

ART, POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Thursdays, October 19 to December 9, 10:00 A.M. to 12 Noon
Fairfield Senior' Centre, 81 Lothian Avenue, Etobicoke

Coordinator and Presenter: Ken Carpenter, York University.

Course Overview: This course examines the relation of the visual arts to society in twentieth-century Europe and North America: how art reflects, and how it is used or abused under the impact of such forces as dictatorship, censorship, war, economic depression, nationalism, and the rise of mass media. The twentieth century has been marked by extreme attacks on art in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and even within the liberal democracies. At the same time art has been co-opted not only by oppressive regimes but also by numerous political and social movements: in Mexico after their revolution, in the United States of the Great Depression, by environmentalists, by experts in mass marketing, and so on.

This course aims to clarify the varied functions of art within society as exemplified at key moments in history. We will consider not only the aesthetic but also the economic, philosophical, political, psychological and social issues raised by these examples.

- October 19. Art under war: World War 1 and the European avant-garde**
Georges Braque was hit in the head by a shell, Franz Marc was killed at the front, and the art laboratories of the European avant-garde were shut down. How did artists like Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp and Arp respond to the crisis?
- October 26. Art under Lenin and Stalin: from utopia to the gulag**
Artists at first greeted the Russian revolution as proof that their artistic revolution had at last been matched by equivalent political advances. Then Communist totalitarian controls were imposed and Socialist Realism became the only approved way to paint. What was lost, and what did the Communists expect art to do for them?
- November 2. Art in Nazi Germany**
The Nazis loathed modern art as decadent and "degenerate." They looted it, burned it and sold it off. At the same time they exploited more traditional art to suit their purposes. Why did they do this, and what were the consequences?
- November 9. Art and revolution: Mexico**
What was the Mexican Revolution, what did it accomplish, and what role did the great muralists - Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros - play in the new society?
- November 16. Art, pornography and censorship in Canada and the United States**
Should art ever be censored? If so, how can society establish appropriate criteria for the censors? And what was so disturbing about Mark Prent, Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, anyway?
- November 23. Photographic documentation of the great depression in the United States**
What caused the Great Depression and the suffering it entailed? How did artists respond to the crisis? We will focus especially on the brilliant photographer Dorothea Lange and her efforts to ensure that the impoverished unemployed were not forgotten.
- November 30. Pollution, poverty and racism: documentary photography by Americans in the 1950s**
In the 1950s and 1960s the world struggled with gross environmental degradation, debilitating poverty, and racial segregation. What did great photographers like W. Eugene Smith and Gordon Parks do to raise these issues before the public, and how successful were they in effecting social change?
- December 7. Kitsch and mass culture**
Henry Mencken once said that no-one ever went broke by underestimating the taste of the American public. Does mass society have an inevitable tendency to sink to the lowest common denominator of the "booboisie"? And what is the appeal of Norman Rockwell, Tricia Romance and Thomas Kinkade, anyway?

Researcher/Committee Contact and Chair: Jo Ann Wilton