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Notation and Memorandum: Special Artists and their Portrayal of the American Civil War

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Notation and Memorandum: Special Artists and their Portrayal of the American Civil War

Abstract

As the first war to see the extensive use of photography, the American Civil War was brought home to civilians in hundreds of photographs portraying camp life or the aftermath of battles. Due to the nature of nineteenth century photography as well as safety concerns, however, photographers were not able to capture scenes of actual combat for their viewers. This task fell instead to men known as Special Artists or “Specials,” hired by the illustrated periodicals of the day to travel with the armies and sketch all manner of events associated with the military, including battles as they progressed. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, sketch artists

Disciplines

American Art and Architecture | History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Notation and Memorandum: Special Artists and their Portrayal of the American Civil War

March 17, 2014

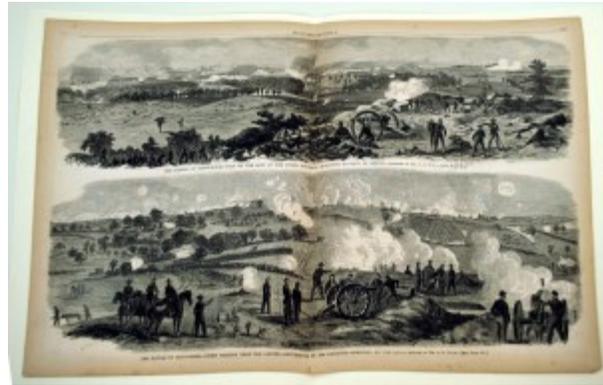
By: Bryan Caswell, '15

As the first war to see the extensive use of photography, the American Civil War was brought home to civilians in hundreds of photographs portraying camp life or the aftermath of battles. Due to the nature of nineteenth century photography as well as safety concerns, however, photographers were not able to capture scenes of actual combat for their viewers. This task fell instead to men known as Special Artists or “Specials,” hired by the illustrated periodicals of the day to travel with the armies and sketch all manner of events associated with the military, including battles as they progressed.

The accuracy of such images must naturally fall under suspicion, as any image of battle so rendered would necessarily pass first through the perception of the artist before being rendered with paper and pen. Thus it is with great surprise that one considers the striking veracity of many of these Specials' portrayals of battle. Two images of the Battle of Gettysburg in particular stand out. Both drawn by Alfred Waud, these scenes of Little Round Top and East Cemetery Hill seem nearly akin to photographs themselves, especially in their consideration of geography and landmarks. The view of Houk's Ridge just as it stands beyond the stony crest of Little Round Top greets the viewer of this image just as it would a visitor to the hill itself, and one can almost visualize cars traveling up and down the Baltimore Pike just in front of the gatehouse to the Evergreen Cemetery. Yet landscapes do not change much in the general sense, and would have been available for an artist to revisit in order to capture every detail. Much more challenging was to capture those fleeting moments of battle before combat ceased and soldiers moved on to different fields.

Specials' technique for accurately capturing men as they fought on the battlefield was an ingenious system of notation and later memorandum. Having ideally gained a vantage point removed from the fighting, to avoid both danger and the smoky confusion of combat itself,

an artist commenced sketching the scene before him. Unable to draw intricate figures on sight, Specials noted soldiers and their officers in the barest detail, little more than stick figures. After the battle an artist would then return to his work, fleshing out his subjects into full human form. This process involved an intricate knowledge of military form and protocol, as each man must be sketched in the correct uniform for his rank and arm of the military. Such intimate interaction with the army did not solely extend to uniforms but to the portrayal of soldiers in general. Specials' early drawings drew ire from the soldiers themselves, seen by those men as "generic, faceless rows of toy troops." This influence, coming from the very men artists sought to portray, slowly changed Specials' depictions of battle into intensely personal scenes, the closest their contemporary public would come to seeing the face of war as it occurred.



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Image:

Waud, A.R. "The Battle of Gettysburg-Union Position Near the Centre-Gettysburg in the Distance." *Harper's Weekly* July 25, 1863.