

ABOUT THE EXHIBIT **IS IT PROPAGANDA? Or is it Political ART?**

This exhibit marks the 60th anniversary of the Army-McCarthy hearings (April-June 1954), which exposed the guilt-by-association and lies which characterized Sen. Joseph McCarthy's investigation into purported communist infiltration and subversion of our government and cultural institutions. This is also the 60th anniversary of the Senator's censure by the U.S. Senate (December, 1954), which brought an effective end to the "red scare" and to McCarthy's political career.

Yet the defensive measures adopted by the country's most important museums, art galleries, artists and collectors more than half a century ago, in anticipation that they would be McCarthy's next target, remain in place---with very real and unfortunate consequences.

It may be difficult, if not impossible, for most Americans living today, even those curators, artists, critics and collectors directly involved in the world of art, to believe that the choices the art world makes, and the rules it follows, are in any way related to the panic and terror caused more than half a century ago by McCarthy, a man they may never even have heard of.



Yet the diaries of artists active when McCarthy was at his peak, in the early 50s, and conversations with art dealers and others old enough to remember, strongly suggest that the defense against McCarthy's expected onslaught was an unspoken agreement among the major museums and galleries in New York to hide, as best they could, the political affiliations and Marxist theories of many of the New York School painters and critics---and to remove, until further notice, political art of any kind from public display, lest McCarthy find it and use it to destroy our most important museums and galleries---and the careers of some of the greatest artists this country has ever produced.

Perhaps because the rules were unspoken, it was difficult to rescind them once the immediate danger had passed. And the longer they were observed, fewer and fewer of those they affected remembered, or even knew, why political art had been banished from American museums and galleries in the first place. Yet, the origin of the near-total discrimination against political art is found in the word American curators and gallery owners use to describe and dismiss it. The word is "propaganda."

Initially, the word was probably used by curators and gallery owners in anticipation of how they feared McCarthy would describe, discredit and destroy the work and reputations of artists, among them Mark Rothko, once McCarthy discovered their theories and leftist sympathies and affiliations. Over time, the word took on a less specific meaning and connotation. "Propaganda" became the accepted code word and short hand for any art that museum curators and gallery owners chose not to show because they thought it might create political controversy they wished to avoid. Post-McCarthy, the justification for not promoting, exhibiting, selling and/or collecting political art had less and less to do with real or imagined linkages to the proverbial "communist plots" that were said to be everywhere in the 50s and 60s, and more and more to do with a new (and, some might argue, far more subversive) threat: offending the political sensibilities, business interests and/or world view of the wealthy patrons and government-funded arts councils whose money most American art museums and galleries depend for their survival.

Today, the defensive measures, rules and attitudes adopted in the early 50s are so ingrained that most of the current arbiters of taste and culture in the United States would never think to question why art that addresses contemporary social and political issues is almost never shown in our greatest museums or sold in our most important galleries. Nor would they think it odd that the political views and ideas which informed, inspired or were, at times, reluctantly conveyed by the work of artists throughout history---from Titian to Goya, Delacroix to Picasso, Diego Rivera to Fernando Botero, the Dadaists to many of the New York School abstract expressionists----are almost always downplayed. Or, whenever possible, not mentioned at all. As I hope this exhibit demonstrates, we lose a great deal by ignoring political art --- and even the best propaganda art. It's been 60 years since McCarthy and McCarthyism were repudiated.

So, isn't it time we stopped asking **IS IT PROPAGANDA?**

Can't we all agree that **POLITICAL ART** should have its own place in the **HISTORY of ART?**