

## George Biddle: Art of the American Social Conscience

by William R. Valerio

**B**orn into the distinguished Biddle family of Philadelphia, George Biddle (1885-1973) was a leading voice in American art through the middle decades of the twentieth century. He believed that art was the necessary source of free thinking in any society that aspired to an equali-

*George Biddle: Art of the American Social Conscience* is on view through January 22, 2023, at Woodmere Art Museum, 9201 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 19118, 215-247-0476, [www.woodmereartmuseum.org](http://www.woodmereartmuseum.org). An 85-page catalogue, with essays by William R. Valerio and Ronald Story, accompanies the exhibition.

ty of people. Despite his social status, Biddle embraced modernism for its promise to disrupt social hierarchy and break the contrivance of high-born cultural refine-

ment. Equally committed to painting and printmaking, his work is sensuous and alluring, whether oil on canvas or ink on paper. He loved bright color, but rejected





ABOVE: George Biddle working on a portrait of actor John Qualen to promote *The Long Voyage Home*.

RIGHT: *Self-Portrait with Skis*, 1937, o/c, 47 1/2 x 32 3/8, Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami Beach, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection.

LEFT: *Evocation of the Past*, 1966, o/c, 72 x 80, Woodmere Art Museum, gift of the Michael Biddle Family.

stylistic artifice that strayed too far into abstraction. A Philadelphia realist at heart, Biddle mostly painted what he could see in front of him. His subjects were always selected for their emotional significance, and he often expressed his point of view through playful satire and caricature, which could be alternatively biting or warmly embracing. In self-portraits, he almost always depicted himself as an outdoorsman, and by the time he was in his early fifties, he depicts himself as a skier. He had come to realize that life is a quick ride from top to bottom.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Biddle was just old enough for family friend Mary Cassatt to introduce him to Renoir, Degas, and the avant-garde of Paris. He attended the first exhibitions that gave the world Cubism and Futurism, and he attended the Armory Show in New York in 1913. For a time, he was a New York bohemian, and he haunted the speakeasies of Greenwich Village and the jazz clubs of the Harlem Renaissance. Although he made his home eventually in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, he re-



mained connected to Philadelphia through family, friends, and a world view steeped in Quaker ideas about respect and empathy.

Biddle sought opportunities to get art into the popular arena, and like so many other artists of Philadelphia—which has been a newspaper city since the time of Benjamin Franklin—he readily accepted jobs as an illustrator for magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and *Coronet*. He was a prolific writer,

too, publishing books and articles, always extolling the importance of art as a vehicle for the questions of a self-governing society. He was not a purist when it came to “high” and “low” forms of art.

In 1940, with Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, Raphael Soyer, and other leading American artists, he participated in a project with film director John Ford in Hollywood. The invited artists made por-



LEFT: *Hélène Sardeau*, 1934, o/c, 40 x 30, Michael Biddle Family.

BELOW LEFT: *Child Killed by Bombing*, 1943, ink on paper, 5 3/4 x 7 1/4, Woodmere Art Museum, gift of the Michael Biddle Family.

RIGHT: Close-up of central wall *Society Freed through Justice*, 1936, Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, photograph by Carol M. Highsmith.

BELOW RIGHT: *Portrait of Man Ray*, 1941, o/c, 50 x 60 1/16, Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of the artist.



traits of the characters in the film adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *The Long Voyage Home*, which then traveled across the country in an exhibition that advertised the movie as a work of art. During the same sojourn in California, he reconnected with his friend and fellow artist from Philadelphia, Man Ray, who, with his Russian Jewish background, had fled Nazi-occupied Paris. In Biddle's *Portrait of Man Ray*, the painting within the painting is Man Ray's depiction of a rape.

Among the most important experiences of Biddle's career were several working trips he made from the 1920s through the 1940s to Mexico. His friends south of the border were many, including Diego Rivera. In the mural painters of Mexico, Biddle found a figurative modernism that simultaneously looked back to the lofty ideals of Italian Renaissance frescoes and ahead to public-facing, progressive goals.

Directly as a result of his experiences in Mexico, Biddle became known as both an artist and a "New Dealer." In 1933, he wrote to his schoolmate from Groton and Harvard, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, describing the muralists' achievements in Mexico and encouraging that the United States should implement a similar program. To revive the American economy, Biddle said, artists should be included in the Works Project Administration's programs. Biddle can't be given credit for starting America's mural movement whole cloth; it was already taking shape in New York, California, and elsewhere with murals by Rivera and others. However, Biddle knew how to use the strength of a powerful social network. Moreover, having attended Harvard Law School, he could argue a point and serve as a capable organizer and administrator. This led to



numerous invitations to join or chair several federal committees that advanced the cause of public art.

Biddle's own monumental mural project in Washington D.C., *Society Freed Through Justice* (1936) in the Department of Justice Building, received a great deal of positive attention in popular media. It was also criticized by conservatives for its expression of overtly leftist ideas and inclusion of Black and Jewish figures. Together with Helène Sardeau, the noted sculptor who was his wife, he completed additional mural projects in Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro, where he served as U.S. Cultural Representative to Brazil.

In 1943 and '44, Biddle chaired the U.S. Dept of War Art Advisory Committee, assigning about eighty artists to accompany American troops across the globe to document the events of World War II firsthand for magazines and other popular publications. He assigned himself to *Life* magazine and traveled with U.S. troops for six months in Tunisia and Italy, documenting the brutality of the war and the suffering of its victims.

In 1946, his brother, Francis Biddle (former Attorney General of the United



States), was appointed one of four international judges at the Nuremberg trials, which was charged with bringing Nazi war criminals to justice. To accompany his brother, Biddle obtained his own position

as the courtroom artist for *Look* magazine and documented the proceedings. In 1949, he also traveled to Israel, writing and making art for *The Atlantic*, describing the founding of the nation and the physical and



LEFT: *Indian Village Scene*, 1960, o/c, 25 x 30, Woodmere Art Museum, Museum purchase.

BELOW LEFT: *36 to be Hanged*, 1946, ink on paper, 8 3/4 x 11 1/2, Woodmere Art Museum, gift of the Michael Biddle Family.

RIGHT: *Frank Loper aet suae 86*, 1937, lithograph, 12 x 9 1/2, Woodmere Art Museum, gift of the Michael Biddle Family.

FAR RIGHT: *Self-Portrait*, 1933, o/c, 31 1/8 x 25 1/4, Philadelphia Museum of Art, bequest of Margaretta S. Hinchman.

BELOW RIGHT: *Whoopie at Sloppy Jo's*, 1933, o/c, 40 1/2 x 40 3/8, Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of the artist.



Michael. Another significant portrait grew from the encounter between Biddle and Frank Loper, the elderly doorman at the Colorado Springs Art Center (where Biddle enjoyed a teaching appointment in 1936). It made a deep impression on Biddle that Loper had not only been born enslaved, but also that he had been the property of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate States. The portrait, with its steady gaze and ennobling Latin title, *Frank Loper aet suae 86*, shows Loper's strength of character, beauty, and wisdom, even as his uniform identifies him as a man whose life remains dedicated to serving others.

In 1938, the Museum of Modern Art included Biddle's portrait of Loper in an exhibition that was sent to Paris as a gesture of international solidarity. The show expressed to a nervous French populace bracing for the inevitable confrontation with Nazi Germany that American democracy stood for an approach to life that was philosophically humanistic. In this context, Biddle's portrait of Loper says that no person can be reduced to a typology of race, even if they are subjugated by the upheavals of history or dehumanized by a violent, oppressing regime. Biddle's purpose is to tell these stories.

In 1966, at the age of eighty-one, Biddle looked back and made a large group portrait of the artists he considered kindred spirits: *Evocation of the Past*. The twelve-figure canvas is a rendering of likenesses Biddle had made from life in earlier years. For example, he adapts his *Portrait of Man Ray* made in California; situated in the lower right of the larger composition, the artist is seated with some of the bones and driftwood he collected for use in his photography. From left to right in the top row

psychological condition of the millions of displaced Jews of Europe who made it their home. Another significant event occurred in 1959, when, on an extended visit to the ten-year-old nation of India, Biddle was introduced by a Philadelphia friend in the foreign service to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. He was honored to make Nehru's portrait.

Biddle's approach as a storyteller comes across in his portraits. Every character he portrayed is a fellow passenger in the excursion of life. For example, he made a majestic portrait of Sardeau in 1934 in which the voluptuous forms of her body strain against the grid pattern of her dress. This is a moment of transformation, the beginning stages of her pregnancy with their son



appears Biddle himself, Georgia O’Keeffe, Charles Demuth, Vincent Canadé, Henry Varnum Poor, William Zorach, and David Burlinuk. In the bottom row are Abraham Walkowitz, Hélène Sardeau, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Man Ray, and Marguerite Zorach.

Each figure occupies its own intellectual space and there is no interaction between them. Some, like Demuth, had been dead for many years, and Biddle shows that most of them have aged. There is also a personal dimension. When Biddle embarked on the ambitious composition in his studio in Croton-on-Hudson, his soul-mate Sardeau was under the same roof. However, she was struggling with a difficult, long-term illness that would prove fatal. Since meeting in New York in 1929, the couple had been passionate lovers, world travelers, parents, and artist collaborators, and Biddle knew that his life would soon change. The monumental group portrait is his way of expressing gratitude to Sardeau, placing her together with him (but on her own, not as a wife) in a context of the artists he considered their equals and fellow travelers in the grand journey of American modernism.

Today, with so many artists committed



to social practice, Biddle’s example should attract interest. Through his many efforts to answer the urgencies of his times and

the emotions of life with his art, Biddle sought to use the privileges of his voice as a force for good.