

Sentimentality and Political Agenda: Idealization of Labor in Great Depression-Era  
American Art

“Everyone is a partisan and to some extent a propagandist of what he likes.” So wrote the artist Boardman Robinson in a letter published in a 1922 edition of the radical leftist monthly *The Liberator*. He was addressing the notion of “proletarian” art, and was part of the contemporary debate around whether or not art should be used as propaganda. For Robinson, art was never impartial: an artist’s voice and views will always influence the work they produce. I tend to agree – it is impossible to separate motivations into biased and unbiased, particularly in the act of creating art, which is a notoriously personal and emotionally involved process. While personal politics always influence the creation of art, I think it is important to recognize when the intention of art interferes with objectivity and produces a representation that contradicts certain realities. This is of course not limited to any one time period, but I’d like to look at how this phenomenon emerged in the Great Depression. American art in the 1930s saw an increase of images related to labor and laborers, but these images were often idealized and exploited for the sake of promoting a political agenda.

How is this argument distinct from simply acknowledging that an artist’s biases play into their artistic production? I’ll be looking at three different things in this paper: visual art, most of which was produced under the federal government’s Works Progress Administration; Robert Frost’s poetry, particularly his work “A Lone Striker”; and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. What I hope to show is that in each of these three distinct formats, the political agendas that the works promote necessitate an idealized vision of what it meant to be a worker in the 1930s, or a rewriting of the context surrounding that

work. In the process of idealization, a facet of truth is lost – and while I don't mean to insist that art must maintain some arbitrary standard of historical objectivity, what I'd like to explore is where each format or work's political aims end up erasing historical context. Funnily, it is the era's historical context that provides the aesthetic background for the works I will look at: work became the subject of heightened artistic interest in the years after the market crash of 1929 specifically because of the national labor crisis. Thus, I will try to compare each format or work's depiction of labor and the surrounding context with the historical phenomenon it depicts to unearth where political agendas come into play.

### **Visual Art**

Erika Doss, a professor who has worked in Art History departments in various U.S. universities, has written extensively on American art from the Great Depression. In a paper on what she calls the "iconography of American labor," she explores the trend toward depicting labor in art as specific to the Depression (Toward an Iconography 53). Doss notes that, despite an ideological identity that is based on "a certain reverence for work" and "an abiding faith in the work ethic," Americans have produced a surprisingly small amount of art that focuses on labor or laborers (53). In the 1930s, though, artists "responded to the crisis of the Great Depression with an extensive iconography celebrating work and workers" (53). Doss argues that this turn toward depicting work functioned as a federal attempt to restore morale and faith in a nation whose identity was built upon work ethic. Between Doss' work and the work of others who have written about WPA art we can point to two artistic tropes that highlight Doss' ideas and where idealization shows up

prominently: in the hyper-focus on the male body, and in the conspicuously peaceful and hopeful depiction of 1930s labor.

A crucial factor in understanding the production of art during the Great Depression is that “during the 1930s, the federal government became the major patron of American art” (Looking at Labor 249). Funding from the Works Progress Administration, part of Roosevelt’s New Deal stimulus plan, produced thousands upon thousands of works from murals to prints to sculptures, and thousands of artists found employment under various federal art programs (250). This patronage was not merely for economic or altruistic purposes. David Horowitz argues that the WPA was a way for Washington to put artists to work while taking advantage of their cultural production, which they realized could boost national morale and “social solidarity” (321). Art became publicized and democratized in order to make its message more appealing and accessible to lower-class people, as before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, art had largely been the purview of the wealthy. Erika Doss echoes this sentiment even more explicitly. She argues that “the federal government came to recognize the value of labor imagery as a way of salvaging the nation’s capitalist and corporate economy and of sustaining idealized notions of the work ethic” (Looking 249). Administrators thus pushed a very specific aesthetic of labor (250). While the numerous agencies set up to fund public art under the New Deal were economically motivated, there was a clear political agenda as well, and it was apparent in the art produced.

Many of the works that Doss examines in her earlier paper are intentionally uplifting. She argues that the federal art agencies active at the time under Roosevelt’s WPA “recognized the powerful social and political import of upbeat images of rugged, dynamic workers during the severe unemployment and cultural malaise” that affected the

population during the Depression (Toward 53). Doss argues that “an iconography of labor was courted by American arts administrators” very deliberately, and thus the paintings produced for federal use – such as murals in government buildings – often depicted



Figure 1. George Samerjan, "Lettuce Workers," 1942

picturesque scenes of men at work (53).

George Samerjan's 1942 mural "Lettuce

Workers" (fig. 1) was

selected for a post office

in Calexico, California,

and exemplifies the aesthetic Doss describes: it depicts a line of farmers who are perhaps not particularly rugged, but appear strong. The image is serene and natural, reflecting Doss' suggestion that federal works tended toward "optimistic views of agricultural and industrial production" through their setting and showing workers directly "accompanied by the fruits of their labor" in the image (Toward 54). Rather than highlighting the unemployment and often brutal working conditions that laborers suffered under, government-promoted art attempted to relieve the anxieties about hunger, lack of work, and poverty that characterized the Great Depression by portraying unrealistically attractive scenes of labor like Samerjan's.

In allowing a very selective portion of the workers' experience to enter the national iconography, the government used "these images and objects ... to cast and constrict wage labor as a classless and collective enterprise" (Toward 55). We can see this in "Lettuce Workers" identical, faceless male figures, and the fact that no landowner is present.

Instead, the farmers appear to work for themselves. Patricia Raynor’s brief overview of the Treasury Department’s Section of Painting and Sculpture, which was separate from the WPA and largely commissioned works for post offices, offers a similar view to the one Doss and Horowitz hold. While it was a separate agency, The Section (as it came to be known) had goals nearly identical to the WPA’s: “the Section’s main function was to select art of high quality to decorate public buildings. . . . By providing decoration in public buildings, the art was made accessible to all people” (Raynor 1). Just like the mass-distributed WPA art, art produced under The Section was intended as a democratic, accessible art form, but was selected by government officials. Thus, the chosen pieces can tell us about the type of labor aesthetic the administrators wished their citizens to see and what message they hoped citizens would internalize.

Samerjan’s “Lettuce Workers” was selected by The Section, as was a six-part mural entitled “History of Springfield,” (fig. 2)



Figure 2. Umberto Romano, "Aftermath of WWI and the Depression," 1937/38

which now hangs in a federal building but was originally displayed in a Massachusetts post office. Painted by Umberto Romano, it is subtitled “Aftermath of WWI and the Depression.” Based on Doss’ discussion of how masculinity was addressed in Depression-era art, I feel comfortable in assuming that the muscular man emulating Christ is a laborer. She argues that, in addition to restoring national faith in labor as an enterprise, the aesthetic trend

toward depicting workers also addressed a loss of manhood. For American men, “labor had been the primary form of identity,” and thus national loss of work triggered a crisis of masculinity (Toward 62). While Romano is clearly making a statement, likely about the trials and tribulations the working-class suffered through, his laborer is idealized in the ways Doss addresses: his muscles are exposed and emphasized, and though this is no heroic portrait, the man on the cross is strong and capable. Rather than punctured by nails, lean and weak as we often see Christ in crucifixion imagery, this worker looks relatively healthy and in very good shape, although held back by what are remarkably loose bindings. He retains a sense of masculinity, and is a show of – admittedly restrained – strength. His defined torso is the visual center of the painting, both in location and in its contrast to the more darkly colored figures around him.

The California mural is nearly the opposite, capturing the other end of the idealized work spectrum. In these two very different murals, we can see the glorified work and worker that Doss points to in her analyses: the hyper-masculine, muscle-bound laborer; and the cheery, calm depiction of outdoor, non-industrial labor. While these are only two murals, they typify The Section’s selection of public art, which tended to “avoid tragic portrayals of industrial accidents” and other “hard realities of American life” (Raynor). Like the WPA that Erika Doss looks at, works produced under The Section ignored social realities, favoring positive images of work over “very real scenes of jobless Americans standing in bread lines” (Raynor). The art produced in this period, particularly the publically funded art, engaged with public interest at the time – scenes of labor and laborers entered the American aesthetic en masse. However, it was largely used as a relevant aesthetic background to produce a certain effect in the public: to idealize the

contemporary situation, to assuage public anxieties, and to leave communities not with images of violent strikes and poverty but of men working in peace.

### **Literature: Robert Frost**

Robert Frost's "A Lone Striker" is the first text I'll look at that idealizes the notion of the worker in the Depression era. This poem is illuminating in its relevance to Frost's own life, as well as its clear ignorance of history and the consequent idealization of the worker's experience. The narrative is actually "based on [Frost's] own experience as a mill worker" in Lawrence, Massachusetts, after arriving late to work and finding himself locked out of the grounds (Goldberg 114). The short poem relays the story of one mill-worker, the "lone striker," who follows in Frost's footsteps: he is locked out of the mill, and after peering in the windows briefly to observe his colleagues, decides to leave the mill behind for the day and pass his time in leisure. In the following section, I will compare the text of "A Lone Striker" both to the historical context of Lawrence and to Frost's earlier poetry that seems also to be set in Lawrence in order to trace the entrance of a clear political agenda into Frost's work, and how it tracks with Frost's idealization of working conditions in his town.

Frost's titular striker says nearly as much about Frost's politics as the body of the poem. The mere idea of a lone striker is laughable. What can one man achieve by leaving his post while everyone else still works? Further, the striker "[fails] to make the closing gate," and thus finds himself "rebuked and unemployed." This is no conscious political stand but an accident, and while the worker knows his absence means he will end up with "his pittance docked," he is unconcerned. The striker leaves to pursue "a path that wanted walking" and "a spring that wanted drinking," feeling enough at ease that he can leave the

mill “in the lurch” (*A Lone Striker*). This reflects the attitude Frost expressed about his own lockout. At a public reading of the poem, he elaborated on the insignificance of his personal “strike,” stating “this is the way it was to me, not a very serious thing” (Goldberg 115).

The ease with which both Frost and his fictional striker turn away from their work and take up their lone strikes contrasts harshly, though, against Lawrence’s very real history with labor organization. In 1912, the town earned itself “a national and even international reputation as a radical labor center” after a two-month strike to win back lost wages after cuts to working hours (Goldberg 91). The strike was organized around the American Woolen Company, which had become the largest employer in Lawrence, putting nearly a third of the town’s population to work in its textile mills. The largest of these employed 7,000 workers and was the “world’s largest worsted mill” at the time (Goldberg 84). The strike was successful but labor unionization in Lawrence continued, peaking in 1919, when the United Textile Workers began advocating for an eight-hour workday, or fifty-four hours’ pay for forty-eight hours’ work (the work week at the time was six days). Local authorities used questionable tactics to try to force citizens back to work, and many families sent children to other cities to wait out the strike. Goldberg argues that a “war psychology prevailed in Lawrence” during the time (111). After 107 days of striking, though, victory was secured, demonstrating the importance and efficacy of unionization and striking (Goldberg 122). It is in light of this history that Robert Frost’s lone striker seems particularly ridiculous. By positioning this one worker, accidentally barred from his factory, as a striker, Frost is making light of Lawrence’s important and influential history with striking as a tool of resistance.



By further suggesting that the striker is unconcerned enough to casually shrug off the loss of his day's wages and can view his "strike" as an opportunity to return to nature and escape his industrial life, Frost ignores the stakes that workers on walkout dealt with. One of the reasons the workers were able to hold out so long, Goldberg argues, is that although unemployment rates were rising given the end of the wartime production boom, that same boom had allowed workers to save up enough money to last them the months without pay that the strike required (100). That any textile worker in Lawrence, as presumably any industrial worker in Lawrence at the time would be employed in a textile mill, would not have to worry about lost wages or potential retribution for missing work seems ahistorical in context.

Some lines in "A Lone Striker" do appear to sympathize with the title character and vaguely indicate that millwork was less than desirable. In the poem's second stanza however, Frost describes the labor being done in the mill as so slow that "it hardly overtaxed" the workers, and the yarn being made as spun "safely." Frost too emphasizes the human element of production:

The spinner still was there to spin.  
That's where the human still came in.  
Her deft hand showed with finger rings  
Among the harplike spread of strings. (Striker)

The poem here makes a stronger case for textile work as enjoyable and skills-based than for the mills as a place of difficult and dehumanizing labor. Comparing the worker's experience to that of a talented musician gives the labor a distinctly artistic sense, evoking an image of cottage industry-scale production. Despite the few indications that the mill and

the work are less than ideal, the tone of the poem is far more neutral, and at times positive, about the work that we know to have been dangerous to the workers.

Even taking into account that Frost's personal experience with industrial work would have been around two decades prior to Lawrence's famed strikes, his depiction of factory work still comes across as grossly misleading when compared with the state of millwork in the 1890s. Contrary to Frost's quaint vision of skilled individual work, Lawrence was a hub of mass industrial economic activity even before the AWC was founded in 1899. Investors from Boston first opened large-scale industrial mills in Lawrence in 1845, and fifteen years later, one of these mills collapsed (Goldberg 83). The accident killed eighty workers, and the working conditions at that point were evidently so awful that they inspired a Winslow Homer woodcut depicting "men, women, and children sadly trudging to work in... 'dark satanic mills'" (83). The "harsh life in the mills" that Goldberg documents in his historical account of Lawrence directly contradicts Frost's assertion that any factory he could have left was "very fine" (88).

"A Lone Striker" is not Frost's only work that treats labor, however, and some of his earlier work is much more sympathetic to workers and openly anti-industrialist. Tyler Hoffman notes that "The Parlor Joke," written in 1910, posits a scenario in overt opposition with the unconcerned workers and easy labor portrayed in "Striker." This poem too seems to be set in Lawrence. The narrator hopes to tell us of "a modern city/Where there shouldn't have been any," likely referencing the rapid construction of the industrial mills that changed Lawrence from a town to a proper city (The Parlor Joke). In the second stanza, he notes that the founders of this city "drew on Ellis Island" in sourcing labor, and David Goldberg tells us that "Lawrence's work force had always been largely composed of

immigrants" (86). As is the case with "Striker," the coincidences between Lawrence and Frost's poetry are too great to be ignored, particularly given Frost's own work experience.

Given the evidence that "Parlor" is about Lawrence, the differences between this early poem and "Striker" are even more pronounced and perplexing. Frost's narrator describes capitalists who come in to build a new city, and then retreat to their comfortable country homes to watch the city's progress from afar. While in "Striker" Frost focuses on a single laborer's thoughts about his work, "Parlor" addresses larger concepts of "the few" owning the source of a town's capital, and the spirit of revolution that can rise up against such a situation. Here, Frost openly discusses the dangerous working conditions in factories: the last two lines of stanza three read "Only then they dealt with water/And now with human blood," referring to the owners' enterprises. Later, the disembodied "presence" of workers' rebellion are heard speaking of "blood a dye for wool." Further, Frost makes explicit the classed nature of Lawrence's labor struggle. He refers to the capitalists as "the few," "the rich," and "gentlefolk"; the immigrant laborers are "the poor" whose "tenements crept nearer" to the mill owners' "villas on the hill" (Parlor). "The Parlor Joke" criticizes not just millwork but the mill owners as well, approaching labor in an entirely different light from the one taken in "A Lone Striker."

Whereas sixteen years later he clearly had a different artistic motive, in 1910 Frost was using his poetry to advocate for the working class in some small way. Frost was willing to openly criticize the capitalist industrialization of small riverside towns, and write about the death and violence they could bring to the population. While dramatized, these earlier representations of Lawrence do not gloss over the abuse of the workers and the dangerous

conditions they faced – they do not idealize industrial labor and industrialized towns the way “A Lone Striker” definitively does.

So what changed? Tyler Hoffman asserts that what changed was Frost himself, and the political climate that Frost felt he had to account for when publishing new work. The individualism that drove Frost’s own politics left him firmly opposed to the New Deal, and thus he wrote “A Lone Striker” to “[consciously resist] the progressive political forces” of Roosevelt’s national plan (114). The idealization of mills, industry and labor that we can point to in “Striker” is not a static position for Frost, but an acquired one. While perhaps Frost saw himself as the titular striker – leaving the politics of the industrial world behind altogether to return to nature where he could do his “further thinking” – given the timing of the shift in his writing and the politics he openly expressed, the absence of advocacy in “Striker” can be understood as a political stance, or at least one heavily influenced by politics (Striker).

Unlike many artists of the period, Frost was committed to an ideology of individualism and self-sustenance, and refused to support unionization and collectivism. Indeed, by the time Frost wrote “A Lone Striker,” he had long since “[come] to believe that communism [presented] a potent threat to American democracy” (122). Frost was particularly opposed to Roosevelt’s politics, and Hoffman argues that “Striker’s” “rejection of sympathy for the working poor” was a direct result of Frost’s “fear of New Deal liberalism” (117). Hoffman claims boldly that it was Roosevelt’s politics that “forced [Frost] to look away from such suffering in his effort to defend the claims of the individual against the state” (119). It is this political leaning that explains Frost’s obvious refusal to engage

with the realities of industrial labor at the time, and actively ignore Lawrence's well known history with labor organization.

**Literature: *The Grapes of Wrath***

It would be a mistake, I think, to talk about labor politics in Depression-era art without treating Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Not only is it an era-defining epic of a novel that speaks specifically to labor under the Great Depression, it is a work that exhibits some of the same problems I have already begun to address in other forms of art.

Steinbeck's migrant farm workers are arguably glorified for the sake of a political agenda, and their portrayal and purpose in the narrative lead to unfair treatment of other classes, as well as a detachment from historical context that recalls Frost's later work. While some have praised the epic novel for its accurate depiction of the life of a migrant worker (including then-U.S. President Roosevelt and his wife), others have noted that certain aspects are less than accurate and somewhat nostalgic. Even Bernard Weisberger's Afterword to my edition says the novel "is a WPA mural ... overly sentimental, and filled with stereotypes" (440). Steinbeck uses his lead characters, and the wider community of migrant farmers, as tools of political change, and the novel posits them as uniquely able to enact this change. In doing so, he reduces other characters to stereotypes, sacrificing the dignity of some working-class people and Native Americans for the glorification of the migrant farmworker.

Steinbeck uses his novel to show just how much strength, spirit and capacity to enact change the farmers have. In his critical essay exploring the farmers' "political capacities," Cyrus Zirakzadeh calls the work a "celebration of preindustrial farming

culture,” one which leads readers to view “only one class (the former yeoman farmers) [as] worthy of political power; other poor folk evoke pity from readers, but do not appear to deserving of political power” (616). This stems partially from the novel’s focus: in writing about a family of displaced farmers, it is of course their lives and burgeoning political awareness that Steinbeck shows us. He is, though, pushing a view of particular political capacity born of the recent and violent displacement the Joads and the thousands of other farming families have experienced. At times, this capacity is brought into focus by contrast with other working-class characters. In encounters with gas station attendants and auto mechanics on the way to California, we see that Tom, at least, is angrier and more politically engaged than these workers, and that other workers are often openly hostile to the farming families and their radical ideas.

I see this contrast as a way for Steinbeck to underscore the theme that runs through his entire novel: that it is displacement from land with which these families have had such strong connection that gives them radical political potential. Over and over again we are given narrative hints that life is tied to land, and that there is a sacred connection between land that you farm and ownership. Just as Doss argues that losing work was a loss of identity for men that then appeared in artistic motifs, Steinbeck shows us the loss of direction and family history that came with their loss of land. After each family is stripped of land and identity, they find each other, and in realizing they are not alone they begin to express radical potential. The farmers, meeting along the road or in California migrant camps, have a shadow of understanding that they are more deserving of land than the bankers, and take steps that accumulate in the second half of the novel into bold strides toward a radical reclamation of their dignity and rights. It is the shared recognition that

land and life are inextricably linked that Steinbeck rewards with rough political awareness. Those workers who do not understand and empathize with the migrants have not been connected to a piece of land, and thus do not have the sense of injustice that drives the more radical characters, notably Tom, to demand change.

In Chapter Five, which shows the scope of the evictions taking place throughout Oklahoma, Steinbeck establishes the value he places in this idea of connection to land. Here, we are shown that the farmers deserve their land because they understand it and love it as hired hands and corporate managers will never be able to. While the landowners, who demand ceaseless production of cotton, are unable to make the land productive, the “squatters” being kicked off of their plot know what the land needs: “they knew, God knew. If they could only rotate the crops they might pump blood back into the land” (36). Later in the same chapter, a tractor driver appears, but he is not worthy of the land either. “He loved the land no more than the bank loved the land,” a stark contrast to the farming families who had supported themselves by working closely with the earth (41).

Steinbeck never stops reminding us the injustice of removing these families from their homes. In Chapter Six, we see the consequences of forced displacement on Muley Graves, who let his family move west without him. He tells the Joads he can’t leave because the “place where folks live is them folks” (56). He has no identity outside of his homestead, and we can see that his eviction has severely destabilized him. When you buy a plot of land, the narration reads, “you’re buying years of work, toil in the sun” – you’re buying lives, and “how can we live without our lives?” (88). As we see the Joads preparing for their journey, Grampa refuses to leave: “This here’s my country. I b’long here” (109). After his death, this idea resurfaces: the preacher Casy says that “Grampa an’ the old place, they was jus’ the

same thing” (143). Littered throughout the narrative are these assertions that people are tied to the land they live and work on, increasing the reader’s sense of outrage on behalf of the displaced workers.

Steinbeck links the farmers’ connection with the land and the hostile takeover of that land by rich owners to the farmers’ capacity for radical change. Passages that remind us how potentially strong the farmers could be if they unionized are often accompanied by passages deriding landowners for growing distant from their land. Steinbeck pairs phrases like, “And it came about that the owners no longer worked on their farms” (224) with, just two paragraphs later, statements suggesting the migrant farmers’ capability to take the land back: “the owners hated them because the owners knew they were soft and the Okies strong, that they were fed and the Okies hungry; and perhaps the owners had heard from their grandfathers how easy it is to steal land from a soft man if you are fierce and hungry and armed” (225). The idea that the farmers’ radical politics are tied to their connection to the land comes to a head toward the end of the novel, when Tom leaves the rest of the family. The vision he paints is of a farming commune, where everyone owns land and they all work for the common good, governing themselves as they did in the Weedpatch camp. He tells Ma he hopes to establish a place where “folks [take] care a theirselves” and “all work together for [their] own thing – all farm [their] own lan” (402). The radicalism that has been growing in Tom since the family’s departure from Oklahoma finds its final form in a communal return to owning land, suggesting that this is an integral part of the radical potential Steinbeck has bestowed on the farmers.

The vision of the “connected farmer,” though, rests on shaky ground. The farmers argue that they worked to own the land, that they established their ownership of it by



fighting for it. In a half-hearted protest against the landowners, the tenants cry, "Maybe we got to fight to keep out land, like Pa and Grampa did" (40). The implication, cemented by the later references to their love and connection to the land, is that they truly earned their property, whereas the bankers and the folks back east have never even set foot on it, never worked on it or bothered to learn how to care for it. However, just as we have seen the visual artists before him and Robert Frost do, John Steinbeck glosses over the less-than-picturesque aspects of the farmers' history in support of his political vision. While Zirakzadeh claims that Steinbeck's idealization is primarily limited to glorification of the farmers and patronization of other working-class people, Steinbeck's treatment of the Native American population is conspicuously shallow.

Zirakzadeh claims in his essay that "the novel describes in detail the material suffering of many kinds of non-wealthy people, including truckers, clerks, gas-station attendants, and Native Americans" (610). I wholeheartedly disagree. While he is not wrong to point out that Steinbeck does draw attention to other workers' poverty, Native Americans feature in the story merely to deepen the importance of connection to land. The first mention of "Indians" comes in Chapter Five, mentioned earlier as the first chapter to establish Steinbeck's "land connection" trope. Here, we see Native Americans as just another natural feature of the land that must be defeated in order to own it. In protesting their eviction, the tenants cry "Gramps killed Indians. Pa killed snakes for the land. Maybe we can kill banks – they're worse than Indians and snakes" (40). While perhaps tangentially this acknowledges the brutal genocide of Native Americans that took place, primarily this merely equates Native Americans with snakes, as dangerous obstacles that must be eradicated in order to take possession of the land and make it livable. Further, the

narrative presents the comment free of irony; there is no indication of the somewhat parallel situations faced by Native Americans and the displaced farmers, nor that the farmers' actions force "Indians" off of land that they have lived on much longer than the farmers have. Rather, Native Americans are merely one generation's hardship to overcome in establishing and maintaining connection to the farmland.

Just as Robert Frost was obviously politically motivated in the writing of "A Lone Striker," John Steinbeck's own populist and communist leanings come through in his novel. Zirakzadeh, in talking about Steinbeck's political motivations, charts a reverse trajectory to that of Robert Frost: Steinbeck was largely apolitical in his youth, and only began writing "proletarian" stories in the later 1930s (604). He came to believe, though, in the power of the people, and thought the U.S. was on the brink of widespread social change (604). His conviction is visible in Tom and Casy's political awareness, which Steinbeck grounds in the injustice they see in the distant management of vast swaths of land by corporate owners, and the very real connection the farmer families feel toward their land. In setting up his vision of the revolutionary farmer, though, Steinbeck denies political agency to other working-class people, and paints Native Americans as nuisances to be defeated by farmers claiming and defending their land. Steinbeck drives the plot and main characters' motivations with his political inclinations and expectation of social revolt and ends up stereotyping and overlooking historical context, similarly to other artists of the period.

## **Conclusion**

I've only really begun to scratch the surface here. There are many other aspects to each of the sections I've covered that continue to demonstrate even more nuanced ways in

which Depression-era art helped to mask the realities of labor at the time. Much of the WPA created was in the form of lithographs, which were often less detailed than paintings or drawings and monochromatic, due to the nature of etching and printing, producing quite literally less realistic images. The story of *The Grapes of Wrath* as perhaps censoring the uglier parts of American history becomes more interesting and complicated when we consider that in the same year Steinbeck was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his novel, it was banned in Kern County, California, one of the locations the Joad family visits, for its incendiary content. Further, notions of political influence on art grow complex in looking at the degree to which Frost and Steinbeck agreed in many ways. The two artists shared very similar ideas about farmers and the industrialization of labor, but as we can see through their art they approached the perceived issue of destruction of family agriculture in nearly opposite fashions.

Historical revision and political agenda in art was nothing new in the 1930s. It is not particularly remarkable that Great Depression-era artists were using their platforms to promote certain ideas or to push certain politics. What is interesting is the way that the relatively new aesthetic of work was seized upon, and how its use in works with agenda often did a disservice to workers themselves or overwrote historical context. In looking at federally funded visual art, which of course will always have an element of nationalist propaganda, we can see that Roosevelt's administration was hoping to pacify and restore hope in the working class. Frost's drastic shift from support of the proletarian cause to a seemingly apolitical and deliberately ahistorical stance is a clear example of politics taking precedence over objectivity, as is Steinbeck's nearly reverse path into explicitly political writing. What the art I've analyzed shows is not a Depression-era tendency toward

idealization, but rather how idealization follows cultural trends, and illustrates thus that 1930s art tended toward ignoring or rewriting realities of Depression- era labor.

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