

JUSTICE, JUSTICE, YOU SHALL PURSUE:

Jewish Political Artists and American Popular Culture

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Political artists have occupied a pivotal role in American art history, especially from the early 20th century to the present. Painters, muralists, sculptors, photographers, cartoonists, poster makers, and other artists have been integral to numerous movements for social change for many decades. Thousands of artworks, addressing all progressive issues and reflecting every movement for social change, have created a huge cumulative legacy. These powerful visual works have inspired many thousands of Americans to become active public citizens through social criticism and political dissent.

Jewish artists have been in the forefront of this American tradition of political art since the early decades of the 20th century. Working in the tradition of such renowned socially conscious artistic predecessors as Francisco Goya, Honore Daumier, Kathe Kollwitz, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and hundreds of others, they have often invoked an historical biblical mandate to support their visual expressions of political and social criticism and dissent. Refusing to remain indifferent to the vast complex of social and political ills in America and throughout the world, they have sought to combine their passion for social justice with their outstanding talent as visual artists. Their artworks, spanning the decades, are concrete visual examples of the historic Jewish commitment to social justice. Above all, they reflect a passionate moral vision that has pervaded Jewish social activism in the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the environmental movement, the gay and lesbian movement, various anti-war movements, and virtually every other political cause to which the injunction “justice, justice, shall you pursue” applies (Deuteronomy 16: 18).

The list of American Jewish political artists is enormous—and growing in the early years of the 21st century. A multi-volume edition would scarcely suffice to provide a comprehensive critical treatment of the many hundreds of accomplished Jewish political artists in America. Many of these talented men and women produced artworks that fall directly within the sphere of popular culture. Like many political artists throughout history, Jewish socially conscious artists have sought the broadest audiences for their work, frequently eschewing the elite art world requirement to produce individual paintings and sculptures destined for museum and private gallery exhibition and for affluent private collectors and consumers. Although many American Jewish artists have been first-rate painters and sculptors, they have often used other art forms like prints, photographs, murals, cartoons, and posters in order to attract viewers far beyond the narrow confines of elite culture. Their democratic vision of public accessibility directly reflects their view that political artworks should catalyze social action rather than augment the conspicuous consumption of art.

Some Jewish political artists dedicated to popular cultural expression and dissemination are highly visible and extremely well represented in art historical and critical literature. Others are much less well known; they are routinely neglected, even now, because their overtly critical imagery has offended mainstream critics and

scholars. Both groups, however, deserve substantial examination and much further exposure to specialists and laypersons alike.

Ben Shahn (1898–1969) may well be the most famous figure in American art history to fuse brilliant artistic technique and political commitment and commentary. It is appropriate, accordingly, to commence this survey of Jewish political artists contributing to popular culture with this iconic figure who exemplified the efforts of the artists known as Social Realists. Born in Lithuania, he grew up in Jewish Brooklyn with an atmosphere of social radicalism and repugnance to the pervasive injustices of early 20th century life in America. This background informed his artistic life throughout his long career.

The infamous Sacco–Vanzetti case had a powerful influence on his decision to create socially conscious art. The Massachusetts execution in 1927 of the two Italian–American anarchists focused Shahn’s attention on the deeper problems of xenophobia, social class inequities, persecution of political dissenters, and numerous related issues. His response was to use his art to call widespread public attention to a case that still stands as one of the most egregious cases of judicial injustice and misconduct in U.S. history. His series of Sacco–Vanzetti images, executed from 1931 to 1933, marked his emergence as one of the finest political artists in the modern era.

Ben Shahn’s works include a huge number of artworks within the tradition of popular culture beyond his record as a socially oriented muralist. A gifted photographer and poster maker, he produced hundreds of artworks in these mediums that reflected his lifelong quest for justice. He was one of the major photographers working in the Farm Security Administration, chronicling the Depression’s human tragedy. Shahn’s photographs captured the deep pathos of the era, adding a powerful dimension to his long record of humanistic popular cultural expressions.

Throughout his career, Shahn also produced scores of posters in the same vein. In 1941–42, he worked for the Office of War Information, producing several works dealing with the horrific suffering in the war against fascism. In 1944, he joined the Political Action Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Sympathetic to labor’s historic struggles, he executed many posters with trenchant social commentary, adding further to his prolific record of visual commentary with wide public appeal. Later in his life, he also produced posters condemning nuclear proliferation, the war in Vietnam, opposing reactionary politicians, and supporting the modern civil rights movement. His death ended a magnificent chapter in the history of American political art.

Ben Shahn was only one of many Jewish artists, roughly of the same generation, who created popular cultural visual forms in pursuit of Deuteronomy’s justice requirement. Another key figure in the Social Realist tradition was William Gropper (1897–1978), whose entire artistic life was devoted to a progressive political vision. His early childhood in the Jewish ghetto of New York’s Lower East Side, with both parents working in the city’s notorious sweatshops, imbued him with a class–consciousness that pervaded all his paintings, murals, drawings, and cartoons. Like Shahn, he joined his political passions with a profound sense of his personal Jewish identity, returning regularly to Jewish themes throughout his exemplary career.

Gropper's early work as a cartoonist provided him with large and appreciative audiences. He was the featured cartoonist and pictorial satirist for the *New Masses*, influential in the 1930s and successor to the earlier radical publications *The Masses* and *Liberator*. Although most of Gropper's cartoons for the *Masses* and other popular publications were ephemeral comments on topical issues of the day, some achieved a more universal character because their content transcended the times and provided visual commentary of equal relevance in the present.

Shahn and Gropper were among the most visible of Jewish political artists of their era. Still, their collective contributions to visual popular culture only scratch the surface of this engaging tradition. Many others created political artworks (including works that are part of visual popular culture) reflecting their Jewish or partial Jewish identities: Edward Biberman, Julius Bloch, Peter Blume, Philip Evergood, Aaron Goodelman, Philip Guston, Minna Harkavy, Joseph Hirsch, Louis Lozowick, Mitchell Siporin, Isaac Soyer, Moses Soyer, Raphael Soyer, Harry Sternberg, and others. Some of these artists have substantial critical recognition in art historical circles and from those who respect political art, especially with Jewish origins and themes.

Some of these talented Jewish artists, however, have suffered from an appalling paucity of critical recognition from the mid-20th century to the present. Figures like Biberman, Bloch, Goodelman, Harkavy, Siporin, and Sternberg are rarely presented in surveys of American art and are virtually unknown among contemporary scholars and students alike in the post-war period. Two other Jewish political artists of this generation, Hugo Gellert and Arthur Szyk, are likewise usually omitted from the canon of American art history. Their extensive commitment to popular culture mandates sympathetic consideration in the present survey.

Arthur Szyk (1894–1951) deserves renewed critical attention in the early 21st century. He remains a tragically neglected figure in American art history. Deeply Jewish in his identity as an artist and as a human being, his entire body of work reflected a passionate response to the traumatic political events of the early 20th century. Born in Poland, where he experienced harsh anti-Semitism as a young man, he spent his early years as an artist in Paris and London, finally arriving in America in 1940. He saw his adopted land as a bastion of freedom against the fascist threat in Europe.

Like other politically active artists, he turned his critical attention to the complex of problems besetting America at the time. Soon after his arrival, he used his art to attack the seemingly intractable problem of racism against the African American population. His visual assault on discrimination reflected his lifelong view that art should never be neutral, but rather an instrument of political and moral engagement. In the early 1940s, he devoted much of his artistic attention to the growing threat of Nazi Germany and its allies to peace and world security.

He swiftly became one of the nation's leading caricaturists, publishing scathing drawings in leading newspapers and magazines, including *Time*, *Life Magazine*, *Collier's*, and the *New York Times*, with readerships in the millions. His politically charged images were directed against isolationist sentiments in America, which often masked a deeper underlying anti-Semitism. His cartoons and posters railed against the growing threat of Hitler and his Italian and Japanese allies. Savage and richly

detailed, these efforts eschewed subtlety in depicting the Axis leaders whose imperial and genocidal policies constituted the greatest threat to civilization in human history.

Szyk's produced his most notable anti-fascist artwork in 1942. Entitled "Satan Leads the Ball," this work was reissued in his 1946 book of satirical political drawings, *Ink & Blood*. Produced shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, this drawing deliberately demonizes the Axis enemies, fueling public opinion in America as it embarked on World War II. Szyk employs gross caricature, including some imagery that in the modern period could well be regarded as anti-Asian racism. At the time, however, the artist's portrayal of Japanese warlords was highly popular, reinforcing widespread public anger at Japanese aggression.

The drawing features a grotesque Satanic figure leading the procession to the ball, followed by a Japanese military figure wearing a swastika on his sleeve, an unambiguous message to viewers that all Axis powers subscribed to the Nazi objective of world domination. His blood stained Samurai sword underscores the theme, intensifying public sentiment to victory in the war. The most familiar figures in "Satan Leads the Ball" are the Nazi political, military, and industrial leaders, including Hitler himself, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, and Luftwaffe Head Hermann Goering. Szyk often used the bloated figure of Goering in his war-related artworks that were strikingly reminiscent of the caricatures of German anti-Nazi artist George Grosz. Above all, these Nazi figures signify unadulterated evil, offering only death and destruction to their victims in Europe and throughout the world.

Equally prominent in this public artwork, at the far left of the composition, are the notorious French collaborators Marshall Henri Petain and Pierre Laval. The latter, often satirized in the artist's wartime work, is pictured as a modern-day Judas, clinging to his bag of silver coins, reflecting his traitorous activities that resulted in his trial and execution following the Allied victory in 1945. At the extreme end of the drawing is the fascist dictator of Italy, Benito Mussolini, portrayed as the malevolent yet buffoonish character common in public perceptions of the era.

This and Szyk's other devastating portraits joined thousands of other visual efforts that contributed to the war effort. In the post-war era, he turned his attention to support for the creation of a Jewish homeland culminating in the creation of Israel in 1948. He also continued to disseminate artistic images on a variety of topical concerns. In 1951, the House Un-American Activities Committee investigated him during the period of post-war anti-communist fervor. He died at the young age of 57, possibly an indirect consequence of the Congressional witch hunt that enveloped him and the entire community of progressive political artists. In the early 21st century, critics and scholars are slowly rediscovering him, providing a long overdue recognition of his outstanding artistic stature.

Ben Shahn, William Gropper, Arthur Szyk, and many others represent the first wave of 20th century Jewish political artists who made huge contributions to American popular culture. A younger generation of artists continued their legacy, adding further luster to this remarkable record of visual social commentary. George Segal (1924-2000), for example, was a major figure in the long tradition of Jewish popular political art. An internationally acclaimed sculptor, produced life-sized plaster casts of human figures in elaborate, realistic settings. His assemblages reflected a profound concern

with human feelings and emotions. During his long career, he addressed the alienation of the elderly, the plight of the homeless, the savagery of the Vietnam War, and several other topics that express the historic Jewish concern with social justice.

In 1980, Segal created one of his most controversial politically charged sculptures, a public artwork entitled “Gay Liberation.” The effort is typical of his style throughout his career. Two gay couples, one male and the other female, are shown in ordinary but tender poses—Segal’s understated yet powerfully effective view of the intrinsic dignity and humanity of all people, whatever their sexual orientation. The male couple is standing, with one partner holding the shoulder of the other. The female partners are sitting on a long bench, with one woman gently touching her friend’s leg. When he completed the sculpture, it swiftly raised substantial public controversy. It evoked serious opposition from residents in New York’s Greenwich Village and was never installed. It met similar opposition in Los Angeles, despite its large gay and lesbian population.

Finally, in 1984, the sculpture was installed at seemingly liberal Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. Nevertheless, “Gay Liberation” was repeatedly vandalized, reflecting the deep-seated homophobia at Stanford and throughout America. In 1992, Segal moved this work to Sheridan Park in New York, across the street of the famous Stonewall Inn that catalyzed the modern Gay and Lesbian movement more than 30 years ago. The sculpture is now a fixture in the neighborhood, a public reminder that the personal is truly political and that gay men and women deserve full respect in the human family.

Many contemporary Jewish political artists continue the commitment to popular expression of visual social commentary and criticism. A key figure is Barbara Kruger (1945–), who has become one of the premier visual artists whose works pervade popular culture. She is an imaginative descendant of the classic tradition of American Jewish political artists of the early and mid-20th century. Her professional design background has made her widely known for her black, white, and red poster-like artworks combining provocative images and aggressive text that address a wide range of social and political issues. Beyond her regular exhibitions in mainstream museums and galleries, her works have been publicly displayed throughout the United States and the world on billboards t-shirts, magazine covers, newspaper editorial pages shopping bags, coffee cups, and similar sources that guarantee large audiences.

During her career, Kruger has used her art to support legal abortion, to oppose domestic violence, to critique excessive American and European consumption, and to demand more humane social and political priorities. Many of her textual captions express her viewpoints forcefully and effectively: *I shop therefore I am; Your body is a battleground; It’s a small world—but not if you have to clean it; Don’t Die For Love—STOP Domestic Violence; How come only the UNBORN have the right to LIFE?; God said it. I believe it. And that settles it;* and many more along similar political lines. These terse messages confront viewers directly, demanding active engagement and serious reflection.

Many of Barbara Kruger’s themes appropriately address feminist concerns. Her thematic range, however, far transcends these urgent and vital problems. A trenchant critic of many other contemporary public policies, she has used her art to call public

attention to other perverse political and economic priorities in America. Her 1989 billboard in San Francisco, “Fund Health Care Not Warfare” was constructed for Art Against Aids during the height of the Aids crisis in that city. The white text on a red background immediately grabs public attention, encouraging audiences to examine the billboard even more closely. Scattered symmetrically among the imagery of hands in the composition are five smaller textual features: FIGHT AIDS.

Beyond this noble objective lies a devastating critique of U.S. public policy. Constructed during the administration of President George W.H. Bush, the artwork pointedly accuses the government of ignoring the catastrophic human consequences of Aids in favor of military funding during the run-up to the Persian Gulf War in 1990. Like many socially conscious artworks, this effort transcends its topical character and applies more generally to questionable political developments. More than a decade and a half after its creation, Kruger’s billboard art is even more relevant to President George W. Bush’s decision to cut domestic spending, including health care, in favor of a tragic and costly war in Iraq. Even more basically, the artwork demands that fundamental economic change is a precondition to creating a decent and humane society in the 21st century.

Many of Kruger’s generational contemporaries continue the tradition of Jewish visual contributions to American popular culture. Beverly Naidus (1953–), for example, has used several art forms to address social, political, and personal concerns, drawing on her progressive Jewish family background. A longtime educator, she has taught at California State University, Long Beach, Goddard College, Hampshire College, and presently at the University of Washington, Tacoma. Her most publicly accessible works have been interactive site-specific installations and artists’ books.

Dedicated to using art for social change, she has focused on the dangers of nuclear warfare, the human alienation of unemployment and economic insecurity, the failures of American education, the crisis in the natural environment, and the consequences of female body dissatisfaction. The latter topic has made her a prominent and effective feminist artist, like Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger, and numerous others in contemporary America. In 1992, she embarked on a major body image project culminating in her 1993 book *One Size Does Not Fit All*.

Long concerned with the issue of physical appearance and its corrosive effects on millions of women, she decided to confront the problem of “body hate” in her artwork. Her own experiences and stories from friends persuaded her to create art to assist women in liberating themselves from their externally constructed obsessions with food, diets, and external approval. Initially, she was reluctant to tackle this problem, perceiving it as trivial in comparison to relative to world suffering and injustice. Too many of her strong feminist friends, however, seemed to her to spend enormous time and energy worrying about their appearances. Her book, accordingly, located this reality in the broader context of patriarchal manipulation of women’s self-respect.

A unique linkage of the personal and political, *One Size Does Not Fit All* chronicles a woman’s struggle with weight and food, following her painful odyssey that begins with self-contempt, transforms into righteous anger, and concludes with joyous acceptance of her own physical dimensions. Readers of this feminist story in pictures

must follow them in sequence in order to appreciate the full value of the work as a whole. Still, several individual images provide the flavor of the liberation theme that pervades the volume. One of the final drawings depicts the protagonist's personal freedom following her painful struggle to overcome the anxiety (or worse) born of her failure to measure up to female beauty and weight standards that economic and other forces beyond her control have imposed on her and millions of other American women.

Growing to a firm acceptance of her own body, she eschews diets, joins a body support group, rediscovers her own sensuality, and finally celebrates her health and vitality. This liberating image highlights her at ease with herself, fully prepared to confront the challenges of an autonomous life. As the drawing's caption suggests, her body had taken—and will continue to take—her everywhere she needed to go. Naidus created the entire book to empower others to attain a more rational and liberated existence. It has found its way into women's support groups and elsewhere, encouraging both women and men that it is in everyone's interest when women take control over their own bodies and personal images.

In 1995–96, Beverly Naidus specifically addressed issues of anti-Semitism, Jewish assimilation, and Jewish cultural identification in post-war America. Using scanned images from old magazines and a photograph of immigrants on a boat, she created a book entitled *What Kinda Name Is That?*, which she exhibited in the exhibition "Too Jewish" that traveled throughout the country. This engaging volume helped define a space for the outsider culture of secular and cultural Jews who seek to maintain their identity and avoid total assimilation into the dominant culture. This identity has historically included many American Jewish artists who have combined perceptive political commentary with popular culture.

Satirical visual art has augmented the long tradition of socially conscious American art. A key figure is Los Angeles artist Erika Rothenberg (1950–), whose formative experiences involved her participation in 60's civil rights and anti-war activities. Her exposure to vibrant social protest has generated a political consciousness in her art that has persisted throughout her career. Following several years of professional work in the advertising industry, she turned fulltime to her art. Her advertising background has deeply influenced her artwork because she learned how successful advertisers combined words and images to attract and persuade the public. Many of her creations adapt the television commercial, transforming this popular medium into devastating visual satire.

For more than 25 years, Rothenberg has produced public art that invites substantial public participation. One of her most dramatic efforts was her 1984 satirical sculptural installation "Freedom of Expression National Monument," a huge work that she reprised in New York City in 2004/2005. Containing a large megaphone and a platform for people to mount and speak their minds, the installation encouraged many to take advantage of a rare opportunity for public expression.

This monument reminds audiences and participants of their own alienation and exclusion in a communications university dominated by such massive corporate enterprises as ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, Time-Warner, Tribune, and the like. To underscore this point, the artist inscribed text to that effect at the base of the installation, so that participants could read it just before mounting the platform. Despite the First

Amendment, most Americans have no genuine access to communication channels reaching large audiences. The dominant media provide little alternative to news and entertainment that reinforce the values and priorities of contemporary capitalism. Like all her works, this installation urges audiences to consider the serious underlying issues while enjoying themselves at the artistic surface.

Other Jewish artists of the post-war period have likewise employed various forms to educate and inform the American public and to encourage them to become more active and critical citizens. Among many others, Jonathan Borofsky, Sheila Pinkel, Eleanor Antin, Beth Bachenheimer, and Soviet émigrés Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid have used installations, photographs, sculptures, masks, conceptual art, and other visual forms to augment the vast body of politically engaged popular culture in America. Their efforts address a vast array of social and political themes, adding luster to this entire visual tradition.

During the 20th century and beyond, some Jewish political artists have focused exclusively or primarily on forms that are intrinsically features of modern popular culture, Documentary photography, murals, political cartoons and comics, and posters typically reach large audiences and go far beyond the constraints of artworks found in mainstream museums and commercial art galleries. The artists producing these public forms usually seek to communicate and persuade the general public and are often indifferent (or even contemptuous) to conventional judgments of academic art historians and mass media art critics. Unlike such luminaries as Ben Shahn, William Gropper, Arthur Szyk, and others who occasionally created photographs, murals, posters, and cartoons, these men and women have made deliberate attempts to merge visual art and public social and political advocacy as the central feature of their professional lives.

Photography has made a powerful and enduring impact on critical social and political expression since the mid 19th century. In the United States, the pioneering efforts of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries established a standard of excellence that has inspired younger generations of socially engaged photographers to call attention to the glaring problems of American political, social, and economic life. Several figures with Jewish backgrounds spent decades using their cameras to expose and critique profound injustices, pervasive human suffering, and egregious political oppression.

U.S. Depression-era documentary photography established itself as among the most exceptional in the medium's history. Artists like Margaret Bourke-White, Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, Walker Evans, Jack Delano, Carl Mydans, and their contemporaries produced thousands of emotionally engaging, politically critical images that scholars have justly called iconic and brilliant. The Farm Security Administration (FSA), a New Deal Agency under the visionary leadership of Roy Stryker, hired some of America's finest photographers to document the plight of the nation's poor and dispossessed.

Jewish photojournalist Arthur Rothstein (1915–1985) joined Ben Shahn in this historic FSA endeavor. Rothstein, one of Stryker's students at Columbia in the 1930s, spent five years with the agency documenting the Depression's human consequences in the South, the Southwest, California, and elsewhere. His efforts were the visual

counterparts to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Among his accomplishments, he compiled a striking record of documenting African Americans as dignified and resolute in the face of extreme adversity. In so doing, Rothstein joined a much larger (and continuing) history of American Jewish visual artists portraying African American life and culture with sympathy, compassion, and respect.

More recent Jewish photographers have added to the legacy of socially conscious popular visual expression. A major representative is Milton Rogovin (1909–), whose brilliant output of thousands of socially conscious images for more than fifty years links him to the greatest social photographers of the 20th century. Born in New York, he trained as an optometrist and moved to Buffalo in 1938. Politically active, he was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the anti-communist hysteria of the early 1950s, severely impacting his optometry practice. Turning to documentary photography, he combined his social commitments to workers, people of color, and marginalized men, women, and children in the U.S. and the Third World countries and cultures. His overriding focus has been to portray these ignored, often despised people as strong, dignified, and resilient in the face of oppression and deprivation.

Like other leftist Jewish artists, Rogovin pervasively embodies the historic Jewish ideals of justice, equality, and compassion. His efforts have been widely exhibited in domestic and international museums, galleries, and other public venues. Over the years, he has had huge and appreciative audiences, fortifying his contributions to American popular culture. His 2003 book *The Forgotten Ones*, published when he was 93, summarizes his profound dedication to Buffalo's poor and street people, many of African American, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Native American background and heritage. Throughout his life, Milton Rogovin has stood defiantly with the poor and oppressed against the forces of privilege and power. His prolific record has earned him a place of high honor in the panoply of Jewish political artists.

Several younger photographers have continued this record in uniquely creative ways. An intriguing example is Los Angeles-based Lauren Greenfield (1966–), whose works simultaneously record significant features of American popular culture and add to the body of visual popular culture. Already highly acclaimed in contemporary photographic circles, she has produced an impressive body of work that generates critical and sometimes disconcerting reflection about contemporary American society.

Similar to many artists, she is most comfortable in working on personal projects that evoke strong emotions and intense intellectual curiosity. Recalling her own teenage obsessions with dieting, clothing, and peer approval, she embarked on a major project culminating in a traveling exhibition and book entitled *Girl Culture*. This five-year effort has become a veritably definitive treatment on American teenage girls in the early 21st century. Its focus is on girls' consumption patterns and the consequences for their body images and self-perceptions. Consisting of 57 color photographs, *Girl Culture* reveals how contemporary advertising in magazines, television, and entertainment deeply affect how privileged young girls (including pre-teens) seek obsessively to conform to socially constructed, pernicious standards of thinness and shopping compulsions.

An outstanding example, typical of the entire collection, reveals four 13-year old girls, whose distorted priorities provide a damning indictment of contemporary society. Greenfield captions this image with unnerving text: "Alli, Annie, Hannah, and Berit, all 13, before the first big party of the seventh grade, Edina, Minnesota." Many viewers are (and should be) startled by this image of over-sexualized young girls—still children, in both fact and law. Emulating the dress and posture of adult women, they have succumbed to commercial manipulation that will likely intensify throughout their lives. Lauren Greenfield, like the other artists in this entry, offers a profound visual challenge for more critical scrutiny of dominant social values and economic manipulation.

Like photography, murals are effective forms of visual popular culture. They have a potential impact far beyond that of traditional paintings and sculptures in museums and galleries. Their presence on exterior and interior walls of major buildings makes them easily accessible to large numbers of people who live and work among them. Above all, they are available to viewers in the ordinary course of their daily lives.

For several decades, American muralists have used the form to promote political awareness in the communities in which they work. Rooted in the Mexican mural movement of the 1920s, especially the monumental works of Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and Davis Alfaro Siqueiros, the American mural movement has deep historical origins. During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) employed hundreds of artists, including Jewish artists like Ben Shahn and William Gropper who produced socially conscious works throughout the country.

San Francisco was a major center for such murals. In the city's famous Coit Tower, Jewish muralist Bernard Zakheim (1896–1985) joined several other prominent WPA painters in creating images that caused considerable controversy, including charges of "communist propaganda." His detail showing several men reading newspapers with inflammatory political stories and one in worker's clothing selecting a copy of Marx's *Capital* angered conservative San Francisco interests, generating severe threats of censorship and reprisal.

Sixties social activism catalyzed a renaissance of politically oriented community murals, with many Jewish artists playing leading roles. Hundreds of modern murals address the complex problems besetting U.S. cities, including racism, police brutality, unemployment, drug addiction, and inadequate housing and healthcare. A major strain likewise exhibits ethnic and racial pride in cultural histories generally unknown to the majority population. Themes generally emerge from the experiences and deeply felt needs of community residents, making these paintings integral features of local popular culture.

In the late 1960s, Chicago was the center of vibrant mural production. Mark Rogovin (1946–; son of Milton Rogovin) and John Pitman Weber (1942–) were among the most prominent Jewish muralists from that city, helping to establish an exemplary record for other American artists to emulate. Rogovin's 1972–73 mural, "Break the Grip of the Absentee Landlord," addresses an issue directly relevant to the lives of thousands of African Americans and other people of color. The absentee landlord is often responsible for apartments with inadequate heating, poor lighting, defective sanitation, and vermin infestation. Concerned only with economic exploitation, his

abuses exacerbate life for millions of low-income residents. Rogovin portrays the landlord holding the inhabitants' homes in an iron grip. The people begin to break the grip, while others, at the left, escape their bondage. This fusion of artistic proficiency and social criticism can inspire corrective community action. Like his father, Mark Rogovin adds proudly to the long tradition of Jewish political art.

An accomplished veteran of the modern mural movement, Eva Cockcroft (1937–1999) painted socially conscious murals in several American cities and foreign countries. A childhood refugee from Nazi-dominated Austria, she was a noted writer as well as an artist. Following her 1989 move from New York to Los Angeles, she contributed enormously to the vitality of Southern California mural art. Extending traditional social Jewish concerns to labor and environmental issues, she became a leading cultural figure in that domain before her untimely death.

The American political cartoon has been a staple of visual popular culture since the Revolutionary era. These daily or weekly productions suffer from the exigencies of deadlines, but occasionally individual images transcend their topical settings and become lasting works of art. Intentionally hyperbolic, they typically respond to current events from a critical perspective; at their best, they attack and devastate their targets.

Herbert Block (1909–2001), known professionally as Herblock, is the chief Jewish political cartoonist of the 20th century. The three-time Pulitzer prize-winning artist began cartooning in 1929 and continued until his death, working at the Washington Post since 1946. Proudly progressive, he produced thousands of cartoons that helped sustain the record of artist social dissent. Millions of newspaper readers, including politicians, viewed his daily work over the decades. Like his 19th century counterpart Thomas Nast, Herblock had a long-term effect on public opinion. His sustained assaults on such unsavory figures as Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon, for example, contributed to their ultimate demise. His relentless critique of Ronald Reagan and other conservative figures solidified his reputation as one of the premier political cartoonists of all time.

Herblock's opposition to McCarthyism, which hindered the lives and careers of many Jewish political artists, was a courageous exception to the fear and passivity of that era. Virtually all of his anti-McCarthy cartoons were outstanding examples of social protest art. Typical was his 1954 effort entitled "I Have Here in My Hand--". Using the Wisconsin Senator's own deceptive words, he exposed McCarthy's dishonest, self-righteous methods in accusing countless citizens of subversive activities. The Senator's thug-like appearance mirrors Herblock's own loathing of his subject.

Several other 20th century American Jewish cartoonists have augmented Herblock's exemplary record of popular visual criticism. Seymour Kaplan, for example, produced political cartoons for the California Eagle in the 1940s. He was a rare example of a Jewish artist creating work for a major African American newspaper. David Levine, whose work has appeared since 1963 in *The New York Review of Books*, has parodied virtually every major politician and cultural figure in the modern era.

Jules Feiffer, who stands on the vague borderline between political cartoons and comics, has combined imaginative pictorial and verbal elements in providing witty social and political critique for many years. For 42 years, he drew an internationally

syndicated cartoon in the Village Voice, reaching millions of appreciative readers. Contemporary Jewish comic strip and graphic novel artists Art Spiegelman and Seth Tobacman have also provided trenchant visual commentary to large audiences for several years.

The political poster is both a work of art and a notice to the public. Intended for mass reproduction, it typically combines a verbal message with visual stimuli designed to attract viewers. Its political effectiveness often depends on efficient, inexpensive reproduction to swiftly disseminate its major themes. Ben Shahn was probably the most renowned American Jewish poster artist in the early and mid 20th century, but many of his contemporaries and descendants have also used the medium to advance progressive political and social agendas.

The most well known “guerrilla” poster artist in the nation is Los Angeles resident Robbie Conal (1944–), whose critical posters have engaged and infuriated thousands of people since the late 1980s. Holding contemporary public figures up to visual ridicule, Conal’s public artworks constitute a dynamic counterattack against conventional models of artistic creation and distribution. He and his assistants post his efforts clandestinely in public spaces, causing millions of viewers over the years to confront satirical imagery about American politicians as they travel daily on city streets. Conal attacks all political leaders but reserves special venom for the most conservative among them. Calling his efforts “adversary portraiture,” he uses his art to provide audiences with the opportunity to reflect on political issues in unusual places and circumstances.

In 2001, he produced and disseminated a savage poster entitled “The Second Scumming. ” Brutal and unsubtle, it features, from left to right, former President George H.W. Bush, his son, President George W. Bush, and Vice President Richard Cheney. The words “The” and “Scumming” drip sarcastically across the top and bottom of the composition respectively, conveying a vision of repulsion and disgust. Conal urges viewers to share his disgust at the men who bear immense responsibility for American isolation throughout the world. The word “Second,” painted in bright red, signifies that the second Bush presidency only exacerbates the repressive policies of his father.

The poster’s most revealing features are the specific facial expressions of the political leaders themselves. The first Bush is shown as a smiling nonentity, cheerfully watching his son and his chief subordinate reflect and extend the retrograde economic and military policies of his own administration. The center image of George W. Bush depicts him as empty and vacuous, a poorly educated and intellectually incurious tool of more malevolent persons and institutions in the background. The Vice President’s expression is most revealing; Cheney is shown with a disconcerting smirk, signifying that he is among the most important—and most dangerous—figures in the entire administration. Scholars and journalists alike have noted that Cheney, the former Chief Executive Officer of the Halliburton Corporation, is the most influential Vice President in U.S. history. He is widely believed to be among the primary advocates of the war in Iraq and environmentally dangerous policies at home. Above all, Robbie Conal seeks to generate and solidify political opposition, using satire to implement the ideals of critical discourse and dissent necessary to preserve any democratic society.

From Shahn to Conal, American Jewish political artists have created a rich and durable record of visual popular culture. Their art has been antithetical to institutional forces perpetuating injustice and inequality and exacerbating the historical gaps of wealth and power in the United States. The cumulative efforts of these creative women and men have reminded their fellow residents that dissenting voices refuse to be silenced and that artistic social criticism will be relentless. Like Jewish social activists for thousands of years, they have pursued justice vigorously, fulfilling the biblical mandate to which they have responded so passionately.