



**Leon Bibbel**

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**Art, Activism, and the WPA**

September 19 to November 11, 2013 | Lora Robins Gallery of Design from Nature | University of Richmond Museums

## Introduction

Leon Bibel (American, born Poland, 1913-1995) created a prolific and provocative body of work during the Great Depression era. From 1936 to 1941, he worked in various sections of the Federal Art Project (FAP), a program of the Works Projects Administration (WPA), that employed artists. Bibel used his art as a means of calling attention to societal inequities and to document protest. This exhibition, featuring paintings, prints, and drawings, makes apparent the principal themes of Bibel's work: the social ills of racism, poverty, unemployment, and war; the necessity of protest; and the shared humanity of the common worker.

Organized by the University of Richmond Museums, the exhibition was guest curated

by Phyllis Wrynn, Director; Park Slope Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, and independent scholar. Special thanks go to the curator for her insightful selection of the works by Bibel for this exhibition and for contributing the essay in this brochure.

Presented as part of a year-long interdisciplinary focus on "Arts and Activism" at the University of Richmond, the exhibition offers perspective on the power of activist art to challenge the doctrines of exploitation and to focus awareness on social injustice.

RICHARD WALLER  
Executive Director  
University of Richmond Museums



Refugees, 1938, oil on canvas, 33 x 38 3/4 inches,  
Lent by the Estate of Leon Bibel, courtesy of the  
Park Slope Gallery, Brooklyn, New York

## Leon Bibel: Art, Activism, and the WPA

*In the midst of their shared despair, the public and the artists. . . possibly for the first time in America, found themselves on common ground. Through unexpected adversity, the artist has finally found a home in his own country.*

— Joshua C. Taylor (*American, 1917-1981*)

In the early 1930s, a generalized anxiety was gripping most segments of society. The poor and working classes, always vulnerable, were hit hardest by the plummeting economy, enduring an unemployment rate of 25 per cent.

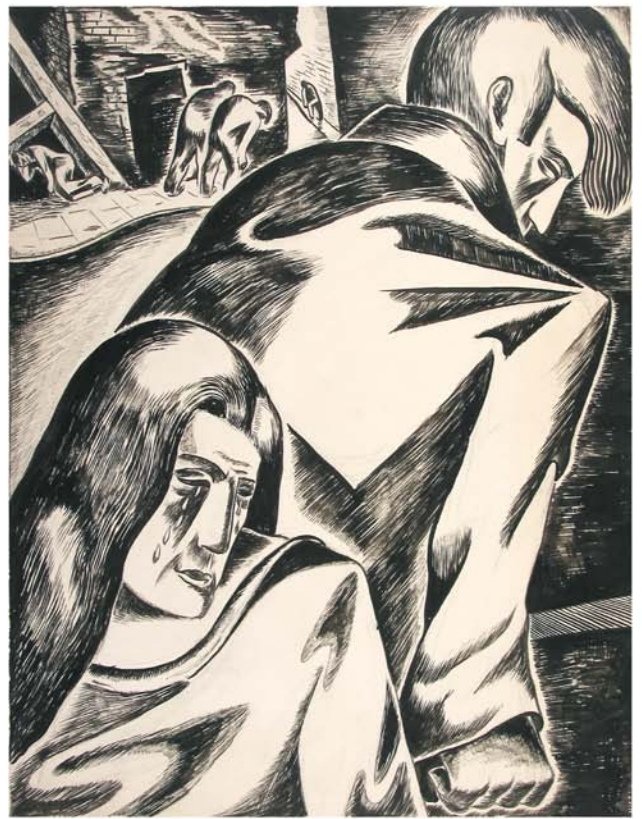
Due to the Great Depression, a kind of thunderbolt was essential to extricate the nation from the economic quicksand that was taking its toll in emotional and physical ways. That thunderbolt was the federal government taking direct action to put people back to work.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt chose a former social worker, Harry Hopkins, to lead the new Federal work programs. Hopkins believed that earning a paycheck was preferable to simply getting a handout, and 8.8 million workers were mobilized in the largest peacetime undertaking in American history. The recognition that artists were also suffering great hardship led to the creation of the Federal Art Project, a division of the Works Projects Administration (WPA).

*The artist, a highly sensitive person, found himself helplessly a part of a devastated world. Faced with the terror of the realities of the day, he could no longer justify the shaky theory of individualism.*

— Louis Guglielmi  
(*American, born Egypt, 1906-1956*)

George Biddle, an artist and school chum



*Despondent Couple*, circa 1936, brush and ink on paper, 25 5/8 x 21 5/8 inches, Lent by the Estate of Leon Bibel, courtesy of the Park Slope Gallery, Brooklyn, New York

of President Roosevelt, suggested that the president look at a Mexican program in which the government hired artists at plumbers' wages to create public murals. Hopkins saw the need for preservation of public morale as well as the preservation of skills and talents, lest they be lost to lack of use. He also believed that just as the highways and the bridges were being built to prepare the economy for growth, the nation's culture would be enriched by the production of art, art education, and art research.

*The Federal Art Project is finding art where no one has ever looked for it before. Through its teaching*

*force, galleries, schools and circulating exhibitions assembled from work produced on the project, it has helped to heal the breach between the artist and the man in the street. It has helped to convert art from a luxury and a confection into a useful and necessary element of our daily life.*

— E. M. Benson

Holger Cahill, National Director of the Federal Art Project of the WPA, stated, "For the first time in American art history, a direct and sound relationship has been established between the American public and the artist." The massive program, providing so much support and expertise, fueled a great generation of artists. From Orson Welles to Berenice Abbott to Jackson Pollock and Alice Neel, the various projects and workshops were phenomenally successful in moving people from despair and feelings of failure to a sense of self worth. The spirit of cooperation and the ability to participate fully in society through the WPA literally saved people's lives.

Constant worries about feeding families and figuring out how to keep life going had been real and present for some time. Crop failures, floods, and dust storms at home, and news that fascists and Nazis were on the march abroad, intensified the state of anxiety. So, it is not surprising that many of the artists addressed themes of social injustice, poverty, and intolerance in their art. They were often victims of these problems. Through their attention and role as witnesses, they were saying that this current situation was not apocryphal.

This exhibition presents the work of Leon Bibel (1913-1995), created when he was a member of the WPA Federal Art Project in New York City. As a young boy, Bibel emigrated with his family from Poland, settling in San

Francisco. He studied at the California School of Fine Arts and worked on several murals with Bernard Zakheim, student and friend of the great Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.

In 1936, Bibel moved to New York City, and signed on to the Federal Art Project almost immediately. He had to qualify for relief to be considered for eligibility, a daunting and humiliating process. He began as an art teacher at Bronx House, studied and worked at the Harlem Art Center, took part in the Easel and Graphic Art sections, and participated in many exhibitions organized by the FAP.



Leon Bibel, 1937, Bronx House, New York, photograph from the Estate of Leon Bibel, courtesy of the Park Slope Gallery, Brooklyn, New York

*Machinery Devours*, 1936, brush and ink on paper, 21 3/8 x 17 1/2 inches, Lent by the Estate of Leon Bibel, courtesy of the Park Slope Gallery, Brooklyn, New York



Bibel's works in this exhibition address poverty (*Depression Family Interior*, *Food Not Cannon*, and *Unemployed Marchers*) and war (*War Extra!*, *Death from the Sky*, *Hand to Hand*, *Mirage*, *War Casualty*, *The Day Paris Fell*, *Parachute*, *Ravages of War*, *Aftermath*, *Refugees*, *Women at the Front*, and *The Return*).

His sense of outrage at the horrors of lynching is made clear in works such as *The Lynching*, *The Lynching Portrait*, *Masked Riders*, and *The Revolt Against the Masked Riders*. Bibel calls out a bully who commanded the airwaves

in *Mass/Mass*.

People who managed to find employment were often taken advantage of. Even dangerous work was better than no work, and many suffered injuries and illnesses from unsafe work environments. Bibel calls attention to the plight of abused workers (*Machinery Devours*) as well as to the heroic dignity and value of work (*Descending* and *Study for Dockworkers*).

*Border Dispute* alludes to people fighting and dying to protect borders of all types. In the great 1937 film, *La Grande Illusion*, the

concept of borders is the title-inspired thread. Made in light of World War I and with another impending war, there is an exploration of the absurdity and futility of so many imposed delineations: nationality, lines on a map, military rank, class. Bibel made this drawing in 1936, prior to the film, showing the prescience of a very aware young artist, whose family had experienced serious difficulties in Europe, propelling their journey to the United States.

In *Despondent Couple, Pushed Too Far, Drowning Man, Civil Defense, and Shattered*, Bibel is confronting the generalized emotional toll of prolonged despair.

In the work *In the Shadow of Liberty* (see cover image), the single dark cloud does not bode well. The imperfections of our democracy, with several of the issues addressed individually in other works, are shown in one iconic and single tableau. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes many virtues, yet Bibel sees the dichotomy. The statue may stand in the harbor, but it does not always protect against unfairness and injustice on the ground.

The act of protest — either for or against what you believe is just or unjust — is the essence of activism, and that is addressed in *Pickets and Protest with Flag*. Bibel was arrested in a protest against cuts in the Federal Art Project and painted the watercolor as the scene was unfolding.

*Politicians were alarmed; artists in the United States had never before challenged anything other than other artists. . . They had no intention of being frightened back into a secure artistic haven remote from the problems of their time.*

— Joshua C. Taylor

Because of the severity of the crisis in the 1930s, protections against another crisis of

such magnitude were put into place, such as Social Security, protecting the elderly from cascading into poverty when they were no longer able to work. There are many more protections in place today, and no one will say that the economic crisis that began in 2007, and for many Americans still continues, has taken as great a toll as the Great Depression.

But, if you have lost your job or your home, and if you have exhausted your savings, or you know someone who has been adversely affected, *then this work will resonate*. If you have gone to war, or know someone who has, *then this work will resonate*. If you have been the victim of discrimination, or know someone who has, *then this work will resonate*. And, if you have been moved to sit in or march or protest when there is a cause you believe in, *then this work will resonate*.

PHYLLIS WRYNIN

Cover: *In the Shadow of Liberty*, 1936, pen and ink with ink splatter on paper; 26 1/4 x 21 7/8 inches, Lent by the Estate of Leon Bibel, courtesy of the Park Slope Gallery, Brooklyn, New York



UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND MUSEUMS

28 Westhampton Way, Richmond, Virginia 23173

804-289-8276 museums.richmond.edu

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