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## How Artists Resisted Fascism a Century Ago

By *Louis Bury*

September 19, 2025 5:00am

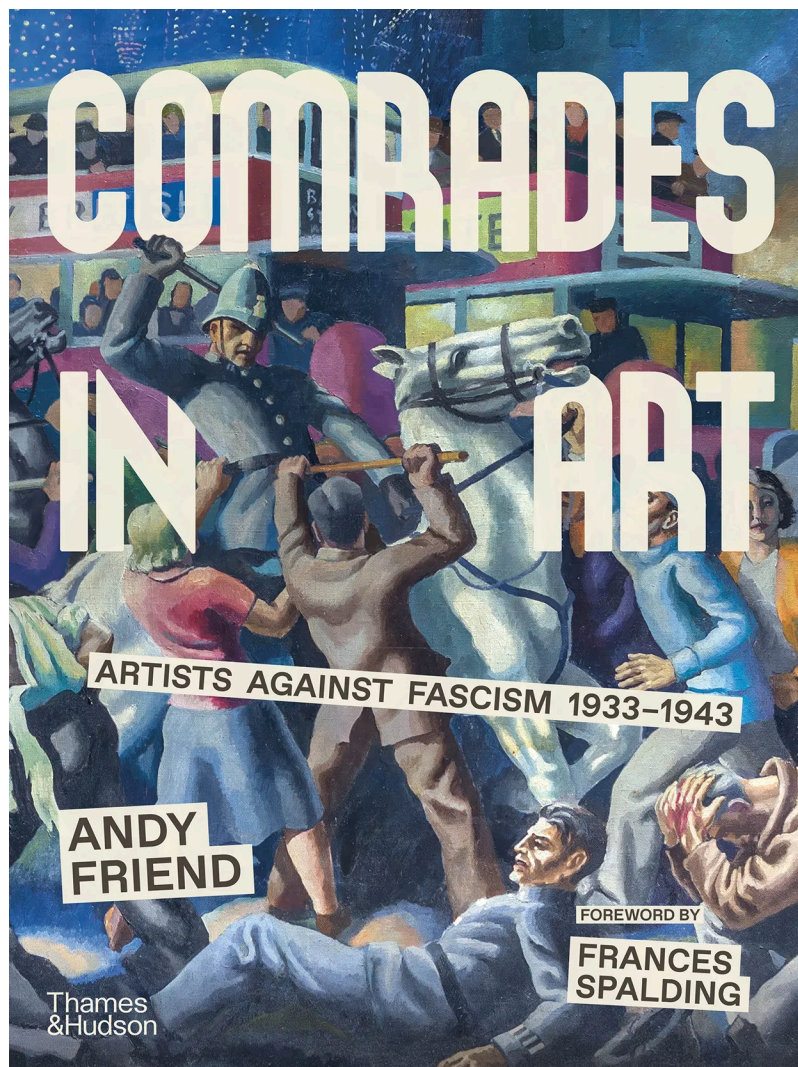


Cliff Rowe: *The Struggle between the Unemployed and the Police Forces*, 1932-33.

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In the early 1930s, frustrated with bank closures, steep pay cuts, and hunger marches, a group of British artists banded together over socialist ideologies as well as propagandistic goals. Most founders of what would become Artists International Association (AIA)—Pearl Binder, Clifford Rowe, Misha Black, James Fitton, James Boswell, James Holland, Edward Ardizzone, Peter Laszlo Peri, and Edith Simon—had working class backgrounds; all were staggered by the Depression. Binder and Rowe in particular had separate experiences living in the USSR, where they were exposed to workers’ cooperatives that helped them imagine alternative ways to organize labor. As one artist (Holland) put it, British artists at this time were “faced with a choice of a cut-throat competition for what crumbs of patronage remained [...] or using their abilities to discredit a system that makes art and culture dependent on the caprices of money markets.”

This Communist-inflected founding ethos, however, soon faced a problem of scale, as Andy Friend describes during his new book *Comrades in Art: Artists Against Fascism, 1933–1943*. The group originally called itself Artists International and, in the words of founding member James Boswell, served as “a mixture of agit-prop body, Marxist discussion group, exhibitions [organizer] and anti-war, anti-fascist outfit.” But as its membership increased, and the threat of fascism escalated, the group rebranded in 1935 to Artists International Association, in an effort to garner wider, more ideologically heterogeneous support. Friend explains how the American Artists Congress, a US Communist arts organization founded in 1936, made a similar decision to “elevat[e] coalition-building above [the] generation of a distinctively proletarian culture,” opting for anti-fascism more than overt Communism. Dissenting members of both organizations felt this big tent approach risked watering down their core values.



These contentious decisions about organizational mission rhyme with early 21st-century debates about the extent to which leftist movements should make

concessions to mainstream liberal politics. Yet here and elsewhere, Friend wisely avoids drawing any parallels to the present, preferring instead to tell an all-trees-no-forest story about AIA and its times. This approach may disappoint readers in search of pat takeaways about how artists today might resist reactionary power. But the biggest lesson isn't about how to exercise individual or collective agency in the face of vast political forces; it's about how strong the desire for normalcy can be, especially during unusual times.

No episode in the book highlights this desire more than AIA's 1940 annual members exhibition, themed "The Face of Britain." The London exhibition was planned to open on September 13, but on September 7, Germany began a bombing campaign of the city; The Blitz lasted for several months. Friend describes how, soon after the campaign commenced, two bombs "crashed through the gallery roof, setting its parquet floor alight, damaging some paintings and forcing a week's delay." Despite the damage, four AIA members "working through dangers... nevertheless managed to hang the show." Following through on the install under such circumstances feels less like bravery and more like a delayed shock response after a serious accident, as when a bloodied driver calmly tries to exchange car insurance information while wondering why witnesses are imploring him to seek medical treatment.





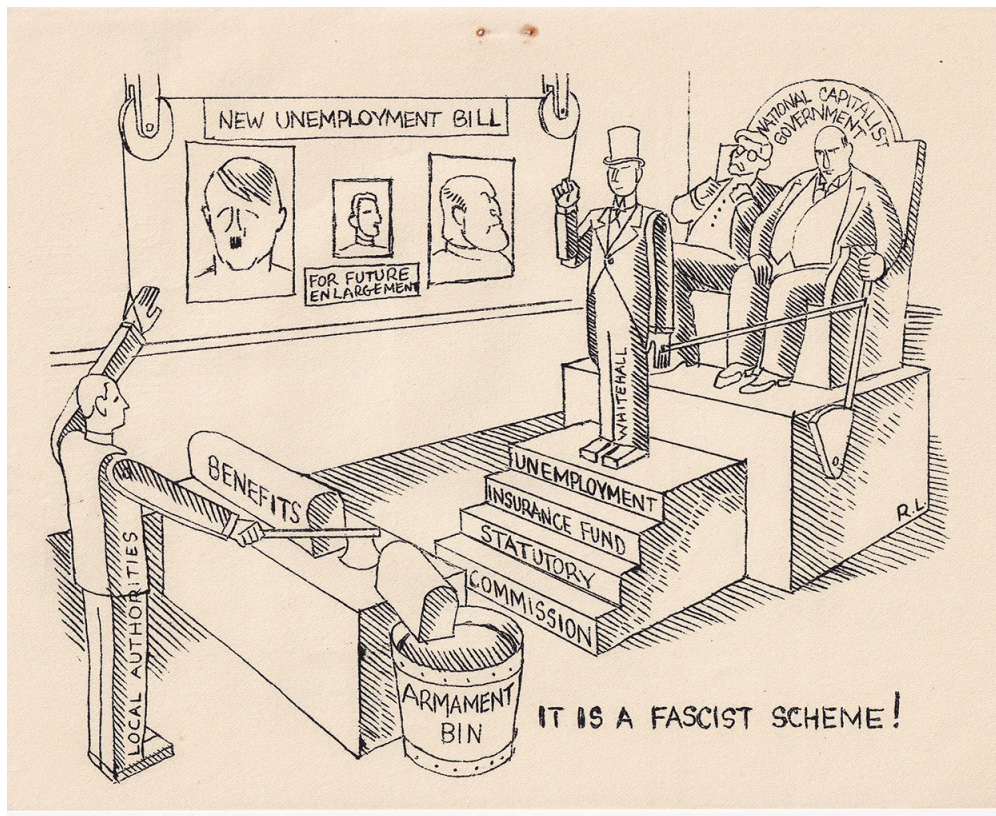
ROBIN FRIEND

Throughout *Comrades in Art*, AIA spends enough time planning and hanging exhibitions that a cynical reader might wonder if their anti-fascist activities amounted to much else. But during the book's war years, Friend quotes Britons expressing gratitude that, despite dire conditions, cultural life persists through art, albeit in curtailed forms. In both London and the rest of the country, the early 1940s saw a surprise "strengthening of popular interest in art." Friend attributes this interest not only to a confluence of "material factors"—shops with bare shelves, fewer restaurants, no professional sports—but also an "existential" factor: "life had never been so uncertain, so potentially ephemeral and, amid personal danger, was being lived with a hitherto unknown intensity." Now that's something art can help with.



Friend describes AIA as curiously overlooked, despite evidence that “a clear majority of the country’s leading artists [participated] in its collective endeavors.” Prominent international artists—Pablo Picasso, Stuart Davis, Diego Rivera—make cameos in his book. But unlike many art history books, Friend tells a story with no main characters. Some of AIA’s Marxist co-founders—Misha Black, Pearl Binder, Clifford Rowe—appear throughout the narrative. But fundamentally—and fittingly, given its subject—*Comrades in Art* is a true group biography: as Friend recounts AIA’s eventful first decade, the cast of characters ranges so widely that few if any individuals stand out from the rest. Instead, as in works of literary naturalism such as John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy, the emphasis is on the historical forces buffeting the characters.

This emphasis provides a counterweight to the popular tendency to mythologize individual artistic genius, making *Comrades in Art* an exemplary case study in the importance of social scenes to art history. AIA is hardly a household name. The Tate Britain is currently showing a single-room exhibition connected to Friend’s book, “Artists International: The First Decade,” but the group’s most extensive previous museum treatment was back in 1983: “The Story of the AiA, Artists International Association, 1933–1953,” at what was then called The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. Friend attributes the group’s historical neglect in part to the “apolitical bias that colours so much monographic writing in a cultural era where art is an asset class and competitive individualism—and the banal pursuit of celebrity—thrives largely unquestioned.”



Yet even as star power drives the contemporary art market, substantial critical and curatorial interest in the relationship between art and politics persists. The more robust explanation for AIA's neglect is not simply that the art industry favors individualism over collectivism, nor that wealthy patrons and the institutions they influence prefer apolitical subject matter, but also that AIA's efforts to resist fascism valued social and political ends over the kinds of formal and aesthetic innovations that define the 20th-century Western canon, offering no -ism to build on Constructivism, Futurism, or Cubism. For a time, AIA's own slogan was even, "Conservative in art and radical in politics." The group's predominantly social realist aesthetic, visible throughout this generously illustrated book, complicates the narrative that Western art advanced until it culminated in abstraction, a simplified narrative that has the effect of making their style feel retrograde.

During its first decade, as the world approached and then entered war, AIA did indeed serve, in the words of co-founder James Fitton, as "the bell on the fire engine." But beyond the political alarms it sounded, the group stands out for its commitment to art as an activity that humans just plain enjoy, as well as its commitment to bettering the conditions facilitating that activity. AIA's various initiatives involved organizing artists, making art affordable through prints and lithographs, and even staging an exhibition inside a London Underground station so it would be more accessible to the public: these were efforts, within their scope

of influence, to improve how things were typically done. Such efforts represent the positive side of the desire for normalcy—for a future worth the struggle.



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