

Printmaking As a Tool for Social and Political Change in America From WPA to Shepard Fairry

Dr. Wael A. Sabour

**Faculty of Architecture & Design, Middle East University - PO box 383, Amman
11831, Jordan**

Faculty of Fine Arts, El Minia University , El Minia 61519 , Egypt.

Wabdelkader@meu.edu.jo

Abstract

This research seeks to explore the effectiveness of utilizing the art of printmaking as an effective tool for social and political change in societies, focusing on two case studies in the United States of America. The research also examines the different ways in which the art of printmaking can contribute to the development of public awareness of social and political issues, as well as the potential positive effects of utilizing printmaking to communicate with the public regarding social and political issues affecting the community.

The research also explores the concept that the art of printmaking is one of the most democratic disciplines of art. For investigating the concept of printmaking as a (democratic) art. The research reviews the different approaches to make the art of printmaking more accessible to the public, by pushing the emergence of the art of printmaking in the public arena, outside the art galleries and taking advantage of the expertise of print artists to develop awareness posters. This research focuses on two study cases, namely the American Federal Art Project and the works of the American artist (Shepherd Ferry). The state of the American federal art project during the Great Depression in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century in the United States of America is one of the most successful examples of using art to serve society and advance the awareness of the public on economic, environmental, and health issues.

The works of contemporary American artist (Shepherd Ferry) also represent a unique model of utilizing art as an important tool in building public awareness and dealing with difficult political and social issues. Ferry's prints in particular, have met a great success among American society. Below, the research will explore these two study cases, and it will explain some of the most important examples of printmaking artwork for each.

Keywords:

Printmaking, WPA, Matrix, Multiples, Substrate.

Objectives

- 1-The prime goal of this research is to investigate potential social and political implications of exhibiting printmaking in public arenas.
- 2- To shed light on historical and contemporary examples of utilizing printmaking as a tool for social and political change in the united states of America .
- 3-To investigate the concept of printmaking as the most (democratic) form of visual arts .

Significance

This research may represent a progression in the way we define and conceive the role of printmaking art today. This research is an attempt to explore the essence of printmaking art as a platform for mass communication and to establish a greater connection with the public. In addition, this research may open the doors of utilizing printmaking as a tool to deal with social and political problems rather than being merely a reproductive process for beautiful images.

Introduction

One of the most often quoted characteristics of printmaking that is used to differentiate it from other disciplines of art is that it allows for the creation of multiple, practically identical, images or impressions. This notion, which holds reproducibility as the hallmark of printmaking's functional potential, can be divided into three essential components: the matrix, the medium, and the substrate. Portability and ease of distribution are another set of traits used to define printmaking from other types of artistic production. The combination of these characteristics: the creation of multiple impressions, portability, and ease of distribution serves as the premise for the claim that printmaking is the most democratic of all art forms. Art history has witnessed several attempts to implement the democratic ideals of printmaking in the public arena; two of the most prominent examples are the WPA's federal art project and, American artist Shepard Fairly.

Background

During the 1930s, the era of the great depression, American artists made printmaking one of the decade's most vital and exciting art forms. Both democratic ideals and financial constraints encouraged artists to explore print-media as a way to produce "art for the millions.", progressive printmakers emphasized meaningful Social Content, and sought new strategies for dispensing their works to a wider audience. Their desire to expand public interest in visual arts paralleled contemporary American interests in indorsing "cultural democracy", a term used in the 1930s, to suggest that greater access to fine art, music, dance, and theater would benefit every citizen. Supportive critics and art dealers quickly asserted that the diversity, originality, and dynamic visual quality of 1930s, prints demonstrated their significance as a vitally democratic type of American art.

A- Work Progress Administration Art Project (WPA)

The Federal Art Project was the main visual arts project of the Works Progress Administration during great depression-era (1935–1943). The Federal Art Project was a program intended to fund the [visual arts](#) in the [United States](#). The project created more than 200,000 artworks, some of them remaining among the most significant pieces of public art in the country. It was initiated not as a cultural activity but as a relief measure to employ artists and artisans to create murals, easel paintings, sculpture, graphic art, posters, photography, [theatre scenic design](#), and arts and crafts. The WPA Federal Art Project established more than 100 community art centers throughout the country, researched and documented American designs, commissioned a significant body of [public art](#) without any restriction to content or subject matter, and sustained some 10,000 American artists and artisans during the [great depression](#).

The Federal Art Project's primary goals were to employ out-of-work artists and to provide art for non-federal municipal buildings and public spaces. Artists were supported by institutions such as schools, hospitals, and public buildings. The artworks were divided into art production, art instruction, and art research. The primary output of the art-research group was the Index of American Design, a comprehensive study of American material culture. As many as 10,000 artists were commissioned to produce work for the WPA Federal Art Project, the largest of the [New Deal](#) art projects. Three comparable but distinctly separate New Deal art projects were administered by the [United States Department of the Treasury](#): the [Public Works of Art Project](#) (1933–34).

The [Section of Painting and Sculpture](#) (1934–43) and the [Treasury Relief Art Project](#) (1935–38). The WPA program made no distinction

between [representational](#) and [nonrepresentational](#) art. [Abstraction](#) had not yet gained favor in the 1930s and 1940s and, thus, was virtually unsaleable. As a result, the Federal Art Project supported such iconic artists as [Jackson Pollock](#) before their work could earn them income.

In 1934, American Artist [Anthony Velonis](#) was hired by the Civilian Work Administration as a poster artist, at that time Silkscreen printing was mostly used for textiles and large backgrounds for department store windows, but Velonis had been introduced to the process two years prior. Before he joined the WPA, he and another graphic artist, Fritz Brosius, had run their own printing shop out of Velonis's cousin's place in New York City.

From 1935 and 1942, Works Progress Administration, commissioned unemployed artists across the country to produce over 35,000 poster designs in exchange for government stipends.

The WPA Poster Project, as it was called, not only produced a [wealth of public service posters](#) that now serve as extraordinary archives of the graphic design of the period. It also had a lesser-known but equally important effect on design history—by popularizing the use of screen-printing that is thanks to Anthony Velonis. When Velonis joined the WPA project, the artists were carefully painting each poster by hand, and Velonis touched the need for a systematized process of mass production and recognized that screen-printing could be used for more than just commercial purposes.

Silkscreen was seen as a particularly democratic and practical technique because of its capabilities to easily produce multiple originals and could, therefore, be sold more inexpensively and distributed more widely than paintings. Francis V. O'Connor, the first scholar to reassess the importance of the 1930s federally funded art programs, has noted the close connection between increased interest in printmaking and the affirmation of democratic social ideals: "Prints in any technique—relief, intaglio, planography, or stencil—are the products of immediate risk and implied social commitment. The artist who crafts them must command an often difficult medium while also possessing a sense of democracy alien to the creators of unique objects." (Langa, 1-2).

The main subjects of the WPA Project posters were promoting labor culture, encouraging internal tourism, and natural preservation of America. One of the good example of WPA posters, a Silkscreen Poster (Fig. 1), advertising Household jobs for women and it shows a white woman working as a house cleaner, which was only acceptable for black women back then. Another Silkscreen Poster (Fig. 2) Titled Work with Care shows an abstract figure representing a repairperson working with a drill. Invites American labor force to apply quality

standards in their work. Another example of labor culture promoting posters is a Silkscreen poster (Fig. 3) titled Work, Play, Study & Health, the poster shows an abstract figure of a young man holding an Axe, and it promotes the labor culture among young population. Forging Ahead, (Fig. 4), is another good example of labor promoting posters; it shows an abstract figure of a powerful man working as a smith.

A good example of WPA Awareness posters is a poster titled Pennsylvania (Fig 5). The Poster shows the profile of a man with strong prominent features holding an axe, and it is commemorating the mining workers of Pennsylvania, the poster is based on linocut print.

Another example of WPA awareness Posters is a warning poster titled Be Careful Near Machinery (Fig. 6). The poster a man in the foreground and a Machine in the background and it advises the workers to be extra careful while working with machineray .

Another type of WPA social change awareness campaign is traffic posters designed to improve the driving behavior of the American society. Several silkscreen posters printed manually and were distributed in different states to raise the social responsibility of driving. One good example of that type of posters a poster titled Don't Mix Them, (Fig. 7), the Poster was printed in Silkscreen and it shows a gas pump and a bottle of alcohol in the foreground and a skull in the background.

The Artist mainly used black and red color to emphasize the danger of drinking and driving. Another example of the traffic awareness campaign is a silkscreen poster titled Don't Kill our Wild Life, (Fig. 8). The poster shows the headlight of a moving car in the background, and two dears crossing the road in the foreground and it invites the drivers to pay attention to the value of the wildlife in America.

Another type of WPA posters is cultural and public awareness posters, one good example of that type is a silkscreen poster titled Little_ Miss_ Muffet, (Fig. 9), the poster promotes the culture of reading among children. Another example of public awareness posters is a Poster titled Cancer Danger Signals (Fig. 10), this poster illustrates a human body and explains to the public the different signs and symptoms of different types of Cancer.

The WPA Poster project not only changed the mainstream perception of Printmaking Art but also created a platform for a drastic social change during the great depression in the United States.

The WPA project has also opened the doors for the Art Social activism, a continuing movement in contemporary America Art. Nowadays many American Printmaking Artists use their art as a tool to implement social and/or political transformations; one of the most prominent examples of those artists is Shepard Fairy.

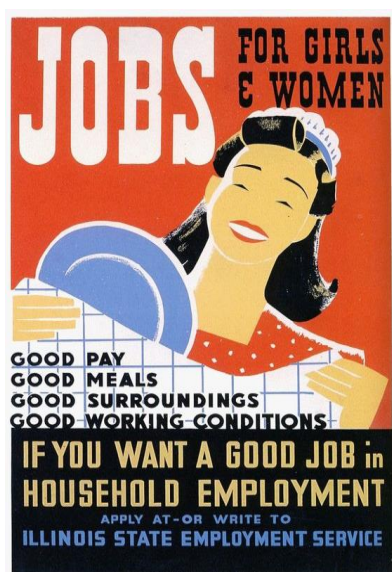


Fig. 1- Work , Play , Jobs for Girls & Women – Silkscreen-WPA Poster.



Fig. 2- Work with Care, – Silkscreen-WPA Poster.



Fig. 3- Work , Play , Study & Health – Silkscreen-WPA Poster.

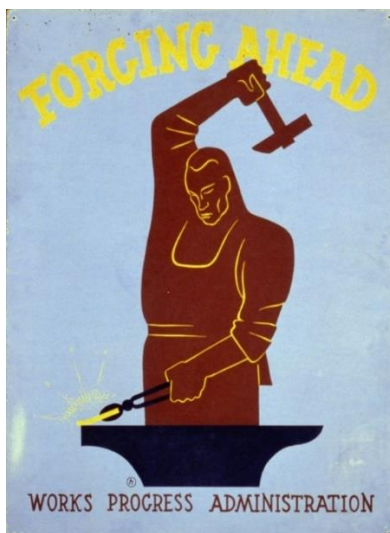


Fig. 4- Forging Ahead – Silkscreen-WPA Poster.

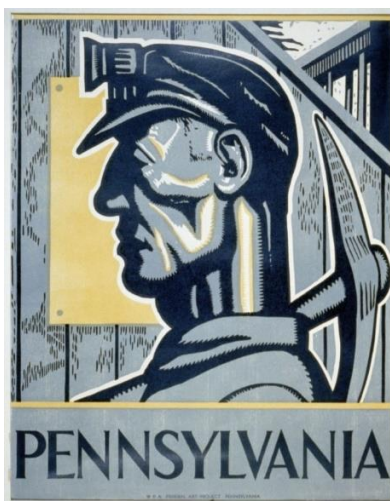


Fig 5. Pennsylvania – Lincocut - WPA Poster.



Fig 6. Be Careful Near Machinery – Lithography- WPA Poster.

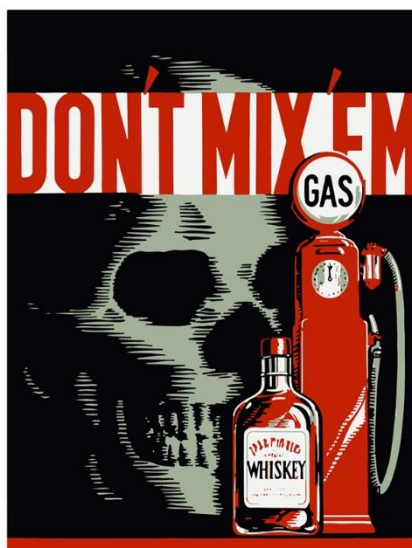


Fig 7.-Don't Mix Them – Silkscreen- WPA Poster.



Fig .8 – Don't Kill our Wild Life – Silkscreen -WPA Poster.



Fig .9 –Little Miss Muffet – Silkscreen- WPA Poster.

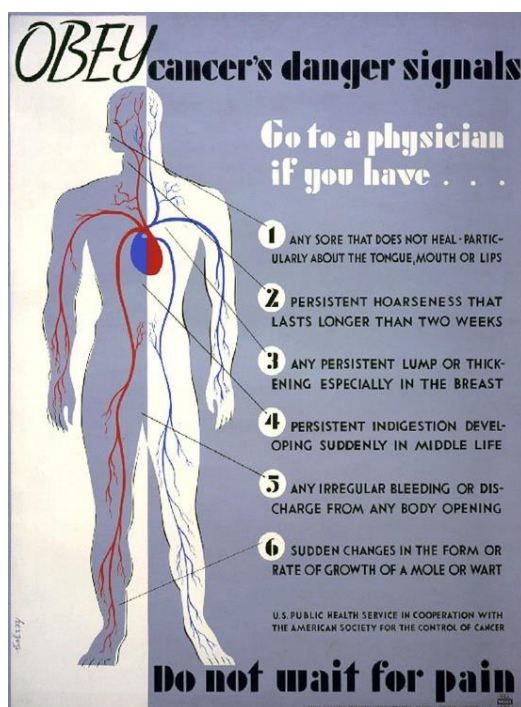


Fig .10 - Cancer Danger Signals- Silkscreen- WPA Poster.

B-Shepard Fairy Social and Political Activism

A contemporary American Artist Born in 1970 in Charleston, South Carolina, Fairy graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1992 where he earned his Bachelor of Arts in illustration. Fairy experimented with different printmaking techniques including Silkscreen, Stencil, Woodcut and Printed Graphite. The Majority of Fairy's works involve Social and Political reference.

Fairy has been involved in social activist and Street Art movement along with other artists including [Banksy](#) and [Mr. Brainwash](#). Fairy blurs the boundary between traditional and commercial art through type and image, communicating his brand of social critique via prints, murals, stickers, and posters in public spaces. In 1989 Fairy created the André the Giant Has a Posse sticker campaign, featuring a stylized image of the wrestler André the Giant (Fig. 11) , this project was the foundation for his seminal (Obey) series, which helped to push Fairy into the public spotlight. Fairy used the image of the wrestler in combination with the word "obey" sarcastically as a metaphor to describe the way politicians have always been trying to manipulate the public through fear strategies.

In 2001 Shepard Fairy launched OBEY Clothing based on his obey sticker series and aligned with his opinion on political and social sights. Obey clothing line became just another way of Shepard to spread his message all around the world. (Fig .12) shows one of the designs of Obey series on t-shirts. One of the most intriguing political works of Shepard Fairy is his Lithographic print (Proud Parents), (Fig 13). The Print shows the US Treasury as a family holding a bomb as a baby. The print is criticizing the American Government for prioritizing wars over American families. One of Fairy's striking political works of his series "Obey", is a silkscreen print titled One Hell of a Leader (Fig. 14), in which he portrays the American President George W. Bush as a smiling satanic Vampire with traces of blood on his mouth in a clear reference to his responsibility of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another good

example of Social artworks of Shepard Fairy is his Silkscreen Poster series titled Drink Crude Oil 1 (Fig. 15), and Drink Crude Oil 2 (Fig. 16) The “Drink Crude Oil” prints uses torn ad posters as a metaphor for the competing fragmented messages we are all confronted with daily. Many of our habits are reinforced by the ubiquity and consistency of propaganda around certain products. For example, consuming oil and gas is promoted as part of the usual daily lifestyle alongside drinking Coca-Cola. Those works suggest instead of always accepting the promoted ideology, it is important to examine the comprised messages with caution.



Fig.11. Shepard Fairey – **André the Giant Has a Posse**– Silkscreen - 60.96 x 45.72 cm – 1998.



Fig .12- Shepard Fairey – **OBEY** – Silkscreen on T-shirt - 2001.



Fig.13- Shepard Fairey – **Proud Parents**- Lithography-60.96 x 45.72 cm.

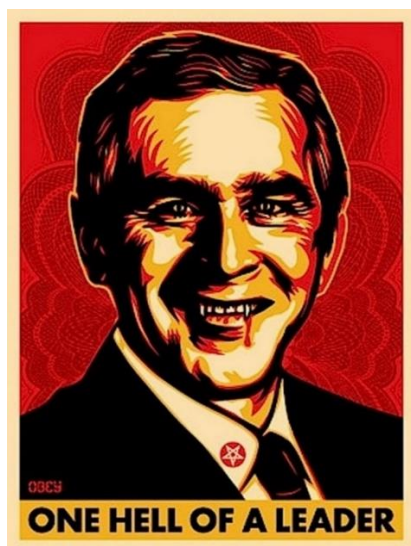


Fig 14. Shepard Fairey – One Hell of a Leader – Silkscreen - 60.96 x 45.72 cm – 2004.



Fig .15- Shepard Fairey – Drink Crude Oil 1 – Silkscreen - 60.96 x 45.72 cm – 2007.



Fig .16. Shepard Fairey – Drink Crude Oil 2 – Silkscreen - 60.96 x 45.72 cm – 2007.

By 2008 Shepard Fairy was one of the main political supporters for the American President Barack Obama, and perhaps he is best known for his Hope (2008) campaign, which portrays a portrait of then-presidential candidate Barack Obama with a challenging facial expression in white, blue and red. That poster is widely considered as a contemporary pop art phenomenon. The (Hope) Silkscreen Poster (Fig. 17), has been utilized as the main Poster of the presidential campaign of Barack Obama, this iconic portrait caught the attention of millions during the historic 2008 presidential campaign.



Fig .17. Shepard Fairy – Hope– Silkscreen - 60.96 x 45.72 cm – 2008.

In 2016 after the election of the American president Donald Trump, Shepard Fairy produced his Silkscreen Poster (DEMAGOGUE) (Fig 18), in which he condemns the fear tactics adopted by Trump. The print represents the mouth of Trump during one of his angry speeches. In 2017, the artist created a series of posters featuring portraits of culturally diverse women, again using a red, white, and blue color scheme in response to the racist rhetoric of President-elect Donald Trump. Fairy has also responded to the recent rise of Islamophobia in the United States by producing a silkscreen poster titled (We the People are Greater than Fear) (Fig 19s), in which he depicts an American Muslim woman. The We the People campaign aims to restore hope, imagination, curiosity, and creativity into our country's dialogue. Ridwan Adhami decided to photograph a Muslim woman putting an American flag as a hijab for the fifth anniversary of 9/11. They stood at the site of the World Trade Center, capturing the iconic image. As the Trump administration's Muslim Ban continues to wage a war on Islamic faith, the artwork's message will keep ringing loud and clear. There is no room for fear, only freedom.

Printmaking as a democratic art should question the intentions, the traditional methods of production and modes of display. Traditionally printmaking is often appreciated merely for the variety of technical effects it can produce. If printmaking is to live up to its claims of

being a democratic art, it must challenge this appreciation and explore the possibilities of a democratic art that begins with civic participation. The nature of democratic participation does not propose concrete solutions; rather solutions are generated through the act of participation itself. The two main sections of this research paper deal with the widespread perception of printmaking, as a decline of visual arts and the role it may play in changing the public awareness, concludes with an alternative conception of an artistic/democratic involvement.



Fig .18. Shepard Fairey – DEMAGOGUE– Silkscreen - 60.96 x 45.72 cm – 2016.



Fig. 19. Shepard Fairey – We the People Are Greater than Fear– Silkscreen - 60.96x45.72 cm –2017.

Conclusion

From Gutenberg's bible that paved the way for a whole new era of information exchange, newspapers that provided a platform for disparate voices, posters either lending support for or denouncing social movements, to limited edition of fine art prints, printmaking's capacity to produce multiples that can be distributed and displayed to a mass audience has been a perennial source of its social and political relevance and appreciation.

What is vital to an exploration of printmaking's reproductive and distributive capabilities, and their connection to the idea of democratic art, is how these capabilities are used. The intended purpose, anticipated reception, visual content, mode of production, and method of distribution utilized in the performative act of printmaking invariably reveal the social attitudes and values held by those involved in the process. Thus, printmaking can be understood as an institutional act and whether participants attempt to renounce the cultural context in which they are embedded or grapple with it, the fact remains that there is a cultural conception of what printmaking is and what it can do that precedes any physical act. It is a cultural understanding.

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