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Visual Culture Project: Confederate War Etchings: Searching for Arms by Adalbert Johann Volck

Lynn B. Hatcher '17, Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Adalbert Johann Volck's 1861 sketch of Union soldiers, "Searching for Arms," represents a substantial contribution to the narrative about gender relations during the American Civil War. This simple, small sketch offers the observer a window into the past. It is a collision of symbols and meaning—from gender to war to the household—all wrapped up in one image. This is a portrait sketch of a woman being invaded in her domestic, private sphere, revealing so much about gender relations during the time. The mistress herself seemed to embody a vast range of sentiments such as anger, fear, frailty, and strength, proving the tension in her role as a wife, a mother, and guardian of the home. This inner conflict is something that all women faced during this time as they strove to remain loyal to the cause for which their husbands fought.

Keywords

Women, Civil War, Confederacy, Lost Cause, South

Disciplines

American Art and Architecture | Military History | United States History | Women's History

Comments

Written for History 245: Gender and the American Civil War.

More information on the print analyzed by Lynn, "Searching for Arms," can be found in [Gettysburg College's Civil War Era digital collection](#).

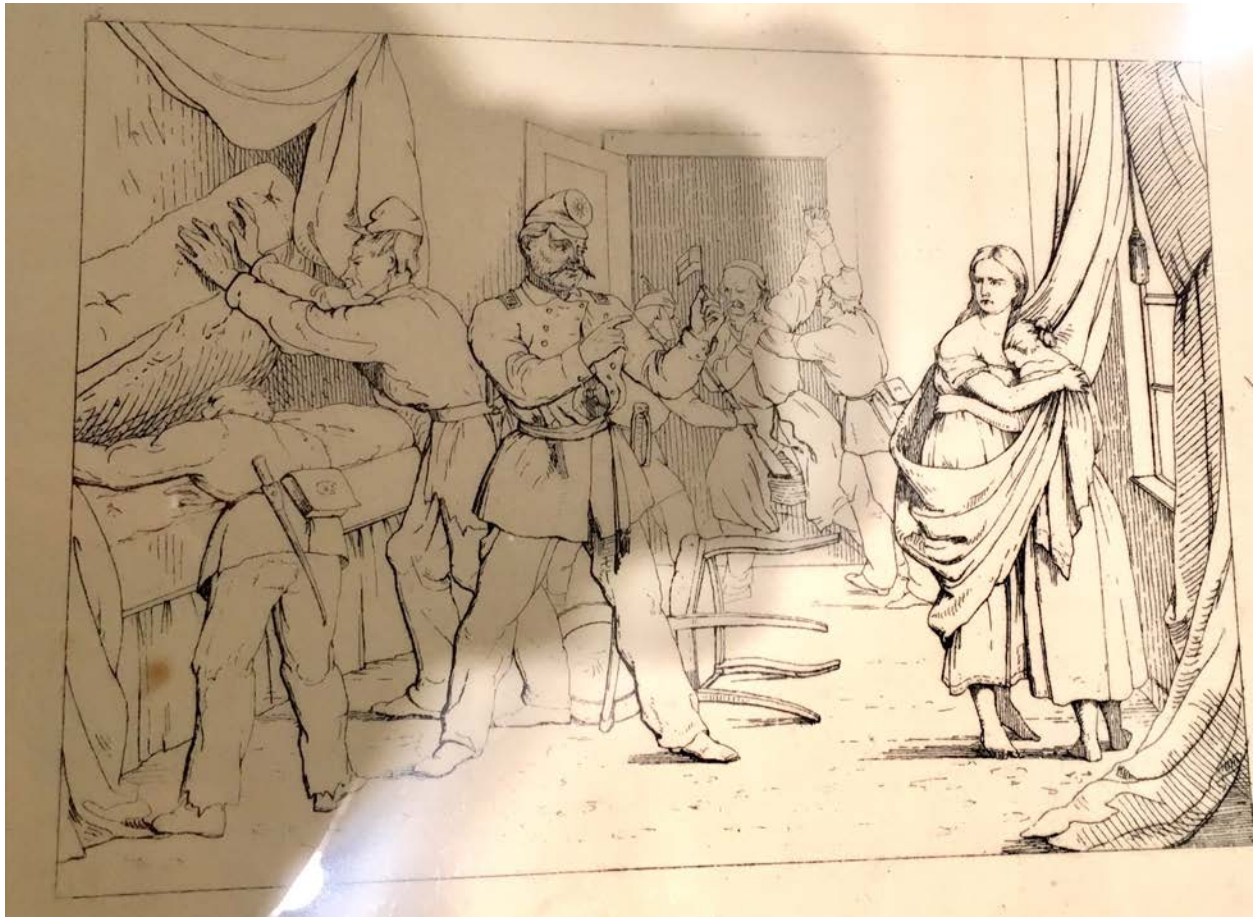
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Lynn Hatcher
Dr. Carmichael
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Confederate War Etchings: Searching for Arms
by Adalbert Johann Volck



1. Write a thorough description of the piece in your own words. How would you describe this to someone who couldn't see it?

This sketch depicts a group of five Union soldiers pillaging a Confederate household, armed and showing aggression. This is taking place in what looks like a bedroom, with a bed displayed on the left and an open window on the right. Nothing is on the walls in the room. This most likely represents a middle-class home. It is evident that the soldiers are searching for something, and by the title, it can be deduced that they are searching for arms. No respect for the house was being shown, as chairs and blankets are tossed to the ground. Clearly, the soldiers are not welcomed, and in the background, it looks like the master of the house is trying to break into the room to oust the invaders. One soldier is using his gun to hold the man back. A middle-aged woman, probably the mistress of the house, is cowering behind the window curtain with her daughter, who is probably in her early teens. The arrival of the soldiers was unannounced, for the mother and daughter are wearing no shoes and clothes that are clearly worn around the house. The facial expression of the mistress conveys disdain and fury while the face of the young girl is hidden into the chest of her mother. One soldier, probably the captain, looks like he is trying to get the attention of the woman, holding a Confederate flag in his hand. This is evidently all that could be found in the house. The image of this soldier and the woman is slightly unnerving as it seems to be conveying that he is looking at her both inappropriately and angrily. This is a plundering of a family home in the Old South.

2. What's the subject of the painting/illustrations? How is the subject framed?

The subject of this sketch is the fact that the Union Army was breaking and entering into the home of a Confederate household. The purpose of this sketch is to prove the unwarranted nature of the breach of private property. Since the mother and the daughter are so central to the

photograph, their presence, juxtaposed with the presence of aggressive army men proves the dramatic and unjustified nature of the search for arms. Clearly, the southern family vehemently opposes these men being there. Evidently, in the search, all that was found was a small Confederate flag. The Union captain holding the flag looks disgustedly at the mistress of the house, and the mistress stands firm in her position as a Southern wife.

3. From whose point of view is it painted/drawn/photographed?

This sketch was drawn from the point of view of an artist who was heavily invested in the Confederate cause, Adalbert Johann Volck. Volck even “became a personal courier for Confederate President Jefferson Davis” and “worked as a spy and operator for the South.”¹ Thus, the purpose of this painting is to depict the Union Army in a negative light. Women used as helpless victims in this context further enhances the point of view of the male artist. While the women in this photo were cowering behind a curtain, however, the author adds a lot of distinct emotion to their faces proving that women’s perspectives were crucial to the war effort.

4. Does it contain symbols?

The most symbolic part of this sketch is the Confederate flag that the Union captain is holding outwardly towards the women. The fact that it is so central in the photograph proves a great deal about Confederate devotion to the cause. Furthermore, since no arms or money could be found in the house, the fact that this flag was discovered proves that, in the eyes of the Confederacy, even with no arms or money, the cause of the Old South will live on. The presence of women in this private sphere are also important symbols. Meanwhile, the fact that the master of the house

¹ John Adalbert Volck, Confederate War Etchings, 1861, GettDigital: Civil War Era Collection, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

could not even break past the soldiers to enter into his own room symbolically speaks to the failing agency of Southern men at the time. Overall, this is symbolic of the Lost Cause mentality that grew even stronger in the years after this image was created. The image was framed in a way that struck a chord at the heart of the southerners who believed they were fighting for their home, their family, and their country. This represents a violation of privacy in the sanctuary of the home.

5. Make a list of what you know about the piece? (artist, patron or person who commission the piece, date, medium, visible marks on the back, provenance/ownership)

Produced in 1861, this piece was etched on Japan paper by Adalbert Johann Volck. It was the fifth in a set called “Confederate War Etchings, 1861-1864.” Volck lived in Baltimore, MD. His pro-south influence during the war has been noted. Specifically, “during the Union occupation of Baltimore by General Benjamin Butler, Volck expressed his pro-Confederate sentiments through his art.”² From 1861 to 1863, Volck completed two sets of his Confederate War Etchings. Apparently, these sketches were not widely known during the war due to limited accessibility by Southerners, but the collection met great success after the war.³ Volck remained devoted to the Confederate cause for the rest of his life, acknowledged as one of the primary artists of the Confederacy.

² John Adalbert Volck, Confederate War Etchings, 1861, GettDigital: Civil War Era Collection, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

³ John Adalbert Volck, Confederate War Etchings, 1861, GettDigital: Civil War Era Collection, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

6. Make a list of what you don't know but would need to know if you were writing a history of the illustration work/source? What other sources might you use to answer your questions? Where would you find the answers?

Knowing the specific people that inspired Adalbert Johann Volck to draw this particular image would have been interesting. Perhaps there were women in his life that he captured in this sketch. It would also be fascinating to know more about the Southern home and which class it represents. The importance of class cannot be undermined, so knowing this information would have been helpful. It was hard to decipher the quality of the dress that the women in the photo were wearing, and this could have been an indication of class. It would also be interesting to know if this southern home had slaves. Finally, the master of the house clearly was not out fighting with his fellow men on the battlefield. Knowing more about his occupation and role in the house also would have been beneficial to complete the narrative. Finding this information would be challenging, however, since this is mostly a representative sketch of a common phenomenon in the South during this time. Thus, researching more specifically from where Volck found inspiration for his sketches would be a window into knowing more about this image.

7. Please make an argument for its significance as it relates to gender during the Civil War.

Adalbert Johann Volck's 1861 sketch of Union soldiers, "Searching for Arms," represents a substantial contribution to the narrative about gender relations during the American Civil War. This simple, small sketch offers the observer a window into the past. It is a collision of symbols and meaning—from gender to war to the household—all wrapped up in one image. This is a portrait sketch of a woman being invaded in her domestic, private sphere, revealing so much about gender relations during the time. The mistress herself seemed to embody a vast range of sentiments such as anger, fear, frailty, and strength, proving the tension in her role as a

wife, a mother, and guardian of the home. This inner conflict is something that all women faced during this time as they strove to remain loyal to the cause for which their husbands fought.

Volck propagandized the southern Lost Cause mentality through his sets of sketches. His primary audience was the South, and this image in particular would have deeply angered southerners. It fed into the discourse that Union soldiers were corrupting the southern way of life and disrespecting the importance of southern honor. Union soldiers breaking into private property and frightening women further solidifies the discourse that southern men had to go off and fight for their homes and their wives as a part of the Confederate cause. The disrespect that the Union soldiers were showing the mistress and the mistress's daughter hints at the problems with rape and sexual assault that many women faced. The paper successfully depicts a total lack of character on the part of the Union men. This is a distinct contrast to the perceptions of the white southern gentleman. The 'ideal' white middle class man during this time embodied principles of restraint, refinement, and virtue, and not a single man in this sketch showed this. This was a highly politicized piece that drew upon Southern Lost Cause sentiments. The divided government, the divided country, and the desperation are all conveyed in this image. The observer is most likely to sympathize with the women in the sketch, and it is even more likely that the observer will feel emotions of anger towards the invading Union soldiers.

Specifically, the significance of the Confederate flag must be acknowledged for it is the central, most symbolic image in the photo. This aspect of the picture reflects sentimentalism, connecting the citizen observer to the national cause of the war. It conveys strong wartime sentiments, solidifying the fact that Confederate women stood by the southern cause. In the household of the mistress, this represents the importance of her loyalty to the cause. Women had to handle the duty to the nation while also fulfilling duty to the home. "Confederate thinking

rested strongly on the intertwining of nation and home.”⁴ Unlike southern women, northern women never had to touch the hard hand of war. Confederate women were politicized, for it was their ‘duty’ to support their husbands in the war effort. In *Gender and Sectional Conflict*, Nina Silber stated that “most Americans living at the time of the Civil War” adhered to the belief that “women in a republic lay claim to patriotism precisely in sending men off to fight because doing so meant that women recognized their private claim would rank lower than the public claim of the state.”⁵ This proved women’s devotion to the cause at hand. In that same vein, according to Nancy Cott in *The Bonds of Womanhood*, “If a man was the ‘fiercest warrior, or the most unrelenting votary of stern ambition,’ ‘toil-worn’ by ‘troubled sense of life,’ women would ‘scatter roses among the thorns of his appointed track.’”⁶ The woman’s strength in this sketch reflects this loyalty to the Confederacy.

There are many diaries and letters, written by southern women during the Civil War, that have been saved and studied. While Volck’s image is just a sketch, it holds a lot of the same sentiments and emotions. For example, Martha Futch, a North Carolina woman, wrote many letters to her husband, John Futch, saying things like “I akin my in hand to in form you that I am well at this time hopin that those few lines may find you injoyin the same good blesings.”⁷ Even though things were not going with in Martha Futch’s life, she still projected strength, loyalty, and love to her husband. In another example of written communication during the war, John

⁴ Nina Silber, *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 41.

⁵ Nina Silber, *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 39.

⁶ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (Yale University Press, 1977), 67.

⁷ Martha Futch, “John Futch Papers,” in *North Carolina Department of History and Archives*, (Raleigh), 1.

Pardington wrote back to his wife saying, “Keep up spirits dear for my sake.”⁸ The contribution of women during the war was supposed to be selflessness. In a final example, Isabella Speairs’s husband writes to her saying “My wife loves me with all the passion and devotion of a true and enthusiastic heart.”⁹ He goes on to say that he “perhaps many wives love their husbands and, in duty bound they must love them, but not with this divine intense devotion I have described.”¹⁰ It was up to the women to support the cause by sending encouraging letters to their men at war. Women, like the woman in Volck’s sketch, were very much a part of the war effort. Not only did many southern women physically feel the presence of the war, they emotionally supported and helped advance the cause. Their words were vital to the war effort.

The power dynamics in this piece provide interesting insight into the role played by women in the private sphere during this time. It is interesting that the master of the house does not seem to have any voice in this sketch, as he is being forced out of his own room. In fact, the master of the house is the last aspect of the photo that is noticed. He evidently was not strong enough to protect his wife, and this also goes against traditional discourse. As Nina Silber said in *Gender and Sectional Conflict*, men felt that it was a private obligation to protect and preserve “homes, families, and women.”¹¹ This sheds light on the fact that the home truly represented the woman during this time. Since the woman’s responsibility to the home is paramount, when the Union soldiers broke into her home, it was her domain that faced the consequences. It was her

⁸ John Pardington, “Letters Home from a Soldier of the Iron Brigade,” ed. Coralou Peel Lassen (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 10.

⁹ Arabella Speairs, “The War Letters of Lieutenant William Beverly Pettit and His Wife,” in *Civil War Letters of Arabella Speairs and William Beverley Pettit of Fluvanna County, Virginia March 1862-March 1865*, ed. Charles W. Turner (Delhi: Chanakya, 1982), 85.

¹⁰ Arabella Speairs, “The War Letters of Lieutenant William Beverly Pettit and His Wife,” in *Civil War Letters of Arabella Speairs and William Beverley Pettit of Fluvanna County, Virginia March 1862-March 1865*, ed. Charles W. Turner (Delhi: Chanakya, 1982), 85.

¹¹ Nina Silber, *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 3.

daughter that she immediately protected. It would have been helpful to know whether this family owned slaves because then the observer would have had a better sense of how far this mistress's boundaries of authority extended. Regardless, women had significant power in the home. The mistress's body language shows some frailty and weakness, but at the same time, the facial expression of the mistress proves her anger and confidence to show it. This reflects the tension that the discourse of women represented; women were seen as dependent and fragile, but they were also expected to both be strong and faithful to their husbands.

This scene shows the inherent gender relations during this time in American history. Women were not outsiders to the war effort, and many southern women were affected by the war at home each and every single day. Women, like the woman in this sketch, were very much in physical contact with the struggle. Going into the war, the discourse governed the fact that the home was supposed to be a sanctuary, but the reality of war destroyed this utopian vision. As Nancy Cott stated in *The Bonds of Womanhood*, "Home was an 'oasis in the desert,' a 'sanctuary' where 'sympathy, honor, virtue are assembled,' where 'disinterested love is ready to sacrifice everything at the altar of affection.'"¹² The horrors of war that women, too, had to face is further evidence that the central ideas about gender did not reflect the reality of women's lives. Women, like the woman in the sketch, often faced tremendous burden. These sentiments are described by a plantation mistress: "With men it is on the field—glory, honor, peace, and power—women can only stay at home and every paper reminds us that women are to be violated."¹³ She spoke about the humiliation that women faced, and while these words were related to sexual assault, the reality of her words throughout every home in the South should not

¹² Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (Yale University Press, 1977), 64.

¹³ Crystal N Feimster, "General Benjamin Butler & the Threat of Sexual Violence during the American Civil War," *Daedalus* 138, no. 2 (2009): 127.

be undermined. The woman in this sketch faced a situation also humiliation, filled with no honor or praise. Furthermore, the separated private and public spheres became less distinct because the two spheres converged throughout the war, as depicted in this sketch. Politics became a part of the home. The facial expression of the mistress gave voice to the sisterhood of Confederate women during the Civil War. In that moment she was standing firm in the best way she could, shielding her daughter from the reality of war. Adalbert Johann Volck's sketch represents a room torn apart and destroyed in a country simultaneously torn apart, devastated by death and ruin.

HONOR PLEDGE

"I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code."

Lynn Hatcher