

Painting War

From the Renaissance to the Present Day

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Abstract

War featured strongly in European art during the Renaissance, especially in painting. At that time, depicting *war* meant painting *battles*: it was a question of illustrating in order to tell a story. Already, however, artists began to be drawn to the suffering of civilians and to denounce the violence of war. This tendency increased in the late eighteenth century with the advent of mass war. Increasingly politically committed, artists became the heralds of pacifism in the twentieth century.

Article

Widely present in Greco-Roman art in the form of reliefs or frescos, but abandoned during the Middle Ages in favour of less secular subjects, war returned in force to European art during the Renaissance, particularly in painting.

Whether drawing inspiration from Greco-Roman antiquity and the Gospel (as in the case of Raphael, Tiepolo and Rubens) or from more contemporary conflicts (as in the cases of Tintoretto, with his *Victory of the Venetians over the Hungarians and the Conquest of Zadar*, and Leonardo da Vinci among others), the Grand Masters of the Early Modern period sought to paint *war* by painting *the battle*, in order better to tell its story.

Illustrating to tell a story

Some artists opted for a panoramic view of a battle (such as Albrecht Altdorfer's *The Battle of Alexander at Issus*, 1529), while others preferred to focus on a specific episode within its course (such as Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano: The Counter-Attack of Micheletto da Cotignola*, 1435). Most artists, however, sought to *recount* the battle through the use of multiple images in chronological order, in paintings which echoed each other in the form of diptychs, triptychs or entire cycles: these include Bernard Van Orley's work *The Battle of Pavia* (1530) and Jan Vermeyen's depictions of *The Conquest of Tunis by the Army of Charles V* (1554).

Through compositions in which cavalry and infantry, weapons and horses clashed with extreme violence, they tried to lay down on canvas the intensity and movement of the assaults. These

paintings, like so many other commissioned works, often depicted a great commander or ruler: Charles Le Brun, for instance, in his picture *Louis XIV on Campaign*, chose to represent the king and his army in ancient dress to make the monarch a hero worthy of antiquity. But the battle also includes nameless figures who pay him a heavy tribute: death is omnipresent in the imagination of war.

While battles dominated the pictorial production of the early modern period, other themes were also present. Some works depicted more intimate, individual scenes, focussing on the cruel fate of prisoners condemned to solitude and oblivion. Others, on the initiative of the artists themselves, began to depict the suffering of civilians in order to denounce it more effectively.

Painting to denounce the misdeeds of war: an increasingly politically committed art

In his *Massacre of the Innocents*, Brueghel the Elder transposed this biblical theme onto a Flemish village in order to condemn the cruelty of the Spanish occupation and the barbarous acts perpetrated by the marauding soldiers. Meanwhile, a series of etchings by Jacques Callot entitled *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War* (1633), was a means of the artist denouncing the ravages of the Thirty Years War in his native Lorraine. Other, later works would also denounce the burning, sacking and bombardment of towns and villages.

Marked by the wars of the French Revolution, the campaigns of Napoleon and the Crimean War, the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century would maintain a strong interest in the painting of battles, which would take on a new dimension: artworks were unanimous in showing, on canvas, the increasingly destructive power of firearms. However, in parallel, the tone of artworks became increasingly political and painting was placed at the service of the national epic and of ideology.

The painting of battles now had a dual objective: to fix an embellished recollection of a glorious moment in the collective memory and to construct a national epic around a few key figures. Henceforth, the anonymous representation of combatants gave way to the official heroisation of great men. In this vein, one can mention the painting by David entitled *The First Consul Crossing the Alps at the Saint-Bernard Pass*, which equated Napoleon Bonaparte with the greatest conquerors of the past. However, in a politically committed vision which owed a lot to Romanticism, painting in the first half of the nineteenth century also exposed the doubts and the defeats of great men as well as the darker moments of war.

In his *Episode of the Retreat from Russia, 1812*, Nicolas-Toussaint Charlet concealed neither the fiasco of the Russian campaign nor the suffering of the survivors in the harsh winter weather. A series of 82 engravings by Goya (most in red pencil), grouped under the title *The Disasters of War*, aimed to

illustrate not only the cruelty of the war waged by the French occupiers, but more generally the barbarity to which all conflict leads.

During the same period, the focus shifted: artists depicted the day-to-day realities of war and, influenced by photography (which emerged during the Crimean War), began to take into account the ordinary life of men before battle or their life in military camps.

In the last third of the century, it was to Vasily Vereshchagin, painter of the Russian Imperial Army, that we owe the most arresting personal composition of the century. Entitled *The Apotheosis of War* (1879), this work, depicting a pyramid of human skulls surrounded by crows in a desolate landscape, conveys a resolutely anti-militarist message: war can only lead to the negation and the disappearance of humanity.

Antimilitarism and pacifism

This pacifist message suffused all twentieth century painting, beginning with that of the First World War. Artists sought to give an account of the scale of destruction caused by the power of increasingly sophisticated weaponry such as artillery and machine guns. But trauma and the dehumanising effects of war gained the upper hand over all other themes: for instance, in *The Game of Cards*, Fernand Léger, who was injured and demobilised, equated soldiers with robots deprived of all emotion. It was Otto Dix's triptych, *War*, with its mangled bodies, rotting in the trenches, that embodied mass war in all its horror. In an attempt to exorcise this tragedy, from which he returned traumatised, Dix painted the soldiers without apparent compassion; but from this voluntary distancing emerges a resolutely pacifist message that would later be censored by the Nazi authorities.

Confronted by the violence of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, painters used their art to bear witness to atrocities. They painted bombed towns, destroyed villages and the suffering endured, their own experience mingling with that of the millions of victims on behalf of whom they spoke: this was the case with Boris Taslitzky, whose sketches were made in the prison camp in which he was detained, and with David Olère, who was sent to Auschwitz and survived the Holocaust, sketching the unspeakable in black and white (*In the Oven Room*, 1945) before putting it down on canvas after the war. Other painters, meanwhile, revolted against such horror and called for a resurgence of humanity: this would be the case with Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Dali's *The Face of War* (1940) as well as the fifteen panels on Hiroshima to which Iri and Toshi Maruki, who entered the martyred city three days after the catastrophe, devoted themselves for thirty years, mingling their cry of pain with an unshakable call for peace.

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