

When art becomes patriotic

The exhibition "Art for the Millions" at the Metropolitan Museum in New York shows political art from the 1930s.

In the U.S., the 1930s were marked by the stock market crash in New York in 1929 and the subsequent world economic crisis; mass unemployment, impoverishment and political radicalization were the result. A successful social program of the government of Franklin D. Roosevelt brought new opportunities to thousands of unemployed, including many artists. An exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York shows works from this period and opens up astonishing parallels to the situation today. By Andreas Robertz

Audio

A man on an assembly line is pulled into the machine, where he is pushed back and forth between huge gears. Charlie Chaplin's famous 1936 film "Modern Times" is also a document of the inhumane working conditions in which many workers found themselves in the 1930s. It is important to curator Allison Rudrick to show that the political activism of many artists had its origins in the harsh living conditions of people in the thirties.

At its height in 1933 roughly 25% of the total workforce was unemployed. So you can imagine this was a moment of widespread poverty, of widespread hardship. And for that reason you have people across the country taking action. It's imperative that visitors understand that the depression is something that kind of was a thread that wove its way throughout all the practices that one sees in this exhibition.

In paintings, prints, lithographs, posters, photographs, videos, fashion designs, and sculptures, the exhibition shows how artists responded to this crisis, whether with political activism, patriotic recollection, or futuristic optimism.

In the early 1930s president Franklin d Roosevelt established the New Deal, which was essentially an umbrella program under which many, many, many initiatives were developed to revive the economy, and one of those was called the Work's Progress Administration, or the WPA. And the WPA was specifically designed to employ out of work people in all different fields and industries, one of those being the arts, which is quite remarkable if you think about that today.

Although the WPA was later criticized for its arbitrary selection criteria, it gave many artists the opportunity to find new work, especially those who normally had little access to exhibition offers and work commissions because of their skin color or gender. Thus, in the exhibition, one finds many examples of women and black artists who were engaged in socio-political activities, such as the artist Norman Lewis, whose print "The Soup Kitchen" shows black people standing in line at a food bank labeled WPA.

The initiative also propagated an understanding of art that renounced European influences and favored materials and techniques that were cheap and easy to obtain: Watercolor, linoleum and silkscreen prints, wood and aluminum. They were considered American and democratic.

The exhibition ends with a look at the visual culture around ideas of American exceptionalism, kind of visual manifestations of ideas of technological and industrial innovation and progress and how these things were being developed in the United States and how the United States distinguished itself especially during the late thirties and into the early forties for these advances.

A particularly impressive example of this is the first issue of Life magazine with a photograph of the huge concrete piers of Fort Peck Dam in Montana, tiny next to it: two workers hauling a cable. Or Hobart's squeaky-clean aluminum sausage slicer with the name: "Streamliner." Futuristic, optimistic, monumental and American - that's how the designs were supposed to be. The pinnacle of this movement were the great World's Fairs in Chicago and New York in 1933 and 1939, with more than 55 million visitors.

One of the important points that this exhibition aims to get across is how objects like posters, postcards, magazine illustrations, those types of visual forms, reached a wide and broad audience, an audience that wouldn't necessarily have come to a museum to see unique paintings and sculpture, and how even just a humble postcard in its depiction of futuristic architecture would have been designed to instill hope in the public and the future of the country.

The exhibition gives a good impression of one of the most difficult and dramatic decades in American history, which at the same time became the birth of an independent, American art movement: highly recommended.

The exhibition "Art for the Millions" is on view at the Met through December 10.