

INTRODUCTION

“THIS NEW AMERICAN REACTION TO ART”

In 1938, Emily Genauer, art critic for the *New York World-Telegram*, described a transformation she had observed in the American art world over the preceding five years. She located the change specifically in the size and composition of the audience for fine art. “A wave of art consciousness swept the country such as was undreamed of in the golden age of the Italian Renaissance,” she wrote. “There can be no denying this new American reaction to art.” Genauer argued that the transformation in the social basis of art was profound. “Suddenly,” she said, “the American average man is beginning to see that art indeed ‘is not something conceived on Olympus, but is produced by people very much like himself’ . . . to decorate his city postoffice [*sic*], his children’s schools, his own home.”¹ Monumental changes had occurred in the art world, as in all facets of American life, in the 1930s, from federal incursions into art patronage to the unionization and political mobilization of artists across the country and debates about the nature of a truly “American” art. Yet in reflecting on the major changes of these tumultuous years, Genauer focused instead on the issue of art *appreciation*—the sheer numbers of average Americans who had begun to take an interest in fine art and the new ways they engaged with visual culture.

Genauer identified multiple channels through which the “average man” had begun to breach the invisible barriers that long separated “highbrow” from “lowbrow” cultural audiences. As examples of the changes that had occurred in art appreciation, she cited developments both within and outside

the art world: the circulation of art exhibitions “all over the country” and their popularity with “astounding numbers” of people, a rise in attendance at museums and art galleries, the coverage of art in “publications catering to the great masses of population,” and the explosion of the sale of reproductions of contemporary American art to reach “enormous proportions.”² Genauer equated growing museum attendance and formal traveling exhibitions with art coverage in the mass media. She believed that these factors, taken together, had created a significant reorientation in the social relations of American art. When the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) hosted a forum titled “The Recent Popularization of American Art” two years later, on December 18, 1940, it, too, recognized the diverse sources of Americans’ increased attentiveness to visual art.³ Its panelists covered a wide spectrum of the art world, including artists and leaders from the Federal Art Project (FAP), the Whitney Museum, *Life* magazine, and the Associated American Artists gallery, a commercial enterprise that had achieved marked success marketing inexpensive prints to a mainstream American clientele.⁴

Genauer’s comments and the forum at MoMA each recognized that tangible changes in the nature of the audience had reshaped the art world in the 1930s. Both highlighted the significance of an expanded audience for art and connected its growth to developments within the art world and in the realm of popular culture. Both also suggested that changes in the audience for art were critical to any evaluation of the contemporary state of art in America. These two examples are emblematic of a broad recognition by artists, art critics, and art world professionals of a transformation in the social basis of art appreciation during the Depression decade. In their letters, published writings, and manifestos, individuals in each of these groups commented on a remarkable change in the composition of the audience for art, often labeled an “art boom,” and the surprising prevalence of art in popular culture, from advertisements in subways to reproductions in popular magazines.

What struck commentators at the time as a development of transformational importance for art, artists, and the place of art in American life has been largely lost to history. Scholars interested in the social history of art in the Depression decade have focused on the federal art projects of the Works Progress Administration and the Treasury Department, connections between visual artists and leftist politics, and iconic events such as the destruction of Diego Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads* mural in Rockefeller Center in 1934. At the same time, historians seeking to understand the rise of American art in the twentieth century have largely overlooked changes in the composition and scale of the American art audience during the Depression. Even if scholars have not always embraced Clement Greenberg’s 1939 equation of art for

the masses as “kitsch,” they have tended to focus on the aesthetic shift from realism to abstraction that dominated the postwar period and catapulted the United States into the center of global art consciousness after 1945.⁵

While Greenberg’s narrow definition of modernity has influenced critical evaluation of postwar American art, structural changes that reshaped the nature of art viewing during the Depression had similarly far-reaching consequences for the place of art in American life.⁶ For twenty-first-century art lovers, and even casual observers, the idea of art as a subject of popular interest is nothing new. Although purchasing original art remains financially out of reach (in perception, if not always in reality) for most people, urban museums, public art projects, reproductions, and the presence of art in popular culture all link art to the spaces of mass culture. From snaking entrance lines and visitors stacked four deep at blockbuster exhibitions to the ever present museum gift shops and corporate sponsorship and parodies in the media, fine art has become intertwined with tourism, commercial entertainment, and American visual culture.

The blurring of boundaries between the previously sequestered realms of high and popular culture is a staple of today’s art world, a phenomenon grounded to some degree in the dominance of consumer culture. Museum attendance is a case in point. If museum goers in the nineteenth century were an exclusive group of social elites, middle-class intellectuals, and a smattering of upwardly mobile working-class people, today’s museums attempt to draw visitors from a much broader cross-section of American society, consciously seeking a wider appeal. Once considered a bastion of cultural preservation, in which objects were held for safekeeping, protected *from* the unruly masses as much as *for* them, museums have evolved into inherently public and popular institutions that must balance scholarly and preservationist responsibilities with promoting accessibility.⁷ Twenty-first-century museums embrace a popular educational mandate, employ the techniques of mass media, and cultivate a central position in the public sphere. Today, expensive blockbuster exhibitions at major museums are made possible by corporate donations and promoted through vigorous advertising on billboards, in magazines, even on the top of taxis and wrapped around buses.⁸ The connections between culture and commerce that we now take for granted are rooted in the changes in art appreciation that occurred during the years of the Great Depression and World War II.

Art museums, like the art itself, have become embedded in mass culture. The exhibition “Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955–1965,” held at the National Gallery of Art in 2007, is especially indicative of contemporary intersections of art, popular culture, and consumerism. The exhibition featured monumental color banners outside the museum, kiosks offering inter-

pretive headsets, tremendous crowds of visitors filling galleries on multiple floors, a shop offering reproductions on postcards and souvenirs and expensive exhibition catalogues, as well as online components that included interpretive material and a podcast. The most striking aspect of the show's link to consumer culture, though, was that it was sponsored by the Target Corporation, whose logo bears a simplified yet striking resemblance to the first painting on view in the show, one of Johns's early target paintings. The scale and scope of the exhibition, spread out over multiple floors of the National Gallery, no doubt demanded an outside source of funding, a typical state of affairs in today's blockbuster exhibition format, but the link between Target's emblem and the artist's own visual hallmark was especially striking, all the more so because the nation's premier public art institution mounted the exhibition. Although museums have traditionally included names of wealthy donors alongside works of art, the link between patronage and display, as well as the connection to corporate philanthropy, has become prominent and increasingly visible in the post–World War II period.

To a large extent, museums have embraced the consumer possibilities of their cultural appeal through marketing, restaurants, social events, and gift shop sales. From the early exhibitions of industrial design at the Museum of Modern Art to the Guggenheim's more recent controversial exhibitions of consumer products, consumer culture has made its way into the exhibition spaces of even the most established museums.⁹ Partly as a result of this expansion of museum activities, popular appreciation of art has become embedded in consumer culture and linked to modern entertainment, a visible fixture of urban life, and a centerpiece of cultural tourism. Indeed, the institutional relationship between commerce and culture has become such a fixture of the contemporary art world that it is a recurrent subject in the art itself. Issues of corporate sponsorship, the growing art public, and museum education and outreach practices have all become fodder for artists' critical engagement with the museum.¹⁰

Contemporary intersections between fine art and popular culture, then, are heavily influenced by the culture of consumerism that has become dominant since the mid-twentieth century.¹¹ In the 1930s, though, ties between the art world and consumer culture were more incipient than defined, and the populist vision of many artists, art administrators and critics had more transformative social and political implications. This book argues that the way we see art today is grounded in the culture wars of the 1930s, wars fought on the terrain of art appreciation. That struggle involved leftist artists, the labor movement, the art establishment, and the government, as well as the corporate sector, all interacting with one another and the art world in unprecedented and transformative ways.

During the Depression decade, art appreciation became a battleground of sorts in a fundamental contest over American identity: what would be the prevailing forces and mores in American life? Did the crisis of capitalism brought on by the Great Depression mean the beginning of a new alternative? While some asked what an economic alternative might look like, and what its social and cultural implications would be, others did everything in their power to avoid change. A close look at transformations in the art world during the 1930s reveals a deep contestation over American political economy and national identity. As the art world emerged from its previously sequestered position, it became implicated in debates about the future of the nation. On one side were those who envisioned a restructuring of American economy and society. On the other side were those who sought to defend established economic and cultural institutions and entrench the status quo.

The conscious mobilization of art production and consumption into American politics paralleled global trends. The 1930s and early 1940s saw a heightening of political debates about art around the world. Artists agitated for political change, and governments imbued art with propagandistic purpose. In the Soviet Union, Stalin rejected constructivism in favor of socialist realism, dictating the visual form that would embody the revolution. In Germany, Hitler classified art as good and “degenerate” and pressed cultural workers into the service of the state. Mussolini similarly embraced an identifiable fascist aesthetic, while Diego Rivera and a whole cohort of Mexican muralists linked art to the Mexican revolution, identifying a people’s art in monumental murals that rejected the colonialist history of Mexico by glorifying the indigenous, the farmer, and the working class. In the United States, the New Deal’s federal art projects explicitly politicized art by linking its production to the state, and artists themselves articulated a new political consciousness, organizing into unions, attempting to make common cause with American workers, and agitating against fascism abroad and racism at home.

Implicit in this agitation about the politics of the visual was the growing sense that direct encounters with art had a potential impact on the viewer that went beyond aesthetic gratification. Whether they wanted art to inspire viewers to support the state or rise up in revolution, artists, bureaucrats, and cultural entrepreneurs sought to shape the impact of visual encounter. In part, art viewing was subject to political manipulation because art was being integrated into an emergent mass culture on an unprecedented scale. Because art reached new classes of viewers in record numbers, it carried the potential to create, challenge, or reinforce ideas about national identity, political economy, and social relationships that were themselves under fire in this period of global political and economic upheaval.

This book investigates the politics of the Depression decade through the prism of art appreciation. It examines an unexplored irony of the period: the fact that groups with very different, even competing, social visions and political goals found themselves engaged in the common project of breaking down barriers between fine art and popular culture. As Genauer recognized, a wide range of actors in American society conceptualized and sought to develop a new audience for art in the years spanning the beginning of the Great Depression through the immediate post–World War II period. What efforts did they make, and what were the ideological and political motivations for their actions? What impact did changes in art appreciation have on the broader political, social, cultural, and even artistic landscape? In answering these questions, this book argues that efforts to bring art to a larger public were imbued with ideological significance, not just on the part of leftist artists and the explicit politicization of art through government patronage, but also more subtly through art organizations, institutions, and representatives of the corporate sector who challenged more radical notions of bringing art to the people. These institutions embraced the idea of the mass but ignored the social critique that more radical political and artistic organizations linked to the masses. Many artists in this period sought new ways to reach a popular audience directly, hoping to change the social function of their work. Recognizing that art had long served as a marker of refinement and wealth, these artists labored to make popular appreciation of art the building block of a more democratic American culture for the future. By contrast, institutions in the art world and engines of consumer culture promoted a popularization of art mediated by the school, the museum, the art critic, the corporate patron, or the magazine editor. These sectors participated in expanding the scope of the art world, but they did so in a way that reinforced rather than challenged ideas of refinement and cultural stratification.

All sides seemed to agree that creating a larger viewing public would redound to the benefit of the public, artists, art institutions, and especially American national culture. But what impact would art have? Many artists and intellectuals on the left believed that putting art on a popular footing would contribute to the radical refashioning of American society along egalitarian and cooperative principles. An art created for “the people,” that amorphous mass of everyday Americans often idealized in the cultural discourse of the 1930s, would be an integral part of a nation devoted to real and not just imagined equality. In opposition, many leaders of the American business sector and art institutions saw the intersection between fine art and mass culture as an opportunity to promote rather than challenge the established social and economic systems thrown into crisis by the enormity of the Great

Depression. The more Americans appreciated the significance of this form of culture for their individual enrichment and the stature of the nation, the more they would value the economic and cultural leaders whose patronage brought the world's cultural riches to the United States.

There were competing visions, then, of how and why the audience for art could be refashioned in America. Ultimately, the vision of profound social change through art that activist artists and some New Deal thinkers pursued gave way to a limited expansion of the art world that reinforced rather than challenged the primacy of corporate capitalism and the emergent consumer culture. This evolution of ideas about the nature and practice of cultural democracy, from pursuit of far-reaching social transformation to embrace of a more conservative populism, parallels and illuminates the trajectory of New Deal politics more broadly.¹²

Art Appreciation in the United States

Connections between fine art and a popular audience had precedents in the history of American art. From approximately 1830 to 1860, art—and specifically, American art produced by American painters—enjoyed enormous popularity in the United States. “There was probably never a country or a time when so many people so loved art—some art—as in America from 1830–1860,” Nathaniel Burt has argued.¹³ The art that people loved consisted primarily of landscape paintings by artists such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt, and genre paintings such as those by George Caleb Bingham and William Sidney Mount.¹⁴ Landscape painting in particular garnered significant attention and became intertwined with nationalist sentiment.¹⁵ Art viewers imbued idyllic images of the American wilderness and the cultivated landscape with an almost religious sense of the moral benefits that could be derived from the contemplation of nature. Landscape painting further appealed to Americans’ nationalistic belief in manifest destiny at a time of westward expansion.

Niagara, painted in 1857 by Frederic Edwin Church, epitomized the popular appeal of American landscape painting. Church took a subject that was widely familiar to Americans, from description if not from personal experience, and rendered it on a grand scale that, Franklin Kelly argues, “captured more perfectly than had ever been done before, the very essence of this great American wonder.”¹⁶ Angela Miller has noted that the nationalistic content of *Niagara* derived from the implicit contrast the canvas suggested between the American landscape and the “puniness of European nature.”¹⁷ The history of the commercialized presentation of Church’s painting is also indicative of

the relationship between artists and the public. Church exhibited the painting at a private New York art gallery, charging a twenty-five cent admission to viewers who sometimes used binoculars or other optical aids. Its display was accompanied by a publicity campaign, and Church sent the painting on two tours of Britain.¹⁸

The manner in which Church presented *Niagara* to a large audience drew on the “Great Picture” model of art exhibition in the mid-nineteenth century, when artists and entrepreneurs circulated panorama paintings and monumental history paintings as one-work exhibitions that attracted large crowds. People came to witness the spectacle of paintings that were grandiose in size and theme, usually in the historical or religious genre of painting and often narrative in content. Later nineteenth-century panorama paintings were realistic, 360 degree renderings of landscapes and historical scenes. They demanded the construction of a dedicated building, round in shape and dark in the center, with skylights to illuminate the images. These one-work wonders sustained public interest over multiple decades but disappeared toward the end of the nineteenth century as other forms of mass culture arose to compete with them in the realm of grandeur and wonder.¹⁹ Entrepreneurs conceived and exhibited them as profitmaking ventures that would have popular appeal and as such bridged the gap between art and popular culture.

Fine art in the antebellum period thrived in the popular sphere virtually independent from established art institutions. Organizations—most notably, the American Art-Union in New York—contrived ways to bring art to a broad, middle-class public, but there was no movement in this period to develop museums in America outside the very few that already existed.²⁰ This paucity of museums was due in part to the nationalist character of the popular enthusiasm for art. Americans viewed museums as depositories of art from a remote place and time rather than art of the present. It was not until after the Civil War that American cities began to develop the museums that exist today.²¹

When those museums did develop in America’s major metropolitan areas after the Civil War, they became enmeshed in what Lawrence Levine has labeled a stratification between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture that took place in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²² Museum building became a visible component of the remaking of American cities during the industrial revolution and a key aspect of the emergence of an industrial elite with social power and growing cultural capital.²³ Directors, trustees, and patrons of these museums assembled examples of the iconic art of the Western canon and built grand architectural edifices both to house the work and make a visible mark on the urban landscape.²⁴ They

sought to align themselves with European elites and the Western cultural tradition and, in doing so, to combat ideas about American inferiority to Europe. These museums consciously differentiated high culture they preserved from commercialized leisure activities that were increasingly reconfiguring both urban landscapes and the non-work hours of American workers and the growing managerial class.²⁵

The idea of a museum, and art itself, as a buffer against the cultural degradation attendant to industrialization dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A notable exception to this exclusive orientation of American museums can be found among Progressive-era reformers who linked public museum practice to their broad project of uplifting the masses. John Cotton Dana was in the vanguard of a selective group of museum professionals who experimented with ways to link art to everyday life and expand the audience of the museum. At the Newark Museum, Dana experimented with exhibition formats, displayed and collected the work of living American artists, and expanded the physical reach of the museum through branch outposts and school loans, among other innovations.²⁶ Dana's work, alongside the ideas of John Dewey, formed an important source for New Deal administrators who embraced the idea of cultural democracy in the 1930s.²⁷ The work of Progressive-era reformers tended to focus on expanding definitions of art to include objects that had been outside the purview of the museum, especially the products of industrial design. Questioning the traditional emphasis on painting, sculpture, and architecture, these museum administrators incorporated objects of everyday life as a way to appeal to a broader audience and influence American taste.

There were significant historical precedents for linking fine art to a broad popular audience, and the influence of the Progressive movement in particular could be felt in the 1930s' embrace of the idea of cultural democracy. Artists, critics, business leaders, and museum professionals of the 1930s, however, defined their populist outlook in juxtaposition to what they perceived as the exclusive orientation of the status quo. They constructed the past as elitist, and each developed a distinct vision of how a more democratic future might take shape and contribute to redefining the national cultural identity.

Defining the Boundaries of Art

Unlike Progressive reformers such as Dana, the artists, critics, museum professionals, and corporate leaders of the 1930s and 1940s employed a narrow conception of art as they worked to increase popular appreciation. People as diverse as critic Genauer, the artist Anton Refregier, the Harmon Founda-

tion's director Mary Beattie Brady, and the publisher Henry Luce wanted to expand appreciation of art as it had been traditionally defined, focusing primarily on painting, sculpture, and prints. This contrasted with contemporaneous efforts by some artists and museum professionals to question the boundaries of art in other ways, broadening notions of art itself to include new techniques grounded in the processes of mass media, such as photography and film, and the spaces of everyday life, including industrial design.²⁸ MoMA, founded in New York in 1929, particularly focused on integrating modern media into the consciousness of art world aficionados, holding celebrated exhibitions related to industrial design, for example, and tasking curators with integrating these new media into the core of the museum's activities.²⁹ At the same time that MoMA and others challenged fine-art lovers to expand their aesthetic interests and broaden their conceptions of art, others redrew the boundaries of art differently. Many artists, critics, government policy makers, and corporate leaders worked to bring fine art, traditionally construed, to new categories of art viewers. The notion that traditional art media could be of interest to the general public became widely accepted in a decade in which the rhetoric of cultural democracy linked federal policy to the shaping of national identity. The populist impulse that has rightly been linked to the federal art projects was in fact a central theme of cultural discourse in the 1930s and is critical to understanding how art became imbued in larger political debates about national identity and the American future.

To understand the scope of changes in the nature of art in the United States in this period, it is essential to go beyond new definitions of art attendant to the rise of modernism. Equally important was how art functioned in society and how changes in conceptions of the audience affected the function and meaning of art in American culture. This narrow focus on the traditional media of fine artists mirrors the perspective of artists themselves, for whom popular appreciation of fine art implied the possibility of a new understanding of the role art could assume in everyday life. Although many of these artists also experimented with new media, their primary commitment was to integrate art and American society in a way that challenged traditional modes of consumption and display. These artists' emphasis on popular appreciation of painting, prints, and sculpture was also reflected in the way art institutions and corporate America conceived of their efforts to link fine art to mainstream American consciousness. Because fine art had such strong associations with a tradition of cultural elitism, efforts to alter the relationship between art and society took on heightened political significance.

By employing a narrow definition of art, artists, museum directors, and corporate patrons sought to change the meaning of art in American society

rather than to redefine the nature of art. Another key to understanding the significance they imbued in their efforts was the national scale on which they conceived of their projects. Although many of the artists and museums I discuss in these pages were rooted in New York, their pursuit of a new audience was a national effort to which they attached nationwide political implications. These actors agreed that as the art world expanded its boundaries in terms of not only class but also geography, it could become a more constitutive aspect of national identity. By making art an arena of shared experience on a national level, and by influencing the nature of that experience, these actors responded to other cultural changes that had already begun to reshape a sense of common identity in the United States.

The 1920s saw an explosion of mass culture in America that began to standardize cultural experience across the country. Professional sports—most notably, baseball—provided a topic of national interest beginning early in the century but took off in the 1920s with the help of Babe Ruth and his crowd-pleasing home runs. Film and radio grew exponentially, bringing uniform entertainment experiences to audiences across the country, and the reach of mass-circulation magazines continued to grow. Although reception of these popular cultural forms was initially shaped by local experience, their dissemination became increasingly centralized over time, and mass culture came to provide a shared experience across geographic, class, and racial or ethnic backgrounds.³⁰ Charlie Chaplin was subject to the same hilarious misfortunes in Oklahoma as in Maine; millions of fans across the country listened to *Amos 'n' Andy* at the same time; and while some sports fans rooted for the Red Sox and others for the White Sox, the victories and defeats that they followed were interconnected.

The Roosevelt administration built on the commonalities forged in these spheres as it developed its own vision of national culture based in the arts.³¹ By funding projects in visual art, music, theater, and literature, the New Deal promoted a distinctive national culture to be created and shared by all the country's citizens.³² The nationalist discourse of the New Deal, combined with the growth of mass culture, created a framework for understanding cultural issues in terms of their national implications. Expanding the public for art came to mean not only reaching a larger cross-section of people in New York but also developing a national community that would be responsive to fine art.

As art gained an increasingly national audience and space in popular consciousness, it also became imbued in the debates that reshaped political discourse during the Depression decade. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the production, display, and dissemination of art intersected with tumultuous

social, political, and ideological contestations. As T. J. Clark wrote of a different place and time, art had “a political sense and intention” in the 1930s.³³ My investigation into how art functioned in the political sphere draws on archival resources, such as artists’ letters and diaries and the records of artists’ organizations, and printed material from artists, museums, critics, and periodicals more than on direct examination of the art itself. Whereas many of the artists I discuss certainly imbued their work with the same social impulse that fueled their efforts to reach a broader public, artists’ social engagement extended beyond the visual realm. These pages do not offer detailed formal analysis of individual works of art and their critical reception except as they relate to the question of how style became implicated in larger political issues. Instead, I focus on the diverse rhetorical and organizational efforts of artists, art critics, museums, and a new kind of corporate art patron to reconceptualize the social basis of art with a view toward understanding the implications of both their intentions and their effects.

The Power of Culture

At the same historical moment in which different factions in the art world linked art to popular culture, theorists articulated an analysis of the complex relationship between culture and the exercise of power in modern life. In an age when mass culture, facilitated by technological advances and the spread of consumerism, was exploding in scale, scope, and cultural resonance, Antonio Gramsci and Walter Benjamin wrestled with the question of how to understand the dynamics and implications of cultural power and the possibility of people exercising agency within complex systems of control. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony recognized the multifaceted ways that culture was implicated in power struggles among different factions in society.³⁴ The idea of the exercise of power through culture also created possibilities for resistance as individuals or groups articulated opposition to prevailing cultural norms. Gramsci’s formulation is useful to understanding the complexity of the dynamics at work in contests over the audience for art.

Theorists were not alone in contemplating the relationship between culture and power. Because of technological change and global political and economic upheaval, many cultural producers, political leaders, and corporate representatives understood that established hierarchies of what Pierre Bourdieu has labeled “distinction” were in flux in the Depression decade.³⁵ Indeed, attempts to seek out a new public, and the rationales many artists articulated in support of those efforts, bear the mark of a counter-hegemonic struggle to redefine the foundations of national identity. An art created in

concert with “the people,” that vision of collectivity that dominated both leftist and liberal discourse in the 1930s, carried the possibility of a national culture organized around the masses rather than elites. Artists, then, responded to the extraordinary tumult caused by the hardships of the Depression with a vision of far-reaching social change.

In contrast, art institutions and corporate America used art to sanction a very different message, one that reinforced rather than challenged hegemonic conceptions of social structure and political economy. They constructed a broader audience for art appreciation in America to underscore the soundness of the national culture, despite the economic upheaval of the times, and affirm the ability of traditional custodians of art to continue to safeguard the nation’s cultural health. In new audiences, artists saw the possibility for a reorientation of the social structure, embracing the idea of the collective and the power of the people. By contrast, art institutions and corporate America mobilized the relationship between high art and popular culture to reinforce the centrality of cultural institutions and mass-market consumerism to American society. Their message underlined the importance of the individual, whether it was the artistic genius, the enlightened patron, or the museum-goer.

These diverse efforts to shape the political meaning of culture constituted part of a broad movement to understand and ultimately control the power of culture. Michael Denning has characterized the decades after 1929 as constituting a “crisis of hegemony” that prompted “a prolonged ‘war of position’ between political forces trying to conserve the existing structures of society and the forces of opposition, including the Popular Front social movement, who were trying to create a new historical bloc, a new balance of forces.”³⁶ For Denning, that new historical bloc included leftist artists and intellectuals as part of a broadly conceived New Deal coalition. Denning’s concept of a broad contest over the role of culture in reinforcing or challenging existing power dynamics in American society pertains to the sphere of fine art, as well, and extends beyond the boundaries of state intervention.³⁷

Scholarship on the political entanglements of fine art in the United States has tended to focus on the New Deal and its cultural projects, such as the FAP and the U.S. Treasury Department’s Section of Fine Arts. Issues of national identity and culture, as well as the scope of the federal government’s power, were expressed in the form and content of many of these projects. Jonathan Harris argues explicitly that the New Deal state mobilized art to create its own hegemonic ideas, to bolster the public’s acceptance of a central role for government in American life.³⁸ If government intervention into the traditionally private world of art patronage could be established as the

nation's route to cultural achievement, and perhaps even create a place for the United States as a significant locus of cultural production in global conceptions of the Western canon, that would only underscore the importance of a strong and active central government to the future of the nation.

In linking the state's hegemonic aspirations to federal art patronage, Harris suggests a compelling argument for why other participants in the art world might have similarly imbued art with political purpose. If art could be mobilized in support of the New Deal's vision of American political economy, it could, of course, support competing conceptions of the nation's future. This book looks beyond the realm of the state to understand the broader hegemonic and counter-hegemonic contestations of culture through art in this period. Museums, often tied to the nation's cultural elite, and representatives of the American corporate sphere, such as Henry Luce and his publications *Fortune* and *Life*, directly contested the efforts of radical artists and critics who consciously engaged, in Gramsci's words, in a "struggle for a new culture."³⁹ The efforts of artists, museum administrators, and aspiring corporate art patrons were just as important to the contest over cultural hegemony in the 1930s as the New Deal's efforts to create a normative belief in the power of the state to solve society's problems.

Like Gramsci, Walter Benjamin sought to "theorize a new cultural politics" in the 1930s.⁴⁰ As Denning points out, both theorists developed "seismic readings of the fault lines in the cultural front."⁴¹ Gramsci's and Benjamin's broad conception of the political importance of culture, in other words, provides a framework for understanding the nuances of political contestation, especially in this highly charged period. In the context of fine art, Benjamin's work also offers a more specific framework for understanding the political implications of changes in the structures of art appreciation that brought art into the realm of mass culture. In his now famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin provided an analysis of how mechanical reproduction affected the experience of art in the twentieth century.⁴² Reproduction technologies diminished the "aura" of art, Benjamin argued, and in doing so challenged the principle of art for art's sake, replacing it with an evaluation of how art operated in the political sphere. By undermining the principle of authenticity as the criteria for evaluating an object's worth, mechanical reproduction challenged the false importance imbued in art by the usual trappings of display: the awe-inspiring spaces of museums and the implications of wealth and power those spaces bestowed. Opening the door for a broader understanding of the effect of art on the viewer, Benjamin argued, entailed the possibility for imbuing that relationship with political meaning.

Although Benjamin located his analysis in the connection between specific developments in mechanical reproduction technology, notably film, and the creation of a mass public for art, his ideas are helpful more broadly for understanding how ideology was implicated in efforts to link art to a popular audience in the 1930s. The concept of the auratic component of art viewing and, conversely, the impact of the lack of an aura on the political implications of the viewer's experience illuminate the ways in which various groups sought to challenge or uphold traditional relationships between the viewer and the art object. The manner in which art was displayed carried pregnant messages about its place in creating or challenging American social systems.

These theoretical formulations provide a framework for understanding how links between art and political ideology exceeded the explicit politicization of government patronage and involved a wide range of actors and political agendas. Changes in the structures of the consumption and display of art were also fashioned by artists, cultural institutions, and corporate America. Indeed, the art and aspirations of artists with ties to the political left helped shape how attitudes toward art appreciation evolved in these years. The idea of "the people" not only informed the subject of artistic and literary production in the 1930s but also profoundly influenced ideas about the audience for American culture.⁴³ While culture scholars have shown how the people were represented *in* art, less is known about how artists, administrators, and even corporate leaders endeavored to bring art *to* a broadly conceived people.

My thematic approach brings together a number of different subjects in an effort to show how they are linked through ambitions to promote and control the wider dissemination of art in American society: the activities, scope, and political implications of the FAP, the leftist political inclinations of artists in the 1930s, the impact of MoMA's establishing an institutional home for modernism in America, and the growth of the mass media as a defining feature of modern American culture. Scholarship on the New Deal tends to treat the government art projects as having occurred in isolation from the broader cultural ferment of the decade, except insofar as historians have recognized how agitation on the left infiltrated the projects and contributed politically to their decline. New Deal scholarship also tends to focus on issues unique to state intervention in the arts. Analysis of the New Deal cultural projects in general, and of the FAP in particular, has explored their administrative histories, the consequences for the government projects of political responses to the New Deal and its policies, and the iconography of art produced under their auspices.⁴⁴ Some of these studies of federal projects have contributed to historiographical debates regarding the nature of the New Deal itself. Barbara Melosh's analysis of the gender dimensions

of work produced under the government projects, for example, reinforces conclusions about the essential conservatism of aspects of Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency.⁴⁵ While scholars have considered the political dimensions of the federal projects, though, they have treated the enormous efforts of the government art programs to make art for a new kind of audience as peripheral to the main projects, innovations, and politics of the New Deal and as disconnected from activities taking place in other areas of American culture.⁴⁶ The FAP's efforts to reach new American audiences took place in the context of a broader movement to reconceptualize the social basis of art in the United States.

The presence on the federal art projects of artists with leftist political inclinations constituted a political lightning rod at the time, influenced congressional debates over the longevity and scope of the projects, and has occupied the attention of historians ever since. Here, too, it is important to recognize the complex interconnections that influenced artists' work, ideas, and activism. While contemporary critics and subsequent scholars have tended to reduce artists' politics to their membership, or lack thereof, in the Communist Party, artists' varied responses to party directives were mediated by complex individual perspectives.⁴⁷ Even artists who joined Communist Party organizations did not always follow the party line, instead bringing their own artistic and social agendas to bear on their work and how they conceived of its importance. A broad and loosely formed coalition shaped the populist impulses of cultural workers.⁴⁸ While artists certainly engaged as vehemently as others in the internecine debates that fractured leftist politics in the 1930s, they also embraced the impulse toward collectivity that the economic crisis inspired, participating in the labor movement, forming organizations to express their political and aesthetic ideas, and banding together in myriad ways to conceive of alternatives to the existing market-based principles that structured the art world. The idea that crafting a new audience might reorient the role of art in American life in fact became a point of convergence for a range of artists who held varying degrees of allegiance to leftist politics in general or the Communist Party in particular.⁴⁹ Party ideology, together with the rhetoric of cultural democracy promoted by the New Deal, contributed to artists' desire to bring about social change by reinventing the social significance of art, but artists continually adapted these ideas to their own individual and collective needs.

Each of the three parts of this book addresses a different facet of the changing relationship between art and the American public. Together, they cover artists, art organizations and museums, and the corporate sector. Part I grounds the discourse about expanding the audience for art in artists' own

efforts to reconceptualize the nature and function of their work and their relationship to society. Throughout Part I, the artist Anton Refregier serves as a guide through some of the complex artistic work, political projects, and ideas of artists who gravitated toward leftist politics. Refregier provides a good case study for two reasons. First, although largely overlooked in the historical literature, Refregier was a prominent figure in the art world in the 1930s and his professional activities and affiliations spanned many of the central movements and organizations that captured activist artists' energy and imagination in this period, from the John Reed Club to the FAP. Although Refregier's career, like that of all artists, was unique, the scope of his ideas and activities, and their evolution over time, nicely encapsulates the creative spirit with which a large cohort of artists approached the changed economic and political circumstances of the Depression. Second, his extant personal records provide an unusually clear window into how he understood the connections among those various artistic activities as centering on the issue of challenging the social basis of art. Chapters 1 and 2 chart the evolution of artists' ideas about bringing art to the people, tracing how Refregier adapted his definition of "the people" to changing political and artistic contexts, but arguing that his basic commitment to challenging the elitist social foundations of art stayed constant throughout his career. Refregier saw a continuum between producing revolutionary graphic work for *New Masses*, making public art for the New Deal, creating murals for corporate building lobbies, and producing covers for *Fortune* magazine. He believed that art should exist in relation to a broad viewing public and that artists should embrace every opportunity to create work with that public in mind. From the Proletcult movement of the Communist Party, through the cultural democracy of New Deal-era federal art patronage, to the postwar search for a new model for creating a people's art, Refregier maintained his basic commitment to making art socially relevant, politically engaged, and popularly accessible. For Refregier, conceptualizing the audience for art as inclusive, public, and popular constituted a political challenge to the role art had long played as a marker of wealth and sophistication that upheld social divisions in society.

Part II shifts the focus from artists to museums and other art organizations that developed new mechanisms for reaching a bigger audience. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss two major developments within the art world that made art widely accessible by bringing it into contact with a larger cross-section of the American public. Chapter 3 looks at the growth of traveling exhibitions as a new model for display that expanded the scope of the audience by taking art to places across the country that were not already served by major metropolitan museums. In conceiving a national public for art, traveling

exhibitions also linked the growth of art appreciation to the expansion of the function art served in relation to its audience. As the audience for art grew, so did the social ambitions of those involved in disseminating it, whether it was the Harmon Foundation's pursuit of racial equality or MoMA's promotion of a modernist aesthetic. Chapter 4 examines the increasing importance of mechanically reproduced images as a vehicle for connecting fine art to a mass audience. It highlights the progression by which artists and museums overcame their skepticism of reproductions and shows how, in the process of legitimizing the art world's use of reproductions in outreach activities, artists and museums began to connect the spheres of art and American consumer culture. By treating art itself as a mass commodity, bringing art into the spaces of consumer culture, and using art as a vehicle for institutional marketing and public relations, artists and museums provided a model for how fine art could operate in the public sphere.

Part III explores how the project of bringing art to the people entered the commercial sphere through an examination of two organs of the Luce press and their efforts to recruit art into the service of corporate America. Chapter 5 looks at how *Fortune* magazine used art to promote an idea of business as integral to American life and tried to persuade its corporate readers to use art as a way to enhance their influence over American thought and culture. By positioning business as the ideal conduit between art and a popular audience, *Fortune* coopted the idea of taking art to the people and assimilated it into a larger vision of an all-encompassing market-oriented consumer culture. Chapter 6 shows how *Life* magazine functioned as an example of the role business could play in mediating the relationship between art and the people and in defining the meaning of art in American culture. Whereas *Fortune* was a high-price monthly publication geared to an elite audience of corporate managers, *Life* was a ten-cent mass-distribution weekly that assumed a central place in American visual culture almost immediately after its debut in 1936. Together, *Fortune* and *Life* counteracted ideas of art as a vehicle for social change and criticism established by the New Deal art projects and the radical artists of the left.

In reflecting on the structural developments that had contributed to the transformation of the American art world as of 1938, Emily Genauer referred to a change in the social perspective of artists, government patronage, traveling exhibitions, art reproductions, and coverage of art in mass-circulation periodicals. The chapters of this book cover each of these topics, exploring their connections, contestations, and implications with a view to understanding more fully the complex meanings art assumed in American society during a time of economic, artistic, and political upheaval.