession . . . we will not be able to move forward from a liberalism of innocence to a liberalism of responsibility."

Joseph McCarthy made his political debut as an anti-communist crusader only after Democrats and Republicans alike had demonstrated the political advantages. More effectively than most, certainly more spectacularly than any of his political colleagues, the Wisconsin senator exploited the issue of Communist subversion for political profit. He did not himself create the fear of communism, nor was he individually responsible for the national obsession with Communist subversion. He exploited anti-communism after it had already entered the blood stream of the political culture. He infused the crusade with his own personality. He was able to explain to many fearful Americans the frustration of American power, and he gave them a set of villains, some of them the high and mighty. He also took on less significant figures, who were far more vulnerable and defenseless against his innuendos. Seeking to unearth treason and subversion, he subpoenaed a State Department employee