

The Archive We Don't See: Mining a Speculative Counter-Narrative within MoMA's Victor D'Amico Papers

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Communist Party USA bookstore window, displaying support for the anti-fascist war effort, ca. 1942

“We may have to win this war through bloody battles, but we can win the peace only through sound creative education.” —Victor D’Amico, “I Believe... by 31 Art Teachers,” 1943

As Head of the Fine Arts Department at the elite, private Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York, Victor D’Amico held a personal teaching philosophy that argued for “the duty of art education to develop the creative capacities of all children, for through them only will come an enduring peace.”¹ Two years prior to D’Amico’s statement, the United States had entered the battlefields of World War II

¹ Victor D’Amico, “I Believe... by 31 Art Teachers,” *The Victor D’Amico Papers*, VIII.C.3, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (New York: The Committee on Art in American Education and Society, 1943), 9–10.

in Europe and Asia, prioritizing matters of war and peace for many people. But there is another reason D'Amico framed his educational doctrine in such dramatic, ideological terms. The lines cited above come from one of several dozen "credos," collected and published by The Museum of Modern Art's Committee on Art in American Education and Society, which was established in 1942, and is later referred to as the National Committee on Art Education (and, hereafter, as simply the Committee). D'Amico was the Committee's first Chair.²

In the years that followed, hundreds of artists and art instructors would publish with or attend events organized by the Committee. The group's founding mission was to help promote "the creative arts during the war period and to plan for their increased functioning in the reconstruction to follow."³ At the time, D'Amico was already serving as part-time Director of MoMA's Education Project, and as Chair of the new initiative, he charged the Committee with becoming "art education's answer to Fascism and its contempt for creative art."⁴ He also sought to focus the Committee's attention on how art education might play a role in creating a peaceful, postwar society.

Yet, after the war ended in 1945, and the path toward social reconstruction was unblocked, the Committee's dramatic anti-fascist mission abruptly shifts gears. The stirring rhetoric that initially served to establish the platform gave way to a pedagogical program that was seemingly emptied of social content and refocused around formal, developmental, and materials-based art education. On one level, this sudden turning away from a mission of militant mobilization makes sense given that the enemy had been defeated. However, many of the conflicts that gave rise to European fascism remained active within the United States, especially in the Jim Crow South. If art and art education were to play an important role in establishing a peaceful postwar society, wouldn't it be necessary to continue confronting these social ills in a creative, imaginative way?

This essay seeks to address why this shift from anti-fascism to cultural formalism took place as well as what this change meant for the practice of art education at MoMA going forward. After all, the Museum was, and remains, a preeminent influence within the broader, contemporary art world. Was this apparent apolitical revisionism a reflection of an underlying conservative trend already present within the Committee, and, by extension, within the Museum's Department of Education and its programming?

² Other members of the elite committee included representatives from several private high schools as well as from Teachers College, Columbia University. MoMA staff member Dorothy Knowles served as Secretary-Treasurer.

³ The Museum of Modern Art Press Release, "Museum Of Modern Art Sponsors Newly Created Committee On Art In American Education And Society," The Museum of Modern Art, October 7, 1942, (note: this statement is from the press release and not credited to D'Amico), https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/827/releases/MOMA_1942_0069_1942-10-07_421007-63.pdf.

⁴ Victor D'Amico, The Museum of Modern Art Press Release, "Museum Of Modern Art Sponsors Newly Created Committee On Art In American Education And Society." D'Amico stepped down from Fieldston to work full-time at MoMA in 1948.

Or did external forces ultimately muffle D’Amico’s audacious, art educational undertaking during the rise of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1945? Or was it in response to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s infamous “Enemies from Within” speech, which took place just five years later? In truth, almost nothing I have found in the D’Amico Papers offers definitive answers to these questions.

The approach I have taken treats the online index of The Victor D’Amico Papers as a narrative or, more precisely, a meta-narrative in its own right.⁵ As such, I have sought to interpret aspects of the catalog’s organizational structure, including its classification system and nomenclature, as well as its gaps and omissions, as the actual subject matter of my mining operation.⁶ This approach assumes that MoMA’s catalog contains indexical descriptors that have a reasonably accurate relationship to the D’Amico Papers’ actual content.

Nevertheless, this interpretive method soon revealed another problem. In order to answer my inquiry, it was not going to be enough to merely read the “meta” level of the archive’s index. Instead, I would have to attempt to visualize the archive’s lacunae—much in the way a lab technician injects dye into the unseen tissue of a cell to reconstruct what we can’t see. This begs a final, speculative question: If there is some sort of shadow narrative concealed within MoMA’s D’Amico Papers, might its very invisibility operate as a determining element of the collection’s indexical logic as a whole?



⁵ See The Victor D’Amico Papers in The Museum of Modern Art Archives, The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/damicof>.

⁶ My primary focus is on the list of entries for the National Committee on Art Education (located in Subseries VIII.C.). Still, it is important to note that the Committee has a significant presence throughout the entire collection, which, in turn, implies a robust, ongoing relationship with D’Amico, the Education Department, and MoMA’s pedagogical policies overall.

“The Committee has asked the Museum of Modern Art to sponsor it because it recognizes the Museum’s leadership in art education and believes that it has the courage to defend the creative arts through the crisis and the vision to see their role in winning the peace.... The immediate objective of the Committee is to mobilize the art efforts of teachers and children throughout America in one great offensive for victory.... [The Committee’s plan covers] training of boys for the armed services through pre-induction courses in camouflage, map-making photogrammetry, airplane design; the rehabilitation of the victims of war through art therapy.” —The Museum of Modern Art Press Release, “Museum Of Modern Art Sponsors Newly Created Committee On Art In American Education And Society,” 1942

MoMA’s Committee on Art Education was founded the same year, and with the same spirit, as the United States Office of War Information (OWI). Established in 1942 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9182, OWI was a sprawling governmental agency intended to coordinate public access to news about the war effort from print, radio, and cinema sources, but it was also charged with playing “an active part in winning the war and in laying the foundations for a better postwar world.”⁷

The similarity of language to D’Amico’s personal credo, as well as to his founding statement for the Committee, is not coincidental. Except, in MoMA’s case, anti-fascist cultural mobilization was focused on the arena of high culture and its pedagogy, rather than on the OWI’s broader concern with mass media.⁸ And yet, if the mostly elite field of art can help prepare for sustained postwar peace, then this would certainly require generating a vision of society that squarely rejected all policies associated with fascism, including militarism, sexism, racism, and authoritarianism. Curiously, no trace of that more inclusive cultural conversation appears at the level of the catalog index in MoMA’s D’Amico Papers.

At the meta-level of the collection’s digitized index, most of the content seems virtually disconnected from evolving historical, political, and ideological realities. Specifically, there is no reference to the Cold War (a point I will return to below) as well as no mention of such signature 20th-century social struggles as the civil rights movement, anti–nuclear weapons protests, and fierce resistance by American students to the military draft for the undeclared war in Indochina. There is also no indexical mention of the

⁷ Allan Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 1. The OWI may be best known today for helping to establish Voice of America, also in 1942, which still operates worldwide today.

⁸ This shared mission between elite and populist forms of anti-fascist cultural mobilization is fascinating in its own right, especially if we consider that Clement Greenberg’s influential essay denouncing populism and kitsch was written only a few years earlier. Perhaps anti-fascist unity simply makes for strange bedfellows? Or perhaps it is the burden of the serious art educator to lift the masses, including veterans, out of their tawdry sphere of mere entertainment and introduce them to the illuminated realm of advanced high culture? We certainly see this same mission playing out in the 19th century with the City Beautiful movement, as Carol Dunkin’s research reveals. Transforming the many unwashed immigrants into proper urban citizens was an underlying ideological stimulus for developing grand public spaces, parks, and inspirational monuments.

vibrant political battle underway for the rights of women, gays, Native Americans, or other colonized peoples. Perhaps these omissions would seem less peculiar if the Committee's foundational mission had not stridently emphasized its political mandate to assist in the defeat of fascism, while simultaneously working toward an enduring postwar peace. Arguably, the road to a serene, lasting de-Nazified world would be inseparable from adopting the cultural policies of progressive social change.

Still, we do catch a glimpse of a broader, reform-minded, or even radical discussion that was taking place in and around MoMA during the early 1940s. The roster of artists and intellectuals invited to participate in the Committee's early programs is impressive. Among them, we find Walter Gropius, Viktor Lowenfeld, Robert Motherwell, Meyer Schapiro, and Ben Shahn. Some attendees, including poet Archibald MacLeish and painter Joan Miró, had known ties to progressive or leftist political organizations, including the Communist Party.⁹ It is inconceivable, therefore, that debates about which system—socialism or capitalism—would be victorious over fascist ideology were entirely absent from the Committee's events. Nevertheless, even a cursory glance at the D'Amico Papers' index presents researchers with a historical puzzle. Aside from a few documents that may lead to uncovering D'Amico's anti-fascist position in the early 1940s, the balance of MoMA's archive is assertively apolitical.

Setting aside such speculation, the Committee's moment of inception should also be viewed against the dynamic cultural programs that had been developed by left-leaning organizations and, in particular, the Communist Party USA (CPUSA).¹⁰ Take, for example, the Artists Union and the American Artists' Congress—both founded in 1933 by groups of artists demanding better federal support during the Great Depression. Members of the CPUSA were involved in both organizations, but Party affiliates formed the leadership of the Artists Union in particular.

In 1942, the same year that D'Amico's Committee was founded, not only did the CPUSA's membership reach its zenith of 85,000 members, but these two leftist art organizations merged to become the Artists' League of America and established their own art school at 77 Fifth Avenue, some 38 blocks south of MoMA.¹¹ Bear in mind, too, that in June of the previous year, the CPUSA stopped condemning Roosevelt's military involvement in Europe and began calling for an all-out mobilization against the Axis powers. Such ideological twists and turns were, of course, determined by Communist International's

⁹ An excellent history of these and other Communist Party USA-related arts organizations is found in Andrew Hemingway's volume *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ See Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*. Also note that in 1940, the Party's presidential candidate Earl Browder and his African American running mate James W. Ford received .10 percent of the national vote, not as high a turnout as the CPUSA saw in the 1930s, but still impressive for a third party political organization, and one already under FBI scrutiny.

¹¹ The sudden uptick of Party membership in 1942 is linked by some to Stalin's entry into the war against Germany. See, for example, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry for the Communist Party of the United States of America written by Victor G. Devinatz: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Communist-Party-of-the-United-States-of-America>.

shifting policies toward *der Führer*, as Hitler went from an enemy of communism, to brief ally of the USSR, and then back to foe again within only a few short years.¹² All of which leads us to consider whether D'Amico's MoMA Committee was indirectly seeking to compete with such overtly left-leaning cultural programs and policies by offering a less ideologically loaded, though still essentially anti-fascist, mechanism by which artists, educators, and intellectuals could "do their part" for the war effort.

Given all that was taking place, especially from the early 1940s onward, and in such close proximity to MoMA, D'Amico, and the Committee, it is striking that this archive lacks any indexical keywords that, in any way, relate to issues of ideology, including the turbulent postwar competition between capitalist and socialist states. What makes this absence of references, especially to the Cold War, more intriguing still is that the timeline of the archive corresponds almost precisely with this ideological and sometimes armed conflict.

If we consider the hostilities between the US and USSR to have intensified roughly between the years 1947 and 1989, we can also see that the bulk of dates for the D'Amico collection is listed as 1942 to the 1980s (after that decade, the archive has comparatively little indexed content). So what does the catalog inventory tell us about MoMA's interest in art education during these historical decades? Let's look a bit more closely at what is *not indexed* in the archive's online catalog.

The index for the D'Amico Papers does not list such potentially politically loaded keywords as "Cold War," "atomic bomb," "nuclear weapon," "colonial" or "colonialism," "activist," "activism," "picket," "strike," "union," "partisan," "socialism," "communism," or even "capitalism." Fair enough. But it is surprising that seemingly impartial, descriptive labels, such as "civil rights," "labor," "African Americans," and "women," are likewise absent from the index. While the heading "Young Negro Art" appears once in 1943, it is set within the same wartime framework discussed above and never shows up again—even during the civil rights era about a decade later. The word "politics" is altogether missing, as is the presumably nonpartisan term "peace." The word "community" appears twice, but it does so in a delimited way—first as a reference to the "Downtown Community School" (VIII.B.5), and second regarding a book entitled *Art Therapy in a Children's Community* (XI.10). Similarly, the seemingly neutral word "social" shows up only twice, and in both instances, again, the word refers to a highly specific context, including the phrase "social studies" (III.C.8), and then in Series V., with regard to social events that took place at the Art Barge.

¹² Notably, in a consolidation of authoritarian power, Stalin disbanded Communist International in 1943.

Then I noticed the word “Protest” describing folder X.A.15. Thinking that perhaps my critique was premature, I soon discovered that the term referred to several letters written between 1972 and 1977 in opposition to the closing of the East Hampton Medical Center. Elsewhere, there is one catalog reference that contains the word “Soviet.” On closer examination, this consisted of a folder hosting a sheet of glass slides that document a 1944 exhibition of Russian children’s art. Safe enough. Then I happened across a second reference to the USSR while paging through the archive’s materials. But this turned out to be a 1943 MoMA-sponsored publication entitled *Art in American Education and Society*, which included the article, “Art in Soviet Russia Since War Began.” Of course, the years 1943 and 1944 fall comfortably within the short-lived historical bubble when the US and USSR forged its wartime alliance, but also, as argued earlier, when the Committee expressed its own overtly anti-fascist position. Nevertheless, the terms “fascism,” “fascist,” and “anti-fascist” make no appearance in the online MoMA catalog for The Victor D’Amico Papers, neither in the 1940s nor anytime afterward.

Turning away from the catalog index for a moment, there is a brief mention in the 1947 National Committee on Art Education newsletter (VIII.C.2) that alludes to a protest lodged against the State Department over the termination of a traveling contemporary art exhibition. Most likely, the exhibition in question was *Advancing American Art*, a US State Department–funded project aimed at promoting Western cultural freedoms to foreign intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Latin America.¹³ The title *Advancing American Art* tells it all, with the exhibition consisting primarily of “advanced” works of experimental and abstract art, as well as some pieces made by artists with links to leftist politics including the CPUSA. But following a bevy of harsh criticism in 1947 by the American public, and even harsher denunciations by conservative and right-wing politicians, the project was canceled and the works sold off.

One such repudiation came from a Republican Representative from Michigan who went so far as to assert that modern art is communistic “because it is distorted and ugly, because it does not glorify our beautiful country.”¹⁴ While the propaganda value of contemporary art and literature for promoting American political as well as capitalist values abroad is, by now, well-established thanks to such scholars as Serge Guilbaut, Eva Cockcroft, and Frances Stonor Saunders, the controversy and canceling of the exhibition *Advancing American Art* reveals an early stage of what we today call the cultural wars.

¹³ See Taylor Littleton and Maltby Sykes, eds., *Advancing American Art: Painting, Politics, and Cultural Confrontation at Mid-Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

¹⁴ See comments by Congressman George A. Dondero cited in John Henry Merryman and Albert Edward Elsen eds., *Law, Ethics, and the Visual Arts* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 645.

In the immediate postwar moment, this culture clash was being played out with life-changing consequences as anti-communist and pro-nationalist populists in the US decried leftist political influences on American society. This was happening even as culturally savvy federal agents in the State Department and CIA sought to channel some of this same progressive sentiment into pro-American propaganda. We should also not forget that all of this was taking place just one year before the infamous HUAC investigation of the so-called Hollywood Ten, in which US film industry screenwriters, producers, and directors were charged with insidiously weaving communist propaganda into their cinematic products.

The writing on the wall was difficult to ignore. Even the appearance of being “soft” on communism could lead to severe negative consequences for one’s career and well-being. It was a lesson unlikely lost on D’Amico, any more than the members of the Committee, MoMA’s directors, or the educational staff. That politically vivid spark in 1942 that initiated MoMA’s overt commitment to anti-fascist art education appears, in retrospect, to be an anomaly. Starting around 1945, but certainly by 1948, the D’Amico Paper’s Container List seems increasingly focused on art education methodologies rooted in formalist experimentation, abstraction, and hands-on instruction into artistic materials and techniques.

A folder dated June 3, 1947, lists MoMA’s curriculum for returning World War II veterans with the following courses:

- City Planning
- Jewelry & Metalwork
- Woodworking
- Beginning Drawing & Painting
- Advanced Drawing & Painting
- Fundamentals of Design
- Lettering, Layout, & Typography
- Screen Printing
- Graphic Arts
- Illustration
- Wood Engraving
- Sculpture & Ceramics

Clearly, the emphasis on practical and commercial arts-based disciplines, such as design, typography, screen-printing, jewelry, and illustration makes perfect sense for retraining a population of soldiers seeking a return to productive civilian life. At the same time, the influence of Walter Gropius and his workshop-based Bauhaus curriculum is also apparent. Many of the Subseries III documents include various projects, or works in progress, produced by veterans and children studying under the tutelage of

materials-based art education. And perhaps this depoliticized pedagogical shift makes sense if we adhere to the adage of *l'art pour l'art*. Or, as D'Amico believed, art education should follow philosopher John Dewey's influential notion that a developmental approach toward creative expressivity not only provides a foundation for the process of learning in itself, but also for the maturation of good citizenship.¹⁵

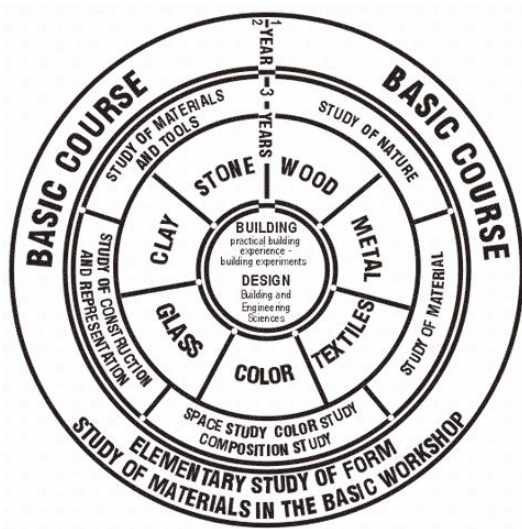


Diagram of the Bauhaus art education curriculum, 1920–30

And yet, isn't the very separation of art from unpleasant social realities what helped spur the culture of European fascism? Recall the Nazi party's condemnation of modernism as both non-Aryan and degenerate. Not only did the National Socialist Party target experimental and abstract art, but it also condemned works of art with political or socially critical content. In any case, the apolitical shift visible within the D'Amico Papers' index stems from 1948—just one year after Voice of America began transmission into the USSR, when Poland became a communist nation, and when President Harry S. Truman enacted the Truman Doctrine to “contain” Soviet expansion by supplying millions of US dollars in aid to pro-Western forces in the Greek civil war.

Though 1947 is typically considered the start of the Cold War, in 1948, with the Berlin Blockade of Eastern Germany and the Foley Square trials of CPUSA members in New York City, we see a crucial turning point in American politics away from anti-fascism and toward widespread anti-communism. Fear and self-censorship were inevitable. For this reason, the name change of MoMA's The War Veterans' Art Center to The People's Art Center, in 1948, is intriguing. Based purely on MoMA's art education

¹⁵ A recent book by curator Mary Jane Jacob stresses this point. See Mary Jane Jacob, *Dewey for Artists* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

program's broader shift in emphasis, this brand makeover suggests a possible goal of establishing a non-left but still populist cultural alternative that might counter communist influences within the broader community of "advanced" artists. Recall that only four years earlier, Pablo Picasso was interviewed for the French Communist Party's daily paper *L'Humanité* under the heading, "Why I Joined the Communist Party."¹⁶



Victor D'Amico by Sara Torres Vega

It does seem that having drilled a contrary mineshaft through MoMA's D'Amico Papers, we wind up with an unbounded series of tunnels and winding passages meandering in-between and just below the surface of the collection. Still, my intention was not to undermine the D'Amico narrative as presented by the archive, but rather to better locate the man that the MoMA catalog describes as a proponent of "progressive museum art education," and a promulgator of a "progressive ideal of art education for a range of populations: children, adults, families, veterans, and seniors."¹⁷

To what degree a more thorough excavation of his papers would prove, or disprove, any of this conjecture is unclear, especially given what seems to be an effort to keep the political and ideological conflicts, which must have been present throughout the tumultuous decades covered by the collection, well out of sight, or at least out of the catalog index entries. With over thirty-six linear feet of materials to mine, finding a definitive answer to my inquiry, if one exists, would constitute a very long-term project. In the meantime, I offer up this speculative sketch of an archive that we can't wholly see.

¹⁶ See Pablo Picasso, "Why I Joined the Communist Party," *Art Theory, Art Zoo*, <http://theoria.art-zoo.com/why-i-joined-the-communist-party-pablo-picasso/>.

¹⁷ Cited in the abstract for the Overview of the Collection, and from the statement on the Scope and Content, The Victor D'Amico Papers in The Museum of Modern Art Archives, The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/damicof>.