

# Artists on the Barricades: The Militant Artists Union Treats with the New Deal

Gerald M. Monroe

From its inception in 1933 as an informal group within the John Reed Club to its quiet demise in 1942, the legendary Artists Union of New York had a profound effect on the lives of its members. In the fight to obtain and expand government patronage, the union engaged in mass picketing, strikes, and sit-ins, and, soon after the creation of the WPA work-relief program in the spring of 1935, it became the *de facto* bargaining agent for wages and working conditions on the Federal Art Project of the WPA. The exceptional working arrangements, the large percentage of the national quota on the New York City Project, the generous exceptions to the stringent relief requirements, and the highest WPA hourly wages were substantially a result of union pressure.

The art projects, along with the WPA in general, were considered a temporary measure, to be disbanded as soon as the economy would permit, and, for that reason, appropriations by Congress were made only with considerable reluctance. In fact, no funds were ever directly allocated for the arts, which were financed out of general WPA monies by executive order of President Roosevelt. The union's combative ways gained it few friends in Congress or the press; an article in the *Sunday Mirror*, September 1, 1935, referred to the organized artists as "Hobohemians . . . chiselers . . . boondogglers biting the hand that feeds them." Most of the WPA workers—carpenters, bricklayers, engineers—dreamed of obtaining full-time jobs in industry. Not so the artists; they cherished government patronage and sought to make it permanent. Artists Union demonstrations, colorful adventures staged with great frequency and enthusiasm, were perceived as essential tactics in a battle for economic survival.

In response to an Administration plan to decrease the size of the Art Proj-

ect, part of an intended reduction of the entire WPA, the union organized a mass sit-in on December 1, 1936, at Art Project offices on Fifth Avenue and 39th Street that resulted in a bloody confrontation with the police. Twelve demonstrators were treated by ambulance doctors and 219 were carried off in eleven patrol wagons. The belligerent tactics apparently were effective, because project artists were not included in the general paring down of the WPA rolls in the spring of 1937. The union leaders advised the membership to prepare for emergency action and declared to the Art Project administrators: "We issue an individual and collective warning. . . . Any administrator that refuses to protest the cuts and to do everything possible to protect the Federal Art Project from the cuts, declares himself an enemy of culture . . . and can rest assured they will pay the price . . . will make himself liable personally for anything that may happen as the result of the cut."<sup>1</sup>

All the cultural projects—music, theater, writing, and art—were to share in the dismissals, but the Artists Union, clearly the most aggressive, was the acknowledged tactical leader. When the leadership of the organized cultural workers met to form a Joint Strategy Committee, Artists Union organizer Chet LaMore was elected chairman. The committee launched an all-out campaign, getting the endorsement of eminent persons in the arts and in public life, contacting Congressmen, and issuing statements to the media. Conceding that Congressional action made curtailment of the WPA inevitable, the committee asked that the Art Projects be exempted from the general order reducing quotas, because they were the least likely to benefit from an improvement in the economy, and that an impartial appeals board be established to review cases of dismissed workers on the basis of their employability and their need. But, since they recognized the first demand as being politically infeasible, though a useful red herring, the committee concentrated on the appeals board, which could have the effect of nullifying the impact of the cuts. On June 11, 1937, LaMore met with Ellen Woodward, the administrator of all WPA professional services, and obtained a vague agreement as to an appeals board. Five days later he conferred with Harold Stein, the top administrator in the New York Art Project, and informed him of Woodward's encouragement. Stein, a sensitive New Dealer who believed the unions performed a real service, had already created an appeals board, but it was empowered to deal only with discrimination and labor relations. He did appeal to Woodward to consider the cultural workers as a special case but told LaMore that the appeals board could not

consider need as a factor, as that would make any implementation of the ordered reduction impossible.

On Tuesday, June 22, 1937, pink slips were issued. The organized arts workers counterattacked with the precision of a military unit. About sixty of them barricaded themselves in the payroll office on Wednesday, completely paralyzing the Art Project. On Thursday, Audrey McMahan, head of the New York City Art Project, remained in her office through the night to hear cases of dismissed workers. Overcome with grief by the evening's work, she wired the National Director of the Federal Art Project, Holger Cahill, asking for exemptions and followed up with a long letter citing specific case histories. Cahill replied, ". . . a larger quota for New York means a smaller quota elsewhere where the situation is equally as desperate, possibly more desperate than the New York situation . . . our cuts have not been as severe as the cuts to the program as a whole, and this has been based upon presentation to the Administration of the almost non-existent private employment for art workers."<sup>2</sup>

On the same day that MacMahon wired Cahill, LaMore led a delegation of about fifty dismissed workers into the Washington offices of the WPA and demanded a meeting with the WPA chief, Harry Hopkins. Told that Hopkins and his two assistants, David Niles and Aubrey Williams, were not available, LaMore became involved in a long debate with a lesser official, insisting that the delegation would not leave until someone with decision-making power was contacted. Members of the delegation then recited heart-rending accounts of needy persons dismissed from the projects. At about 4:30 p.m., LaMore dramatically announced that project workers in New York would enter the Federal Art Project offices and would "conduct themselves in such a way as to force the issue of the appeals board and win it." He added, "We are here as the other section of this action."<sup>3</sup>

At Germania Hall, on New York's Lower East Side, a mass meeting of arts workers taking place on Friday was interrupted by an announcement that all present were to march on the Federal Art Project offices that afternoon and take possession. In a frenzy of activity, they were armed with colorful picket signs, and then proceeded uptown on the Third Avenue El to 42nd Street. At 4:30 p.m., 600 artists, writers, and musicians invaded the building, with an additional 100 forming a picket line outside. A couple of blocks west, about 250 Theater Project workers began a simultaneous sit-in at the Theater Projects offices. The events in New York altered the attitude of the WPA administrators in Washing-

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ton; Williams was quickly located and met with LaMore's delegation at 6:30 P.M. that evening. Also present was LaMore's secretary, who made a verbatim account of the discussions.<sup>3</sup>

LaMore, a printmaker and painter with an M.A. in art history and criticism, became a leader of the Artists Union shortly after his arrival in New York City. Williams, like his boss, Hopkins, had been trained as a social worker. He was probably making most of the key decisions at the WPA at this time, for, as confidant of President Roosevelt and a senior political advisor, Hopkins was now spending most of his time at the White House. Though both LaMore and Williams were committed to social change through political action, their conceptual differences were evident in their discussion. Williams quickly admitted the merit of the project worker's demands, but he insisted that the size of the WPA was determined by Congressional action, over which the Administration had little control. He assured LaMore:

I am the last one to question your right or your good judgment in seeking to keep your jobs. For my part, I am glad that you are protesting, but what can be done about it is something else. . . . We are nothing but agents of the law. We do not write the ticket. There is no doubt that forces are at work in this country to wipe the whole thing out. . . . There are people in Congress who say this thing has to be stopped [evidently referring to the WPA]. They say Hopkins and Williams are carrying these things to excess. . . . I think you have to consider the whole picture. You have to consider it with me and not let this get into a position where it will amount in the minds of the public to insurrection against our government.

Unimpressed by Williams' defense of the need to make drastic cuts in the WPA, LaMore pointed out that, since it was the Administration that formulated the budget, it therefore must accept the responsibility for the removal of thousands of needy persons from the payroll. The assertion that Congress was actually responsible, declared LaMore, was "pure sophistry." Williams indicated that he was willing to continue the dialogue but he had to keep a dinner appointment with writer Emil Ludwig, who was working on a biography of Roosevelt. Further discussions were planned for the morning, but the delegation caucused and decided they would remain in the building and meet with Williams later that evening.

In the occupied New York City offices, Stein was warned by the strike leaders that he and his staff would be forcibly detained if they attempted to



The cover of *Art Front*, June/July 1937. Archives of American Art.

depart before the demand for the appeals board was won. The switchboard operator was instructed to answer "Artists Union" to all calls. Every inch of the floor was covered with strikers. The air became so stifling that two women were overcome and had to be treated by an ambulance physician. Stein called Woodward in Washington to transmit the strikers' demands, and when she affirmed the Administration's position that the funds were just not available, the striker leaders declared that Stein would be held hostage until they received satisfaction — from the President, if necessary. Woodward wired Niles, who was on a train to Boston, ". . . Stein and Ryan are barricaded in their offices by delegations numbering several hundred each which refuse to let them leave until they receive favorable reply to their de-

mands . . . strain on floor may prove dangerous . . . would appreciate your advice as to whether this justifies police intervention." Niles evidently cautioned against police action, because the demonstrators were not disturbed by the police.

After dinner and a phone conversation with Stein, Williams and his dinner guest returned at 10 P.M. to talk with the delegation, which insisted on presenting a series of hardship cases to him. Williams seemed shaken by the personal testimonies but continued to protest the impotency of the WPA to wrest sufficient funds from Congress. "The tragedy is that you are frankly talking to the wrong people. . . . Did you know that this thing rests with the people who were elected by the people and who have the responsibility under the Constitution? . . . They

say that Hopkins is ruining the country. His fighting along this line is a known fact. . . . I have so much money—prospects are such and such—I am hoping for better things, but only time can tell what can happen.”

LaMore reminded Williams that he had failed to support the Waldo bill, a more generous allocation for the WPA than was passed by Congress, but Williams insisted that he had had no choice. “We work for the President. When the President gives a position, either we support that position or we get out. You don’t oppose the President of the United States on a position he takes. . . . I would be very hesitant, no matter what I personally think on matters, in placing the President in a position of this kind. . . . Furthermore, you cannot run a government where Hopkins and the President fight for two different things—that government can’t stand. . . . That does not mean that everyone does not have their hour.”

Some of the delegates continued to relate their tragic cases to Williams, but the administrator remained adamant, in spite of his apparent discomfort. Though he saw no point in further discussion, Williams agreed to meet with the delegation on Saturday morning. When LaMore announced that the delegates would remain overnight at the WPA headquarters because they could not afford to stay at a hotel, Ludwig generously offered to pay the hotel bill. Like Williams, Ludwig was touched by the grievous stories they were forced to listen to during the evening.

On that same Friday evening in New York, Stein assembled his staff to negotiate an agreement with the strike leaders. By morning he had signed a statement agreeing that the method of dismissal was unsound and recommending the formation of a board with the power to retain needy employees. He also requested that the dismissal dates be extended until such time as a review board could complete its work. The agreement, couched in terms that reflected Stein’s limited power, was, of course, worthless without the affirmation of his superiors in Washington. A copy was wired to Woodward at 8 A.M. Fifteen hours after the invasion of his office Stein walked out, having, according to *The New York Times*, “purchased his freedom . . . by granting all of the strikers’ demands to the limit of his authority.”

Williams met with the Washington delegation Saturday morning on schedule, and LaMore immediately requested approval of the Stein agreement. Angered because he believed the agreement was obtained by “third degree methods,” Williams declared that he would neither confirm the statement nor listen to any long harangues. Despite his indignation, however, he was patently despondent

over his role in denying the modest income that work-relief provided for the needy.

He finally agreed to place a social worker on the existing appeals board to consider questions of need “as far as we can go.” Though the concession was not intended to imply that the dismissals might actually be averted, the members of the strikers’ delegation assumed they had won their point. Artists Union president Harry Gottlieb raced to the telephone to inform his members of their victory.

Shortly after Williams made the offer to modify the appeals board, LaMore’s secretary recorded this remarkable postscript to the meeting:

*LaMore:* When we, as individuals and as members of an organization are threatened with extreme privation, ourselves and our fellow men, we are going to fight hard. . . . The Administration cannot expect us to have a conception of responsibility which is based on its program rather than our needs. . . . We resent the implication that we are a bunch of hoodlums . . . at the time we took action we had exhausted every other reasonable action—any reasonable discussion.

*Williams:* What happens to unemployed in America is bound up with the future of what is going to happen in America. I realize more than any of you what social and political implications are involved in this case. . . . I just hope and pray that you don’t do anything in this situation that will turn the country against you. No one doubts the sincerity of your efforts. . . . But what gets my goat and . . . will break anybody’s heart is that you people, in the excesses of your desperate situation, will pull this whole house down. You cannot have a strike against the Government. It cannot be done. By that means you have a *coup d’état*. . . . It is unthinkable. If it occurs all over the country you can kiss the WPA good-bye. Don’t think I have not got temptations to bust loose and tell the whole world as you people do, or . . . inclinations to join you boys and tell this story to America. Moves are being made . . . that are wonderful. This man [Roosevelt] is devoted to one-third of our people. . . . He has great fights on his hands to try and put more money in the hands of one-third of our population. . . . He is trying to bequeath something to the poverty-stricken of America, and you are doing something terrible to us.

*LaMore:* The difference remains one of social conception. When you

speak of the President’s program, you use the word—which is indicative—*bequeath*. Here comes a conception of a democracy which seems to intimate that a democracy can be run by the top administration. . . . It does not become a question of giving things to people but it becomes a question of education. While you deplore publicity, we are glad to have it. We know the press is against us because it is controlled. Nevertheless, in the minds of millions of people who are in hopeless economic straits, we are right. We are going to present to Congress a permanent WPA. We are a completely déclassé social group. In order to solve the situation in a democratic way, we contend that painting, literature, and theaters do not belong to a top group; that they do not belong to people who can pay \$1000 for a painting, and who can pay Broadway prices to see a play. The finer things in life belong to all the people in a democracy. This is the basis upon which we have exerted this effort. We are glad that we have the sympathy of the Administration in this respect.

*Williams:* Will you please write out what you have just said and send it to me?

The meeting ended, and in celebration of the apparent victory, Ludwig invited the entire delegation on an excursion to an amusement park on the Virginia side of the Potomac. Although jim-crow policies denied access to the dozen black delegates, both the management of the bus line and of the park agreed to forgo the racial rules for the day, permitting an afternoon of relaxation before the train trip back to New York City.

The enthusiasm proved to be short-lived however. *The New York Times* reported that the board agreed to by Williams would have “advisory powers to recommend the reinstatement of dismissed workers.” When Williams learned that his offer to modify the appeals board had been misinterpreted, he issued a statement reaffirming the Administration’s position that it was impossible to rescind the order reducing the number of persons to be employed on the Art Project. Stein lost his job as administrator of the New York City Art Project and was reassigned as a special assistant to Woodward, with the task of writing a study of the Federal Art Project. Protests and demonstrations by the arts workers continued but with little apparent effect. On November 4, 1937, Woodward was able to report to Hopkins that “despite some resistance in the field, a twenty-five percent cut was accomplished by the end of July,” adding discreetly, that “further reductions would be embarrassing.”

The decision to pare the WPA rolls was based upon an expectation of an upturn in the nation's economy. But the anticipated improvement failed to materialize, forcing Congress to reallocate funds for the work-relief program. Those workers who had the persistence to struggle through the lengthy rehiring process eventually got back on the government payroll, but the artists' status seems to have suffered in comparison with other WPA workers. In the spring of 1938, Congress voted sufficient funds for a fifty-two percent increase in WPA employment, but the number of arts workers increased less than six percent. It was manifest to the leadership of the union that demonstrations were bound to have diminishing benefits, and so it moved toward an emphasis on more traditional politics in hopes of gaining influence in Congress. The goal was a permanent art project in which the artists might have some form of civil service status. In an attempt to increase its political leverage, the union joined the newly-formed CIO as a local of the United Office and Professional Workers. The affiliation brought few tangible benefits—some technical assistance and perhaps a little status within the labor movement—but the expectation that the organized working class would rally behind a campaign of support for a permanent arts project proved illusory. The union continued to perform a useful function as the *de facto* representative of the Art Project workers, but it no longer had the flamboyant character or the spontaneous enthusiasm that had so inspired the dramatic strike of June 1937.

## The Archivist's Report

Garnett McCoy

John Gellatly, one of the most active art collectors in New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is remembered today as the donor of the Gellatly Collection to the Smithsonian Institution in 1929. He cut something of a figure in his day, but there are few biographical details. He was born in 1853, orphaned at an early age, studied art briefly, and married a fortune. He and his wife began collecting in the 1880's and in 1905 attached a gallery to their house at 34 West 57th Street. By 1913, when Mrs. Gellatly died, they had formed a more than respectable collection of European and American art with a strong concentration of painting by Albert Pinkham Ryder, Abbott Thayer, Thomas Dewing, Childe Hassam, and John H. Twachtman. After 1913 Gellatly plunged heavily in the American market, eventually owning seventeen Dewings, seventeen Ryders, and twenty-three Thayers. The collection contributes much to the distinction of the National Collection of Fine Arts.

Gellatly corresponded frequently with his artist friends. Few of his own letters are known to exist, but a substantial group of letters to him from Ryder, Thayer, and Frederick S. Church, recently acquired by the National Collection of Fine Arts, has now been deposited at the Archives. It provides useful information on American art patronage at the turn of the century and is a fitting supplement to the other records on that subject—most notably in the papers of Thomas B. Clarke, August Jaccaci, and the Macbeth Gallery.

While the letters tell us something about their writers, they also offer a few revealing glimpses of Gellatly. We see him as a man wholly devoted to his collection, capable of behaving with extraordinary generosity, pleased to show off his gallery to appreciative visitors, and glad to accept lavish praises for his taste and judgment. He played the guitar, dressed stylishly, and was fond of good food and drink and the company of ladies. A sketch in one of the Church notes shows a dapper gentleman with a rakish mustache and a convivial air. We also learn that he was not above expressions of annoyance at an artist's failure to finish and deliver a commissioned work.

The correspondence, in reflecting the respective dealings of the three men

with a major collector, throws light on the artist-patron relationship of the time. Church, who sold Gellatly seven paintings over a thirty year period, adopts a fellow man-of-the-world approach in his descriptions of the fare, the clientele, and the abundance of wildlife at a fashionable summer resort. His letters are full of lively sketches and frequently refer to his and Gellatly's shared taste for festive occasions. He makes little effort to promote his own work.

The largest group of letters is from Abbott Thayer and his wife. Written between 1903 and 1923, they convey full expressions of gratitude for Gellatly's benefactions, compliments on his excellent connoisseurship, and apologies for uncompleted work. "We cannot thank you enough," Mrs. Thayer writes after a particularly handsome gesture. "Your own joy in helping us is your pay." Thayer himself, combining the practical man and the visionary, justifies his prices on one page and gushes over "high bred souls in the world whose daily conduct is *Art*" on the next. Gellatly's gallery is "that beautiful shrine" where "at midnight sometimes you sit alone there and feel, I will dare say it, the highest note in three of my pictures. . . ." Thayer's rhapsodies are redeemed, however, by an occasional passage of startling earthiness.

Church and Thayer advance from "Dear Mr. Gellatly" to "Dear Gellatly." Ryder, a more reserved man, confines himself to a guarded "My dear Mr. Gellatly." He too speaks of "your beautiful house and art treasures" and requests that various friends, including the young Marsden Hartley, be allowed to visit. A poet as well as an artist, Ryder is much concerned that the poem he composed to go with his painting *The Flying Dutchman* be rendered correctly "if you should have the verses inscribed on a tablet as you thought of doing."

Who hath seen the "Phantom Ship"?  
Her lordly rise and lowly dip;  
Careering o'er the lonesome main  
No port shall know her keel again.

Thayer's lengthy apologies for delayed work are in sharp contrast to Ryder's refusal to be intimidated. In an August 24, 1905 reply to Gellatly request for an overdue *King Cophetua* and *the Beggar Maid*, he writes, "I realize from your point of view that you have been patient and deserve credit for it. Although I may have seemed indifferent, tis only seeming." Under further pressure, three months later, he expressed himself plainly in what could well stand as a model of artistic independence:

"Allow me to say that I cannot in any sense accept a defensive position in the matter. The commission when

### NOTES

1. "Pink Slips Over Project," *Art Front Organizer* (June 18, 1937), Harry Gottlieb Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D. C.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from correspondence in the Labor Relations File of the Federal Art Project material donated by Francis O'Connor, Archives of American Art, Washington, D. C.

3. Possibly the only existing copy, the twenty-three page typed transcript (with p. 16 missing) covers the Friday meetings, and an additional eight pages records the Saturday meeting. None of the testimony of the dismissed workers is included in the transcript. It is possible that the record may not be complete in all respects. Dan Koerner Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D. C.