



Check (1965) by William Gropper, from an exhibition of his works at the Stanford Art Gallery through May 8.

An artist paints a political canvas

by Valerie Patten

William Gropper is an artist who was committed to political causes, as can be seen in the impressive collection of his drawings, paintings and illustrations now on view at the Stanford Gallery.

Gropper is widely known for the massive volume of graphic art he produced for the radical press during the 1920s, '30s and '40s. An important American social realist, Gropper was not only enormously prolific, but at all times in the creation of his work was true to his own political and social ideals.

Gropper's basic stance was fundamental humanitarianism. He felt deeply for the poor, the underprivileged and the social outcasts devoured by war and impossible economic conditions.

During his years as a political cartoonist, Gropper produced images for a number of leftist publications: *Freiheit*, the Yiddish daily; *Revolutionary Age*, published by the IWW; *The New Masses* and *Liberator*. Gropper's images had immediacy. Combined with his perfect intuitive sense for composition and his style of forceful brevity, this immediacy made an effective weapon when used in the service of political and social critique.

Of the work on view, his graphic work for the radical press has the most intensity. The anti-Fascist cartoons dealing with Germany during the war are gripping, making spare use of powerful symbolic imagery.

Gropper's strength was his ability to create concise visual equivalents for moral extremes. In an untitled cartoon done for the *New Masses*, Fascism is depicted as a mechanical insect on fat, steely legs, dripping blood from its human skull. The insect is being smashed by the worker's hammer.

In another, Hitler is depicted as an enormous dark figure, an animal of prey, the gaping mouth of his skull dripping with blood over a mound of victims.

When dealing with political topics closer to home, Gropper maintained the same critical honesty. In a 1938 cartoon, he equates Martin Dies, chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, with Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels, creating an ideological parallel between right wing elements.

In "China Policy," a fat representative of U.S. Imperialism looks at China through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars, which could double as cannons, waiting to see the effect on China of the Japanese in-

vasion of Manchuria.

Aside from drawings of a specific political character, Gropper also deals with themes of a broad social significance. "Bakery," of 1928, depicts an indigent woman with three children staring at the bread in the window of a bakery. These drawings are quieter, more realistic and linear than the political cartoons. While they point out injustice, they have a disarming simplicity that makes them really personal.

Gropper later turned to the foibles of our legislators in works reminiscent of Daumier's studies of the legal profession. Brought before the McCarthy interrogators in 1953, Gropper spent the next three years exploring that bizarre experience in a series of lithographs.

William Gropper was born in New York City in 1897 to immigrant parents. His acquaintance with the radical left began early, and he studied art at the Ferrer School with Robert Henri and George Bellows, who later became important members of the "Ashcan School" of art. Leon Trotsky attended classes there for a time.

During the Great Depression, many socially conscious artists joined such organizations as the John Reed Clubs and the Artists' Union, where the intellectual climate made socialism seem inevitable. There was an optimism about that prospect which cannot be imagined now.

At the time, Gropper's social realism was an attack on what was considered the dying body of capitalist society, a way of aligning the artist with the goals of the working class. In 1968 Gropper stated: "I've gone through the illusions of Utopia, but I would like to suggest it by showing the other side. . . . I have to face things in the most brutal way that I can and let it out, and then I feel better."

Gropper's significance is more than that of a partisan who knew how to make well-executed political cartoons. He is one of those unusual artists who was able to fully integrate his artistic concerns with his social conscience. Gropper never joined the Communist Party, nor did he emphasize ideology, but he did state plainly that he leaned "toward those who are struggling for something better." ■

Valerie Patten recently exhibited some of her acrylic paintings at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Rental Gallery.