# *The Painting of Jack Levine and the Politics of Criticism*

DENNIS RAVERTY

> I made quite a splash in the art world in the 1930s when I was still a kid and it seems to me that every year since, I have become less and less well known.[1]

JACK LEVINE'S *Feast of Pure Reason* (Figure 1) established him at the forefront of the New York art world when he was just twenty-two years old. Levine's meteoric rise in the years before the Second World War is evidenced by his inclusion in key exhibitions during that time as well as by critical acclaim in both the art magazines and the popular press. *Art News* went so far as to dub him the "dazzling newcomer."[2] In the years following the war, however, the art establishment's consensus on Levine's work went through a dramatic reversal. Just how complete was this turnaround is plainly visible in a review, also in *Art News* from 1955, where Levine's painting was described as "unlikable . . . tired, thin and lacking in wit."[3]

An examination of the vicissitudes of the response to Levine's work reveals that the marginalization of this once-celebrated artist was the result of a shift in critical paradigms rather than a decline in Levine's work. This critical shift was much more than a mere change in taste within the art world, however. It was directly related to the ideological needs of America during the era of the cold war and culminated for Levine in a public denunciation of the artist's work by President Eisenhower himself and a call to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (a call to which he didn't respond).[4]

The extent to which the young artist's work was lauded during the late 1930s and early 1940s was nothing short of phenomenal. Levine's first participation in a major exhibition was *New Horizons* at New York's Museum of Modern Art during 1936. One of Levine's exhibited paintings, *Brain Trust*, was featured on the cover page of the October edition of *Art Digest* and received a favorable review in the *New Yorker*.[5] In an exhibit at the prestigious Downtown Gallery one year later, Levine's *The Street* was hailed as "the most powerful painting in the show" by *Time* magazine, which also reproduced the piece in color (Figure 2)[6]. *Art News* described

Figure 1. Jack Levine, *The Feast of Pure Reason* (1937). Oil on canvas, 42 × 48 inches. Museum of Modern Art, on extended loan from United States WPA Art Program. Photograph courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York City.

Figure 2. Jack Levine, *The Street* (1938). Museum of Modern Art, on extended loan from United States WPA Art Program. Photograph courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York City.

the painting as "an epic work as grand in concept as it is in scale, a work in which subject and technique, regarded as mutually important, are coordinated with brilliance, skill and mordant cynicism."[7] That same year, the Museum of Modern Art procured Levine's *Feast of Pure Reason* for its permanent collection. The acquisition of one of his works by a major museum solidified the prestige of the young, rising artist.

Other successes soon followed. The next year, his work was exhibited at the Carnegie Institute and was included in *Three Centuries of American Art* at the Musée du Jue de Paume in Paris. During 1939, his work was represented in *American Art Today* at the New York World's Fair and in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, *Art in Our Time*. In 1940, his work was selected for the *Whitney Annual*, as it was to be again in three of the following four years.

Such accolades make the critical disparagement that his work later suffered all the more perplexing. The viciousness with which his work was criticized is illustrated well by the article by Manny Farber for *Art News* mentioned earlier:

> Unfortunately, the major parts of the pictures seem to sink under a great, cottony burden of old ideas and symbols of capitalist corruption. The figures (gluttonous tycoons, pale and drawn dowager, pensive little Smith and Dale figures) become sort of dull and generalized, and, perhaps because they are such banalities, Levine seems to lose himself filling faces with wrinkles, shadows, veins, sags, cysts. At this point the picture, for the spectator, ceases to be a painting and becomes an exercise in memory as you try to place the Warner Brother movie of the 'thirties that contained its prototype.[8]

In an even harsher article by Hilton Kramer in *Commentary*, Levine is attacked for his stylistic sources in German expressionism and his lack of influence from the school of Paris where, according to Kramer, "the most significant artistic ideas of the century were being generated."[9] The prejudice in favor of a Parisian line of descent was widespread by the mid-1950s and was diametrically opposed to the reigning paradigms of art before the war, which emphasized above all the autonomy of American art from French culture. The connection to the French, the United States' political and cultural ally both during the world war and the cold war that followed also hints at the hidden political agenda underlying the dominant critical position in postwar American art criticism.

The change in critical reception was not unique to the work of Levine, but was part of a broad shift in artistic paradigms in the United States in the years following the Second World War. Although they cannot always be readily deduced from writings about art, critical models are always present and active in critical assessment. Within these paradigms, limits are established for the field of discourse in terms of style, iconography, and

technique appropriate to the critical construct utilized. The parameters of this arena determine who is an *insider* and who is an *outsider* at any given moment.

Levine's transformation from an insider to an outsider can be most readily understood by examining the models in major textbooks from before and after the shift. Two books of this type, Peyton Boswell's *Modern American Painting* from 1939 and Sam Hunter's *Modern American Painting and Sculpture* of 1959, as general historical treatments of American art, reflect the reigning representations of significant art during their time. It will be noted that these texts are structured according to very different concepts of art and, furthermore, that they present their positions as if the models they utilize were not models at all, but actual historical realities.

Boswell compared the 1930s American scene movement, of which Levine was a part, to nothing less than the Italian Renaissance in significance and characterized it as the most important development in 20th-century art.[10] The author ridiculed contemporary artists who had been influenced by what he saw as the spiritually bankrupt and essentially decorative school of Paris and asserted that "today our exhibitions contain fewer little Picassos, fewer little Matisses."[11] In Boswell's scheme of historical development, the effects of modernism were seen as a passing fad:

> The vogue for ultramodern art has long since passed into the discard, with only the clever publicity machines of Paris standing between it and oblivion.[12]

The American scene movement, for Boswell, was not only the most significant art of the present, but was also the undeniable wave of the future. It was indomitable and amounted, in Boswell's words, to an "irresistible force – with no immovable object in sight."[13]

Twenty years later, a new and radically different reading of modernism was reflected in Sam Hunter's *Modern American Painting and Sculpture*. Hunter's book places special emphasis on the origins of significant American art in French painting – particularly cubism and surrealism. The surrealists' morbid fantasies however, were superseded by the heroic work of the quintessentially American abstract expressionists:

> The fantasia of the unconscious gave way to a general dynamism; turgidity to transparency; and the private obsession was dissolved in the epic, and in monumental designs.[14]

In contrast to the glowing description of the abstract expressionists, the art of the 1930s and early 1940s is described by Hunter as modernism's "dark days." The American scene art, which was so enthusiastically hailed by Boswell twenty years earlier, is characterized by Hunter as "cheerless, harsh, haunted by romantic nostalgia, and addicted to the grotesque."[15]

Hunter covers Levine in the chapter entitled "American Scenes and Symbols." He describes Levine's painting as "an indictment of the avarice of the rich, the miscarriage of justice, the squalor of official public life."[16] The artist's work is represented by a black-and-white reproduction of *The Feast of Pure Reason*. Widespread reproduction of this painting in Hunter's and other broad surveys has led to the common misconception that Levine was an artist who reached full maturity and whose principal works were executed during the 1930s. Hunter seems to find this an acceptable way of classifying Levine:

> Though he blurs, distorts and paints with lavish abandon, Levine is essentially a realist reporter . . . His inflamed social conscience and satirical themes invest his art with the flavor of the thirties, and seem remote from present-day artistic preoccupations.[17]

The author dismisses Levine's later work as "an acting out of violent repentance for [his] early sensuality in paint."[18] Whatever this statement might have meant for Hunter, it reads today like a highly romantic mystification with just the touch of existentialism that would have made it appeal to fashionable intellectual circles during the late 1950s. The cryptic remark about Levine's "repentance" shows how ill equipped, ultimately, Hunter's model is for understanding the artist's mature achievements.

Integral to understanding why this dramatic shift in the critical discourse took place is discerning the cold war agenda of the most powerful institution in American art of the time: the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). It would be difficult to overestimate the role that the MoMA has played in our current conception of modern art. The fact that MoMA was considered a museum rather than a gallery gave it an air of authority few institutions at the time could boast. As an institution, it had taken on the function of a chronicler of modernism as modernism itself was developing. This was a new role for a museum, the former function of which had been a repository of great art of the past. Because of the traditional respect accorded to a museum, the contemporary art that the MoMA acquired took on an aura of historical importance.

Alfred Barr, the museum's director during these years, was the principal tastemaker in American art during his tenure. He was loved, hated, and feared within the art world. Francis Henry Taylor, the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, referred bitterly to MoMA as "that whorehouse on 53rd Street" and characterized Barr as a "Svengali" for his hypnotic power over the press and the art market.[19] According to Andrew Richie, director of the MoMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture during the 1950s, "Everything we did the dealers knew about before we did it, and the prices were affected accordingly. It was inevitable."[20] By the mid-1950s, the MoMA had established itself as the nucleus around which the New York art world orbited. The triumph of abstract expressionism by

the middle of the decade was to a large degree the result of its backing by this powerful institution.

Jack Levine himself characterizes the triumph of abstract expressionism not as an historical inevitability, but as an aggressive takeover:

> I never *saw* such an organization! These people came in and tried to do away with anybody who wasn't in their party. What they really wanted was not just to play their fair part, they wanted to master the situation.[21]

According to Levine, the museum had a more pluralistic exhibition policy during the earlier years of its existence, but by the mid-1950s had "crystallized" in favor of a specific aesthetic: "The Museum of Modern Art by then [1956] had found its way, it knew what it wanted. They knew what American art was *supposed* to be from their point of view, and they insisted on it."[22]

Eva Cockcroft, in a fascinating essay, explores the role of the MoMA in the propagation of abstract expressionist art during the 1950s. According to Cockcroft, the MoMA saw itself as a sort of cultural ambassador as early as 1941, when the chairman of the museum's board of trustees, John Hay Whitney, claimed that the museum could be used to "educate, inspire, and strengthen the hearts and wills of free men in defense of their own freedom."[23]

The key word here for Cockcroft is "freedom." It was a concept that would form the rationale for the museum's international exhibitions during the period of the cold war. In her analysis, Cockcroft follows the lead of an article published the previous year by Max Kozloff. According to Kozloff,

> Modern American art, abandoning its erstwhile support for left-wing agitation during the 30's, now self propagated itself as champion for humanist freedom.[24]

The emphasis that the abstract expressionists placed on personal freedom, the critical explanation of this freedom as an aspect of the existential dilemma of the contemporary artist, and its international success made it particularly suitable for demonstrating the superiority of American capitalism as a rich soil for the flourishing of culture.

The critical and financial success that the abstract expressionists enjoyed in the "free world" was in vivid contrast to the propagandistic function that art served in fascist and communist countries. In Kozloff's view, the identification of the artists and critics with the ideal of freedom coincided with rhetoric of the cold war and "[lent] itself to be treated as a form of benevolent propaganda for foreign intelligentsia."[25]

The enlightened cold war interpretation of abstract expressionism as a symbol of freedom, as well as the purely aesthetic considerations, led the

staff of the MoMA to extend their enormous support to this work. Because of their status as a private nonprofit organization, they were free to pursue these directions without fear of the possible consequences of government disapproval or lack of popular support.

This was not the case for many of the ill-fated shows sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and other government agencies during the 1940s and 1950s. One of the first postwar exhibitions of this kind was *Advancing American Art*, organized in 1946 in response to requests from European and Latin American countries. The State Department spent about $49,000 to buy over seventy artworks by forty-five artists.[26] The artists represented a range of styles, the majority of them representational. Included among its purchases was Levine's painting, *White Horse*.

For the State Department, it presented an opportunity for cultural diplomacy and to show, as Assistant Secretary of State William Benton stated, "the same country which produces brilliant scientists and engineers also produces creative artists."[27]

After being premiered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, it was to travel to several countries. Following its initial showing in Paris, where it received critical praise, it traveled to Prague, Haiti, and Cuba before being shut down and called back to the United States. The criticism at home was spearheaded by Michigan Congressman George A. Dondero, who felt that the work included in the exhibit was "depraved" and communist inspired:

> Modern art is communistic because it is distorted and ugly, because it does not glorify our beautiful country, our cheerful and smiling people, and our material progress. Art which does not glorify our beautiful country in plain, simple terms that everyone can understand breeds dissatisfaction. It is therefore opposed to our government, and those who create it and promote it are our enemies.[28]

These sentiments were echoed in the Hearst press and as the controversy heightened, even in such widely circulated periodicals as *Newsweek* and *Look*.[29] Secretary of State George C. Marshall, under whose department the exhibit was organized, was shocked at the show's "radicalism" and ordered, "No more taxpayer's money for modern art."[30] Shortly thereafter the exhibit was cancelled and the artwork auctioned off at an incredible loss.

Vociferous protests on the part of artists could not halt the tide of public opinion against modern art. In 1948, Boston's Institute of Modern Art changed its name to the Institute of Contemporary Art in order to disassociate itself from modernism. Jack Levine was one of the featured artists who spoke out against the change at a public rally held at Old South Church in Boston.[31] It should be noted that Levine was still considered among the radical moderns at this point.

Another major public exhibit that sparked controversy was held in

1951 in Griffith Park, sponsored by the Los Angeles City Council. Among the issues raised within the council chambers were accusations that certain abstract paintings were actually secret maps of strategic U.S. fortifications.[32]

In response to these kinds of allegations, Alfred Barr of the MoMA published an article in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "Is Modern Art Communistic?" In this article, he refutes the accusations of Dondero and others by describing the official art of the Soviet Union and contrasting it with American and West European modernism:

> The modern artist's non-conformity and love of freedom cannot be tolerated with a monolithic tyranny and modern art is useless for the dictator's propaganda, because, while it is still modern, it has little popular appeal.[33]

The abstract expressionist's freewheeling use of gesture, as well as their nonconformist attitudes, became a metaphor for the freedom artists enjoyed in the United States and helped Barr counter his political enemies at home and later establish hegemony over modern art abroad.

In 1952, the MoMA established its international exhibition program with a generous endowment from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Exhibitions showcasing the abstract expressionists were organized in major cities such as London, Paris, and Tokyo. The museum became an unofficial representative for the United States in major international exhibits. The U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennial, for example, was run by the MoMA from 1954 to 1965. According to Cockcroft,

> The U.S. Government's difficulties in handling the delicate issues of free speech and free artistic expression, generated by the McCarthyist hysteria of the early 1950's, made it necessary and convenient for MoMA to assume the role of international representation for the United States . . . Freed from the kinds of pressure of unstable red-baiting and superjingoism applied to government agencies . . . MoMA cultural projects could provide the well funded and more persuasive arguments and exhibits needed to sell the rest of the world on the benefits of life and art under capitalism.[34]

The kind of biting criticism of the hypocrisy and shallowness of American life that distinguished Levine's mature painting made it singularly unusable for the purposes of cultural diplomacy during the era of the cold war. His subject matter was in direct opposition to covert propaganda functions, which played such an important part in the development of the MoMA's international exhibition program.

In 1959, when it was thought that the antagonisms of the anti-Communist era had to some degree subsided, and with the growing prospect of

détente with the Soviet Union, the government organized a major exhibition of American art for a tour of the USSR that Vice President Richard Nixon was to open in Moscow. Lloyd Goodrich, director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, was asked to select artworks for the exhibition to represent American art of the previous forty years. He included works by the now-celebrated abstract expressionists as well as by Levine and others.

As in the past with so many government-sponsored exhibitions, controversy followed within days after the selection process was completed. As a result of the exhibit, several artists represented in the show were investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee and three were called to appear before it, including Levine, Ben Shahn, and Phillip Evergood.[35] Levine never appeared, however, but rather eluded the committee by traveling abroad with his wife:

Figure 3. Jack Levine, *Witches' Sabbath* (1963). Oil on canvas, 96 × 84 inches. Private collection, Illinois. Photograph courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York City.

> Ruth and I were going to Europe anyway, and so we sneaked out on them [the congressional committee]. . . . [We] heard from acquaintances we ran into there [in Rome] that I was the talk of the town back home for it. . . . I really think that all they [the committee] wanted was publicity – also they probably didn't want to pay for my fare back[36]

A few years later, Levine painted *Witch's Sabbath*, a scathing indictment of the committee, complete with hooded Klansmen and Alger Hiss's pumpkin (Figure 3). [Of course, this painting had not yet been painted at the time of the Moscow exhibit.]

It was Jack Levine's unflattering depiction of generals in *Welcome Home* (Figure 4) that was singled out in the State Department exhibit for criticism by President Eisenhower, who dismissed the painting as a "lampoon."[37] Part of what offended the president was undoubtedly that he was himself a general. On a deeper and less personal level, though, it was probably felt that a painting critical of the government or its military did not reflect well on the "American way" and would play into the hands of the Soviet propaganda, which was perpetually critical of "bourgeois decadence" under capitalism. The unbridgeable class distinctions between the pompous general and the overly deferential waiter, so unmistakably captured by Levine in their postures, addressed the glaring inequities in American society – the very kind of inequalities the Soviets always pointed out in their own propaganda.

Figure 4. Jack Levine, *Welcome Home* (1946). Oil on canvas, $39^{15}/_{16} \times 59^{15}/_{16}$ inches. Collection, Brooklyn Museum, New York. John B. Woodward Fund 46.124. Photograph courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York City.

Artists were outraged by Eisenhower's remarks. "The whole art world was very supportive of me," Levine claims, "even though I was not a member of their crowd anymore."[38] In any event, after this exhibition, government-sponsored shows tended to shy away from publicity by selecting works that would cause little or no controversy, at least in terms of subject matter – nonobjective abstraction in this regard being the safest.

The art of Jack Levine continued to develop in a coherent direction from the time of his early twenties to the present. His work has suffered the ravages of critical disparagement, and he has been relegated to the sidelines of 20th-century American art. Although Levine has been financially successful and his work remains popular, as witnessed by the periodic publication of lavishly illustrated books on the painter, there is a dearth of serious scholarly treatment of his works.

Levine's marginalization was not due to the quality or historical significance of his work, but rather to the complex web of social and political circumstances that were a result of cold war cultural diplomacy. It is hoped that, with the new circumstances of our present political situation, the work of Jack Levine and others who have been long neglected can be evaluated in a new light.

## NOTES

1. Jack Levine, interview by the author, New York City, April 17, 2004.
2. Martha Davidson, "Levine: Epic Painting in a First One-man Showing," *Art News* 37 (January 1939): 12.
3. Manny Farber, "Jack Levine," *Art News* 54 (March 1955): 33.
4. Robert J. Donovan, "President Is Critical of Art for Moscow," *New York Herald Tribune*, July 2, 1959, 6.
5. *Art Digest* 11 (October 1, 1936): cover page; and Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries," *New Yorker* 10 (October 10, 1936): 23.
6. "Twelve," *Time* 30 (October 18, 1937): 37.
7. Davidson, "Levine: Epic Painting," 12.
8. Donovan, "President Is Critical," 33.
9. Hilton Kramer, "Bloom and Levine: The Hazards of Modern Painting," *Commentary* 19 (June 1955): 583.
10. Peyton Boswell, *Modern American Painting* (New York:Dodd, Mead, 1939), 11, 69.
11. Ibid., 48.
12. Ibid., 60.
13. Ibid., 79.
14. Sam Hunter, *Modern American Painting and Sculpture* (New York: Dell 1959), 160.
15. Ibid., 107.
16. Ibid., 119.
17. Ibid. 119–120.
18. Ibid. 121.
19. Quoted in Russel Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Athenaeum, 1973), 250.
20. Quoted in ibid.

21. Jack Levine, interview by the author, New York City, April 17, 2004.

22. Ibid. When asked by this author if the artist did not appreciate the monumental works of Jackson Pollock, he replied sardonically, "Look, I didn't accept Jesus Christ and I don't have to accept Jackson Pollock."

23. Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): 39. This cold war thesis is expanded on by Serge Guilbaut in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1983), and most recently and exhaustively by Frances Stoner Saunders in *Who Paid the Piper: The Cultural Cold War and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

24. Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* 11 (May 1973):45.

25. Ibid., 144.

26. Virginia Mecklenberg, "A Controversy in Style," in *Advancing American Art* (Montgomery, Ala.: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), 35.

27. Quoted in ibid.

28. William Hauptman, "The Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade," *Artforum* 73 (October 1973): 48.

29. "Your Money Bought These Paintings," *Look* 29 (February 18, 1947), 80–81; and "It's Striking, But Is It Art or Extravagance?" *Newsweek* 30 (August 25, 1947): 17.

30. Quoted in Hauptman, "Suppression of Art," 49.

31. Lawrence Dame, "Moderns Protest," *Art Digest* 22 (April 1948): 33.

32. Hauptman, "Suppression of Art," 50.

33. Alfred Barr, "Is Modern Art Communistic?" *New York Times Magazine*, December 14, 1951, 22.

34. Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism," 38.

35. Jane De Hart Matthews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," *American Historical Review* 81 (October 1976): 778.

36. Jack Levine, interview by the author, New York City, July 23, 2004.

37. Donovan, "President Is Critical," 6.

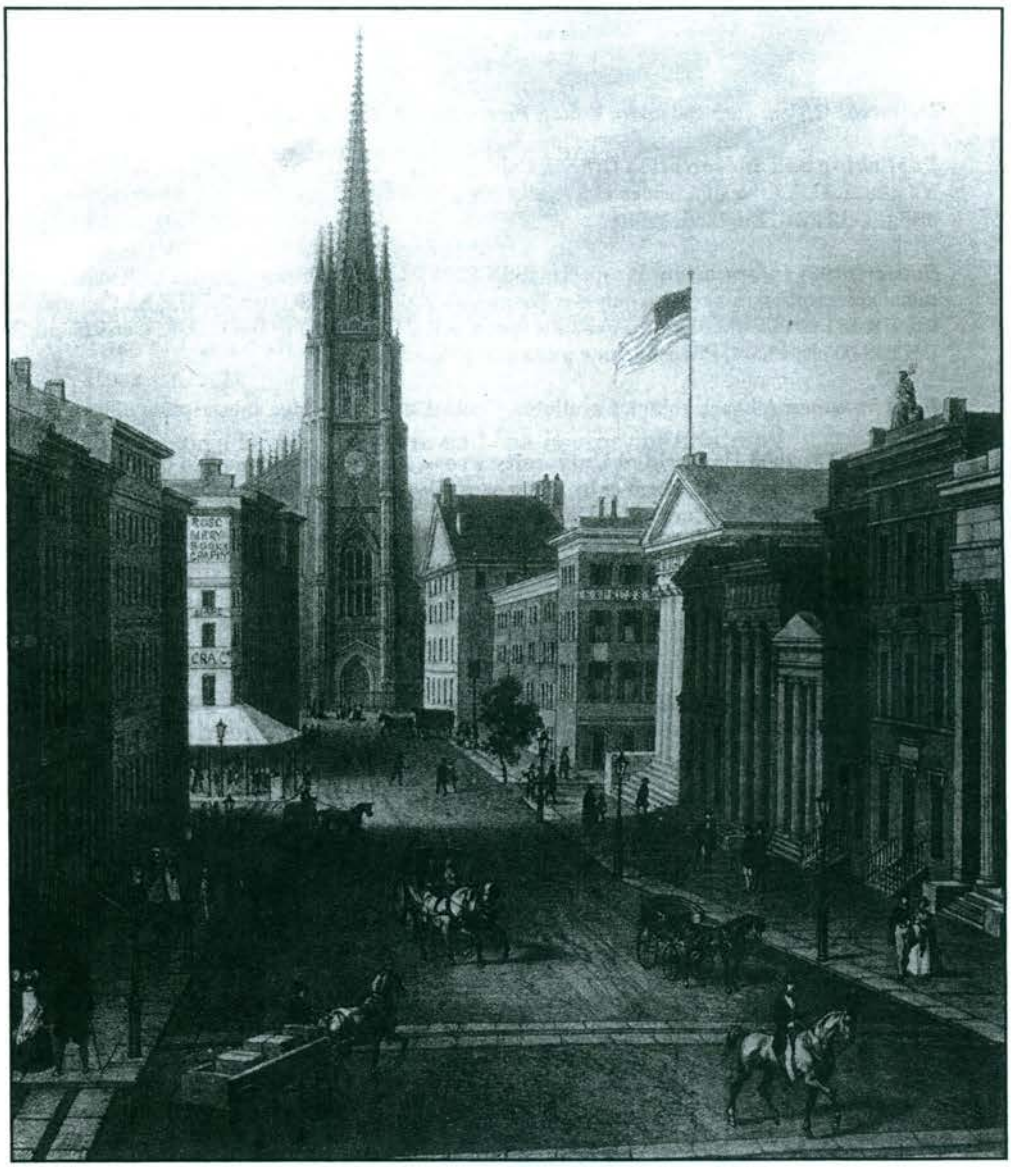
38. Jack Levine, interview by the author, New York City, July 23, 2004.

# PROSPECTS

## An Annual of American Cultural Studies

**Volume 29**

**Edited by Jack Salzman**



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS