ART AS ACTIVISM

Graphic Art from the Merrill C. Berman Collection
Throughout much of the twentieth century, political protests and calls for action reached the public on posters and broadsides. Long before electronic technology made worldwide communication possible, graphic artists used the powerful tools of modernist art to inform communities, stir up audiences and call attention to injustice. American graphic artists, often drawing on European models developed in the 1920s to fight fascism or promote revolution, used brilliant colors and violent imagery to produce ephemeral artifacts aimed to inspire and energize the angry or disaffected. Posted on walls and bulletin boards, or slapped up on store windows and church doors, these bright, quickly produced images embodied the anger of the underclass, ultimately serving as the wallpaper of public discontent.

Art as Activism: Graphic Art from the Merrill C. Berman Collection presents a selection of posters produced between the early 1930s and the 1970s, some by known artists like Emory Douglas and Hugo Gellert, others by unidentified designers. Many of the best known date from the black activism period of the 1960s, but their style and power have deep roots in the past and would continue to shape the imagery of protest until replaced by other forms of social media, including graffiti and ultimately the internet.

Merrill C. Berman, who began acquiring examples of commercial graphic art in the 1970s, has assembled a vast trove of ephemeral paper artifacts that rivals the collections of major museums. Selections from his holdings, representing the best and most interesting aspects of American popular design, have appeared in exhibitions throughout the world. Highlights from the Merrill C. Berman collection and additional information may be found online at mcbcollection.com.

Generous support for this exhibition has been provided by the Ford Foundation.

Exhibitions at the New-York Historical Society are made possible, in part, by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.
During the economic depression of the 1930s, the runup to World War II, the War itself, and the post-war anti-communist scare, community organizers repeatedly tried to galvanize their constituents by issuing urgent calls for collective action against racism and political impotence. Many of the posters, like those displayed here emanating from the Communist Party and the young but growing Labor Party, called for strikes and rallies. Others, while focused on more traditional areas of culture like music, electoral politics and the theater, used similar imagery and color to suggest their solidarity with ties to oppressed communities.
Unidentified artist
Equal Rights for Negroes Everywhere, 1932
Lithograph on paper

Unidentified artist
On to Washington! Demand from Congress ‘50 Federal Winter Relief Unemployment Insurance; Support National Hunger March, 1932
Lithograph on paper

Charles McClane
Progressive Young Colored Democrats, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, event organizers
Gala Reception & Ball in Honor of the No. 1 Roosevelt Democrat Joseph F. Guffey, 1935
Lithograph on paper
In the early 1930s, as economic depression overtook the country, traditional party politics and calls for civic engagement reflected the anger and despair that permeated black communities. Radical groups and leftwing groups, including the Communist Party, supported candidates who promised opportunities for change. Mass meetings, hunger marches, and demonstrations became effective tools for the support of candidates who appeared to be sympathetic to demands for local and national government relief. For the first time since the end of Reconstruction, black participation in electoral politics surged.
Although protest politics are often assumed to be the product of urban environments, the widespread hardships of the period affected farmers and agricultural workers whose problems were intensified by years of drought and crop failure. Urban liberals across the country were drawn to their cause, particularly that of black farm workers of the rural south.
The *Daily Worker*, newspaper of the American Communist party, kept readers informed on the many labor battles of the 1930s, the struggles of the American worker and the Party’s role in the worldwide fight against oppression. Hungarian Jewish immigrant Hugo Gellert created many works for the paper and the Communist party, seeing printmaking as an easily disseminated art form able to spread a political message. For Gellert, “Being a Communist and being an artist are the two cheeks of the same face and…I fail to see how I could be either one without being the other.”
J. Louis Engdahl, general secretary of the International Labor Defense (ILD) group, had been faced with prosecution as a pacifist during World War I. The ILD, established in the 1920s as the legal advocacy arm of the Workers Party of America, later the Communist Party, mounted campaigns to defend political dissidents and to publicize violations of human rights. Engdahl’s publication, Labor Defender, brought international attention to the trial of the Scottsboro Boys, nine young black men who had been sentenced to death for the alleged rape of two white women in Alabama. The case lingered on for many years, but largely because of the activities of the ILD and the outrage generated by publications like Engdahl’s, some of the defendants were pardoned and the verdicts eventually reversed or overturned.
Blacklisted writer Howard Fast spoke for many activists who faced political persecution during the Korean War when he defended May Day as a uniquely American holiday born during the labor struggles of the 1880s. Declaring May 1 as an opportunity to march for peace, justice and the rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, Fast’s pamphlet, illustrated by Gellert, detailed the erosion of government support for organized labor and appealed to supporters to march for freedom, especially precious during wartime.
The literary and artistic achievements of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s brought attention to African American culture, but much of the excitement of the earlier period dissipated during the depression years in the face of grinding poverty and persistent hunger. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) organized by the Roosevelt Administration to provide employment...
opportunities for artists and cultural workers, among others, sponsored and supported the production of many plays with overt political content. Plays by established authors like the poet Langston Hughes allowed issues of black identity and self-empowerment to reach black and white audiences.
Lester Beall (1903–1969)  
Cross Out Slums, 1941  
Lithograph on paper

The U.S. Housing Authority, established in 1937, provided loans to state and local housing authorities for new low-income housing and the removal of substandard accommodations. Known for his love of photomontage and European modernist design, graphic artist Lester Beall created this U.S.H.A. poster highlighting the benefits of slum clearance.
Unidentified photographer
Women surrounded by posters in English and Yiddish supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt, Herbert H. Lehman, and the American Labor Party teach other women how to vote, 1936
ILGWU. Photographs. 5780 P. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University.

Unidentified artist
Vote American Labor Party; Roosevelt and Lehman, 1936
Lithograph on paper
America’s labor unions and labor-supported political parties joined the call for victory after America’s official entrance into World War II in December 1941. Supporting President Roosevelt’s efforts to fight fascism abroad and his progressive domestic agenda, organized labor lent their support to his electoral campaigns while continuing to advocate for better treatment for the American worker.
Hugo Gellert’s drawing and subsequent poster for a 1952 May Day March for Peace shows how American progressives continued fighting for social justice and international cooperation despite the Korean War and the increasingly hostile political climate of the Cold War. Gellert faced investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and established the Art of Today Gallery in New York City in 1954 as an exhibition space for blacklisted artists.
The Black Panther Party, founded in California by Huey Newton (1942–1989) and Bobby Seale (b.1936) in 1966, was organized at a volatile point in national politics. Fed by widespread anger at the Vietnam War and the politics of alienation that cut across social and racial boundaries, the group—initially named the Black Panther Party for Self Defense—was originally founded to patrol African American neighborhoods, protecting residents from police brutality. Party members developed education and social welfare policies for the poorest neighborhoods, but with the escalation of the Vietnam War and the slow pace of change following the Civil Rights Act, revolutionary Black politics soon dominated the Panther agenda. Party spokespeople and their sympathizers—among them H. Rap Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis, Fred Hampton, and others in addition to Newton and Seale—called for revolution and armed resistance against unjust government authority. Confrontation and violence with the police resulted in multiple arrests, jail sentences, assassinations and targeted assaults against perceived enemies.

The powerful graphic designs used by the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, in particular the Black Panthers, were closely tied to minority politics of earlier decades. The Panthers, although short-lived as an organized party, used the posters and the press with extraordinary effectiveness to get their message across. Images of Cleaver, Newton, Seale and others, often including weapons and incendiary slogans, became instantly recognizable throughout America.
An Attack Against One
Is An Attack Against All

The Slaughter of Black
People Must Be Stopped!
By Any Means Necessary!

Distributed by the Robert Brown Elliott League
An Attack Against One is An Attack Against All, ca. 1970
Lithograph on paper
The massive claws and sinuous body of the panther, poised to attack, embodied the threat to established order that lay behind the mission and policies of the Black Panther Party. The Party adopted the panther symbol from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), an all-black political party founded in rural Alabama by community members in partnership with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Eighty percent black, Lowndes County had no black voters registered in 1966, a year after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Given widespread illiteracy in the area, ballots featured symbols to represent political parties. The dominant Democratic Party used a white rooster; in response, the LCFO chose the black panther, declaring the group’s readiness to claim their rights.
Eldridge Cleaver (1935–1998), the Minister of Information for the Panther Party, galvanized the literary public with his book *Soul on Ice* (1968). Written in prison, where he was serving time for rape and other crimes, the book was a collection of mesmerizing and pointed essays on the topic of race. Cleaver ran for President in 1968, as a candidate for the Peace and Freedom Party. He lived in exile from 1968 until 1977, becoming a conservative Republican in his later years.
Unidentified photographer
Huey Newton with cigarette, ca. 1970
Lithograph on paper
The public image of the Black Panthers was consciously modeled on the celebrity culture of the decade, adapting the techniques and tropes of commercial art and advertisement to get the message across to a wide public. The iconic poster of Party founder Huey Newton, shows him enthroned in a wicker chair, weapons in hand, with shields alongside to demonstrate how the Black Panther Party functioned to shield black Americans from racism and oppression. The appeal of the Newton photograph was international.
Twenty years after its publication, Daniel Lainé photographed a similarly posed traditional leader in Cameroon, the Fon (king) of Bandjun, who was believed to turn into a panther at night to travel freely through his kingdom.


Free Huey rally in front of the Alameda County Courthouse. Huey P. Newton, cofounder and Minister of Defense of the Black Panther Party, was on trial inside for first-degree murder of a police officer. He was acquitted on the murder charge but sentenced for voluntary manslaughter. Oakland, September 1968.

New-York Historical Society
Bobby Seale and fellow founder Huey Newton created a Ten Point Program detailing the aims and platform of the Black Panther Party to show residents of their community that they were understood and represented. Their message about the ability of an empowered community to demand justice drew many to their cause.

Bobby Seale’s activism landed him in court in 1969 when the Chicago Eight, a group of protesters charged with conspiracy to incite a riot during the Democratic National Convention, were brought to trial. His angry outbursts over the proceedings and over being denied his chosen legal counsel resulted in his being shackled and gagged in the courtroom and sentenced to four years in prison on 16 counts of contempt of court. Seale’s three-yearold son, Malik, depicted here, was brought into court, staying at his father’s request to witness the trial.
Bobby Hutton (1950–1968) was one of the first members of the Black Panther Party. He was killed in Oakland, California in a police ambush tied to protests following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., two days earlier. More than 1,500 people attended his funeral. Billed as the first Black Panther martyr, his name became a rallying cry for party sympathizers and others in the protest movement.
Fred Hampton, Illinois Black Panther Party leader, died at age 21, killed by Chicago police in the early hours of December 4, 1969 in a raid directed by the Cook County State Attorney’s office. Hampton’s death outraged the Panthers and a wide range of supporters, from college students to politically active establishment liberals who lent their wealth and prestige to the Panthers’ legal defense.
Close scrutiny by police and the FBI resulted in numerous clashes with the authorities for the Black Panthers. Radical prisoners became icons; the names of Angela Davis and George Jackson in California and the Panther 21 in New York became rallying cries inspiring others to call for their freedom.
In September 1968 two off-duty policemen fired upon the window of the Black Panther Party National Headquarters in Oakland, California, which was covered with well-known posters of Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Hutton, all exhibited elsewhere in this gallery. The fractured images of the three Panthers quickly achieved fame in their own right, especially the portrait of Newton reproduced here on the cover of *The Black Panther* newspaper.
Minister of Culture and Black Panther newspaper editor Emory Douglas frequently created heroic images of local community members. His striking images of individual empowerment aimed to show the dignity inherent in each of his subjects and the strength they could possess through their participation in the revolution.
Emory Douglas (b. 1943)

*H. Rap Brown, 1967*
Lithograph on paper

Emory Douglas (b. 1943)

*Revolutionary, ca. 1967–68*
Lithograph on paper
Expressing solidarity with liberation movements around the world, Emory Douglas’s depiction of women holding weapons and calling for action paid homage to revolutionary art from Vietnam, Cuba and South America.
The Panthers established many “survival programs,” social welfare programs to provide services to the community. From free health care to free lunches for children, the Panthers carried out a vision of Black self-determination.
Emory Douglas (b.1943)
Revolution In Our Lifetime, 1969
Lithograph on paper
From the late 1960s to the early 70s, the overwhelming fact of the Vietnam War absorbed much of the energy of social protest. Activist images and messages originally developed by the radical left were soon adopted by other social and political movements.

Anger against racism, demands for armed resistance to the draft, fury against elected officials, and calls for autonomy by communities of color, were kept in front of the public on posters and cheaply printed broadsides. They became part of a general social turmoil that would eventually force policy changes and an increased awareness of the fragility of civil and human rights.
A plea on computer paper to turn in U.S. government draft cards signals the broadened focus of protest movements of the early 1970s when resistance to the military engaged the emotions of American students and a broad spectrum of political activists. This poster of the Chicago Eight (later Seven) inviting readers to “Join the Conspiracy” has been cropped. The original poster advertised the October 1969 Days of Rage, the first highly publicized attempt by the Weathermen, the radical faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), to protest injustice and draw supporters through violent actions and street fighting.
The international scope of the anti-war movement reflected a widespread disillusionment with America's use of its power outside its borders. Emphasis on the Vietnamese civilians affected by the war and the right of the Vietnamese to self-determination were some of the many arguments against the war.
Tomi Ungerer, perhaps now best known for his memorable illustrations for children’s books, produced a series of four powerful anti-war, anti-racism posters, which were commissioned by Columbia University but ultimately rejected because of their inflammatory content. The most famous, *Black Power/White Power*, responds to the extremism he saw devouring the country, and also refers to Goya’s work.

Berkeley art history graduate student Jay Belloli appropriated Francisco Goya’s *Saturn devouring his Son* (1820–23) in response to President Nixon’s unexpected announcement about the bombing of Cambodia on April 30, 1970. Printed on computer paper, Belloli’s poster was one of many created during the student strike that followed the Cambodia announcement. Silk-screen posters produced by students in the early 1970s were distributed throughout the country for posting on college campuses and in activist centers to engage potential allies in the battle against militarism and entrenched power.

Jay Belloli, Berkeley, California  
*Amerika is Devouring Its Children*, 1970  
Screenprint on computer paper

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828)  
*Saturn devouring his Son*, 1820–23  
Museo Nacional del Prado

Tomi Ungerer (b.1931)  
*Black power/White power*, 1967  
Screenprint on paper
The American Indian Movement (AIM) called for reclamation of Native lands lost through violations of treaties and agreements. Activists in the movement occupied the island of Alcatraz, the location of the infamous former prison in San Francisco Bay, for over a year. The profile of a Native American familiar from the nickel coin over a fragment of the American flag effectively conveyed the message of exploitation without further words.
The 1970 images of members of the Ohio National Guard firing on and killing student protesters at Kent State University circulated widely in the press and, for many Americans, was evidence of the toxic conflict then dividing the country.
Unidentified artist
Peace Officers?, ca.1969–74
Lithograph on paper

Unidentified artist
Vietnam, ca.1964–68
Lithograph on paper
Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley’s efforts to quell protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention led to violent clashes in the streets. Policemen attacked protesters with clubs and tear gas, raising questions throughout the country about the right to protest and the direction the country was taking.
Organized by a coalition of anti-war groups, some of which had advocated for peace and an end to U.S. involvement in Vietnam for over a decade, this celebration with musical performances and speeches drew well over 50,000 to Central Park’s Sheep Meadow. A 1972 image of a Hanoi circus performer with trained doves was used for the poster.

Phil Ochs (1940–76), Cora Weiss (b.1934) & Dan Luce
The War is Over!, 1975
Lithograph on paper

A product, like many others in this collection, of the productive poster workshop at the University of California at Berkeley, “Recycle Nixon” employed the green and white stripes of the newly burgeoning ecology movement as a vehicle for a political commentary with an anti-Nixon, anti-war message.

Unidentified artist, Berkeley, California
Recycle Nixon, 1970
Screenprint on computer paper
Special thanks to Louise Mirrer, President & Chief Executive Officer; Stephen Edidin, Chief Curator; Casey Daurio, Exhibition Designer; Marcela Gonzalez, Graphic Designer; Jean Ashton & Laura Mogulescu, Label Text Authors; & Dottie Teraberry & Mark Schlemmer, Registrars