



Fall 2012

Visualizing War

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Egbert, Andrew, "Visualizing War" (2012). *Student Publications*. 69.
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Visualizing War

Abstract

Popular artwork during the era of the Civil war can be placed into three broad categories. The first is a prewar theme of political discontent, in which political leaders were viewed as ineffective and ill-prepared to address the political challenges of the day. Additionally, this prewar theme was also characterized by a romanticized interpretation of war and unrealistic ideas about the nobility and honor of war. The second period is the wartime period in which the romanticized depictions of war disappeared as the harsh reality of prolonged civil war set in. Popular artwork was much more focused on the ugly realities of the war and not on fanciful notions of glory and honor that had pervaded prewar society. Finally, there is a postwar period which saw the slow return of the stylized and idealized representations of the American Civil War. While this change was not a rapid shift, the changes began to creep into art, as the immediate horror and suffering dimmed in the public eye. These idealized postwar portrayals of the American Civil War still exist today, though they do not represent a total regression to prewar idealism, as the human cost of the war is addressed in a stylized manner in the postwar period.

Keywords

American Civil War, art, popular depictions of war, depictions of war

Comments

The exhibit catalog that accompanies this presentation is available through *The Cupola* at:
<http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/artcatalogs/10/>

Before I begin I'd like to quickly thank the people who helped make this exhibit possible. Thanks to Professor Carmichael and the Civil War Institute for inviting me to do this and helping me with research. Thanks to Shannon here at the Schmucker Art Gallery for all her helping us put up the exhibit and making sure everything had a place. A big thanks to Carolyn at Special Collections for helping us find this wonderful art work and for showing us examples to get our minds working. And lastly, I'd like to give a special thanks to my co-curators Allie and Natalie who are off enjoying study abroad right now. They worked incredibly hard on their research and on writing essays for the brochure, and then they went and stuck me with the public speaking part. So again, I'd just like to thank everyone named and unnamed here who helped make this exhibit happen, it's been fun, informative and probably a once in a life time opportunity for a psych major like myself.

For my talk today I'd like to address the ways in which the depictions of war changed over the course of the American Civil War and into the post war period and beyond. First I'd like to address how the public perceived the war during the early years of the Civil War. For the most part, the view of the war held by many Americans was a romantic idea. The lithograph "Off for the War", neatly encapsulates this rather naïve idea that war, especially a civil war was romantic and heroic. The soldier and his family are shown in a rosy and idealized fashion. This romantic view can be viewed in many ways, either as simple naiveté or as a more malicious political move seeking to glorify war and urge young men to serve their nation in its time of need. This is not to denigrate the work, but rather to highlight different interpretations of how civilians understood the war in 1861. In a sense, this work seeks to draw out the patriotism of ordinary men and provide an example of a man torn between his duty to family and nation, but who chooses the needs of the many of the needs of his family. However this was also a time ripe with political

discontent at the outset of the war. The cartoon of James Buchanan as a gas lamp on the wall of the White House shows the deep frustration many Americans felt at the onset of the war.

Though the cartoon was published a year before in 1860, it reflects the deep malcontent with politicians who had failed to avert an impending catastrophe. The slavery crisis had been building for years and yet, no political leader was able to take a meaningful stand to resolve the brewing conflict between the factions advocating for expansion of slavery and those seeking to abolish or at least contain it. In the early parts of the war in 1861 Americans thought of war in romantic abstractions, even as they feared its coming and ridiculed the politicians who failed to resolve the problems that ultimately led to disunion.

As the war progressed, there is another clear shift in the way in which war is portrayed in art of the time period and Natalie, Allie and I all found representations of this with which we were able to bring to light that shift in popular thought. An example of this can be found as early as October 1861 in *Harper's Weekly*. The cartoon of Jefferson Davis reaping the lives of the noble soldiers gone off to war shows a very clear shift from the stylized and sterile portrayals of war in the early part of 1861. I found this piece highly compelling because of its powerful, yet simple message. The cartoonist is clearly disgusted by the loss of life even in the early stages of the war and lays the blame at the feet of Jefferson Davis for leading this unconscionable rebellion. This cartoon is further evidence of the public's anger towards politicians. What I found to be especially important was that the basic premise of this cartoon is so familiar to us now. This statement of disgust with political leaders during wartime is something easily recognizable in modern political cartoons. Even though we are separated from this cartoonist by 150 years of language evolution, culture shifts and societal upheaval, this basic sentiment still carries through with incredible clarity. Similarly, the cartoon *Distinguished Militia General during Action*

shows a similar vein of dissatisfaction with Union commanders in the early years of the war. Though many citizens felt compelled to help troops and show compassion towards those who bravely faced injury and death on the battlefield, they had few qualms when it came to ridiculing those in command. I believe this is an important turn away from the idealism and somewhat simplistic view of the war in the early days of the war. No longer was it just politicians who were held responsible for the deaths of soldiers, now the military hierarchy was a target for cartoonists who wished to criticize the war effort. When studying the Civil War it is easy to find anecdotal evidence showing just how unprepared both sides were for a prolonged conflict and it shows in these cartoons. These pieces are a representation of the painful transition many Americans felt as it became clear that the Civil War would not be a short lived conflict, but rather a bloody struggle with dire consequences.

One such consequence of the prolonged war took place right here. The photograph of dead soldiers at the base of Little Round Top is an example of the ways in which the cost of the war was brought home to civilians. So often we assume that true graphic representations of war dead only came to pass with modern wars, such as the filming of the War in Vietnam or the embedded reporters in the War in Iraq, yet these photographs tell a different story. The displayed photos and others like them had a profound impact on those who saw them. These graphic and gruesome representations of war ripped away all pretext of glory and nobility. The story they told was simple and universal, war means death. Though civilians during the civil war were not inundated with images of war in the way we are today, they still had an intimate understanding with the bloodshed of the war. Even in the north where there were few major battles, civilians still could see the carnage of war in papers, magazines and other forms of print media. As the war dragged on, more and more photos of dead soldiers were taken, and distributed through

various outlets. Though many photos were staged, with photographers moving bodies and even in some cases mislabeling the battlefield, the simple truth conveyed in them was evident. These men did not die glorious and heroic deaths, they died in brutal engagements sometimes led by incompetent officers. The early mythology of war being filled with honor and glory was in large part set aside during the period of late 1861 early 1862 until the end of the war in 1865.

Finally, there is the post war period in which there is a clear return of the stylized and idealized representations of the Civil War. While not an instantaneous shift, there is a progression away from the graphic representations of war, and a return to some of the earlier romanticism. The two lithographs of the Battle of Gettysburg show a softened view of the war and a more heroic view of the soldiers partaking in the battle. The representations of the dead and wounded lack the visceral and dark touch found in wartime artwork. However, ones interpretation of this shift can be both positive and negative. This change certainly downplays the intense suffering and costliness of the war; it also elevates those who showed initiative and courage to heroic status. While these lithographs may not portray historically accurate or realistic portrayals of the war, they show a change in public appetite. Americans wished to see the positive side of things and remember that good did come of this terrible conflict. It would be easy to declare that these artworks show a total regression to the prewar and early 1861 portrayals of war I believe that does not do these pieces credit. There is an obvious glossing over of the intense carnage and horror seen on the battle, but at the same time there is an acknowledgement of the death and injury caused by the war.

These changes over time can still be seen today. Just walk up Stienwehr Avenue here in town, or peruse the tourist shops in the circle and you can see that even today art, though not always the most sophisticated, is still being created and the representations of the Civil War still exist in a

similar post war era style. The harsh political criticism of politicians and generals is absent and is instead replaced with a simplified view of war that acknowledges death, but fails to hold those in authority responsible. It can be argued that these changes seek to remove the political edge to the conflict and instead only focus on the nobler aspects of the war. Do these changes do the war justice? Is this kind of representation a disservice to those who fought and died here? Or is this apolitical shift a bad thing? Does dwelling on the darker side of war only serve to desensitize us to its cost? Is this cyclical change in the representation of war inevitable or is it something that maybe evolves over time. I'm not sure I have answers to these questions, but I hope that by asking questions like this we can critically examine representations of war and better understand how they reflect our society, as well as how society takes cues from various forms of art. Thank you for your time, and if you have any questions, comments or thoughts on the exhibit please feel free to share them.