SHOUTS FROM THE WALL:

Posters and Photographs Brought Home From the Spanish Civil War by American Volunteers

BY CARY NELSON

A Catalogue to Accompany the Exhibit
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ART IN FLAMES: THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR POSTER

CARY NELSON

Jan. 7.
Barcelona beautiful.
Streets aflame with posters
of all parties for all causes,
some of them put out
by combinations
of parties.[1]

So wrote American volunteer Robert Merriman in his diary when he arrived in Spain at the beginning of 1937. Full-color posters, banners, and fliers, brandishing dramatic swaths of red and black or blue or yellow were all over the city: along the streets, taped to windows, tacked up on kiosks in every public square, on the interior walls of office buildings and private homes, in all the subway stations, on the sides of buses, trucks, and even trains. By the second week of the war, early in July 1936, they were already defining the public space of major cities. *Daily Worker* correspondent George Marion, writing to *Time* magazine on his return home—his March 1st, 1938, letter is unpublished but a copy is in his file at the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives—reported that "the posters flow from a hundred sources. During the many months I was in Spain I found the collection of posters just about a full-time job because there was no central source."[2] Many, he continued, were "put out by non-governmental bodies: trade unions, youth organizations, women's committee, Fifth Regiment, and others." On the Puerto del Sol, central square of Madrid, one huge poster on the side of a building occupied a whole floor. Soon they appeared on bulletin boards and at headquarters at the fronts where men were fighting. They gave people information they needed, built morale, and focused debate and action on the key issues and campaigns of a given week. Communication, exhortation, persuasion, instruction, celebration, warning: all these aims and more were served by the 1,500 to 2,000 different posters appearing in the Spanish Republic from 1936–38. Of this number, perhaps 20 percent were exclusively textual; the rest of the posters were preeminently pictorial.

They were first of all an excellent mode of communication for a population with a high rate of illiteracy. For many years, Spain's Catholic church, in control of public education, believed there was no need for either peasants or women to read. The Republic would begin rapidly to reverse that pattern, but in the meantime posters in public places combining striking iconography with brief slogans made it possible to get basic messages out to people quickly. The combination of strong graphics with concise captions also made the posters memorable and convincing.

1 The passages taken from Robert Merriman's diary and from letters by Dave Gordon and Leon Rosenthal are quoted from Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, eds. *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War.* The originals of these documents remain in the possession of family members, but we were permitted to photocopy them.

2 Marion signed the letter with his pseudonym "James Hawthorne."

Early on large numbers of them were essentially recruitment posters. Carles Fontseré's *Al Front* urged everyone to turn their eyes and their full attention to the rapidly expanding war; its helmeted soldier negotiated all the extremes of light and dark in such a way as to suggest there was no world outside the imperiled horizon of battle. In the presence of this icon there might seem no alternative but to volunteer. So too with José Bardasano's *España*. All available and politically relevant nobility is combined in its lion's confident stance and gaze of warm concern; stand with honor, the poster urges us, and give yourself over to be gathered into the country's protective vigilance. These highly general inducements to solidarity and commitment were balanced with special pleas for particular militias. "Workers!" declared one of J. Bauset's posters; "joining the Iron Column fortifies the revolution." The iron column was an anarchist battalion, but other militias had their recruitment posters as well. In such cases, moreover, the posters went beyond literal recruitment. They amounted to ideological recruitment, urging people to place their faith and their loyalty with a particular political point of view.

LES MILICIES, US NECESSITEN!
THE MILITIAS NEED YOU!
Arteche

In these first months of the war there were also a series of gendered posters. Spanish women were urged to join the militias, to take up arms with men and boys. Even now, these images, including Sim's remarkable portraits of armed women in battle, have the power to surprise us. By spring 1937, however, it became clear to many that the militias would not suffice to fight large-scale battles in a prolonged war; a centrally organized army was required to meet coordinated attacks by columns of infantry, tanks, and planes. Meanwhile, the army needed to increase its size as well, thereby leaving behind fewer men to keep Spain's industries running. Women were not sent back to the home, their traditional site in Spain, but they disappeared from combat as the militias were dissolved; instead, posters appearing from mid–1937 on urged them to take up the slack in industry and agriculture. Juan Antonio's *Women, Work for the Comrades Who Fight* is a good example of that sort of poster, as is a poster jointly designed by Juana Francisco and José Bardasano, *Our Arms Will Be Yours*. One of the most telling pieces of visual evidence of the disappearance of women from combat is Sim's second portfolio of drawings, *12 Escenas de Guerra*. In his first collection of battle illustrations, *Estampas de la Revolucion Española 19 Julio de 1936*, women are portrayed in about half of the illustrations; *12 Escenas de Guerra* is devoted entirely to men. His first portfolio, notably, was published by the anarchists. The second collection was issued by the central government, the Generalitat, of Catalonia. The second collection also uses less vibrant color, emphasizing the brown uniforms of the regular army rather than the red and black colors of anarchism.

Throughout the war there were poster campaigns focused on particular needs and events. Thus when the Asturias were overrun by Franco's troops posters like Cheché's ***Aid The Families of the Fighters of the North*** helped focus public attention on the plight of the refugees. Continuing problems, like the perennial one of soldiers getting drunk on leave, would also be the focus of special publicity campaigns; hence Artel's ***A Drunk! He is aParasite! Eliminate Him!*** Some issues and campaigns were the subject of posters throughout the war; the effort to promote literacy, one of the Republic's key social agendas, was one of these. Other topics received more intermittent treatment; these include ecological posters warning people cutting wood for heat about the dangers of deforestation. The last year of the war, when the Republic was losing territory to the fascists, saw a number of posters aiming to help build morale, stiffen resistance, and reinforce solidarity. Slogans like "Resist," "Counterattack," or "Fortify" identify a poster as produced in 1938 rather than 1937.

Our information about production methods for Spanish Civil War posters comes mainly from Carles Fontseré, the Catalan artist who was active in the Union of Professional Artists (***Sindicato de Dibujantes Profesionales***) in Barcelona. As he describes the process, a poster artist typically painted in water colors on moistened paper stretched across a frame. The verbal text was also painted by hand. In most cases, after the original poster was painted, a lithographer copied each color onto a separate zinc plate for printing. Some of the artists, however, including Fontseré, worked directly on the zinc plates themselves. The requirement for multiple plates worked against the use of too many colors; three or four was typical, five or six unusual.

A number of other material constraints also affected the posters. First, they had to be clearly visible from a distance in order to be effective in public sites, including outdoor locations. Second, the use of watercolors made it impractical to overpaint with light colors over dark ones. Instead, poster artists often used the white of the paper itself as a major design element. Finally, the paper used was generally the least expensive, often a form of newsprint. The largest number of posters were about 30 inches wide and forty inches high, though double-sized posters, printed on two sheets of this size and glued together were not uncommon, and

some substantially larger posters were produced. Many posters were printed in runs of 5,000 or 10,000 copies, enough to guarantee wide distribution and visibility. The cities of Barcelona, Madrid, and Valencia each had two or more large poster workshops working continually. Usually a given workshop specialized in posters for a particular political group or coalition of groups.

Variations on the primary pattern included a number of small posters printed by photo–chromolithography on high quality paper and sold in streetside stalls, offices, and bookstores. Drawings and lithographs were also issued in more limited editions on heavy stock for sale to individual buyers. And some posters needed for immediate use in a particular place were done as unique paintings, sometimes in oil. Like similar workshops in Madrid and Valencia, the *Sindicato* also produced banners and placards. The banners were painted directly on primed cotton whenever it could be obtained.

A great many posters were also reprinted as postcards, sometimes many months later, so that a given image often received a second life and a second means of distribution. A considerable number of postcards were also independently designed and never appeared as posters. From time to time sets of ten postcards were sold in illustrated packets. Many thousands of such cards were sent home by international soldiers, journalists, and other visitors to Spain. Finally, small decorative stamps in substantial numbers—over a thousand different ones during the course of the war—were issued as miniature posters. Some reproduced large poster designs, but many represent independent works of art.

Fontseré has called the posters the "certificate" of the social revolution that formed in response to the generals' attempted coup: "each union, each small committee, came out with its poster; each profession, each trade–barbers, taxi drivers, tram conductors–could be seen in a poster breaking the bonds that oppressed them."

Inevitably, visitors and volunteers began sending the posters home; there was no more economical way to communicate the passion of the war. Here, on a single sheet typically thirty inches wide and forty high, was a powerful synecdoche for the war's anguish and its idealism—a woman holding a murdered child, the working classes looking up as they yearned for liberation, the archetypal soldier now taking a stand against the evil of fascism. Inevitably

too, not only in Spain but across Europe and in America as well, exhibitions were mounted to give people a chance to see numbers of posters at once. Few at the time doubted that art and politics were here decisively fused, for the posters were both aesthetically beautiful or terrifying and politically compelling. They cried out to be seen and acted upon; between the two impulses no space of doubt need fall. If we have unlearned this lesson in the intervening years, the 60th anniversary of the start of the Spanish Civil War seems an appropriate occasion to have it displayed for a different generation.

When American volunteers wrote home about the posters they saw and sometimes sent back to friends and family, it was, often as not, an individual poster that would engage their attention. Leon Rosenthal, writing home in August, 1937, took some relish in comparing a friend back home to one of Ramón Puyol's satiric portraits: "As for Gershon—I wish I had the poster I would like to send him—it shows the super-leftist—with two arms on the right shoulder raised in 2 fists and one left one—and a fist for a nose, etc.,etc., and inside his belly is a fat bourgeois sitting on a soft chair & smoking a cigar." Dave Gordon, writing in July 1938, concentrated on a poster with little dramatic color but with a decisive cultural message:

> Who hasn't seen thousands of posters, whether for advertising or for propaganda? (Of course the advertising is only another type of propaganda itself.) Has there ever been a poster which did not contain a rather more than less obvious moral tailing along, either in the watchwords or catchwords or in the photograph, or drawing? It would be hard to find one which spoke for itself. It is extremely difficult to present the lesson desired without some concise wording or without plainly indicating the idea graphically. Yet this is exactly what was done in a poster issued by the Generalitat of Catalonia. What is more, this particular poster deals with the principal pride of Catalonia, with what so strongly characterizes its special individuality and comprehends all of its cultural traits—the Catalan language. Picture to yourself a photo-montage of two pages of a newspaper, one more and the other less obliquely reproduced on a huge poster sheet. Remember, too, that these newspaper pages are taken from a rebel fascist newspaper, impertinently bearing the name *Unidad*. The name "Catalonia" is printed in large letters, once at the head and once at the foot of the poster. Part of one of the

EL IZQUIERDISTA – EL EMBOSCADO SE CUBRE DE TODOS LOS ROPAJES PARA MEJOR ASESINAR EN LA SOMBRA! ANIQUILÉMOSLE SE ENCUENTRE DONDE SE ENCUENTRE!
THE ULTRALEFTIST—THE AMBUSHER WEARS MANY DISGUISES TO ASSASSINATE FROM UNDER COVER! WE ANNIHILATE HIM WHEREVER WE FIND HIM!
Ramón Puyol [1936–37]

> newspapers is underscored in black. The underscored lines are only one sentence in a longer article. The paper is written in the Castilian tongue. The specially marked portion, translated, reads: "José Juan Jubert (fined) 100 pesetas and Javier Gibert Porrero, 100 pesetas, for speaking in Catalan at the table in the dining room of a hotel." The newspaper, published in San Sebastian, bears the date January 6th, 1938. The news item is a report of the court procedure of a day at the fascist tribunals. The poster carries no more than what I have explained above. Yet it speaks worlds. It reflects a profound confidence in the understanding and pride of the Catalan. At the same time it reveals a grand contempt for the dogs of fascism who aim to crush the culture of the regions of Spain. It is a convincing call to all Catalonia to fight with Spain to defeat fascism if it wishes to retain its freedoms. It is a simple poster, colored simply. I wish I had a copy to send you so that I need not have been compelled to describe it in words. It speaks most eloquently for itself. Yet I can't help writing about it for two reasons—it impressed me considerably and I could not get a copy of it.

There were new posters continually throughout the war and in time old ones would disappear from stores and be covered over on the streets with new issues. One of the most useful things to know would be the exact week that each poster was published. Definite proof would not always be available, but a search through daily newspapers and weekly magazines from 1936–39 could produce a list of poster reproductions; that would set latest dates of appearance for a number of posters. Also helpful would be a detailed chronology of wartime slogans and cultural campaigns; that would give likely dates for many of the posters bearing such slogans. Though there are many detailed military and political chronologies of the war, we lack a comparably detailed cultural chronology. Again, no one has yet done this research in Spanish publications, but it could be done. All this would enable far more precise readings of the posters than scholars have produced to date.

Even without being able to date and contextualize each poster, we can, however, give some overall feeling for the rich, mutually reinforcing semiotic environment in which many of the posters were displayed. Those that were published and displayed for particular week-long campaigns, for example, would have seemed not isolated objects to be noticed or ignored but rather part of city-wide activities and celebrations concentrated on a single topic. Thus

a week-long campaign to build support for the Republic's new regular army was held throughout loyalist Spain in February 1937. Numerous posters were created for the occasion and displayed all along the streets. In Barcelona's *Plaza de Catalunya* a huge soldier designed by sculptor Miguel Paredes was constructed of wood, wire, and plaster of Paris. At the week's end a parade was held; as the army marched through Barcelona's *Paseo de Gracia* and *Plaza de Catalunya*, literally tens of thousands of volunteers held posters and placards aloft. Meanwhile numerous pamphlets and postcards were printed to supplement the posters, along with smaller decorations that people could attach to their clothing.

Large multifaceted cultural events focused on other week-long campaigns as well. A week of support for the Basque region, held from May 29 to June 6, 1937, brought out posters, banners, and placards with Basque motifs. A monument symbolizing the sacred tree of Guernica was erected in the *Plaza de Catalunya*, and the Basque play *Pedro Mari* was performed in the Liceo theater on Barcelona's Ramblas; poster artists designed the sets. The opening performance was interrupted by a bombing raid, but the cast and audience spurned the air raid shelters and stayed on singing the "Internationale." Later that summer a week advocating "Aid to Madrid" followed. That fall special celebrations to honor the International Brigades were held in Madrid. On September 5 a mass meeting adorned with posters and banners produced for the occasion was held in the Monumental Cinema. Posters advertising the meeting and other posters honoring the I.B. went up across the city. Pamphlets were issued about the event, as was a book of poems about the volunteer soldiers.

By no means all of the civil war posters were issued during these special campaigns; indeed, it would be purely speculative to estimate what percentage were. But one thing is true of almost all the posters: they require special annotation now if people are to decipher their special symbols and messages. In all of this Spanish Civil War poster scholarship is in its infancy. Indeed, in most cases the annotations provided here are the most detailed to be found anywhere. An emotional or aesthetic response to the image alone is an important part of any response we can have, but it does not suffice. Our understanding needs to be contextualized; we need to have some grasp of how the posters might have been read in their own political and historical moment. In some cases the iconography makes specific references that would have been obvious to contemporary Spaniards and would be utterly opaque to most of us

now. This catalogue starts that process for the posters in this show. Writing comparable annotations for 1,500 posters would be a more daunting task, but at least the annotations here can be used as a guide for asking comparable questions of posters in other books or archives.

Equally problematic is the lack of biographical detail about the artists themselves. The research that should have taken place in Spain to establish at least the basic biographical facts about the Republican artists of the Spanish Civil War unfortunately could not begin until after Franco's death in 1975. By that time a number of the artists had no doubt died as well; many opportunities to interview artists or their friends or family have thus been lost. In any case, nothing was published in Spain about Republican posters until after 1975, and the books published about Civil War posters to date offer excellent general essays on the posters but include virtually no biographical information about the artists. In a number of cases no one has even established the artist's full name. Nonetheless, scattered information about several artists' lives does exist, and it is collated and published here for the first time in English. I concentrate on six figures—Bardasano, Fontseré, Francisca, Puyol, Renau, Sim—who are unquestionably among the most important poster artists of the war and four of whom are featured in the second section of the exhibit.

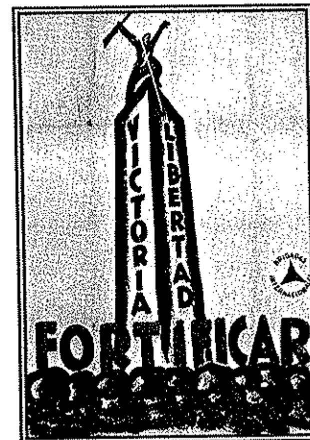
As scholars gather solid evidence about the specific dating of the posters and the careers of the artists it will be possible to take up a series of important issues that remain unresolved. Central among these is the question of stylistic development and changes in poster art over the course of the war. Clearly subject matter changes significantly from mid–1936 to the end of 1938, but does the style of the posters change as well? Some, including Carles Fontseré, have claimed that the most artistically inventive posters were done in 1936 and 1937, that by 1938 Spanish Civil War poster art had succumbed to dull uniformity and realism. Fontseré tends to blame this on the central government's increasing influence, but his is a highly interested political account. For those who romanticize the anarchist and POUMist militias, the increasing power of the central government in Catalonia, the move to a conventional army, and finally the growing influence of the Communist Party (a rather small group at the war's start) all combine to stifle spontaneity and promote conformity after the summer of 1937.

Yet Renau's "Victory" poster, a 1938 issue, seems a good counter example of fairly startling creativity. So too, in my opinion, do Giandante's 1938 poster sketches, many of them

simultaneously issued as postcards. They are almost the 1938 equivalents of Sim's 1936 sketches of the people's resistance. Giandante did rapid ink sketches seeking a symbolic iconography of last resistance and solidarity. Hardly straightforwardly realistic or representational, his posters aim to capture the emotional core of a people under assault but united in purpose.

A number of artists remain steadfast in style and productivity throughout the war. Bardasano is a good example, producing posters in expressionist realism from 1936 to the end of 1938. On the other hand, there are artists whose style changes. Puyol stopped doing his surrealist portraits after 1937, and there is one Puyol poster in a flatly realist style dating from mid–1937, but Puyol had always worked in a variety of styles. So the issue is partly one of taste. If you do not admire Bardasano or Renau, if you find Giandante's poster sketches uninteresting, then you can easily say that no good work took place in the last year of the war. The issue then is partly what *count* as the most exciting posters. On the other hand, given the remarkable diversity of posters at all points in the war, it seems at best risky and anachronistic to impose our own aesthetic on such rich and complexly relational artistic products. The more abstract and symbolic posters were part of a relational field that included photographic posters, poster-sized cartoons, and posters from numerous modern traditions. Decorative, serialized art deco images coexisted in the public sphere with naive realism. All these styles to some degree spoke to one another and to an audience that processed and understood the war by way of these images.

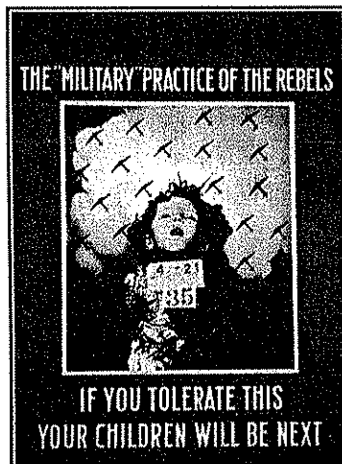
Consider, for example, the range of posters focused on civilian anguish in the first year of the war. There are photographs of frightened women and children and of young bombing victims, and there are more symbolic, emotionally mediated painted icons of fear and anguish. Some photographic posters are almost flatly reportorial in their design, whereas others make use of collage or modernist dislocation. In Madrid and Barcelona, Valencia and Albacete, and in other towns and cities throughout the Republic one would have seen all these posters. One can imagine these different styles producing somewhat different responses and doing somewhat different sorts of cultural work. But nothing less than a representative selection of the total field of images can give us anything approximating the historical meaning of the posters. A certain catholicity of taste seems necessary, along with a willingness to seek contextualized knowledge. That is the way these images can speak to us most fully and powerfully.



FORTIFICAR
FORTIFY FOR VICTORY AND LIBERTY
Giandante [1938]

NO PASARÁN! JULIO
THEY SHALL NOT PASS! JULY 1936 WE SHALL NOT PASS! JULY 1937
Puyol [1937]

Before judging which poster of a dead child is most aesthetically successful, for example, we need to remember that virtually any Spanish resident of Madrid or Barcelona would have seen actual dead children on the street after air or artillery bombardments. They would then have seen comparable news photographs in newspapers and on pamphlets. The emotions they felt in the presence of real bodies and documentary photographs of real bodies would be carried into their response to the more mediated and stylized poster representations. The posters would concentrate and generalize those emotions, connecting them with abstract notions of injustice, violence, and beauty and with binary images of good and evil. The posters would give to anger and outrage and visceral shock or horror a certain aesthetic cast and make those emotions more available to political conviction and action. The posters, then, helped give direct experience broader cultural and historical meaning; moreover, they provided people with visual, emotional, and cultural icons that would serve as reference points in future bombing raids. Comparable wartime subject matter, in effect, recirculates through varying forms and contexts of representation. Even at a distance from Spain, there would be a difference between, say, a news photograph of bombing victims and Ras's bold, stylized poster of a mother holding her dead child. These complex negotiations between experience and multiple forms of representation are an inescapable part of the wartime meaning of these posters, and we cannot understand their historical meaning without reflecting on them.



Anonymous

Writing shortly after the war was over, in his 1940 memoir *Freedom's Battle*, the Republic's foreign minister Julio Alvarez del Vayo recalls something of what these posters meant to their first audience:

> For some time the poster was one of the most effective mediums of propaganda. Its lesson was a visual one. In a country where—until such time as the Republican work of education began to bear fruit—a large part of the rural population was unable to read, the posters took the place of the written word and carried to the remotest village the message of Loyalist Spain. In the towns it helped create a war atmosphere. With the rebel troops closing in on the city, the spiritual temperature of Madrid rose rapidly when posters were displayed on all her walls calling on the people, with dramatic realism, to resist. When, mirrored in

> the posters, the women of Madrid saw themselves attacked by the invaders or separated forever from their children, they rushed to the barricades to finish the work of building and fortification. Every militiaman dreamed of himself as that brave and resolute fighter in whom the artist had symbolized the counterattack which was to save the city. Every workman rebelled against the thought of working under the threat of that Fascist whip which lay outstretched across the poster as though its sinister work had already begun. Some of these posters—in particular those of Renau, a Valencian artist who later held an important position in the Ministry of Education—were quite remarkable. No foreign delegate or writer who visited Republican Spain left the country without taking a set back with him. The finest artists offered their services for this propaganda work, and there was a good deal of friendly rivalry among the various organizations and political parties as to which could produce the best posters (pp. 150–51).

Curiously enough, this competition did not extend to the fascist or Nationalist side. The overwhelming majority of Spanish Civil War posters come from the Republic. Moreover, few of Franco's posters show much artistic invention. The most common fascist posters were images of Franco himself, of which a significant number of different versions were produced. The other common posters on the Nationalist side were produced by the fascist Falangists, generally posters honoring their executed founder and cult figure, José Antonio Primo de Rivera. The Republic also regularly honored individuals—including General Miaja for his leadership in the defense of Madrid—but not repeatedly. The only Loyalist hero to receive a significant number of different poster representations was the anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti, whom a number of organizations honored after his death in the defense of Madrid, and the Durruti posters themselves show a wild variety of artistic styles. Fascist poster art was thus focused on a cult of personal adulation, which is one reason it is little reproduced or exhibited. As it happens, many of the Franco or Jose Antonio posters reproduce black and white or sepia photographs, which offer little visual impact. Colored borders were not enough to make them graphically powerful. There are perhaps two dozen color fascist posters of some interest—generally heroic battle scenes in a realist style—but they do not add up to a significant component of Spanish Civil War art. A interesting essay about Spanish fascist aesthetics could be written by describing illustrated books, posters, and other visual artifacts, but it would be difficult to sustain an essay based on their posters alone.

There is, however, a substantial amount of Republican art outside the scope of this exhibit that deserves mention, ranging from individual paintings (some of which were exhibited at the Spanish Pavilion in Paris in 1937) to drawings, lithographs, and wood block prints. Some influential Spanish Civil War artists never designed posters, only working in these more traditional media. Others, like Bardasano and Puyol, did both, producing not only posters but also oil paintings, lithographs, magazine and book illustrations, and editorial cartoons. I include examples of Bardasano's prints here to give readers a sense of his stylistic range. Some of their work was mass produced, some of it issued as fine art prints. As other scholars have noted, the scholarship on graphic art of the Spanish Civil War is at an even earlier stage than work on posters. There is no catalogue raisonne of any category of civil war art, but graphic work is not even represented by a book-length selection. Finally, only a few essays deal with Spanish Civil War art from other countries, of which there is a significant amount. We hope this travelling exhibition stimulates funding for some of these projects; indeed, we hope the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives is able to help sponsor some of this work.