



11-16-2018

Understanding the True Nature of War: Dr. James Clifton's Lecture Mediated War

James T. Goodman
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Goodman, James T., "Understanding the True Nature of War: Dr. James Clifton's Lecture Mediated War" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 332.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/332>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/332>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Understanding the True Nature of War: Dr. James Clifton's Lecture Mediated War

Abstract

Wartime artwork allows us to experience certain aspects of battle and its aftermath and yet to also be distanced from it: When viewing the artwork, we get a small visual window into the carnage and devastation of war, but we are spared the affronts to our other senses. This concept was present in Dr. James Clifton's lecture, *Meditated War*. Dr. Clifton, the director of the Sarah Cambell Blaffer Foundation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, coordinated with Gettysburg College to loan the collection of European war prints for the exhibit, *The Plains of Mars*. The exhibition is currently on display at Schmucker Art Gallery and will remain so until December 7th. The pieces are comprised of wartime images from 1500 through 1825 and depict battles, individual soldiers, and civilians. Dr. Clifton's lecture focused primarily on what one can learn from wartime art, specifically war prints, but also what they lack. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Francisco Goya, Plains of Mars Gallery, war art

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Understanding the True Nature of War: Dr. James Clifton's Lecture Mediated War

By James Goodman '20

Wartime artwork allows us to experience certain aspects of battle and its aftermath and yet to also be distanced from it: When viewing the artwork, we get a small visual window into the carnage and devastation of war, but we are spared the affronts to our other senses. This concept was present in Dr. James Clifton's lecture, *Meditated War*. Dr. Clifton, the director of the Sarah Cambell Blaffer Foundation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, coordinated with Gettysburg College to loan the collection of European war prints for the exhibit, *The Plains of Mars*. The exhibition is currently on display at Schmucker Art Gallery and will remain so until December 7th. The pieces are comprised of wartime images from 1500 through 1825 and depict battles, individual soldiers, and civilians. Dr. Clifton's lecture focused primarily on what one can learn from wartime art, specifically war prints, but also what they lack.

Dr. Clifton began his lecture by explaining the commonality of the pieces in the collection. According to him, there were thousands of war prints created from 1500 to 1825. European nations were at war almost every year during this time, so there were ample opportunities to create these works. During these conflicts, many Europeans could be very personally impacted by war: They not only paid for extensive armies, but they dealt intimately with all the direct challenges war created, like hunger and destruction. Clifton points out that for westerners this is largely not the case today. While Westerners pay for war in a financial sense, they cannot understand the emotional cost of heavy conscription, the razing of villages, or quartering thousands of men for months at a time. There is a significant degree of separation between modern people in the Western world and war. Early European society, however, was defined through war and Dr. Clifton indicated that this was the overarching reason behind the creation of this exhibition. Many of these pieces were created to bring viewers who did not partake in or witness a battle first-hand closer to the experiences of a conflict. The artwork allowed viewers to see events occurring upwards of thousands of miles away. However, these images also removed the viewer from the scene. While the images serve as a medium for war, they distance the viewer from the horrors of the true event; in doing so, they protected the viewer's potentially delicate sensibilities.

However, Dr. Clifton urged modern-day viewers to look even more deeply at these images as windows into the societal makeup and cultural worldviews of various European countries over time, and think about how artwork reveals a great deal about how Europeans have thought about war in different contexts and how they wanted to

portray violent conflict. While attempting to present scenes from war, these artists were consciously imbuing their images with particular narratives that would evoke certain feelings and thoughts from viewers. Therefore, the artists' political motives and inherent biases prevented the images from being completely factual snapshots of the battle. These narratives within war prints persuaded public opinion and pushed forth the world view of the artist or his commissioner. Much of the time, these pieces served as news from a battle. Some were a bird's-eye view of the destruction while others focused in on a specific moment within a battle or its aftermath. Despite their inherent political agendas and biases, these images were generally presented and accepted as fact, and Europeans would view and purchase these images with the assumption that they were accurate depictions of particular battles. Thus, these artists and their commissioners had immense power in shaping Europeans' understanding of warfare and its political implications.

Dr. Clifton demonstrated his points using period images. A large portion of his images came from Francisco Goya, whose prints demonstrated the brutality of the French Invasion of Spain under Napoleon. Goya's images were graphic; they included illustrations of death and grotesquely depicted French soldiers committing horrible acts against seemingly innocent Spanish civilians. This appears to be Goya's goal when he created these prints: He wanted his audience to experience the pain the Spanish people had suffered under the French. His work conveys a clear political motive by presenting the French as blood-thirsty and heartless killers, while the Spanish appear as the innocent victims. Goya thus spun a narrative of sympathy for the Spanish in his war prints by forcing the viewer to visualize and feel the shock of the carnage inflicted by the Napoleonic French soldiers. However, despite Goya's intent to depict the horrors of war to viewers, that degree of separation between the violence and the viewer was still there. According to Dr. Clifton, this is due to the sanitizing nature of art. Since the viewer is not actually present at the site of the atrocity being depicted, they cannot fully grasp the emotions present in the painting. They can view what has occurred as terrible, but they cannot fully understand the event's far-reaching impacts: Even though I was looking at pictures of dead bodies, it was still apparent that I was not there and could not feel the pain inflicted on those soldiers.

Dr. Clifton concluded his lecture by harkening back to his initial point of art's ability to both bring us closer to the realities of war while also sanitizing it for us. Although artists want the viewer to feel something through the artwork, they can never fully capture what is present before them on a battlefield. However, this sense of removal may be intentional. The artist may want to present a particularly costly victory as a major triumph or hide the full extent of devastation to protect contemporary sensibilities. It depends on the goals of the artist. (Goya's work would fall heavily on the destruction aspect of this scale, which again speaks to his personal political motives.) Both extremes are highly political. An artist depicting triumph is likely attempting to rally their nation behind the cause of war and nationalism while an artist depicting the opposite is seeking to discourage future conflict by bringing the sobering reality of war to the public eye. Thus, art served as an educational mediator between civilians and war during this period. Without completely exposing the viewer to the devastation present in war, war

art informed people of what was occurring so far from their homes, while also seeking to craft a particular narrative about the nature and political implications of that conflict. Dr. Clifton's lecture reminded us that modern viewers especially, who largely have been spared the first-hand brutalities of war experienced by earlier Europeans and depicted in these images, inherently walk away with from the images in this exhibit with more sanitized and less intimate sensory perceptions of these early European conflicts. However, he also reminded us that, while it is important to understand that art thus always veils from us the true nature of war, through close cultural analysis of these war images, we are able to gain valuable insights into the social and political world of the artists who created them and the societies that initially consumed them.