

# Getty Acquires Historical Prints, Posters, and Other Materials from 20th-Century American Movements

The Merrill C. Berman Collection contains 600 works related to American social justice movements and Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration Era

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Left: *Women Work for Victory*, circa 1941–1943. Getty Research Institute, 2023.M.38. Middle: *Cross Out Slums*, 1941, Lester Beall. Getty Research Institute, 2023.M.38. Right: *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, 1928, Roscoe C. Wright. Getty Research Institute, 2023.M.38.

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The Getty Research Institute (GRI) has acquired 600 prints, posters, catalogues, journals, maquettes, drawings,

## and printed ephemera from the collection of Merrill C. Berman.

Assembled over five decades, this selection of works reflects Berman's lifelong interest in history, the social role of artists, and the integral role of art and graphic design in social movements of the 20th century.

“With this transformative acquisition, the GRI can boast a preeminent research resource for situating graphic design within the broader narratives of American art and history,” says Mary Miller, director of the GRI. “This important selection from Berman's collection addresses a major gap in our American holdings, illustrating the influence of the Bauhaus and other modernist movements on American design of the 20th century, emphasizing the critical social role of artists, and adding further momentum to the important work being done by our African American Art History Initiative.”

Merrill C. Berman honed his interest in socially engaged visual culture, graphic design, and posters in the early 1970s, a collecting focus that hadn't been embraced by the mainstream art world. Berman established himself as a pioneer in a new arena, setting the terms of scholarship and defining standards for collecting. With a particular focus on European and American art that engaged and reflected the century's social and political upheavals, Berman acquired rare prints, graphics, posters, books, periodicals, and ephemera alongside unique photocollages, maquettes, and drawings. Berman developed a collection that, in its art historical range, scope of materials, breadth of subject, and quality of works, is among the most comprehensive of its kind.

The GRI's acquisition highlights four core strengths of Berman's collection: Works Progress Administration-era posters, social justice and LGBTQ+ collections, and African American culture, activism, and protest collection. Together, these works illustrate critical chapters of the nation's history from diverse perspectives from early 20th century social and labor movements, the Great Depression and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, World War II, the politically turbulent era of the civil rights movement, and the “culture wars” of the 1980s–1990s. It is a collection anchored at once in powerful social conscience and in an acute interest in the correlation

between major political and ideological shifts and the aesthetic innovations that accompanied them.

## **Works Progress Administration-Era Posters**

In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal launched the Works Progress Administration to create jobs for the millions of unemployed Americans. Visual artists were employed through the Federal Art Project (FAP), championed by Eleanor Roosevelt, which asserted the beliefs that art could enrich all lives and that art was central to economic recovery—ideologies that gave rise to and sustained the WPA's prolific Poster Division. Posters advertised New Deal programs, including art exhibitions, theater performances, and concerts, and advanced the New Deal agenda by fostering civic literacy, encouraging community involvement, and promoting knowledge that would equip citizens to meet the challenges of the modern world.

Berman's collection of some 120 silkscreen and lithographic posters reflects the WPA's overall poster output in both form and content. It exhibits the distinct style that came to characterize the WPA Poster Division, which unified fine art and design, and represents sophisticated designers like Richard Floethe, the Poster Division leader who channeled his Bauhaus training toward the needs of his new circumstances, Dorothy Fellnagel, Katherine Milhous, and Dorothy Waugh. Crucially, Berman sought out examples produced by poster offices operating across the country (key among them New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia). These posters address some of the most pressing concerns of the age—employment, health, education, protection of the environment—and remain strikingly relevant today.

## **Social Justice and LGBTQ+ Collections**

Berman collected a wide range of graphic works and ephemera related to American political causes across the 20th century, with major areas of focus being the history of labor rights, anti-war movements, and the history of socialism in the United States. The collection holds issues of rare and graphically innovative journals such as *The Masses* (1911–1917) and *Labor Defender* (1926–1937). Posters and sketches by artists such as Hugo Gellert

and Lester Beall advance a range of progressive causes from the 1930s to 1950s. Other works document anti-war protests in the 1960s and 1970s, protests against gun violence following the Kent State shootings in 1970, and the feminist movement of the 1970s. Berman's LGBTQ+ collection centers on gay rights issues from the 1960s to 1990s and comprises posters, flyers, and ephemera related not only to gay rights, but also gay culture and gay pride. Alongside political ephemera are rare posters for experimental queer cinema by Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and Kenneth Anger, and flyers for drag performances by icons such as Mario Montez and RuPaul. The collection also documents artists' activism against the AIDS crisis and waves of anti-gay violence in the 1980s, with notable works by Donald Moffett, Marlene McCarty, and David Wojnarowicz, who is represented by a powerfully disturbing pencil drawing.

## **African American Culture, Activism, and Protest Collection**

The collection conveys the political and cultural history of African American civil rights and radical political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It includes exemplary rare prints, posters, maquettes, and periodicals from established civil rights organizations, such as the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and more radical Black political organizations such as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). These progressive movements provided indispensable forums where many of the national and international concerns facing American democracy and Black people could be discussed and addressed. The graphic representations from African American political movements, such as those illustrating *Crisis Magazine* (1920s–1940s), as well as prints and posters from the BPP (1960s and 1970s), demonstrate the key role visual communication played in catalyzing these social movements. Artists of both the earlier period, such as Vivian Schuyler Key and Laura Wheeler Waring, and of the later, namely the BPP's "Minister of Culture" Emory Douglas, were keenly aware of the manner in which predecessors such as the visionary artists of the Russian Revolution harnessed the power of imagery and of mass-reproduction, and adapted these strategies toward their own ends. These visual materials bring to life the aims and militant ambitions of radical Black politics and embody the artists and iconic personalities behind them. Images of prominent and youthful activists such as Angela Davis and Huey P. Newton were widely influential and the designers of these vanguard

graphics paid close attention both to the personalities and politics that defined the era as well as to the enthusiasm for progressive political change.

As Berman wrote of these works in 2020:

“The history of new, radical art in the 20th century and the history of struggle for social change, equality, and human rights are inexorably linked. This principle has long guided my curatorial and collecting practice. It is reflected in my focus on areas such as the Russian Revolution, Spanish Civil War, American Anti-War, and Pride. I acquired portraits, paintings, and political works by Black artists and activists over many years. Looking back on these works from today’s perspective offers a historical context, a sense of déjà vu, and simultaneous feelings of frustration and hope.”

The collection will be cataloged over the next several years and then made available to researchers at the GRI. ■

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