

“I Was Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature,
What Was Your Crime?”
Materials and Techniques of Twentieth-Century
American Political Cartoonists

ABSTRACT

Editorial cartoonists and their work have been an important social and political force on the American scene throughout the history of the nation. What has become increasingly important during the twentieth century is an appreciation of the original drawing's artistic merit and its increasing monetary value. The Library of Congress began collecting cartoon and illustration art in earnest in the 1930s and today stands as one of the largest repositories of original graphic art in the world. The editorial cartoon drawings form a major portion of the collection and have been the focus of several recent exhibitions and publications.

While American political cartoonists have never shied away from communicating acerbic and controversial opinions, until the early part of the twentieth century the drawings themselves tended to be stylistically conventional. It took the tremendous social turmoil of the period and an artistically and politically impassioned group of artists/writers to develop a distinctive American style of cartooning. Working for the influential magazine *The Masses*, artists such as Robert Minor, Stuart Davis, John Sloan, Boardman Robinson, George Bellows, and Art Young consciously adopted a philosophical shift towards direct action and more confrontational styles of protest. Drawing on European traditions and acknowledging the emotional power of Honoré Daumier's style, they adopted a coarse crayon technique of drawing. These artists admired the ability of the broad strokes made with a litho crayon to express the immediacy they sought. Additionally, these artists developed new printing techniques to more accurately capture the raw power of their expressions in lithographic crayon on paper. The shockingly powerful and emotional drawings which were the result of this

deliberate artistic decision remain influential for an entire generation of artists, politically inclined or not.

As the century progressed, editorial cartoonists continued to develop unique materials and techniques to realize the graphic expression of their opinions. Unlike other artists, political cartoonists work under the constant tyranny of a daily deadline, which requires a surety of hand and economically rendered drawings. Political cartoonists such as Herb Block, Jules Fiefer, Pat Oliphant, Bill Mauldin, and Paul Conrad have managed to remain true to their artistic vision while churning out a quality daily drawing. Each artist has developed his/her own techniques, incorporating materials developed to aid with the daunting output required. “Duo-shade” paper, various “transparent shading films,” use of correction fluids and other opaque “correcting” materials as well as various illustration boards and layered paper supports will be discussed. This paper addresses the challenges to the conservator posed by these materials. Also discussed are the various notions of authorship and originality which become more complex as the role of assistants and the incorporation of technology are considered.

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