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# ART IN LIFE: FASHIONING POLITICAL IDEOLOGY THROUGH VISUAL CULTURE IN MID-CENTURY AMERICA

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ART IN *LIFE*:  
FASHIONING POLITICAL IDEOLOGY THROUGH  
VISUAL CULTURE IN MID-CENTURY AMERICA

Isadora A. Helfgott

*Life* magazine debuted onto the American publishing scene in November, 1936. The third major publication to come out of Henry Luce's publishing empire, Time, Inc., *Life* was a picture magazine. It helped to transform visual culture in America, elevating images over text as a means of communication and developing an influential new style of photographic journalism first introduced in the magazine's inaugural issue with Margaret Bourke-White's photographs of the Fort Peck Dam (Figure 1). Ranging in subjects from international politics to society news, *Life* provided a visual survey of modern experience for its readers, a weekly synopsis of the state of the world presented through pictures elucidated with bold headlines and short captions. While *Life*'s impact on photojournalism is well-known, the magazine's coverage of fine art is more obscure. And yet from its first issue, which included an article on the American painter John Steuart Curry, *Life* made a point of featuring fine art as a centerpiece of its visual pageant of American life. Henry Luce's ambitious prospectus for the magazine included art as an important aspect of the magazine's subject matter: "To see life: to see the world ... to see man's work—his paintings, towers and discoveries ... to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed."<sup>1</sup> The blend of entertainment and edification articulated by Luce was central to *Life*'s presentation of fine art: by covering the world of painting and sculpture alongside society parties and international events, *Life* normalized art as an aspect of everyday life; by adopting a didactic approach to presenting art, the magazine attempted to shape the way mainstream America thought about artistic production and display.

At a time when the New Deal government was sponsoring federally-funded art projects that trumpeted ideals of cultural democracy, and politically radical artists were arguing for the role of art in promoting revolutionary social change, *Life* used popular consciousness of art to reinforce established social hierarchies. If art could be a weapon of class struggle or an instrument of state democracy, it could also,

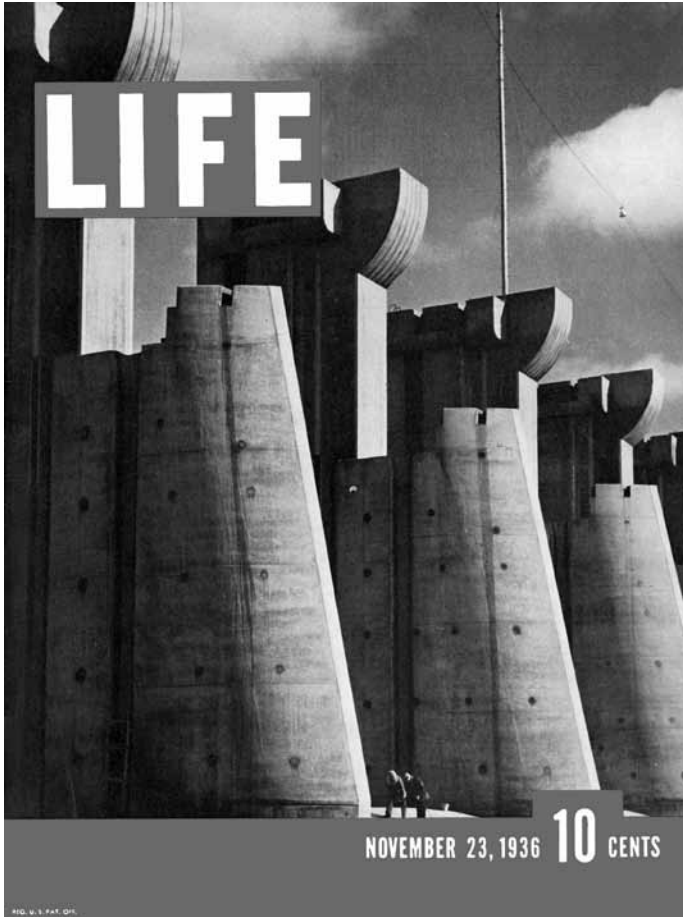


Figure 1: Margaret Bourke-White, Fort Peck Dam, *Life*, November 23, 1936, cover. LIFE® used by permission of The Picture Collection Inc.

when embedded firmly in American visual culture, reinforce the core principles of democratic capitalism. *Life's* impact on American visual culture went beyond its innovations in photojournalism. With circulation in the millions and a preeminent place in mainstream American experience, *Life* brought art into the realm of mass consumption and politics into the realm of visual culture.

*Life* was instrumental in pushing art from the realm of the rarified to that of the popular. The magazine introduced readers to a broad spectrum of the art world: it provided a visual summary of the canon of Western art, introduced prominent American collectors and museums, and covered trends and events in the art world that infused art with a sense of spectacle. The magazine also made a point of featuring and fostering art by home-grown American artists. Like the New Deal government, *Life*

**LIFE ANNOUNCES  
A NEW ART PROGRAM FOR 1939**

**B**ECAUSE LIFE firmly and sincerely believes that the great future of the world's Art lies in America, rather than in war-torn Europe . . .

And because LIFE believes that, as the masterpieces of the illustrious past were painted on commissions from churches or private individuals, so great Art of today can also be produced on assignment . . .

LIFE announces that, in 1939, the editors will commission America's foremost contemporary painters to create a series of pictures especially for LIFE—and for America!

These pictures, to be published as part of LIFE's regular Art program, will comprise a sequence of dramatic historical scenes from the stirring epic of America during the last twenty years. And they will be painted by the outstanding painters alive in America today; painted as each artist wants to paint them—in his own idiom and with his own creative ideas.

This important series of paintings will be drawn from every field of American activity and every phase of the American scene—Politics, Sport, Crime, Industrial Achievement, Industrial Interest . . .

LIFE is confident that, though you may like some of these pictures and not like others, this ambitious project is almost certain to produce a few great examples of truly American Art . . .

But—most important of all—these LIFE paintings will form a unique collection of great episodes

from American contemporary history, painted by the outstanding American artists of our time!

\* \* \*

In 1939, LIFE will also continue to present its readers with the world's best Art from every country and from every age.

As in the year just past, LIFE showed you the great paintings of private collections in America, so, in the year to come, LIFE will take you on a tour of this country's great museums and art galleries, from coast to coast—starting with the biggest of all, New York's famous Metropolitan Museum of Art.

\* \* \*

And, in the year ahead, LIFE will go on commissioning outstanding nature artists to present Science in the medium through which it can often best be expressed—Art.

Hundreds of letters from readers have told us that LIFE's pictures by Rockwell Kent of astronomers' predictions about "the end of the world"—LIFE's celebrated paintings of migratory birds last May—and of wild ducks in November—presented their subjects better than any photographs could have done!

So, for the future, LIFE will continue to show its readers many informative pictures of Nature—presented as Science—but seen through the eyes of an artist.

**LIFE**

Figure 2: Advertisement for *Life's* art program for 1939, *Life*, January 30, 1939, inside front cover. Copyright 1939 The Picture Collection Inc. Reprinted with permission. All Rights reserved.

declared a need for cultural stimulus in the United States and articulated a role for itself in contributing to the overall uplift of the country. Indeed, the magazine made a discernable point of highlighting what it called its “art program” and pointing out the national significance of its project to make fine art more accessible and knowable to the American public (Figure 2). *Life* emphasized that it could do what other distributors of color reproductions could not: bring art quickly, cheaply and regularly into the realm of mass consumption. In advertisements for the magazine within in its own pages, *Life* highlighted three ramifications of its art program: it showed how the magazine increased accessibility to the world's great art, how it showcased and promoted American artistic achievement, and how it inspired others to follow its example by undertaking new initiatives to expand the scope of art appreciation in America.

In arrogating to itself the role of liaison between the elite echelons of art and its own popular readership, *Life* also entered an ideologically charged debate about the role of art in American life and political discourse. 1936 was the year that American artists responded to the creation of the Popular Front by staging the American Artists' Congress, a meeting of prominent, mostly leftist, artists and critics in New York that sought to articulate a collective stance on global political questions of war and fascism. The Congress also addressed issues like censorship, highlighted by the spectacular destruction of Diego Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural, and the need to expand government art programs in order to ameliorate the decline of established patronage systems.<sup>2</sup> 1936 was also the second year of Federal Project Number One, the visual art component of the WPA's cultural work-relief projects that put artists directly to work for the American government. Both the Artists' Congress and the government projects discussed the future of art in the United States in relation to the audience for which it was produced. In the context of these two developments that explicitly linked artistic production and consumption to political theory, *Life's* decision to develop an art project of its own, and to couch that project in terms of national significance, puts the magazine squarely in the center of a larger conversation about the ideological implications of visual culture.<sup>3</sup>

*Life* posited a popularization of art based on widespread familiarity and interest as a viable alternative to the New Deal's democratization of art, which suggested a major shift in ownership over cultural knowledge, and the left's politicization of art, which sought to mobilize art for radical systemic change. Art critics at the time understood the difference. In November, 1936, the same month that *Life* released its first issue, leftist art critic Meyer Schapiro pointed out what he saw as the danger of a popularization of art unaccompanied by broader social change to the members of the Artists Union in its magazine, *Art Front*. Even if the "best art" being produced was "physically accessible to the whole nation," Schapiro warned, that would not mean that the country would have a "public use of this art." Without a more profound reorganization of American society, art would continue to be "almost meaningless to the people," or, worse from Schapiro's point of view, it would be more widely appreciated, not as art, but simply as "accompaniments of a desired wealth or status."<sup>4</sup> By reinforcing traditional art world values, *Life* challenged the efforts of artists on the Left to heed Schapiro's call to change the nature and function of art through broadening the base of art appreciation. *Life's* popularization of art demonstrated how art could be popular and accessible without being radical. It provided access to the formerly sequestered spaces of high culture rather than challenging the primacy of those spaces in the national cultural life. The magazine's art program sustained a division between high art and popular culture and in doing so defined a need for *Life* itself to act as a cultural interpreter. *Life* did not just promote one artist or one kind of

art, but a particular idea of art, how it was created and for whom, and how it functioned in national life.

*Life's* art program sought to infuse fine art into mainstream Americans' visual vocabulary so as to make art an integral part of American visual culture. To accomplish this demystification, *Life* introduced its readers to the art, institutions, and personalities that comprised the core of the art establishment. It sought to imbue readers with reverence for the centuries of accomplishment that culminated in collections like those at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In its widespread coverage of art, *Life* consistently upheld the established values and traditions of the art world. It emphasized the importance of great painters who produced notable works and the wealthy patrons who made that work possible, the significance of major museums for safeguarding this cultural patrimony, and the wealth of leading American industrialists who brought it to the United States. In its presentation of art, *Life* offered its readers greater access to high culture without changing the social relations of art or challenging core assumptions about how art was valued, paid for, and exhibited. The main change that *Life's* art pages did suggest, its own entrance into the matrix of art production and display, served to solidify the magazine's significance as a cultural player.

To sell art as interesting to its readers, *Life* had to convince them that it was accessible. Part of the magazine's role in making art knowable to a popular audience was to give that audience a basic introduction to the history of Western painting. It introduced readers to the great painters and sculptors of the Western canon and explained their exalted status in art historical terms. In its first year of publication, beginning in November, 1936, *Life* ran three stories featuring individual old master painters, including Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and Cézanne, and one featuring an important American collection, the Frick Collection in New York. In its second year, the magazine combined its coverage of canonical art with examples of influential patrons, showing paintings held in prestigious American collections. *Life* made it a project to give its readers a comprehensive survey of Western art masterpieces that featured prominent American collectors, thereby underlining the connection between American wealth and the Western cultural tradition. In ten parts, *Life* reproduced a concise summary of paintings that could be considered "the greatest of this great art."<sup>5</sup>

*Life* presented its series of articles on old master paintings as exhibitions in themselves and devised a format that linked the reproductions of old master paintings in *Life* to the aura of the museums or collections that housed the originals. The series began out of chronological sequence with a story on "England's Greatest Portraitists in America" (Figure 3). The article set the tone for the rest of the series, illustrating *Life's* desire to confer an aura of significance onto its educational initiative. Departing from the typographical style established

*England's Greatest Portraitists in America*

LIFE HEREWITH PRESENTS CHOICE EXAMPLES FROM THE HUNTINGTON  
COLLECTION OF THIS 18TH CENTURY SCHOOL AS THE FIRST OF A  
SERIES SHOWING THE DEVELOPMENT OF PAINTING THROUGH THE AGES

In line with LIFE's plan to show prime examples of various schools of painting through notable pictures hanging in outstanding U. S. collections, the next four pages contain color reproductions of some of the finest works in the country's top-notch group of 18th Century British masterpieces—the Henry R. Huntington Art Gallery in San Marino, Calif. Presented as a sample of the art series which LIFE will run from time to time, this brilliant assortment will be followed by a chronological sequence of the several great trends of painting beginning with the pre-Renaissance primitives.

Because the 18th Century was essentially a period in which the social graces were paramount, and because the England of George III revolved around a worldly, well-bred society whose pastimes were taste and elegance and wit and charm, it was natural that the most talented British painters should turn primarily to portraying the leading celebrities of this brilliant and carefree world. Like the four great portraitists shown below, they were for the most part men of fashion themselves. Enriched by a continual rain of generous commissions, they dressed well, lived well, adored the *beau monde* whose fastidious figures they painted with enthusiasm and skill. Many of them moved in court circles and several of them were knighted for their work. To later ages they left a rich record of the dignified fashion and charm characteristic of a glamorous way of life that will never recur.

*Thomas Gainsborough*

The youngest of nine children of a wooden manufacturer, Gainsborough married a rich woman in 1748 when he was 19 and devoted his life to painting, music and society. Altogether he did some 500 portraits and landscapes. Hardly anyone bought the landscapes but orders for portraits came so thick and fast that he once complained "I am tired of portraits. I would like to live in some peaceful village where I could paint landscapes . . . in quietness and ease. But these fine ladies, with their cups of tea, their balls, and their husband-hunting cheat me out of my last ten years." Gainsborough was a great friend of Garrick, the actor. He painted George III eight times.



*Sir Joshua Reynolds*

An immensely ambitious man who started life as the son of a clergyman, Joshua Reynolds became the outstanding fashionable native painter of an English society which had until then patronized foreigners like Holbein and Van Dyck. A portraitist at 80, he was made the first president of the Royal Academy in 1768 and instituted the annual banquet which this body still holds. George III knighted him the next year. Deaf since his youth, he wore partially tinted in old age (note glasses). His funeral procession to St. Paul's contained 91 carriages and the pallbearers included three dukes and three earls. He left a \$700,000 estate.



*Sir Thomas Lawrence*

Two years after his father failed as tin grasper in 1779, penniless Thomas Lawrence, then only 14, was earning his family's living by crayon portraiture. At 81 he painted Queen Charlotte. At 83 he was elected an associate of the Royal Academy of which he later became president. Sir Joshua Reynolds whom he met when the latter was 64 told him "Study Nature! Study Nature!" but Lawrence never took this advice and remained frankly artificial. Exclusively a portraitist, his feeling for charm and fastidiousness made women his most successful subjects. His gifts won him a knighthood and his death in 1830 closed the brilliant, worldly era of British native portraiture.



*George Romney*

Born the son of a cabinetmaker George Romney spent part of his childhood doing wood carving. Apprenticed to an itinerant painter when he turned to sketching, he later became a wandering painter himself, executing portraits for a couple of guineas. At 27 he deserted his wife and his two children and went to London. There he came to share society's favor with Gainsborough and Reynolds. A feud with the latter prevented him from ever exhibiting at the Academy or from being elected a member. Romney's paintings are the personification of grace. In old age, shattered in body and mind, he returned to his wife, died in her arms.



Figure 3: "England's Greatest Portraitists in America," *Life*, January 24, 1938, p. 28. Copyright 1938 The Picture Collection Inc. Reprinted with permission. All Rights Reserved.

throughout the magazine, *Life* added an element of formality to these art stories by giving their headlines and subtitles an ornate italic flourish and using formal language to describe its lofty offering. In introducing the story, for example, the magazine wrote, "*Life* herewith presents choice examples from the Huntington Collection."<sup>6</sup> Introductory text gave readers a schema from which to understand the reproductions that followed. Emphasizing the period's "taste and elegance and wit and charm," *Life's* interpretation of eighteenth-century British portraiture gave readers an easily digestible overview of the period peppered with gossipy personal tidbits about the artists, Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Sir Thomas Lawrence, and George Romney,



which lent the story a degree of human interest. Reynolds was “deaf since his youth,” Gainsborough married well, Romney deserted his wife and two children and gained “society’s favor” in London.<sup>7</sup> Each artist was also portrayed in a portrait. The four pages of color reproductions that followed the background information about the artists included didactic captions that gave readers an introduction in formal analysis, historical background, or critical strategies for comparing qualities among works. *Life* described Reynolds’s “Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse” as “an excellent example of this famous painter’s grand style,” and Lawrence’s “Pinkie” evoked “the restrained gaiety and idealism of eighteenth-century England.”<sup>8</sup> Presented like a museum exhibition in print, *Life*’s features on the art of the Western canon validated the canon while making the art that comprised it more accessible to the average reader. Giving a chronological narrative of art historical development that was easy for readers to trace and peppering the educational content with human interest details, *Life* provided its own brand of exhibition that gave readers familiarity with the visual vocabulary of art, and it did so in an appealing way that reinforced ideas about aesthetic greatness and individual genius.

As *Life* would emphasize later on when it embarked on its own program of commissioning art, great masters were made possible by great patrons. In America, great patrons were the captains of industry and their heirs whose largesse had brought high culture to the United States. *Life* showed its readers not just great art but the great individuals who made that art possible and, just as importantly, brought it across the ocean. Each of its features on different schools of art included postscripts that discussed the individual collectors who had purchased the art in question and brought it to America. These profiles served the dual purpose of highlighting the cultural achievements of American captains of industry and reaffirming the division between those who had access to ownership of great works of art and those whose access to that art was made possible by *Life*’s reproductions.

An addendum to the pages devoted to the art of “England’s Greatest Portraitists” gave background information about Henry E. Huntington, the collector, and showed photographs of the works of art hanging in their places in the Huntington Art Gallery. *Life* highlighted the monetary value of the collection (\$50,000,000) and described Huntington as the heir to the South Pacific Railroad fortune, situating him as clearly exceptional in economic stature. At the same time it brought him down to earth by noting that “the man who brought the richest European culture to far-off California never went to Europe until he was 63.”<sup>9</sup> Firmly American, then, *Life* gave readers grounds to both revere and connect with the wealthy collector. Like art in *Life*, Huntington was presented as someone who could be both venerated and understood.

While the wealthy collectors whom *Life* profiled were exceptional in

terms of financial assets, *Life* showed their own processes of cultural awakening, a process to which the magazine's readers could perhaps relate. Chester Dale's collection of French paintings, for example, was a product of the tycoon's change of heart about the art. "The story of the collection itself is as interesting as the pictures in it," the magazine maintained. The subject of interest was Dale's epiphany of taste. Ceding originally to his wife's interest in art, Dale himself became interested in French painting when he was "enraged" at the "exorbitant" prices charged for a Toulouse-Lautrec painting "which seemed to him supremely ugly. He decided to find out what there was about those pictures that excited people. Within 48 hours he had bought a Lautrec himself, and returned to New York a few weeks later with 65 French moderns ..."<sup>10</sup> Somewhat of an accidental collector, Dale personified the cultural awakening *Life* was offering its own reader: appreciation through exposure.

*Life's* coverage of the collectors who brought the great art masterpieces to America also underscored the commodity value of art, one of the art world's most fundamental values. The magazine's discussion of prominent American art patrons emphasized the monetary value of great works of art and the vast resources needed to own them. The magazine's discussion of French paintings, for example, noted in a headline that Chester Dale had amassed his collection at a cost of \$6,000,000.<sup>11</sup> *Life* also emphasized the nature of art as a valuable investment commodity. Of Vermeer's "A Woman Weighing Gold," *Life* noted that it had been sold in 1696 "at auction for the incredible price of \$65, with a folding cabinet thrown in." By 1911, however, "the late Peter A. B. Widener paid incredibly more for it."<sup>12</sup> *Life's* series on old master paintings reinforced many of the art world's most cherished assumptions: the idea of the artistic genius, the unquestionable greatness of specific works and schools of art, the role of wealthy individuals in the creation of great art and its dissemination, and the treatment of art as a valuable and precious commodity. A subsequent series on American museums similarly reinforced the importance of those institutions to the cultural life of the nation.<sup>13</sup>

*Life's* art historical series made the assumption that its readers were largely ignorant of the history of Western representational art. Similarly, the magazine presented "tours" of great American museums that assumed a general lack of familiarity with the institutions and their collections. *Life's* discussions of museums presumed to provide an entrée into an unfamiliar world. It was not just specific museums or artifacts that *Life* assumed to be unfamiliar, but the whole world of museums as bastions of cultural preservation and education. More of a recurring feature than an actual series, *Life's* tours of museums began with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. A snapshot of the diversity of the museum's holdings, *Life's* tour emphasized the element of discovery made possible by the museum's "strange and wonderful mis-

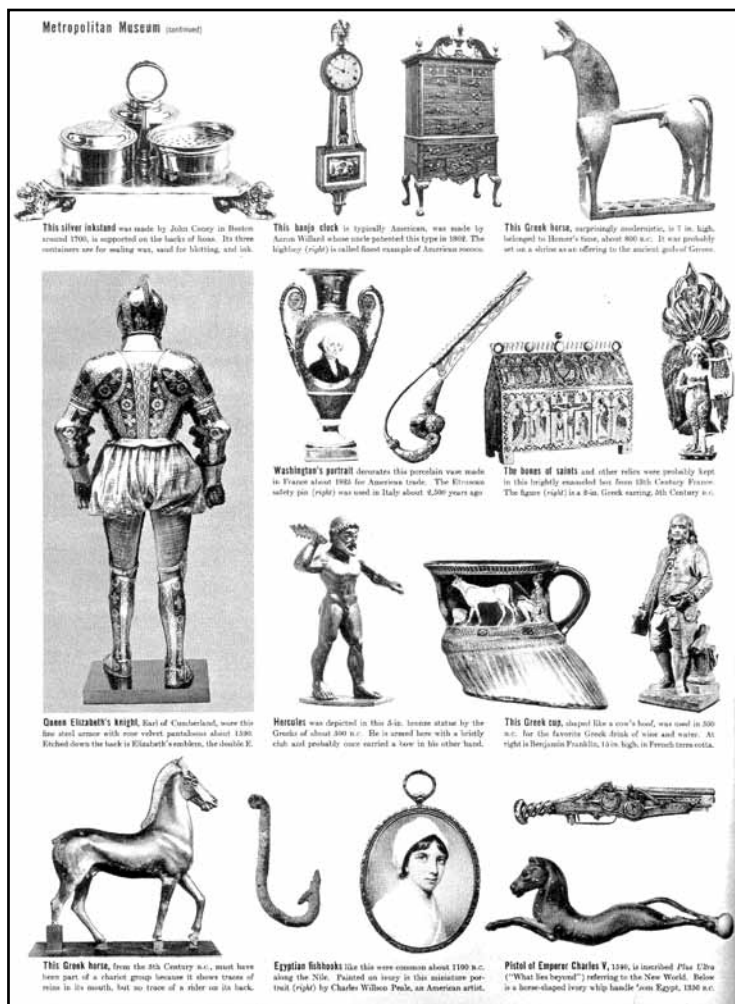


Figure 4: "Metropolitan Museum: It's Miscellany is a Browser's Paradise," *Life*, March 20, 1939, p. 52. Copyright 1939 The Picture Collection Inc. Reprinted with permission. All Rights Reserved.

cellary."<sup>14</sup> *Life's* own tour seemed deliberately haphazard. With photographs of fifteen items crowded onto each page, the magazine surveyed the variety of objects the Metropolitan housed in no particular chronological or stylistic order. *Life* situated an Egyptian fishhook from 1100 B.C.E. in between a statue of a Greek horse from the fifth century B.C.E. and a miniature cameo-style portrait by American Charles Willson Peale (Figure 4). The objects were all pictured in black and white, and readers were left without any ability to group them or evaluate them in terms of material, texture, or even scale. An American highboy, for example, was pictured the same size as a statuette of a Greek horse that was seven inches high, and a set of Egyptian dice hovered over the

same space occupied by an American bed.

Without the means to really contextualize or group the objects, *Life's* survey was more of a catalog of historically significant objects, the collection of which redounded to the significance of the museum, than a meaningful introduction into the worlds that the museum represented. *Life's* depiction of the Metropolitan Museum as a grab bag suggested that neither the historical context of the object nor the historical understanding of the viewer were important. The perspective *Life's* coverage of the Metropolitan Museum conveyed, that history did not matter and that therefore the individual was no longer conditioned by history, was emblematic of the magazine's penchant for disregarding material, local conditions in favor of an encompassing national perspective. The ideological implications of that perspective were clear to contemporary critics of the magazine. Although writing some years later, in 1947, in response to a subsequent series on Western culture, Charles Humboldt pointed out the "attack on causality in the field of history" propagated by *Life's* articles on Western culture. *Life* focused on "personalities and psychological elements," Humboldt wrote, to divert "attention from the economic and social determinants which augment or limit the historical effectiveness of the individual."<sup>15</sup> *Life's* profiles of great artists and its presentation of objects as a hodge-podge conformed to Humboldt's later analysis of the ideological message imbued in the magazine's presentation of history and historical causation. In addition to presenting the production of art as divorced from particular historical circumstances, *Life's* museum profiles reinforced their significance for protecting the world's cultural legacy while highlighting the magazine's own role in making the institutions broadly accessible to the American public.

*Life's* coverage also celebrated museums as private institutions that were largely independent of governmental support. The Boston museum, it noted, was built from private funds.<sup>16</sup> The William Rockhill Nelson Gallery owed its existence to the local newspaper, the *Kansas City Star*.<sup>17</sup> The Metropolitan Museum relied on wealthy American collectors. "Most of the Metropolitan's paintings are gifts of such millionaire art patrons as Morgan, Vanderbilt, Havemeyer, Hearn and Altman," *Life* informed its readers. These wealthy patrons had made the Metropolitan the "world's richest museum."<sup>18</sup> The Whitney Museum, run by "two firm-willed women," was made possible by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, heiress to two fortunes, and Juliana Force, who ran the museum with an "enlightened autocracy."<sup>19</sup> Although the institutions themselves served public functions, exceptional individuals were paramount in *Life's* narrative of the place of museums in the nation's cultural development.

All of these museums seemed harmonious bastions of high culture, successfully safeguarding valuable objects and displaying them to an eager public. By contrast, *Life* portrayed the St. Louis City Art

Museum as a center of discord resulting from its status as a tax-supported institution. "No museum in America has been the center of so many art fights as St. Louis' City Art Museum," *Life* wrote. The reason for the friction lay in the complication of blending cultural standards with public financing. "Every citizen feels it his right and duty to criticize the museum's activities because it is tax supported," *Life* pointed out. Although *Life* acknowledged that despite these difficulties, the museum had assembled "one of the finest collections in the U.S.," *Life's* emphasis on discord in St. Louis, unique in its coverage of museums, conveyed its reverence for private wealth and patronage as the foundations of public art institutions.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond the art itself and the museums that displayed it, *Life* brought the world of art to its readers through coverage of its main events: contemporary exhibitions in galleries and museums, publications of monographs or surveys in art history, or controversies arising in art circles. It often showcased exhibitions that were new or on an especially grand scale, such as the "largest loan show of international sculpture ever seen in America," at the Philadelphia museum, one that gave the "largest cash prizes" at the Corcoran gallery in Washington, and "the biggest show" in the history of the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>21</sup> *Life* also gave readers a glimpse into trends in the art world at home and abroad, covering, for example, "the most discussed painting of the London season" and Surrealist portraits achieving popularity abroad.<sup>22</sup> It covered exhibitions that were drawing large crowds, drawing attention to their popularity, like a modern sculpture show that attracted 25,000 viewers in the first two weeks and a controversial Picasso show attracting "half a million Americans."<sup>23</sup> These discussions suggested that the art world constituted a newsworthy subject and a significant area of American experience, but they also tended to highlight the need for some level of interpretation between aesthetic values that were taken for granted by art world insiders and the level of taste and understanding among *Life's* readers.

This emphasis on translating fine art for its readers was especially true of *Life's* coverage of modern trends in painting, especially abstractions like Henry Moore's sculpture, which *Life* characterized as "bizarre variations" on the human form.<sup>24</sup> *Life's* presentation of artistic currents that resonated with critics but might have seemed foreign to its own readers emphasized the divide between the magazine's readership and the arbiters of quality in the art world. In pointing out that disjuncture, the magazine reinforced its own position as a conduit between the two. For example, *Life's* brief discussion of the "puzzling objects" of Isamu Noguchi noted that "at least a dozen top U.S. critics and museum heads" believed they were "first-rate art."<sup>25</sup> Likewise, *Life* assured readers that although Georgia O'Keeffe's "horse's skull and pink rose" might "strike some people as strangely curious art. ... American experts, collectors and connoisseurs will vehemently assure the doubters

that it is a thing of real beauty and rare worth."<sup>26</sup> The role of the magazine in these two cases was as intermediary: to show readers work that art enthusiasts appreciated, even if it did not persuade them to agree. It was for readers themselves "to like or dislike—but to see and thus to know."<sup>27</sup> In presenting work that art critics deemed significant, *Life* recognized the authority of those critics to determine cultural value. At the same time, the magazine's presentations underscored the difference between the tastes of the art world elite and those of its own readers. If readers did not necessarily appreciate the qualifications that constituted quality in modern art, *Life* brought them enough familiarity with the subject of art to recognize the authority of those who did. The point was not, as the New Deal cultural projects promoted, for *Life's* readers to become critics themselves, but rather for them to be able to better assimilate the pronouncements of the experts.

Through its features on Western art, American art collectors and museums, and art world events, *Life* magazine demystified the world of high art for its readers. Introducing the range of facets that comprised the art world, *Life* provided a common visual vocabulary and access to an entire cultural realm that, whether for geographic or economic reasons, had been largely exclusive. The manner in which *Life* presented the world of art served, on the one hand, to popularize that world and, on the other, to reify its most central tenets. The inherent importance of the art itself, the necessity for wealthy patrons, the need for museums to regulate, preserve, and display the world's cultural heritage, and the commodity nature of individual artworks were all values that were deeply ingrained in the functioning of the art world. They were also values that were being challenged by federal funding of the arts under the New Deal and artists who sought to reorient the place of their work in society.

If one aspect of *Life's* art program was to bring fine art into visual culture by making readers familiar with the visual vocabulary of the Western canon, another was to normalize art in America, to promote the idea that art was fundamentally compatible with American life. Despite long-held ideas about America's cultural inferiority to Europe, art, *Life* showed, was something that was created by Americans and could be interesting to them.<sup>28</sup> Artists as individuals were just regular Americans; their work process, goals, and obstacles were familiar and understandable. Art, then, was not foreign to America. As Henry Luce wrote, the editors of the magazine felt that "the future of world art lies here rather than abroad."<sup>29</sup> *Life's* promotion of art showed how the United States was both the inheritor of the Western cultural tradition and its hope for the future.

Although the magazine has been associated with the American Scene, or Regionalist, school of painting, and the celebratory national ideology that school of art connoted, *Life* featured American achievement in the arts regardless of the style of art produced or even, in some cases, the political affiliations of the artist who produced it.<sup>30</sup> Ameri-

can artists, *Life* showed, were producing work worthy of commercial, critical, and popular attention across a broad spectrum of stylistic and subjective modes. *Life* emphasized this point even in discussion of artists with leftist political affiliations. The magazine defined American art by the individuals who produced it, not by the scenes it portrayed. *Life*'s article on John Sloan, the painter whom *Life* touted as having had greater influence on American art than any other "living man," encapsulated this message. Sloan painted scenes of urban realism, but often featured the underside of city life, what *Life* called "slum scenes and subway bums," a perspective in line with the socialist politics that led him to illustrate for the radical *Masses* and *New Masses* publications between the 1910s and the 1920s. *Life*, however, was more interested in Sloan's ideas about Americanism in painting than his politics. *Life* positioned Sloan as a symbol of success, the pinnacle of American achievement in painting who was also shaping the country's artistic future. The article was subtitled "A Teacher-Painter Crusades for American art," implying that Sloan himself believed in a nationalist agenda in art. And yet, *Life* noted that he "deplores flag-waving in art." For *Life*, the two seemingly incompatible ideas were not contradictory. Like the magazine itself, *Life* argued that Sloan believed in the significance of art production by American painters regardless of style. Sloan, *Life* reported, told artists, "if you are American and work, your work will be American."<sup>31</sup> *Life*'s characterization of Sloan as first and foremost concerned with Americanism in painting, despite his acknowledged affinity for depicting the seedy side of American life, and his unacknowledged political background, reinforced the idea that American painters made American art, regardless of stylistic or ideological considerations.

Sloan himself was a painter whose work fit loosely within the magazine's emphasis on realism in American painting. Another artist, Max Weber, made work that was much farther afield from *Life*'s aesthetic inclinations, and yet the magazine embraced his accomplishments and touted his significance as an American painter. Weber, like Sloan, was connected to currents of radical politics that linked art production to social agitation in the 1930s, having been active in the American Artists' Congress and other activist artist organizations in the decade. *Life*'s enthusiastic profile declared Weber "the pioneer of modern art in America." It further noted that Weber was revered among artists not just as "the greatest artist in America" but also as "one of the few really great ones in the world."<sup>32</sup> *Life* made a point of noting that Weber was "not a realistic painter." But it touted this fact as a positive thing that reflected on Weber's individual genius, writing, "he does not copy nature. Like most great artists, he edits it ... until he has conveyed his own personal vision of the objects he contemplates." *Life*'s brief discussion of Weber's paintings highlighted two characteristics absent from the American Scene aesthetic: the foreign influences in his work and his social consciousness. *Life* presented Weber's foreign influences as

a step towards the development of "his own personal style of painting" and noted the artist's temporary adoption of realism to portray the economic hardships of the depression, illustrating the point with a painting by Weber that depicts a group of men looking for work.<sup>33</sup> The other images that accompanied the article stressed Weber's connection to an aesthetic modernism that drew on European influences, such as Cézanne and Picasso, and also highlighted Weber's Jewish background with a portrait of a rabbi. Neither Weber's modernist artistic background nor his social consciousness, however, reflected poorly on the artist in *Life's* estimation. Rather, *Life's* emphasis was on highlighting and explaining Weber's genius as a product of American cultural accomplishment.

In 1946, an overview of the first ten years of *Life's* art coverage underscored the overall importance of American accomplishment in art over individual styles, recognizing that "not all American artists were regionalists."<sup>34</sup> The juxtapositions in the article reflect the shift by this point from the division between Regionalism and the Social Content school that had dominated discussions of American art during the 1930s to the division between realism in general and modernism which was often abstract.<sup>35</sup> It pointed out that by 1944, the influence of painters with "individual styles" such as John Marin, Max Weber, and Ivan Albright "had begun to turn the tide against the regionalists and other American realists." *Life* saw art institutions as recognizing this change as well. "Museums and galleries from coast to coast blossomed out with a vast new crop of symbolic and nonrealistic paintings," it wrote. Even Iowa, the home of Grant Wood, had turned the tide, becoming the site of "one of the most important exhibitions of abstract and subjective art in U.S. history." *Life* reported this stylistic evolution as an inevitable swing and argued that the transformation itself was "less important as a lesson in esthetics than as proof that American art is on the move. Art has had fine realists and fine painters of cubes and fantasies. The significant thing is that, over the past 10 years, America has shown itself capable of producing both."<sup>36</sup> Pointing out that the history of art was marked with instances of "sudden and extreme revolt," *Life* left open the question as to whether American art would turn back around or continue forward on a path away from the realism of the 1930s: "Today U.S. art may be simply in a mood of perverse revolt. Or it may be at the beginning of a newly forceful and creative era."<sup>37</sup> In either case, *Life's* readership could take pride in the quality of American achievement and appreciate the role of the magazine in illuminating it for them.

*Life* not only championed contemporary American art in general but also sought to situate American artistic output in the context of the great Western art that it had presented to its readers. *Life's* art historical series had ended with a feature on the French Impressionists of the 1890s, characterized as "the ultimate advance in representational art."<sup>38</sup> In *Life's* narrative, the successor to French impressionism was



not abstraction, surrealism, cubism, or any other modernist school of painting. Rather, it was American art that had inherited the traditions *Life* had spent the previous year surveying. The eleventh piece in *Life*'s art history series placed American culture as the inheritor of the great Western cultural tradition. "American Art Comes of Age: History of Art in the U.S. from Colonial Days to the Moderns of West" placed American art, historical and contemporary, as the culmination of Western achievement in the arts. *Life*'s argument for America's place in the cultural progression did not rest on quantity, quality, or distinctiveness of achievement. It rested on linking glimmers of greatness in the past to forecasts for the future that were grounded in the comparative conditions of the present. "There has never yet been a truly American art," *Life* acknowledged, and repeated the familiar criticism at home and abroad that "American art is entirely derived from European sources."<sup>39</sup> However, *Life* argued that "it is in America, not in war-torn Europe, that the world's art future lies."<sup>40</sup> The magazine's survey offered both "a salute to the artists of America's past" and a "hope for the future" that rested on the quantity of interest in art in America: "with such a popular enthusiasm for the practice of painting as the world has not seen since the Italian Renaissance, the day of great American painters and painting has arrived." That enthusiasm, one could easily infer, was due in part to *Life*'s own initiatives in bringing fine art to the forefront of mainstream American culture.

*Life* grounded its promotion of American art in a small but significant historical context. It did not present contemporary American art as something that had emerged, like Athena, fully grown from the head of Zeus. *Life* showed how contemporary American art had its roots both in the history of Western civilization and in a small but significant history of accomplishment in fine art in America. In addition to the survey of American art it included in its series on Western painting, *Life* presented a smattering of profiles of American painters, living and dead, who could be considered among the master ranks. These included Winslow Homer, Charles Sheeler, Georgia O'Keeffe, John Sloan, Mary Cassatt, Thomas Eakins, the Hudson River School, George Caleb Bingham, William Sidney Mount, and George Bellows.<sup>41</sup> Like the magazine's feature on the coming of age of American art, its individual profiles underscored American painting as the culmination of Western art through various representational modes. This emphasis on realism, though, did not necessarily lead straight to the American Scene. "American Art Comes of Age" did feature small reproductions of Grant Wood's famous "American Gothic" and Thomas Hart Benton's "Susanna and the Elders," but by far the largest painting included was Fletcher Martin's "Trouble in Frisco," an image, depicting the 1934 general strike in San Francisco, that *Life* described as showing "the strength of the new movement in American painting: its interest in current problems."<sup>42</sup> The great masters of American painting, as presented by *Life*, were

individuals (except in the instance of the Hudson River School, when multiple painters were grouped together) whose work, if not necessarily appreciated in their own lifetime, had come to be recognized as worthy of the highest level of consideration.

Throughout its coverage of American artists, *Life* emphasized their individualism. If art appreciation and production were presented as national phenomena, *Life's* profiles of artists brought its discussion of art back to the importance of the individual. As a producer of art, and as someone whose work and success redounded to the prestige of the nation, the individual personality featured prominently in *Life's* presentation of contemporary art. *Life* used the emphasis on the individual artist to show readers that artists were just like them, providing case-by-case demonstrations of the compatibility of artists with mainstream values and expectations and underlying the sense of art as the production of an individual rather than a manifestation of a larger social movement. Like the profiles of old masters that accompanied *Life's* art history series, the magazine's features on lesser-known contemporary American artists normalized the conception of the artist and the process of artistic production.

*Life's* artist profiles underscored the idea of artistic production as an individual enterprise. Presenting their work in "one-man shows," *Life* argued that its own "art-reporting obligation" did not end "with the reproduction of an artist's work." Instead, *Life* felt a compulsion to include information about the artist as well: "all these human details about the human beings men call Artists *are* interesting. So LIFE uses them to round out its reporting of Art."<sup>43</sup> *Life* personified the artists whose work it reproduced by giving biographical background, generally in order to explain the route by which a regular American ended up becoming a painter. It also gave readers a visual image of the artist through photographs. Each story was accompanied by at least one image of the artist and often two, one a portrait and the other an action picture that showed the artist at work. Together, the biographical details and photographs illustrated many art world examples of the mythic Horatio Alger story of American success.

Portrait photographs often served the dual purpose of conveying the personality and normality of the artist. *Life* showed John Kane, a "house painter" who turned into "a Major U.S. Artist," in two images (Figure 5). In the first, the artist is pictured sitting at his easel. His face looks directly at the camera in a frank stare and he appears distinctly knowable. The other photograph shows Kane dressed in work clothes, painting the side of a barn. The text emphasizes Kane's history as a house painter and describes his work as being characterized by "honesty and solidity."<sup>44</sup> *Life* photographed Peter Hurd of New Mexico in three different situations. In one, he wears a plaid shirt and sits with his fingers interlaced at a table covered with a checkered tablecloth as a farmer might sit waiting for a simple meal. The caption links him to

**PITTSBURGH TURNED HOUSE PAINTER JOHN KANE INTO A MAJOR U. S. ARTIST**

In the cellar of the Valentine art gallery in Manhattan are three dozen paintings by the only American house painter who ever became a major figure in American art. He is John Kane of Pittsburgh, four of whose paintings are shown on the following pages. The Valentine gallery thinks enough of Kane's work to ask \$5,000 and up for a Kane canvas. This makes Kane's work more valuable than the art work of any other modern house painter, including that of the only other twentieth-century house painter who became famous for something else than house painting—Adolf Hitler, whose art was published in *LIFE* for Nov. 30.

John Kane's real name was Cain. It was changed to Kane by a bank teller in Akron, Ohio, who wrote Cain as Kane in a new bankbook. "Cain or Kane," said John Kane later, "it made no difference as long as the money was safe." John Kane was born in 1860, in Scotland of Irish parents. As long as his farm hand father lived, John went to school and was waddled for drawing pictures on his slate. When John was 8, his father died and the boy left school, went to work in the coal mines. Ten years later he came to America and got a job as a "gandy dancer." A gandy dancer tamps rocks down between

railroad ties. After a while, Kane went to work in a steel mill but that was the era of the 7-day steel week and he quit because Sunday work interfered with his regular churchgoing. Then Kane helped construct a steel mill, ran a coal-mine scoop shovel, paved Pittsburgh streets, had his leg cut off while pushing his drunken cousin from in front of a locomotive, was a railroad watchman and got his first painting job in 1900. This was painting the sides of steel freight cars. He would amuse his fellow workers by putting drawings on the sides of the cars, then painting over them. There are probably still some original Kanes riding around the country on the sides of freight cars.

This use of paint gave Kane the idea of coloring the drawings he always made. He took up tinting photographs and made as much as \$15 a picture coloring family photographic portraits. He sold hundreds of them. House painting claimed him about 1905 and he remained a house painter most of the rest of his life except for some excursions in carpentry and construction work. His first actual paintings were made on Beaverboard. He lived in "The Strip" section of Pittsburgh across from the Heinz pickle works but he thought Pittsburgh was beautiful and

delighted to paint it. Not until 1925 did he dare submit his work to an exhibition. That year, the Carnegie International Exhibition rejected Kane, rejected him again the next year. In 1927, his work was accepted. Thereafter he showed regularly at Carnegie International, winning a group prize in 1929. Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr. was one of the first important collectors to buy a Kane. She paid \$150 for hers. Kane made enough out of his canvases to give up house painting but he was never prosperous. He died of long-neglected tuberculosis in 1934, aged 74.

By the time Kane became a serious and frequent painter, his hand had grown too stiff to permit him to draw easily. His honest, literal work suggests that of a child artist but it is not childish. Kane's talent carried him over the all-important gap that separates the childish from the childlike. It is the open-eyed, childlike quality that gives Kane's work much of its charm. Though his perspective often went awry, Kane's instinctive feeling for composition brought unity and a grace of decoration into his painting. His deep religious feeling is the base of the literalness in his work. He said he wanted to paint things just as God made them.



On rainy days, John Kane painted on canvases because bad weather kept him from plying his trade as house painter. Sundays and holidays he would go into the country around Pittsburgh, make sketches, bring them home to be worked over in paint. He would return to the scene of his painting again and again to make sure that his rendering was accurate.



On good days, John Kane slipped paint with heavy brushes on the sides of houses, barns, silos. Kane loved hard work. He was a strong man, 6 ft. tall, weighing 190 lb. When he was young he liked to box. He once went 75 rounds with a professional, another time stayed five infernal rounds with a stranger he always believed was James J. Corbett.

Figure 5: "Pittsburgh Turned House Painter John Kane into a Major U.S. Artist," *Life*, May 17, 1937, p. 44. Copyright 1937 The Picture Collection Inc. Reprinted with permission. All Rights Reserved.

agrarian work, noting that Hurd "has the hands of a cowboy and the keen eyes of an artist." Another image shows Hurd at work, dwarfed by his studio and reaching for paints made of "ocher and yellow earth from his own ranch." The third photograph portrays Hurd practicing his polo game by sitting aloft an elevated wooden horse inside a chicken-wire cage. *Life's* biography of the artist concluded with a note that declared his normality: Hurd's "cowboy friends refuse to call him a highfalutin 'artist.' As a tribute, they call him a 'sign painter.'"<sup>45</sup> Artists, Kane and Hurd demonstrated, were just regular working people.

Very few women artists were discussed in *Life*. In fact, the magazine went out of its way to emphasize the masculine nature of paint-

ing. Discussing amateur painters, for example, *Life* argued that men, especially “professional men—doctors and lawyers,” were “especially attracted to it.”<sup>46</sup> *Life* attributed this attraction to what it saw as the defining feature of the act of painting: it required “isolation and concentration,” exactly the things, *Life* argued, men sought in a hobby. By contrast, *Life* suggested that women preferred hobbies such as “crocheting or knitting” that permitted simultaneous “visiting friends or listening to the radio.”<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, *Life* did acknowledge those American women who became artists. Accompanying features on female artists, *Life* included photographs that addressed the issue of their femininity. Mary Cassatt, a “spinster,” was pictured in the “only known photograph” sitting outdoors, holding an umbrella and looking lonely in a solitary chair.<sup>48</sup> Photographs of Georgia O’Keeffe underscore both her artistic strangeness and her feminine normality.<sup>49</sup> Three depict her with animal bones, one with a nearly full skeleton, two with skulls, and one image shows her against a background of the New York landscape. *Life*’s visual connection of O’Keeffe to the city also linked her to Alfred Stieglitz, who was pictured in the feature and described as the man who “made Georgia O’Keeffe famous.”<sup>50</sup> *Life* credited Stieglitz with O’Keeffe’s rise from “one-time schoolteacher” to “one of the country’s most prosperous and talked-of painters.”<sup>51</sup> Linking the eccentric female painter to her romantic partner and attributing her success to him presented a feminine side that counteracted the large image on the first page of the article that showed her, dressed in jeans and a cowboy hat, hefting two large pieces of a cow’s skeleton.

It was not only realist artists whose photographs in *Life* served to humanize the artist. In addition to O’Keeffe, *Life* pictured modern artist Max Weber, discussed earlier, at home in a living room decorated with an oriental carpet, standing lamp, and nicely upholstered furniture. With him was his wife, dressed in a suit and heels, and his daughter, similarly dressed and playing the piano. “Mr. and Mrs. Weber,” the caption noted, “spend many leisure moments listening to the playing of their 18-year-old daughter Joy, a gifted pianist.” An accompanying photograph showed Weber at work, wearing a white overcoat to shield his clothes and applying paint to canvas. His studio, *Life* wrote, “is maintained with spick-and-span orderliness.” *Life*’s photographic depiction of Weber treated him like any other middle-class family man.

A notable exception to *Life*’s pattern of showing artists to be, like its readers, regular people, was its coverage of Surrealist artist Salvador Dali. Surrealism as an art movement attracted a significant amount of attention from *Life* magazine. The fourth issue of the magazine, in 1936, included a four-page article on the Surrealism exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and others over the next ten years covered news and exhibitions of Surrealist work.<sup>52</sup> Dali was a particular favorite of the magazine. He was featured in most of *Life*’s coverage of Surrealism as an art movement and even authored a story

in the “*Life’s Reports*” section of the magazine in March, 1944.<sup>53</sup> *Life* treated him as an eccentric success story, consistently emphasizing Dali’s commercial aptitude, his ability to attain great “heights of fame and fortune.”<sup>54</sup> A September, 1945 feature on the artist, one of the earliest in *Life* to appear with an author byline, gave an overview of the artist’s career but focused on how Dali had capitalized on his art. While Surrealism had begun “in one of art’s most esoteric ivory towers,” Winthrop Sargeant reported how Dali had made it a “commercial success.”<sup>55</sup> Granting that some of his fellow Surrealist artists considered him a “practical joker,” the author noted that Dali’s paintings nevertheless hung in important collections and most artists regarded him as a gifted artist.<sup>56</sup> Dali’s “supreme talent,” Sargeant wrote, was “that of an advertising genius, and the product he advertises is Salvador Dali.”<sup>57</sup> Granting the artist’s eccentricities, *Life’s* feature on Dali showed how even art that was far outside the norm could exist profitably in the commercial sector. Dali was exceptional for bringing Surrealist art out of its elite seclusion, injecting it into the public sphere through advertising. While Sargeant portrayed Dali as “a combination of professional lunatic, popular psychic mythologist, artistic trickster, perennial adolescent and incurable exhibitionist,” he also provided an explanation for the artist’s oddity that grounded it in the experience of *Life’s* readers: Salvador Dali was a businessman who profited from the art world’s tolerance for deviant behavior. In the context of financial gain, Dali’s nonsensical actions made sense and were consistent with the values *Life* promoted.

From a housepainter with artistic inclinations to a madman with a knack for making money, *Life* brought readers a vision of the artist that could be easily integrated into the magazine’s mainstream vision of the American experience. The magazine’s portrayals showed artists to be in essence middle-class entrepreneurs who faced the same challenges and harbored the same motivations as other working Americans. It promoted the idea of art as being the product of individual inspiration, motivated by the goal of personal enrichment and recognition.

*Life’s* glorification of the individual in art—from producer to patron to critic—was central to the challenge the magazine posed to new ideologies of art production being espoused by the architects of the federal art projects and by artists affiliated with the political left. Leftist artists in the 1930s positioned themselves as wage laborers: they organized collectively into a union and sought common cause with workers and the labor movement.<sup>58</sup> The New Deal’s cultural projects developed a conception of the citizen artist as public servant. Both linked art to ideas of communalism. With the federal government as a common employer, artists increasingly saw a uniformity of interest among their peers. Encouraged by leftist sympathies, they organized collectively for their rights, articulated their opinions with a common voice, and worked on projects in groups. As the painter Anton Refregier later com-

mented, "The idea of cooperative concepts was in the air."<sup>59</sup>

The WPA's art projects, meanwhile, emphasized the social basis of art at every step. With art production organized and paid for through the public purse, community art centers emphasizing the links between art and the general community, and government administrators trumpeting the quest for cultural democracy, federal patronage threatened to situate art firmly in the realm of the social. Promoting a more communal understanding of art's worth, the Federal Art Project (FAP) also threatened to undermine the commodity basis of the value of art. Long viewed as a solitary enterprise dependent on an individual patron's largess, this communal view of art production and consumption represented a significant reorientation of the art world. Like *Life*, the Federal Art Project also proposed new ideas about appropriate spaces for encountering art. Unlike *Life*, in doing so, the FAP sought to promote a different kind of relationship between art and audience. By changing the spaces of encounter and engaging the artist in the community, the FAP promoted direct interaction between art and audience. *Life* also took art out of the museum, but it did so in a way that created the need for an intermediary, *Life* itself, between the popular audience and the art.

Examining the Federal Art Project through the lens of the theory of hegemony, Jonathan Harris has argued persuasively that the New Deal's attempt to refashion the world of art in the 1930s was part of a conscious program to bolster the authority of the state in American life.<sup>60</sup> He contends that the central hegemonic principle of the New Deal was "that the federal state—represented as a rational and neutral instrument mobilized by the New Deal administration—was capable of resolving the economic, political and ideological conflicts of a capitalist society in crisis."<sup>61</sup> The art projects were specifically enlisted in support of that ideology. The Federal Art Project, in Harris's estimation, amounted to an attempt by Roosevelt's government to reconceptualize the foundations of the art world: "The Federal Art Project's general role was to attempt ... to define the meanings and values of art and culture in the New Deal nation-state. We may characterize this attempt ... as a *pragmatics of display*—a strategic state semiotic—working ideologically to reconstitute and represent 'America' to both the nation's citizens and those outside the country."<sup>62</sup> The New Deal, in other words, sought to attack the bases on which art production and consumption had traditionally rested, to develop a new set of criteria for the evaluation of meaning and value in art, and, thereby, to bolster a specific vision of the role of the state in society. The architects of the New Deal conceived of culture as a significant arena in which to maneuver for ideological influence. *Life* magazine agreed.

*Life*'s art program had its own set of ideological objectives. Where the New Deal's art projects bolstered the centrality of the state, *Life* emphasized the significance of the individual and the importance of the corporate sector. Henry Luce was unabashed in his opposition to the

New Deal's statist tendencies, which he viewed as dangerously communal. In a letter to Archibald MacLeish in 1938, Luce articulated his personal belief in the importance of the individual, a belief he saw as in opposition to prevailing trends: "The great phrase which is characteristic of the present period is 'Social Consciousness'. But it seems to me that a completely unanswerable argument could be made to the effect that the current emphasis on social conscience is largely at the expense of individual conscience. And that unless a better balance between the emphasis of individual and social conscience can soon be achieved, nothing worth while is likely to come out of all our storm and stress."<sup>63</sup> Three years later, Luce articulated similar ideas in the pages of *Life*. His famous "American Century" article situated his belief in the primacy of the individual at the heart of his vision of what was extraordinary about America: "We have some things in this country which are infinitely precious and especially American—a love of freedom, a feeling for the equality of opportunity, a tradition of self-reliance and independence."<sup>64</sup> *Life* promoted "equality of opportunity" in part by giving individual readers access to the cloistered world of art.

Through art, *Life* promoted the independence that Luce saw as a defining feature of the American temperament. The magazine extended its glorification of the role of the individual in art production and patronage to art appreciation through its own art program. Like the Federal Art Project and the various efforts of artists themselves to broaden the basis of art appreciation in America, *Life* gave its readers access to art. It did so, however, in a way that reinforced the distance between elite tastemakers and the popular consumers of culture. *Life* made high art accessible, familiar, and understandable for its readers. But *Life's* vision was not one of a communalist democratization of culture. In fact, the magazine rarely used that terminology despite its popularity in New Deal cultural discourse.

If anything, *Life's* art program upheld the idea articulated in an article it printed by Somerset Maugham about viewing art, that "in the end democracy depends on the virtue of the individual and great art conduces to virtue."<sup>65</sup> *Life* advocated a popularization of art that upheld existing divisions while expanding the boundaries of access to encompass a greater range of individuals. *Life's* portrayal of the art world was based on a model of individual ownership and public display that was made possible through powerful art institutions, which were in turn founded and funded by private wealth that was invariably a product of an individual's commercial success.

*Life's* model of art appreciation was based on consumption, but it was the kind of rarefied consumption that would have been out of reach for the majority of its readers. Instead of becoming consumers of art themselves, the magazine's readers became consumers of *Life*. Knowing about art, the magazine suggested, was important even if one could not own it. *Life* underscored this point in one reply to a reader in the Letters

to the Editor section. A reader who was enthusiastic about *Life's* art reproductions had written to complain that they were "small, scrubby, no-good" for framing. *Life's* editors included a reply that "LIFE does not pretend to present 'paintings suitable for framing.'"<sup>66</sup> In printing color reproductions, *Life* did not intend to give art to its readers. Rather, it gave them a kind of access to the world of art that reinforced the need for an intermediary. *Life* promoted a popularization of art that emphasized the importance of its own role as the purveyor and interpreter of high culture. Its goal was not for readers to own art but rather to come to think about it along the lines that the magazine suggested. If the federal government purported to give Americans equal and direct access to art, *Life* educated viewers but maintained a division between those who could really buy art and those who could look and appreciate it but who would continue to require a middleman to grant them access.

Like the New Deal, *Life* linked art and ideology. The magazine's art program presented a specific challenge to the government's claim for the primacy of the state in the cultural realm. As an alternative to the Federal Art Project's democratization of culture, *Life* suggested a popularization of art made possible by fealty to the tradition of wealthy individual patrons, supplemented by enlightened corporate entities such as the magazine itself.

*Life* made a space for itself and by extension the commercial sector in the world of high culture. By claiming a place in the art world, *Life* sought to elevate the commercial sector over the public, and the glorification of individual initiative over the New Deal's articulation of common goals. *Life* did not just use art passively to reflect its point of view; it sought to shape the role that art occupied in American life. At a time when the federal cultural projects and activism on the left both threatened to challenge the traditional social relations of art, *Life's* art program upheld them.

*Life's* art program sold a vision of art in America that underscored the established values of the art world: the primacy of the individual artistic genius, the commodity basis of art production and consumption, the importance of art institutions as collectors and arbiters of quality, and the idea of art as something with a rarefied aura to be venerated. As a case study, *Life* magazine's art program casts an interesting lens on Walter Benjamin's predictions about the impact of the modern age on the aura and social meaning of art. In 1936 Benjamin posited mechanical reproduction as the vehicle for the destruction of the aura of art.<sup>67</sup> If mechanical reproduction could break down the ritualistic function of art, which was linked to the authenticity of individual objects and the environments in which they were displayed, then the meaning of art might expand beyond its traditional confines and extend into the political sphere. Benjamin perceived revolutionary potential in breaking down the aura of the object as the central aspect of its value. Divorced from its limiting reliance on authenticity, and its



historical foundation in ritual, an object might assume meaning for a mass audience and thereby become imbued with political potential. For Benjamin, then, there was tremendous possibility in the destruction of the aura as mechanical reproduction made art available to a popular audience.

*Life* used reproduction technology, as Benjamin foresaw, to bring art to a mass audience and in doing so to link art to political ideology. Although not in the direct service of either Communism or Fascism, the political dialectic that dominated Benjamin's perspective, *Life* served Henry Luce's version of corporate liberalism. In a turn on Benjamin's ideas, *Life* attempted to use the power of mechanical reproduction and mass distribution to bolster the aura of art. By upholding the auratic nature of the art-viewing experience for a popular audience, *Life* reinforced the social importance of the wealthy elites who made that experience possible and challenged efforts by politically conscious artists and the New Deal government to divorce visual art from its association with social stratification and elite privilege. The magazine's model brought mainstream people into a limited space within the world of art rather than trying to change the world of art in order to bring it to the people. *Life* sold the idea that art was important, interesting, and accessible, but it also emphasized that art was something that needed to be interpreted and taught. Unlike New Deal art projects that heralded the direct engagement of art and artists with viewers and the community, *Life's* model reinforced the need for a mediator between the artist and the art audience, a role the magazine claimed at least in part for itself. *Life* sought to become the mechanism for the popularization of fine art in America. It developed an art program that underscored the significance of the corporate sector for America's cultural health, and, in the process, challenged state hegemony in the cultural sphere and leftist integration of art and politics.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Prospectus for *Life* Magazine, quoted in Robert T. Elson, *Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise, 1923-1941* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 278.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent history of the relationship between artists and the Left, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-1956* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> On the history of the New Deal's cultural projects, see Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) and Belisario R. Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983). Francis V. O'Connor's two edited collections feature recollections of artists and administrators about the projects: *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1977) and *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972).

For iconographical analysis of the art produced under these projects, see Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), and Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "Public Use of Art," *Art Front* 2 (September-October, 1936): 5.

<sup>5</sup> "Life's Art for 1938," *Life* 3 (December 37, 1937): inside front cover. The articles in this series included "England's Greatest Portraitists in America," *Life* 4 (January 24, 1938); "Great Primitive Paintings in America," *Life* 4 (February 7, 1938); "Italian Renaissance Paintings in America," *Life* 4 (March 21, 1938); "Great Flemish Painters in America," *Life* 4 (April 11, 1938); "Great Spanish Paintings in America," *Life* 4 (May 16, 1938); "Germany's Greatest Painters in America," *Life* 5 (July 11, 1938); "Great Dutch Paintings in America," *Life* 5 (August 20, 1938); "Great English Landscapes in America," *Life* 5 (September 12, 1938); "French 18th Century Paintings in America," *Life* 5 (September 26, 1938); "The French Impressionists in America," *Life* 5 (October 10, 1938).

<sup>6</sup> "England's Greatest Portraitists in America," 28.

<sup>7</sup> "England's Greatest Portraitists in America," 28.

<sup>8</sup> "England's Greatest Portraitists in America," 29, 30.

<sup>9</sup> "\$50,000,000 Huntington Collection was amassed by one man in 17 years," *Life* 4 (January 24, 1938): 33.

<sup>10</sup> "Chester Dale has spent \$6,000,000 for French paintings," *Life* 5 (October 10, 1938): 29.

<sup>11</sup> "Chester Dale has spent \$6,000,000 for French paintings," 29.

<sup>12</sup> "Great Dutch Paintings in America," 31.

<sup>13</sup> "LIFE announces a new art program for 1939," *Life* 6 (January 30, 1939): inside front cover. Articles in *Life's* series on American museums included "LIFE looks at America's Finest Museum," *Life* 6 (March 20, 1939); "Toledo Museum All the City Flocks to its Free Classes," *Life* 7 (July 31, 1939); "A Great Newspaper Builds a Great Art Museum: The William Rockhill Nelson Gallery," *Life* 7 (October 9, 1939); "Boston Museum of Fine Arts; Its Treasures Reflect the Old Town's Love of Oriental Opulence," *Life* 9 (July 22, 1940); "Chicago Art Institute: Its French Exhibit is Tops, Its School Best in Midwest," *Life* 11 (September 8, 1941); "Whitney Museum of American Art," *Life* 12 (April 20, 1942); "City Art Museum: It is the Great Pride and Problem of St. Louis," *Life* 13 (November 9, 1942); "Cleveland Museum: It is a Treasure Trove of Great Art Masterpieces from All Over the World," *Life* 15 (September 20, 1943). In addition to these general profiles of art institutions, *Life* often ran stories that discussed individual exhibitions.

<sup>14</sup> "Metropolitan Museum: Its Miscellany is a Browser's Paradise," *Life* 6 (March 20, 1939): 51.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Humboldt, "Sweet Mystery of LIFE: II The Castle and the Rack," *New Masses* 65 (November 11, 1947): 14. This was the middle article in a three-part series that examined the ideological orientation of *Life* magazine. See also "Sweet Mystery of LIFE," *New Masses* 65 (November 4, 1947): 7-9 and "Sweet Mystery of LIFE: III Hatchet-Man in Full Dress," *New Masses* 65 (November 18, 1947): 11-14, 22-23.

<sup>16</sup> "Boston Museum of Fine Arts," 50.

<sup>17</sup> "A Great Newspaper Builds a Great Museum," 52.

<sup>18</sup> "Metropolitan Museum: Its Miscellany is a Browser's Paradise," 54.

<sup>19</sup> "Whitney Museum of American Art," 72.

<sup>20</sup> "City Art Museum," 92.

<sup>21</sup> "Nudes and Lovers Brim Philadelphia Museum in Biggest Sculpture Show," *Life* 9 (August 12, 1940): 54; "Corcoran Gallery in Washington Awards Largest Cash

Prizes," *Life* 6 (May 1, 1939): 45; "Life Goes to the Opening," *Life* 6 (May 21, 1939): 82.

<sup>22</sup> "White Russian Painter Puts His World on 63 Square Feet of Canvas," *Life* 5 (September 5, 1938): 56; "These Surrealist Portraits are a Vogue in London," *Life* 4 (May 16, 1938): 4-5.

<sup>23</sup> "Modern Sculpture Makes Pictures News," *Life* 5 (November 7, 1938): 5; "Picasso: Spanish Painter's Big Show Tours the Nation," *Life* 8 (March 4, 1940): 56.

<sup>24</sup> "British Sculptor: Henry Moore Shocks and Pleases in his First Big U.S. Exhibit in U.S.," *Life* 22 (January 20, 1947): 77.

<sup>25</sup> "Japanese-American Sculptor Shows Off Weird New Looks," *Life* 21 (November 11, 1946): 13.

<sup>26</sup> "Georgia O'Keeffe Turns Dead Bones to Live Art," *Life* 4 (February 14, 1938): 28.

<sup>27</sup> "Life's Art for 1938," *Life* 3 (December 37, 1937): Inside front cover.

<sup>28</sup> On the relationship of the United States to European culture, see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> Henry Luce to George Biddle, October 11, 1939, Box 14, George Biddle Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>30</sup> On the association between *Life* and the American Scene school of painting, see Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Bradford R. Collins discusses the magazine's acceptance of modernism in "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-1951: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise," *The Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991): 283-308.

<sup>31</sup> "John Sloan: A Teacher-Painter Crusades for American Art," *Life* 7 (December 11, 1939): 44.

<sup>32</sup> Winthrop Sargeant, "Max Weber," *Life* 19 (August 20, 1945): 87.

<sup>33</sup> Sargeant, "Max Weber," 85.

<sup>34</sup> "Ten Years of American Art," *Life* 21 (November 25, 1946): 72.

<sup>35</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change 1920-1950* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003); Patricia Hills, *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Paintings of the 1930s* (New York: American Federation of Arts and Bread and Roses Cultural Project of the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees, 1983); Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Stacy I. Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Susan Noyes Platt, *Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism, Americanism: A History of Cultural Activism During the Depression Years* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1999); David Shapiro, ed., *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973).

<sup>36</sup> "Ten Years of American Art," *Life* 21 (November 25, 1946): 72.

<sup>37</sup> "Ten Years of American Art," 78.

<sup>38</sup> "American Art Comes of Age: History of Art in the U.S. from Colonial Days to the Moderns of West," *Life* 5 (October 31, 1938): 27.

<sup>39</sup> "American Art Comes of Age," 27.

<sup>40</sup> "American Art Comes of Age," 27.

<sup>41</sup> "Thomas Eakins," *Life* 16 (May 15, 1944): 72; "William Sidney Mount," *Life* 18 (June 25, 1945): 64; "Hudson River School," *Life* 19 (September 10, 1945): 82; "George Bellows," *Life* 20 (March 25, 1946): 75; "Baltimore Show Reviews Curious Case of Mary Cassatt," *Life* 12 (January 19, 1942): 54; "One Hundred Years of Winslow Homer," *Life* 2 (January 11, 1937): 26-27; "Sheeler Finds Beauty in the Commonplace," *Life* 5 (August 8, 1938): 42; "John Sloan: A Teacher-Painter Crusades for

American Art," *Life* 7 (December 11, 1939): 44; "Georgia O'Keeffe Turns Dead Bones to Live Art," *Life* 4 (February 14, 1938): 28; "George Bingham: Old Missouri Artist Now Comes Back to Favor," *Life* 7 (September 11, 1939): 40.

<sup>42</sup> "American Art Comes of Age," 30.

<sup>43</sup> "*Life* and Art" *Life* 2 (April 5, 1937): 64-65.

<sup>44</sup> "Pittsburgh Turned House Painter John Kane into a Major U.S. Artist," *Life* 2 (May 17, 1937): 46.

<sup>45</sup> "Peter Hurd Paints his own Ranch in New Mexico and Swaps Art for Ponies," *Life* 7 (July 24, 1939): 24.

<sup>46</sup> "Hobbies: America's Millions Express Their Ego in Profitless Fun," *Life* 6 (January 2, 1939): 41.

<sup>47</sup> "Hobbies: America's Millions Express Their Ego in Profitless Fun," 41.

<sup>48</sup> "Baltimore Show Reviews Curious Case of Mary Cassatt," *Life* 12 (January 19, 1942): 54.

<sup>49</sup> "Georgia O'Keeffe Turns Dead Bones to Live Art," 28. *Life's* credits attribute these portraits to Ansel Adams, Paul Strand and Carl Van Vechten.

<sup>50</sup> "Alfred Stieglitz Made O'Keeffe Famous," *Life* 4 (February 14, 1938): 31.

<sup>51</sup> "Alfred Stieglitz Made O'Keeffe Famous," 31.

<sup>52</sup> "Surrealism on Parade," *Life* 1 (December 14, 1936): 24-27.

<sup>53</sup> "Nightmare Journey," *Life* 16 (March 6, 1944): 17-18, 20.

<sup>54</sup> "Surrealism on Parade," 24.

<sup>55</sup> Winthrop Sargeant, "Dali," *Life* 19 (September 24, 1945): 63.

<sup>56</sup> Sargeant, "Dali," 64.

<sup>57</sup> Sargeant, "Dali," 64.

<sup>58</sup> See Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph Trovato, Oral history interview with Anton Refregier, November 5, 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>61</sup> Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 103.

<sup>63</sup> Henry Luce to Archibald MacLeish, January 4, 1938. Box 8, Archibald MacLeish Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>64</sup> Henry R. Luce, "The American Century," *Life* 10 (February 17, 1941): 65.

<sup>65</sup> Somerset Maugham, "Paintings I have Liked: A Great Novelist Tells of His Experiences with Another Art," *Life* 11 (December 1, 1941): 81.

<sup>66</sup> "Unsuitable for Framing," *Life* 2 (April 26, 1937): 14. The phrase "suitable for framing" became a hallmark of art in advertising campaigns in this period, as corporations who included art reproductions in their printed ads offered readers color reproductions either free or for a nominal charge. In 1946, Russel Lynes commented on the relationship between art and reproductions in his article "Suitable for Framing," *Harper's Magazine* 192 (February, 1946): 162-69.

<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 211-44.