



Despite his skill as a painter, William Gropper, above, was best known as a leftist political cartoonist. "Unemployed," done in 1930, shows his style, a blend of symbolic gestures or ideas with specific human characteristics.

## William Gropper, Artist

New York—Funeral services were to be held today for William Gropper, 79, of Great Neck, a leftist political cartoonist and painter, who died Thursday at North Shore University Hospital of a heart ailment. Gropper's work has been exhibited at some of the world's best art museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Gropper's paintings, considered to be in the social satire tradition of the 19th Century artist Honore Daumier, are expressionistic in the use of thick, rich color and striking spatial arrangements. However, Gropper is more famous for his political cartoons, which chided politicians and capitalists for their lack of concern for people.

Gropper, who grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, began his career as an illustrator for the New York Tribune. In 1924,

he became staff cartoonist for Freiheit, a Communist Yiddish-language daily. His political cartoons also appeared in the Sunday edition of The Daily Worker, and in Vogue and other magazines.

Murals by Gropper are in the Department of the Interior building in Washington and in the Freeport Post Office, where his winter scenes decorate the east and west walls of the lobby. Gropper, his wife said, tore up any work he was not proud of. He died before he could fulfill a lifelong ambition to do a series of paintings on the ballet, and have dances choreographed from them. Besides his wife, who lives at 33 Hickory Dr., Great Neck, Gropper is survived by two sons, Gene of Los Angeles, and Lee, of Los Altos Hills, Calif., and four grandchildren.

Services were scheduled at noon at Riverside Memorial Chapel Burial in Sharon Gardens, Valhalla, N.Y.

## William Victor Gropper

The Queen's Museum in Flushing, Feb.-July 2016, mounted a very successful exhibition entitled "Bearing Witness. Drawings by William Gropper."

Gropper who was an accomplished, versatile artist known for his cartoons, murals, paintings, and lithographs does not have his name included in the list compiled by Edgar von Schmidt-Pauli of hundreds of "Famous and Recognized Great Neckers", but there is no doubt that he was a very distinguished Great Neck Estates resident who lived on Hickory Drive until his death in 1977. The current owners bought the house from his widow.

A little story goes along with that. When the Family moved into the house, they had some work to do to fix it up. In the breakfast room they had to remove the wallpaper. On the bare wall there was a mural. Having just settled in this country, they did not recognize that the seller of the house had actually been the widow of the famous muralist Gropper and since the mural was also not in great condition, they erased it!

For those who may not remember his name, Gropper is well known for his passionate outcry for social justice by means of his artistic talents. He was closely associated with the artistic movement known as social realism although he eschewed labels. The following quote from an interview with Gropper in 1960 explains his mission best:

"I don't like labels. I am interested in mankind. People create the "landscapes" in my paintings. I fight wrongs. I fight in a creative sense. I am not fighting myself and I have no emotional conflicts. All my stuff is myself, passionately myself. I am involved with ideas and concepts. I am not trying to indoctrinate, I am trying to express my thoughts."

His activist thoughts were greatly influenced by his early education and surroundings. . He saw his father, a highly educated man who spoke seven languages, never able to find employment commensurate with his talents and he lost a favorite aunt in the 1911 garment industry fire, both of which and much else, he blamed on a flawed contemporary society.

He quit school at the age of 14, worked twelve-hour days and registered for night classes at the progressive Ferrer art school promoted by the anarchist Emma Goldberg. At the school he was under the influence of Robert Henri and George Bellows, members of the Ashcan School of Art. Their teachings had a profound influence on his artistic development. He later recalled: "I began to realize that you don't paint with color-you paint with conviction, freedom, love and heart-aches with what you have." He continued to attend the National Academy of Design briefly where he was offered a scholarship to what is now known as the Parsons School of Design. His versatile artistic skills were developed there, which allowed him to work in a variety of media besides cartoon drawings. .

*Gropper began his career as an illustrator for the New York Tribune where he only lasted for 2 years. In 1924 he became a two-decade staff cartoonist for the "Morning Freiheit", a Left-wing Yiddish-language Daily where his political cartoons chiding politicians and capitalists for their lack of concern for the*

people were more acceptable. His cartoons also appeared in The Sunday-edition of the Daily Worker and other magazines.

In the 1930's, during the Depression, when work was harder to find. He obtained commissions funded by the WPA (New Deal Works Progress Administration) for a variety of projects, including murals for the Post Office in Freeport, L.I. He won a national design competition to create a mural for the new U.S. Dept. of the Interior Building in Washington, as part of the U.S. Treasury Art Project. "Construction of a Dam" was completed in 1939 as a tribute to Technology and Teamwork inspired by the Grand Coulee and Davis dams.

American Folklore was another of his fascinations, and figures, such as Johnny Appleseed, Paul Bunyan and Daniel Boone became subjects of his art. In 1946, he painted a map entitled "William Gropper's America: Its Folklore". It was published and widely distributed by the U.S. State Department . Unfortunately, it also reached Sen. Joseph McCarthy who believed that the map was inspired by Communist ideas and subpoenaed Gropper to appear before his investigative committee in May 1953. Gropper invoked the Fifth Amendment, refused to answer any questions, and was subsequently blacklisted.

His public and private commissions as well as his offers to exhibit his work suffered from that episode. Nevertheless, through financial support from his sympathizers, he managed to complete his own series of The Capriccios in which he expressed his 'disdain for the American ideological culture of the 1950s'. The work was inspired by Goya's work of the same name, which depicted Spain's political and social turmoil of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

*Gropper's first anti-Hitler cartoon appeared in print in the 1930's, but his embrace of Jewish themes came only late in the mid-forties when he was invited, with other artists, to the unveiling ceremony of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument. "I 'm not Jewish in a professional sense but in a human sense; here are six million destroyed. There is a ritual in the Jewish religion of lighting a candle for the dead, but instead of doing this, I decided to paint a picture in memory every year. In this way, I paid my tribute, rather than burning a candle."*

Gropper did more than that. After the Holocaust, he created the suite of impassioned lithographs, *Your Brother's Blood Cries Out*, in 1943; with Howard Fast, the illustrated poem, "Never to Forget: The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto" and in 1970 the *Shtetl*, a series of 24 color lithographs on Jewish village life in Poland.

As Louise Weinberg curator of the Queens Exhibit points out, Gropper was famous in his own time, but remarkably underappreciated since his death in 1977, (even in his own village of Great Neck Estates). Ms. Weinberg refers to him as a "lifelog humanist, whose impassionate commentaries on fascism, war, freedom of speech and action, capitalism and labor rights, corruption and hypocrisy, Immigration and racism resonate so viscerally almost 100 years later."