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# The Founding of **Artists Equity Association** After World War II

DAVID M. SOKOL

In an era in which the art market is booming, in which museums and institutes of contemporary art are devoted exclusively to displaying the work of living American artists, when almost all city newspapers cover the exhibitions of these artists, and the availability of information about their work is accompanied by richly colored illustrations in dozens of general and specialized art periodicals, it is hard to realize how little attention was paid to American artists and the prevailing economic conditions at the end of World War II. The government support for artists that had been available through the work relief programs during the Great Depression and the early years of the war and the accompanying exhibitions of their work had disappeared; at the same time, collectors still looked to Europe for works by artists who had secure international reputations. In addition, in the immediate postwar period the idea of organized artists was looked on with suspicion by conservative critics and legislators, first because of lingering antipathy to the activism of such groups as the Artists' Union and secondly because of the developing Cold War mentality.<sup>1</sup> In this social and economic climate, Artists Equity Association, an important and successful organization, was created to protect the economic position of living American artists and to integrate them as much as possible into the fabric of postwar American life. Artists and dealers today tend to take for granted many of the issues that impelled AEA to organize, and I hope to increase general awareness of and to give a historical context for the organization by this investigation of its founding in 1947.

During the late 1960s and the early 1970s there was a busy period of discovery and great enthusiasm for everything relating to the structure of the government art programs during the Depression and the work of the artists and administrators who played important roles in the organizational structures of the Federal Art Project and other public art programs.<sup>2</sup> Old records, archives, and letters in the hands of artists and admin-

istrators who were still living were all eagerly consulted by a new generation of scholars who were either interested in the parallels to the new Great Society creations of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities or had come upon the earlier histories of major figures in postwar abstraction. Excellent work followed by scholars who explored, cataloged, and analyzed the murals and other works in individual states, often first in the form of Ph.D. dissertations that were later published as books or exhibition catalogues.<sup>3</sup>

Although there had been some attention to the artists' organizations of both the period during and immediately after the Depression and World War II, most of that material was journalistic rather than scholarly, with many local newspapers in large cities devoting frequent coverage to both organized groups like the Artists' Union and to groups that met in favorite haunts.<sup>4</sup> When the major histories and surveys of American art were being written in the 1960s and early 1970s, the organizations that the artists had joined and the political issues they discussed were usually touched on only in passing. It was not until the later part of the 1970s and into the 1980s that the organizations and their political life were taken up as subjects for serious study. Several scholars began to document the role of the artists in general political activity within the relief projects, others concentrated on the content of the art, and a few commented on the artists' relationships with the Communist Party, the John Reed Club, the Artists' Union, and the American Artists' Congress.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of the formal institutions and organizations through which American artists attempted to obtain economic viability was downplayed. Scholarly treatment of postwar artistic developments concentrated on explaining the rise of Abstract Expressionism as an "American" art form and as successor to the great avant-garde tradition of modernism in France.<sup>6</sup> In 1983 Serge Guilbaut made his audacious claim that the suc-

EQUITY ASSOCIATION

AEA

PRESIDENT: YASUO KUNIYOSHI • HONORARY PRESIDENT: LEON KROLL  
VICE PRESIDENTS: JOHN TAYLOR ARMS, WILLIAM S. HAYTER, PAUL MANSHIP,  
HENRY SCHNAKENBERG, EUGENE SPEICHER, WILLIAM ZORACH  
SECRETARY: FRANK KLEINHOLZ • TREASURER: JOSEPH HIRSCH

PROGRAM OF THE  
**FIRST ANNUAL MEETING**

AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK CITY

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 30, 1947, 8:30 P.M.

**RENE D'HARONCOURT** OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

**YASUO KUNIYOSHI** CHAIRMAN OF MEETING  
PRESIDENT OF ARTISTS EQUITY

**ANTOINETTE KRAUSHAAR** OF THE KRAUSHAAR GALLERY

**INTRODUCTION OF THE NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
OF ARTISTS EQUITY**

**JULIANA FORCE** OF THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

**ELMER RICE** OF THE DRAMATISTS GUILD

**HARRY STERNBERG** CHAIRMAN OF THE PROGRAM COMMITTEE

**DISCUSSION PERIOD FOR MEMBERS AND GUESTS**

**LEON KROLL** HONORARY PRESIDENT OF ARTISTS EQUITY

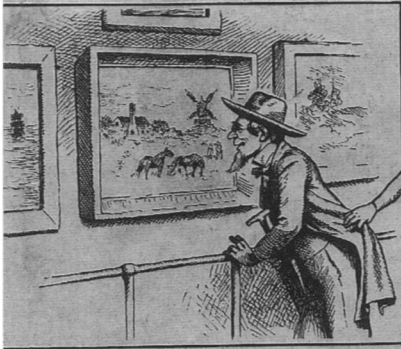
Flyer for the first meeting at the Museum of Modern Art, 1947, New York Artists Equity Association Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

cess of Abstract Expressionism was due more to cultural imperialism and government support for America's claim to legitimate artistic leadership than to aesthetic considerations, and since then revisionism and counter-revisionist arguments have centered on the innovative quality of Abstract Expressionism, debated the centrality of European thought, and analyzed the

writings and pronouncements of the artists and their critic apologists, all without much regard to how the economic issues were being addressed by the artists themselves in this period.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note the political climate in which the artists found themselves at the end of World War II. Having produced murals that graced our public

"WE ASKED FOR EQUITY . . . BUT THERE WAS NO EQUITY."  
George Washington XXX 3:15:47



TRUST NOT THE MAN WHO HATH PICTURES IN HIS HEART."  
Michelangelo: Circa 1549

"HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL IN THE HUMAN BREAST."  
Machiavelli: PL:3:02:8



there is but one answer:

# ARTISTS EQUITY

SUBSCRIPTION \$1.00  
ENTERTAINMENT  
DANCING  
PLUS those new Broadway sensations  
Frankincense & Myrrh  
"... they stoned Goliath for less."  
—Variety



whose founders most cordially invite you to a

## PARTY AND BALL



in celebration of the promising future of this most worthy organization.

at CARAVAN HALL, 110 East 59th Street

on a most fitting date, April 1, 1947 — a Tuesday from 9 PM

**DANCE**

"HOW PLEASANT IT IS TO HAVE MONEY!" *The man in the Street*



"ART IS A JEALOUS MISTRESS, AND IF A MAN HAVE A  
GENIUS HE MAKES A BAD HUSBAND AND AN ILL PRO-  
VIDER." Emerson

"TOO POOR TO PAINT AND TOO PROUD TO WHITEWASH."  
*The man in the Studio*

"THE UNION OF HEARTS, THE UNION OF HANDS." *Madame Equity*



Flyer for 1947 Artists' Equity Ball, designed by Ad Reinhardt, New York Artists Equity Association Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

buildings and then worked to support the war effort, after the war most artists hoped for a period of extended support for the arts through both government and private patronage. Most were enthusiastic about proposed cultural exchanges with our recent allies, including the Soviet Union, and delighted when State Department officials J. LeRoy Davidson and

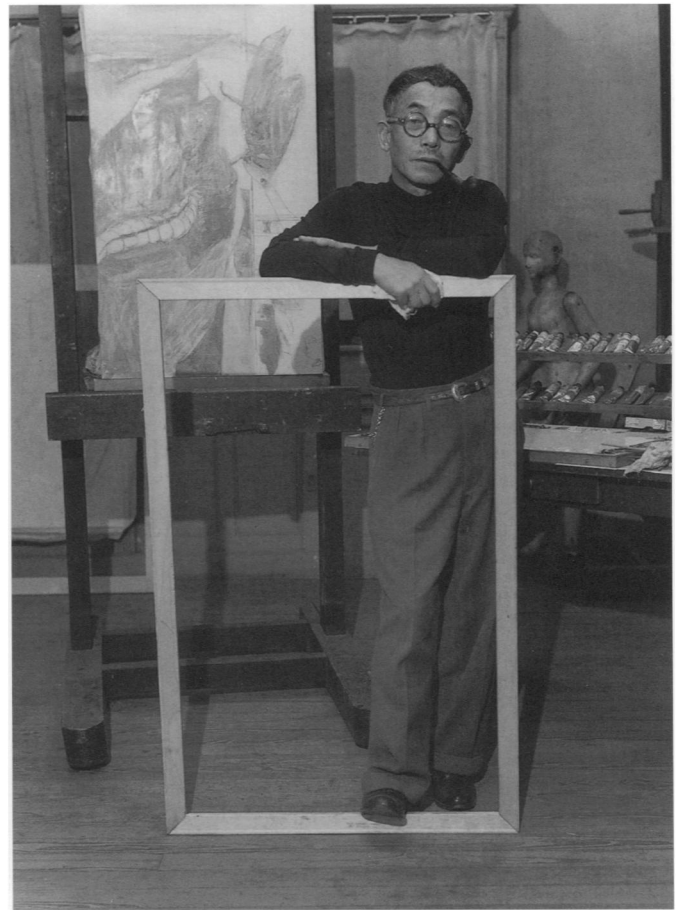
Richard Heindel purchased 152 oils and watercolors by American artists from which they meant to create a number of exhibitions that would tour the world. The works included lyrical abstractions by William Baziotes and Georgia O'Keeffe, geometric abstractions by Ralston Crawford and George L. K. Morris, biomorphic surrealist images by Byron Browne and Adolph Got-

tlieb, and figural pieces by Robert Gwathmey, Reginald Marsh, and Yasuo Kuniyoshi. The series of exhibitions, called "Advancing American Art," first opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1946 and then began to tour Europe, as planned. The European versions were received most favorably, but the American press, particularly the Hearst chain of newspapers and *Look* magazine, denounced the works, the artists, and the program. The artists were portrayed as leftist radicals who were set on destroying conventional artistic standards as part of their antidemocratic and radical egalitarianism.

The press coverage was strident and persistent, using satire and exaggeration to make its objections clear, and at least some negative public reaction reached both the State Department and Congress. The Republican Party leadership in Congress latched on to the issue as a way of embarrassing President Truman, but the president himself had an extremely conservative tastes in art and architecture and rejected any kind of artistic abstraction. Eventually, the senior State Department official who supported the program, William Benton, a collector and the publisher of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, was forced by Secretary of State George Marshall to cut the exhibitions short. Fearing repercussions on other State Department programs, Davidson resigned, the remaining exhibitions were cancelled, and the art was sold at a public sale by the War Assets Administration in 1948.<sup>8</sup>

The climate worsened with continued attacks by such conservative Republican representatives as Fred Busbey of Illinois and George Dondero of Michigan, and when Joseph McCarthy became their leader in Congress, the conservatives' power and strength was consolidated. Their position combined a traditional American suspicion of government support for the arts, a fear of foreign contamination of American values, and a willingness to attack both artists and their art for political exposure, and it prompted some of the art world leaders to move to create some kind of organization that could speak to artists' needs and help to define and improve their place in society.

The need for some sort of organization to support their economic interests was obvious to many artists, whether or not they had been active in the more radical groups of the Depression era or had participated in protests about cuts in the WPA as the federal relief programs were slashed and eligibility rules were made more stringent. Late in 1946, in response to attacks on the "Advancing American Art" run at the Metropolitan Museum, several groups of artists and other cultural leaders met (independently of each other) to discuss the antagonism of both Congress and much of the print media, as well as to voice support for greater government support of the arts. One such ad hoc organization, "The Round Table on the Creative Arts," brought together men in positions of authority and leadership in the arts: René d' Harmoncourt from the Museum of



Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Photographs of Artists—Collection I, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Modern Art, Daniel Catton Rich from the Art Institute of Chicago, the composer Howard Hanson, the poet Archibald MacLeish, and Hudson D. Walker of the American Federation of the Arts.<sup>9</sup>

Other men who were influential in cultural organizations were thinking along the same lines, including Theodore Spector, a government lawyer and part-time painter, and the painter George Biddle. In a series of letters in mid- to late 1946, Spector outlined his objectives for a yet-to-be-named "national society of artists," and tried to enlist support of people of influence in the broader world of culture.<sup>10</sup> Writing to Henry O'Connor, the president of the elite Salmagundi Club in New York, Spector noted the following issues as important to the economic well-being of the artist: royalties and rents from licenses to reproduce an artist's work, the need for fees when reproductions of works are sold, the deaccession of traditional work so museums could buy contemporary art, and for public awards to artists for outstanding contributions in the field of art. Spector also supported the concept of having one or two percent of the cost of new building construction set aside for purchase and commission of art, a formula first proposed by Edward Bruce, the late head of the Public Works of Art Program and other Treasury

Department art projects.<sup>11</sup> Biddle supported all the economic ideas behind Spector's plan, but he was not sure at the time of the need for a new organization. Biddle had a very clear recollection of artists being arrested and brought to trial when they had organized and gone on strike to protest their lack of appropriate working conditions and actual pay cuts under the WPA arts program. In addition, his substantial political sophistication and experiences during the life of the recently ended government programs and their critics had taught him to be leery of the possible political overtones of such an organization.<sup>12</sup> He proposed working under the umbrella of an existing organization, such as the Audubon Artists, and suggested that they should wait until the political situation improved. Spector's reply rejected both the umbrella concept and the desire for delay: "Existing organizations adhere to a familiar pattern and their objectives are not broad enough generally to permit progress without complete reorganization." He also responded: "As to the delay you suggested because of the political situation, I feel that artists and their organizations should be free from the effects of political changes."<sup>13</sup> Actually, Spector got very little support from any of the people he contacted other than Biddle, and his activities seem to have gone into abeyance until the plan of a new and important group

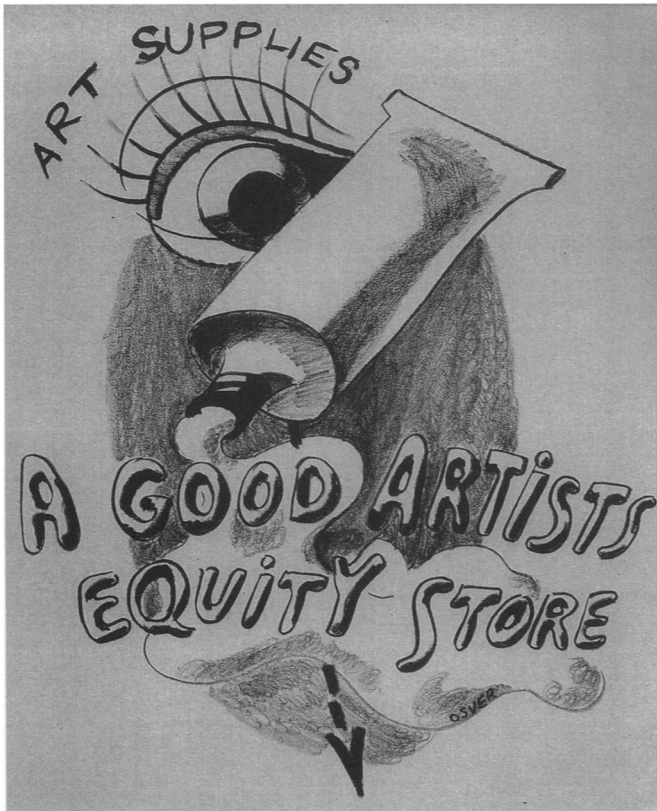
were made known to him in March 1947.<sup>14</sup> He then approached the artists who he heard were planning to start a new organization and offered to work with them in some sort of paid position.

Artists Equity Association, organized at the same time that Spector was proposing a similar kind of organization, did everything possible to avoid identification with any political ideology. Fully aware that they had learned something during both the Great Depression and the war about both generating public support and the need to band together, the founding artists developed the structure of an organization that also scrupulously avoided any aesthetic allegiance and tried never to take public stands other than on matters of financial importance to its member artists.

The guiding genius and founder of Artists Equity was Yasuo Kuniyoshi, one of the most vilified artists of the immediate postwar period, whose somewhat distorted figures of performers and workers in moments of repose became the symbols of all that was bad about contemporary art in the eyes of conservatives in the press and Congress who wished to put an end to any financial support of the arts by the federal government. Kuniyoshi had a great deal of experience as an artist-activist, having been a vice president of the American Artists' Congress before World War II and president of

1948 Artists Equity Association banquet in honor of Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Mitzi Gallant Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.





"A Good Artists Equity Store"—advertisement from 1950 Spring Fantasia Masquerade Ball Album, New York Artists Equity Association Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

An American Group during the war. Galvanized by the modest prospects for artists after the end of the federal art projects and the loss of opportunities for artists with the end of the wartime economy, and feeling that government hostility to the arts made the renewal of any kind of federal art project unlikely, he met during the latter half of 1946 with like-minded friends and created both a new organization and a new approach that would bring artists together to work on behalf of their economic well-being.

Many conversations that led up to the founding of AEA took place in the summer and early fall of 1946 in Woodstock, New York. Kuniyoshi was one of a large number of artists who either lived full-time in or around Woodstock or spent their summers there (as he did). These men and women were the people with whom he shared his ideas about an organization that would address the pressing economic issues they all faced; not surprisingly, large numbers of Woodstock artists were active in the early years of the association.

There was enough interest on the part of a group of highly influential artists that a number of them met at the New York office of the American Federation of Arts on 15 November 1946, through the courtesy of the AFA's president, Hudson Walker.<sup>15</sup> There were additional meetings during the next few weeks and, as the

new year began, the fledgling organization began to take its mature form. Kuniyoshi's political astuteness helped him to bring in well-known artists of every aesthetic and ideological stripe, while making it known that politics of any sort were to be avoided. He was remarkably successful in attracting both long-established figures and active young artists, including conservative figurative and landscape artists and young abstractionists. The more recognized artists in the group included Max Weber, Paul Strand, Ben Shahn, Charles Sheeler, William Gropper, Philip Evergood, George Biddle, John Sloan, Raphael Soyer, Guy Pène du Bois, Isamu Noguchi, Henry Varnum Poor, Reginald Marsh, Gifford Beal, and Jo Davidson; Julio de Diego, Paul Burlin, Peter Blume, Abraham Rattner, Jack Levine, Doris Lee, Jacob Lawrence, David Smith, Romare Bearden, and Morris Kantor were among the younger members.

Kuniyoshi avoided the pitfalls of those Armory Show organizers who had listed artists without their consent, and he personally contacted each artist whose support he wanted. Even so, some of the more established artists were wary or unclear about the purpose of the organization and refused membership when approached. Those who refused membership or a place on the proposed board of directors did so without rancor. Stuart Davis was one, writing to Kuniyoshi—Yas, to his friends—on 19 February 1947:

*Dear Yas:*

*In regard to your invitation to join the proposed Artists Equity, there are a number of questions about it in my mind that cannot be settled offhand. It will be necessary for me to decline at this time. I appreciate your having taken the trouble to tell me all about it, and maybe later on the validity of the project will become clearer to me.<sup>16</sup>*

Others felt that they could not afford to spend the time required of officers in a new organization and declined that role with every indication of interest in the aims of the organization and with expressions of their obvious respect for Kuniyoshi himself.

A great deal of work was done by the group that sat on the first board, which established a membership structure, found an office space to rent, solicited members for a National Board from throughout the country, and got public relations and legal matters in hand before announcing the creation of the new organization.<sup>17</sup> In just four months, between the 15 November meeting and mid-March, things were sufficiently well organized that a general press release was distributed on 25 March 1947 that began:

*More than 160 well-known American artists have united in establishing Artists Equity Association, it was announced today by Yasuo Kuniyoshi, President. The new organization was described as the first of its kind in the United States to advance the economic interests of painters, sculptors, and graphic artists.*

*Private and institutional patronage of the arts will be*



Cover of 1953 Masquerade Ball Album, New York Artists Equity Association Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

*encouraged as one of the Association's chief objectives. The group, which represents artists of every school, will endeavor to maintain and extend the importance of American art.*<sup>18</sup>

The press release went on to note the address of the temporary headquarters at 400 Madison Avenue, to state that the dues had been fixed at \$12.00 a year, and to note that the dues would be used to pay operating expenses and the salary of an executive secretary.

The same document succinctly articulated what the fledgling organization meant to advocate:

*Legislation designed to help the fine arts will be encouraged. Standards of procedure will be set up to protect the artist and reputable dealers and agents from unscrupulous practices. Problems of copyright, reproduction, and royalties will be regulated. A clearing house will be provided for vital professional information for artists and a welfare fund will be established.*

*The Artists Equity Association will work closely with museums, educational institutions, industrial organizations and other art organizations to achieve its objectives.*<sup>19</sup>

Several of the artist members had acquaintances within the theater and music communities and they looked to Actors Equity and ASCAP as models. The initial press release pointed out how much AEA would follow their leads, quoting Kuniyoshi as saying: "The creative artist in every other field of expression in America has an organization dedicated to the expansion and protection of his economic interests. . . . Artists Equity Association has been organized to fill the artist's need for a counterpart of the Author's League."<sup>20</sup> In an article in *Art Digest* that appeared just one week after the official announcement of AEA's founding, the conservative critic Peyton Boswell approvingly noted that it was "taking its cue" from the actor and musician groups.<sup>21</sup> Elmer Price, a past president of Actors Equity and an active participant in the Dramatists Guild, was a featured speaker at the first general meeting of the AEA, where he informed the audience of the benefits of organization, averring that "economic benefits can come about only if the organization is in a strong bargaining position by reason of its wide and complete membership in the field."<sup>22</sup>

Kuniyoshi had also established a group of regional directors who were specifically not the presidents of autonomous chapters. Among this group he also maintained a balance between traditional and avant-garde artists, between young and old, and between political liberals and conservatives: Thomas Hart Benton of Kansas City, Kenneth Callahan of Seattle, Lamar Dodd of Athens [Georgia], Milton Horn of Olivet [Michigan], Rico Lebrun of Santa Barbara, Ralph Stackpole of San Francisco, and Andrew Wyeth of Chadds Ford were all listed in the original press release. Within a year the national board included such additional well-established national figures as Charles Burchfield of Buffalo, Richard Florsheim of Chicago, Mervin Jules of Northampton [Massachusetts], and John McCrady of New Orleans.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly in an organization founded by a Japanese American who had experienced real racial discrimination, the AEA was broadly based, with an initial board of directors that included five women and African American, Hispanic, and Asian American members.

Although the full range of artistic expression was accommodated in AEA ranks, one of the more vexing membership questions was the definition of a professional artist. Rather than setting some aesthetic standard and having to pass judgment on the work of individual applicants or using some variable such as education or training, the working criterion became professional recognition: all painters, sculptors, and graphic artists (including photographers) whose work had been included in a major exhibition or who had had a one-person exhibition at a what they termed a "recog-





Saks Fifth Avenue window display designed by David Smith and Jimmy Ernst, 1950, New York Artists Equity Association Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

nized" dealer were deemed eligible for membership on submission of their evidence and the payment of the \$12.00 dues. The interpretation of "recognized" could and did become contentious from time to time, as the burden of providing proof was placed on the would-be members who were not automatically accepted as artists; in the end, the desire for inclusiveness usually carried the day.<sup>24</sup>

After all of the behind-the-scenes work, the correspondence with prospective officers and regional directors, and the careful work to bring in the widest range of representation among artists, the first regular public meeting of the organization was held at the Museum of Modern Art on 30 April 1947, a finely tuned and carefully planned event with about four hundred people in attendance. The official speakers included Kuniyoshi, Elmer Rice of Actors Equity, Hudson Walker, the unpaid executive director of the new organization, and Leon Kroll, who was honorary president. René d'Harnoncourt, the director of MoMA; Juliana Force of the Whitney Museum; and the respected art dealer Antoinette Kraushaar also attended. Many members of

the audience rose to speak in favor of the new organization and its aims, including John Sloan, George Biddle, and Max Weber; even Francis H. Taylor, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, voiced his encouragement.<sup>25</sup>

President Kuniyoshi's address not only outlined the aims of the organization, but gave the assembled crowd a witty and picturesque description of the way the group had developed its initial structure:

*I am to talk on the structure of Artists Equity Association, a rather dry topic, but I will try to do my best with it. Let us take a very ordinary comparison of a horse drawn two-wheeled wagon. This sturdy cart bedecked with hundreds of artists is Equity's membership. The Board of Governors are one wheel and the Regional Directors the other. The horse, who responds to giddyap and whoa, that's the officers, consisting of Honorary President, President, 6 Vice Presidents, Treasurer and Secretary.<sup>26</sup>*

Kuniyoshi welcomed both the membership and their distinguished museum guests and outlined the history that led up to AEA's founding, going on to address

most of the issues facing the artists. The artists' concerns about government support for the arts were made loud and clear when Hudson Walker proposed a resolution urging Secretary of State George C. Marshall not to cancel the "Advancing American Art" exhibition that was under such attack in the Hearst-controlled press:

*No Government fulfills its duty if it fails to foster and promote the art of its People. Leadership which does not recognize and use the creative imagination of its artists impoverishes itself, and is a poor and unbalanced expression of the spirit of its people. As professional soldiers lead a people in a war, as scientists map out programs in science, so artists should have the voice of authority in matters pertaining to the encouragement and the growth of the arts.<sup>27</sup>*

Kuniyoshi intended to get support at the first meeting for a specific and concrete program rather than just have good feelings and resolutions about individual issues. Therefore, the program chairman, Harry Sternberg, was ready with a fifteen-point program for action by the organization during its first year that included plans for a written constitution, a legal service for members, a welfare fund for members with emergency needs, an initiative to get artists covered by Social Security, and a group health insurance plan. The more general issues of rental fees, clarification of copyright law and reproduction rights, artists' rights in the use of their art in the new medium of television, and the representation of artists on museum boards were also included in the plan. Last, some broad public policy issues were enumerated, such as the need for state and federal art projects, the desire for a working relationship with UNESCO, the necessity of surveys of all aspects of the economics of culture, and the value of a coordinating committee to work with any other organizations that might be working on causes in common.<sup>28</sup> The program was approved as presented, and the organization was off and running.

AEA was greeted warmly by the art press, all of which covered the meeting at MoMA, as it was by major museum leaders and dealers in contemporary art. *Art Digest*, for example, noted that: "If a bomb had dropped on the Museum of Modern art [sic], the evening of April 30, it would probably have set American art back a quarter century," as part of its introduction of the new organization.<sup>29</sup> The editor of *Pictures on Exhibit* devoted his "Editor's Corner" column for May to a warm welcome for the new organization. He opened with: "A new deal is in the making for the painters, sculptors and print-makers of this country. And it is not something that is being done for them by others; they are setting up this new deal themselves." After lambasting the American public for its preference for European art in general and modern French art in particular, he pointed out the need for action on the many economic issues facing artists, lauding AEA for addressing those issues, and ended his comments with

an expression of his expectation that they would succeed:

*This magazine cordially welcomes and endorses the newly organized Artist Equity association, which has been formed exactly and solely for this purpose. . . . With an organization in such strong numbers, they will be able to standardize and regularize all their business dealings, eliminate unfair practices and impositions, and get a uniformly fair return on the uses made of their art. This will work to the advantage of the art dealers as well as to the artists themselves. The way has already been blazed by The Actors Equity, and The American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers. Now the painters, sculptors and printmakers of this country will get the new deal that long has been coming to them.<sup>30</sup>*

Both the general and the arts-oriented press supported the idea of artists working together on behalf of their economic interests, though there was little written about the actual structure that Kuniyoshi had developed. Seeking both to emulate successful businesses in corporate America and to provide opportunities for contact with other organizations in a way that would make their members as comfortable with artists as possible, he made up committees on Finance, Welfare Fund, Museum, Public Relations, Publications, Artist-Dealer Relations, and many others. Each had a chairman, some even had co-chairs, and surprisingly women chaired or co-chaired committees in much higher proportion than their numbers among the general membership would suggest. There were actually so many committees that both overlap and inactivity occurred. Within three years, the *Newsletter* announced a major reorganization necessitated by the reality that the "list of committees made up a very impressive catalogue of activities, but it bore little relation to the actual work being done."<sup>31</sup> Fewer and more efficient committees were chaired by a group loyal to the president, some of them based neither in New York nor Woodstock, for instance Richard Florsheim in Chicago and Mitchell Siporin in Boston. Under the leadership of Siporin, well placed as a professor of art at Brandeis University, excellent legal and accounting consultants were attracted, and the fledgling organization recognized the importance of presenting itself in the best possible light by retaining the public relations firm that had announced its founding.

AEA continued to grow very rapidly, reaching a membership of over a thousand by the time of the first anniversary meeting in 1948. On 30 April, one year to the day after the first meeting, the attendance of over two hundred forced the group to meet at the Plaza Hotel, and an Equity Ball was held there that same evening. As the president was proud to announce, there had been real growth and accomplishment the first year, with over \$5000 in the treasury and \$1500 in the Welfare Fund. A constitution had been approved, a group health insurance plan was in the works, a separate not-for-profit support fund had been

established, and the Equity attorney, Joshua Cahn, had already written a handbook, *Copyright in Works of Art*, that the organization sold for \$1.00 per copy.<sup>32</sup>

Politics, both aesthetic and social, threatened to destabilize the group from the outset, something Peyton Boswell had cautioned the group about in his commentary in *Art Digest* at the time of the first annual meeting in 1947:

*It is to be hoped that Artists Equity will remember those words when the first do-gooder arises in meeting to advance the fortunes of some politician or espouse some social cause, no matter how worthy. Otherwise, all their ambitious plans will be wrecked amid partisan debate—and the end will be that of the WPA-bred Artists Union, which was more concerned with picketing than painting. . . . This they may be able to accomplish, if they avoid political entanglements and partisan fissure along aesthetic lines.*<sup>33</sup>

Kuniyoshi and his friends took that message completely to heart, and the leaders did everything to keep the members' political activity distinct from their work on behalf of AEA. But it was not easy to do so, and cliques were formed along lines that related to the political sympathies of the artists.<sup>34</sup>

The issue of politics and political sympathies remained uppermost in the minds of many, as correspondence between Henry Schnakenberg and Kuniyoshi two years after the founding of AEA makes clear. Representing the organization, Schnakenberg had met with leaders of the museum and gallery worlds to discuss attacks on modern art by conservative critics and come away with a sense that suggested concern about the appearance of political issues should be of far greater concern to AEA. He wrote to Kuniyoshi about this on 14 June 1949:

*Last Wednesday I went to the meeting of the informal committee which has been started to formulate plans to combat the increasing attacks on the more experimental forms of contemporary art. Any moves to be made are for the time being indefinite.*

*The one thing I did discover, which I feel I should let you know about, is the real worry on the part of all about Equity. Those present—Alfred Frankfurter, Emily Genauer, Alfred Barr, Eloise and Otto Spaeth, Bob Hale, Lloyd Goodrich, Aline Louchheim, Antoinette Kraushaar, and a few others are all friends of Equity and want very much to see us take the very important place that we rightfully should take. At the meeting and after to me personally several of them stated that they feel Equity is in a dangerous position with so many of radical leanings in key positions. This, they consider, leaves us open to private and public attacks and also prevents a number from joining who would otherwise do so if they had more confidence that Equity was not just another "front" organization. I gave my positive assurance that there had been no action taken by Equity that could in any way be thought of as "putting us in the red." I also said that*

*there had been several changes which had come about quite naturally in some of the officers. But Frankfurter and Barr especially still felt that the line-up leaned heavily toward the radical—not in art of course but in politics.*

*I must say I too think we have a number whose greater loyalties lie elsewhere and who would not hesitate to use their influence in Equity to further other causes, even if Equity suffered thereby. What is to be done about it, I do not know. I merely feel, that you should know, as you probably do already, how friends of Equity are concerned about its future. We already know how our enemies think and that they will not stop trying to put us out of business. If there is anything we can fairly do to make ourselves less vulnerable it should be done. I'm afraid, as others are, that if Equity fails there will be no chance to form another artists' organization in a long, long time.*<sup>35</sup>

Kuniyoshi's response shows just how aware he was of the danger, and how committed he was to making the organization succeed:

*Thank you for your letter giving me more details on the committee and your reactions obtained from the other members. I am aware of the difficulties that lie ahead but believe that with constant vigilance we can keep things under control.*

*I know how ruthless their tactics can be [i.e., members with political agendas], but I feel that since their own personal economic status is involved that they will be careful and not dare use Equity as a front organization. We won't let them. I don't know what else we can do, since they were duly elected by the membership. We can only build trust by reporting our activities as often as possible to friends and those associated with Equity so as to assure them of our intentions and objectives, which we must repeat again and again.*<sup>36</sup>

President Kuniyoshi was very successful in getting his policies and agenda approved, but the one major battle he lost in the first two years was over the question of local chapters. He had repeatedly argued that there were no chapters of Equity, only regions, but there was irresistible pressure to found local chapters, not the least from New York. His response, in a report to the board was: "Make clear that Artists Equity has no Chapters. Regions have been designated for convenience and points of contact; New York is only one of the regions but since there are more artists in New York the main office is in New York; it could be anywhere."<sup>37</sup> With a large percentage of the national membership living in and near the city, a New York chapter was founded as the result of discussions at a general membership meeting on 15 December 1948. It was provisionally called the New York Metropolitan Area Chapter, and an organizing committee of fifteen members was authorized to facilitate the matter.<sup>38</sup> The new group covered the metropolitan area, but stopped at the Hudson River: there was a New Jersey chapter in Newark and a Woodstock chapter by the time of the annual meeting of 1949. Indeed, as the executive



Yasuo Kuniyoshi, John Sloan, Leon Kroll, and Hudson D. Walker, New York Artists Equity Association Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

director, Hudson Walker, informed prospective members in a letter announcing the first official meeting of the New York chapter, there were Chicago, Boston, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore chapters in place by the end of 1948.<sup>39</sup>

The organization grew and became more effective and widely respected. By the time the delegates met in Chicago in April 1951 for the fourth annual meeting, there were over eighteen hundred members and thirteen active chapters. This was the first annual meeting outside of New York and the last for Kuniyoshi in the role of president, as the constitution limited his tenure to two two-year terms. In his remarks to the delegates, he pointed with pride to the growth and accomplishments of the organization, and there were many: the growth of the Equity Fund to help artists in need, legal aid provided to artists who could not afford paid legal advice, the several Woodstock Conferences on the arts, a Code of Ethics in place, new and active chapters, and committees working with museums and government. Kuniyoshi felt both relief and a real sense of loss at leaving what had been almost a full-time job for him, but noted both that he would still want to be involved as an artist member and that he might have a leadership role again some day.<sup>40</sup>

There were many tributes to the outgoing president, from the membership and from the artistic community in general, and there was clear recognition that without his commitment, perseverance, and effort, the

organization would never have become the large, respected, and influential voice of American artists that it had become. Hudson Walker, who had worked with Kuniyoshi most closely, summed up ten days after his return from Chicago:

*I have been meaning to write you ever since the annual meeting, to let you know how memorable an experience it was to work closely with you the past four years. Your very hard work and the long hours you put in on behalf of Equity, were only matched by your good judgement in handling people and difficult situations. I am going to miss the close association with you, but certainly look forward to have you still involved in Equity's work as Honorary President and Committee member.*

*Your genuinely inspirational leadership and fine sense of humor are the perfect combination for launching a new organization. I do hope you will still keep your eye on Equity to the extent you can spare the time.<sup>41</sup>*

Kuniyoshi had served four years and was succeeded as president by Henry Billings. In recognition of his tremendous contribution, the founding president was elected to the office of honorary president but, already an ill man, he died only two years later on 4 May 1953. Artists Equity continued to enjoy rapid growth through the next few years and made an increasing impact on both the visibility of the artists and their financial conditions. Practical publications were released on taxes and opportunities for exhibiting, and the Woodstock

Conferences of 1949 and 1950 were pioneering events that brought together artist leaders and the directors of major museums to discuss such issues as representation in museum shows, the cost of shipping and insuring their works, participation on juries, and so on.<sup>42</sup> Finally, and most important, a new spirit of cooperation came about among the artists and museums, dealers, the art press, and collectors. Artists Equity had become a truly national organization, and if its principles and pronouncements were not always adopted, they were certainly taken seriously and granted discussion in all quarters.

In spite of its successes, the organization was not fated to endure in that form for long. Tensions between the parent organization and the New York chapter grew worse, and disputes over resources and access caused a split between the two; the eighth president, the sculptor Louise Nevelson, was the last to serve as the national president, from 1963 to 1965. The New York chapter continues with minor name changes, and another National Artists Equity organization is based in Washington D.C. Both continue the heritage of the original Artist Equity Association in their concern for the economic well-being of their members and for such issues as health and life insurance, contracts with dealers, and the health hazards of artist's materials. Kuniyoshi's organization may not have lasted in the form that he wished, and he was unusually prescient about the divisive power of local chapters, but the ideas and ideals that motivated the creation of Artists Equity Association are the basis of many artist cooperatives and incorporated artists organizations today. ▀

## NOTES

I want to thank Josephine Volpe, a 1998 graduate of the Department of Art History and honors student, for her excellent and enthusiastic help in organizing my files, for securing microfilms from the Archives of American Art, and for her many helpful suggestions.

1. There were two major groups identified with political radicalism, the Artists' Union and the American Artists' Congress. The former, organized in 1934, was dedicated to improving the economic lot of the artists working on the federal art projects, but its tactics, including strikes and other forms of political demonstration, were considered to be too socialist in approach and inappropriate in their criticism of the government. The American Artists' Congress was more overtly political, with a platform of opposition to fascism; it had many Marxist members. See Gerald Monroe, "Artists on the Barricades: the Militant Artists' Union Treats with the New Deal," *Archives of American Art Journal* 18 (no. 3, 1978): 20–23; and Richard McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

2. Such pioneering studies as William McDonald's 1946 study that was finally published as *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1969); Francis V. O'Connor's *Federal Art Patronage: 1933–1943* (College Park, Md.: University of Maryland Press, 1966) and his *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (Greenwich, Ct.: New York Graphic Society, 1969); and Richard McKinzie's *The New Deal for Artists* provided the basic documentation on which so many other studies were based.

3. For New York alone, see: Eleanor M. Carr's, "The New Deal and the Sculptor: A Study of Federal Relief to the Sculptor on the New York City Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, 1935–1943" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, Institute of the Fine Arts, 1969); Greta Berman's, "The Lost Years: Mural Painting in New York City Under the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, 1935–1943" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1975); and Karal Ann Marling's *Federal Patronage and the Woodstock Colony* (Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1971).

4. Art magazines like *Pictures on Exhibit*, *Art Digest*, and *Magazine of Art*, and newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune* carried articles almost every week.

5. In addition to the many articles that covered the era were such important exhibition catalogues as Patricia Hills's *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Paintings of the 1930s* (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 1983).

6. Major studies of the era and the success of the abstract artists in New York and the two summer colonies of Woodstock and Provincetown include Irving Sandler's *The New York School: The Painters & Sculptors of the Fifties* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) and his other writings on the period. A more critical examination of the evolution of the New York artists, their European influences, and the meeting of politics and aesthetics can be found in Dore Ashton's *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (New York: Viking, 1972).

7. See Serge Guibault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

8. Margaret Ausfeld and Virginia Mecklenburg's commentary on the immediate postwar reaction to artist's perceived radicalism, *Advancing American Art: Politics and Aesthetics in the State Department Exhibition, 1946–48* (Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), describes the outcry in the news media, the reaction of Congress, and the way that fear for the future of other programs made then Connecticut Senator William Benton, through pressure on Secretary of State George C. Marshall, end the State Department purchase and international display of a quite good collection of American art. A small collection of clippings in the Archives of American Art documents "Advancing American Art"; see *Advancing American Art Records*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 3769, frames 386–663.

9. An advertisement for the meeting of the Round Table appeared in *Magazine of Art* 39 (November 1946): n.p.

10. Spector to Biddle, 11 December 1946: "Thank you very much for your letter endorsing the objectives in my recent letter, for a national society of artists" (The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.); Spector to Aldo Hibbard, 17 March 1947; Spector to Henry O'Connor, 4 December 1946; Spector to Yasuo Kuniyoshi, 7 April 1947. These last three letters were among some photocopies of correspondence about Artists Equity Association that were given to Tom Wolf, a Kuniyoshi scholar at Bard College, by Sara Kuniyoshi, Yasuo Kuniyoshi's widow (hereafter cited as Wolf photocopies).

11. Spector to O'Connor, 4 December 1946, Wolf photocopies.

12. No letter from Biddle to Spector has been located, but Spector's letter to him of 11 December 1946 indicates that Biddle had probably countered some proposal of Spector's for a new organization by suggesting that artists needed to work within the framework of an existing organization: "Thank you very much for your letter endorsing the objectives outlined in my recent letter, for a national society of artists. The suggestion concerning the use of an existing organization, such as the Audubon artists, has received my consideration" (The Archives of New York Artists Equity, Inc.).

13. *Ibid.*

14. Spector to Biddle, 26 March 1947, starts, "I have read in this morning's *New York Times* that an Artists' Equity Association has been formed." Wolf photocopies.

15. "Artist's [sic] Equity," Hudson Walker Papers, Archives of Amer-

- ican Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel D355, frames 1383–1384.
16. Davis to Kuniyoshi, 19 February 1947, Yasuo Kuniyoshi Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
  17. The core of Artists Equity included a large contingent of both summer and year-round residents of Woodstock: Milton and Sally Michel Avery, Arnold Blanch, Paul Burlin, Julio de Diego, Philip Guston, Sidney Laufman, Doris Lee, and Fletcher Martin (author's interviews with Andrée Ruellan and Karl Fortress, Woodstock, N.Y., 1994). All had very solid reputations as serious artists and many of them were also teachers or lecturers at the Woodstock Summer School of The Art Students League of New York.
  18. Win Nathanson & Associates, Inc., press release for Artists Equity Association, 25 March 1947, p. 1, The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.
  19. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
  20. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
  21. Peyton Boswell, "Comments," *Art Digest* (1 April 1947): 7.
  22. *Artist Equity Association Newsletter*, May 1947, p. 1, The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc. In a letter to Elmer Rice, dated 1 May, Kuniyoshi thanked him for his "level-headed address last night. I know that the artists present at the meeting would agree with me that we have a lot to learn from you, and others like you, who have cut the path we are now trying so desperately to make" (Kuniyoshi papers, AAA).
  23. Not all of the early records agree about the original membership, with one undated typed list omitting names on the press release and another including names not mentioned there (The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.). It is probable that some people dropped out of leadership positions and others replaced them. Henry Schnakenberg, for example, is listed as a member of the board in all the official announcements and in Hudson Walker's historical statement quoted above, but he had already asked Kuniyoshi to remove his name as a vice president in a letter written a full month before the press release was written. Like several other potential officers, he was afraid that he couldn't spare the time demanded of those "in responsible positions in our recently formed organization" (Schnakenberg to Kuniyoshi, 24 February 1947, Kuniyoshi papers, AAA). It should be noted however, that the board's membership seems to have been resolved by the end of the first year, judging from the letterhead, newsletters, and other official materials.
  24. There were some disagreements about this matter, especially during the years of Karl Zerbe's greatest involvement, as he expressed a desire for the educational requirement of a college degree. But he was in the minority. Others complained that the ranks were being swollen by Sunday painters and amateurs, but there was no practical effect on the organization through their membership but the benefit of their dues money.
  25. *Artists Equity Association Newsletter*, May 1947, lists the speakers, The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.
  26. Speech, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 30 April 1947, The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc. Kuniyoshi also mentioned that the initial group could "pull the wagon" until the time when the membership reached about five hundred. Finally, continuing the analogy, he defined the president's position as the horse's tail. The meeting and the speech were covered by all of the major New York dailies and the national art press.
  27. *Artists Equity Association Newsletter*, May 1947, The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.
  28. Variations on the fifteen points are found in a number of documents, as they were refined over the first year; a list was published in the *Artists Equity Association Newsletter* of May 1947, The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.
  29. "Artists Equity Holds Initial Policy Meeting," *Art Digest* (5 May 1947): 11.
  30. Charles Z. Offin, "Editor's Corner," *Pictures on Exhibit* (May 1947), pp. 60-61.
  31. *Artists Equity Newsletter* 3 (no. 4, December 1950): 1, The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.
  32. The booklet was first printed in April 1948, required a second printing in November of that year, and was revised in a second edition in April 1956. An acknowledgment placed at the end of the fourteen pages of text noted that "this publication has been made possible by a grant from Artists Equity Fund, Inc." (copies in The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.).
  33. Boswell, "Comments," p. 7.
  34. Recalling events of the earliest years of the organization, some forty-five years after the fact, the representational sculptor Dominic Facci spoke with contempt of the activists within the group. He referred to Ben Shahn, the Soyer brothers, and others as "shtetl artists" concerned with making social statements rather than objects of beauty (author's interview, 26 August 1994). He also spoke of still living members whose affiliation with the Communist Party hurt the reputation of the organization. Others, like Anthony Toney, believed that it was important for the artist to make a political statement and was still doing so through his paintings (author's interview, 28 August 1994).
  35. Schnakenberg to Kuniyoshi, 14 June 1949, with a note on the top: "Yas—I'm sending a copy of this to Hudson [Walker]" (Kuniyoshi papers, AAA).
  36. Kuniyoshi to Schnakenberg, 27 June 27 1949, Kuniyoshi papers, AAA.
  37. The undated report explains that the purposes and structure of the organization seems to have been to exhort board members to get out there and recruit new members. A circle has been placed around the first sentence, and a handwritten marginal note says, "skip this" (Kuniyoshi papers, AAA).
  38. *Artist Equity Association Newsletter* 2 (no. 2, March 1949), the results of the organizational activities and the names of the officers were announced at a meeting on 6 February 1949 (The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.).
  39. Letter from Hudson Walker to the members of AEA who were potential members of a New York Chapter, undated, to include the five boroughs, Long Island, and Westchester County, Wolf photocopies.
  40. His comments in this regard were: "When you grow up with an organization as I have and with fellow artists, working for it, and with it, you can't help developing a sentimental attachment and at the same time a real interest. It seems a natural reaction to want to protect it and see that it grows so that you are proud to be a part of it, and I know that you all share my feelings. At this time I would like to hibernate for a while and as an artist I will contribute whatever I can to Equity. At another time I will be active again. . . . I have been part of Equity so long that my mind has been occupied with Equity, but maybe now I know I will miss it and be lost" (Kuniyoshi papers, AAA).
  41. Walker to Kuniyoshi, 15 May 1951, Wolf photocopies.
  42. The booklets were *Community Art Center Guide Book* (1953), *Income Tax and the Artist* (1961), and *Death, Taxes and the Artist* (1961), copies in The Archives of New York Artists Equity Association, Inc.