Visualizing War
Any inquiry into the past dangles before us the false promise of finding truth, as if any historical moment—though ground down into fragments over the course of time, though scattered and dispersed—can be discovered, collected, and made whole again. Simply gluing together shards of facts into a mirror capable of reflecting the entirety of an event is impossible; there are always chips and cracks that distort images, that hide blemishes, and that exaggerate imperfections. Our need for history to convey clear-cut truths is understandable, but the notion that the eye can discern indisputable knowledge is a problematic assumption that guides too much historical thinking. A clear line of sight into the past simply does not exist. There are too many mirages and too many obstructions in the sources. If too much trust in placed in the power of the eye, we can go blind to the many realities of how the past was imagined and experienced by people who occupied the same historical space at the same time. It is impossible, furthermore, to find an image that can encompass something as chaotic as organized killing during a civil war. No single frame can conceivably bring into focus the many experiences of war and the multitude of ways that people invest meaning in death and destruction.

Civil War Americans were the first generation to believe that they had discovered the real war from the safe confines of the home front. Many of the images and illustrations in this exhibition were originally published in wartime papers or viewed in galleries, usually to large civilian audiences who craved contact with a war that felt distant and removed. Today these visual “relics” appear hopelessly romantic for a historical people who sought a delusional escape from war, and thus remained innocent of a bloodletting that ultimately took at least 700,000 lives. If we resist the urge to search for hard truth in each print, our gaze into the past becomes more historicized. Visual representations should be used as portals to slip back into time. When this occurs we have an opportunity to assume the perspective of Northerners and Southerners, to see and feel the war as they did. We can, in other words, perceptually navigate and process the war in historical real time. The etching *Free Negroes in Hayti* [sic], for instance, offers a glimpse into the emotional DNA of white Southerners who imagined emancipation as a descent into racial anarchy, in which violence and rape would envelop the Confederate nation, leaving women and children helpless in the face of vengeful black mobs. Whether this etching is an accurate depiction or not misses the point. The appeal of the artist is what matters. He captures a dark and visceral force that stirred the imagination of many Confederates who envisioned the possibility of defeat as an apocalyptic conflagration. Their fears were certainly exaggerated, but that was the truth of their existence, since they, in their minds, believed the war would ultimately determine the fate of their way of life.

Curators Andrew Egbert, Natalie Sherif, and Alexandra Ward have designed an experience that allows us to consider why these images resonated with such power for Civil War Americans. In doing so, they have shifted the gallery experience away from a truth-seeking mission, giving us instead a platform from which to move beyond questions of whether visual culture was realistic or not. They offer us a chance to explore the emotional and intellectual connections that sustained Americans long after the shouts and cheers in rushing to arms had faded. The lithograph *Off for the War* by Currier and Ives is a highly sentimental rendering of war. As the casualties mounted and war weariness set in, it is tempting to believe that the people back home dismissed
such art as ludicrous, especially after they saw Edwin Forbes’s sketches from the front or the 1863 photo of the Gettysburg Slaughter Pen. Yet, the Off for the War print remained a popular cultural icon after the Civil War! Rather than criticize Americans for desiring historical art that sanitizes war, the curators encourage us to ask why these representations captured their imaginations. A portal opens to a way of knowing and feeling—alien to us—but a visual representation that captured cherished aspirations in which men and women believed that through suffering and sacrifice they could build character, live more virtuously, and give their lives for a higher purpose.

We might be tempted to gaze at these illustrations and prints as transparent windows in the gritty reality of the past, but Civil War Americans would have been baffled by anyone who simply wanted art to convey realism. They sought not an accurate reflection of themselves but a model of how they might actually live the war. In many of these illustrations they found confirmation of their selflessness, their heroics, and their idealism, even while Civil War armies were fighting savagely, killing each other with impunity, and devouring the land in a mighty revolution that had taken a life of its own, far removed from the war Northerners and Southerners had set out to fight in 1861.

— Peter S. Carmichael
Fluhrer Professor of History
One of the hardest things to do is picture what it was like to live in another era, especially when one comes from a generation where everything is just a click away. Today we are flooded with daily torrents of information and wonder if it reflects our modern world with depth or accuracy. This concern was shared during the American Civil War. Americans made many images that tied them to great events and assured them that through their suffering there was a noble purpose. Prints and wartime images brought clarity and focus to how individuals saw themselves as a people at war, but no sketch or painting could paper over the deep confusion and ambiguity that all Americans felt toward the Civil War. The art of the era reflects the turmoil of war and the public’s general uncertainty of how to deal with individual losses and being part of a nation at war.

This exhibition offers different perspectives held by the public during the Civil War. *Off for the War*, a popular lithograph produced by Currier and Ives, illustrates the early romanticized view of the war. It is a patriotic image depicting a man making the hard choice to do his duty for his country. Though only a
year later than *Off for the War*, *Civil Bellum or Brother and the Fallen Dragoon* is a darker illustration which emphasizes that with war there is death. As the nation began to comprehend the extended duration of the war and the staggering numbers of casualties, attention turned to the value of the individual and his wartime experience. *Through the Wilderness*, a post-war etching, quite accurately depicts the daily toils of a soldier’s life. Also on display is a Civil War-era map; its eastern perspective of the nation shows how far-reaching the American Civil War affected the nation, geographically, politically, and emotionally.

*Off for the War*, a colored lithograph by Currier and Ives in 1861, reflects the early tension between the needs of the home and the needs of the nation.\(^1\)

Currier and Ives visibly emphasize the individual and national conflict in the placement of the home and regiment on opposite sides of the lithograph. The man, though saddened to leave home, is honorably responding to the call of his country, as symbolized by the regiment and flag in the left background. Interestingly, in the same issue Currier and Ives ran an image entitled *Home from the War* where an identical family is seen embracing. The father’s regiment in the background marches off, indicating the perceived shortness of the war and the return of the individual to his domestic life after the completion of his duty to his nation.\(^2\) Illustrations published during the early stages of the war were typically very dramatic and romantic and often showed the heroic idea of war, not the harsh reality.\(^3\) This image focuses on the sentimentality, the bonds of family and the soldier’s noble and patriotic mission; as the embracing couple prepares to part, the child pulls his mother and father together as much as he is pulling them towards himself.

*Off for the War* would have circulated widely, not only because it was published by one of the largest lithograph firms of the time, but also because these prints were typically displayed by wives in their front rooms to show the bravery of their husbands.\(^4\) However, only a fraction of the images produced by Currier and Ives and other firms during the war were about the war. At the National Academy of Design art exhibition in New York Mark Twain said “more than half of the paintings [were] devoted to the usual harmless subjects, the same old pile of cats asleep in the corner.” From a modern standpoint, we assume that the war was the topic of conversation and news; however, this indicates that it was only part of a whole, other concerns and daily needs pressed on.
"Rifleman, shoot me a fancy shot
Straight at the heart of yon prowling vidette;
Ring me a ball in the glittering spot
That shines on his breast like an amulet!"

"Ah, captain! here goes for a fine-drawn bead,
There’s music around when my barrel’s in tune!”
Crack! went the rifle, the messenger sped,
And dead from his horse fell the ringing dragoon.

"Now, rifleman, steal through the bushes, and snatch
From your victim some trinket to handsel first blood;
A button, a loop, or that luminous patch
That gleams in the moon like a diamond stud!"

"O captain! I staggered, and sunk on my track,
When I gazed on the face of that fallen vidette,
For he looked so like you, as he lay on his back,
That my heart rose upon me, and masters me yet.

“But I snatched off the trinket--this locket of gold;
An inch from the centre my lead broke its way,
Scarce grazing the picture, so fair to behold,
Of a beautiful lady in bridal array.”

"Ha! rifleman, fling me the locket!--’tis she,
My brother’s young bride, and the fallen dragoon
Was her husband--Hush! soldier, ’twas Heaven’s decree,
We must bury him there, by the light of the moon!

“But hark! the far bugles their warnings unite;
War is a virtue,--weakness a sin;
There’s a lurking and loping around us to-night;
Load again, rifleman, keep your hand in!”

The *Civille Bellum or Brother and the Fallen Dragoon* reflects the transitional time when the public’s attention concentrated on both the nation’s needs and a soldier’s personal war experience. The lyrics describe the tension between the individual and the nation when the soldier cannot bury his brother because of the bugle’s call. However, it also shows the emergence of the popularity of the individual’s story in the description of the two soldiers’ connection. During the Civil War, poems frequently brought to light the struggle of the individual. The general population avidly read soldiers’ poems, especially poems about death, which provided a way to understand and articulate this tragedy. In a war where so many died, poems were a medium through which an
The author could memorialize and idealize death for the home front. The *Civille Bellum or Brother and the Fallen Dragoon*, written during the war by Irish poet Charles Dawson Shanly, was converted into a song by Joseph Webster, who composed music for it in 1862. Illustrated sheet music would have been displayed on the piano in one’s home, clearly conveying the cost of war to anyone in the room. In the illustration, the rifleman, kneeling next to the fallen dragoon, is looking for the trinket his commander wants. Just in front of the body is the locket that first attracted the attention of the Northerner. Mounted on horseback in the background is the commander who ordered the shot that killed the rifleman’s brother. The ever present army camped along the river bank is illuminated by the ominous moon in the far background. The artist chose to paint the moment when the rifleman is on the verge of discovering the identity of the dead man. In this second, the rifleman is still ignorant of the victim’s identity, which heightens the sense of drama for the audience. Second, the compositional emphasis on the dead body makes the image more graphic and clearly challenges the early romanticized or sanitized view of the war. Finally, the artist has shifted the responsibility for the killing away from the rifleman by not painting him making the deadly shot. The focus on the tragic consequence rather than on the rifleman’s firing or on his autonomy as a soldier reflects the general uncertainty Americans had about who was responsible for the Civil War.

During the Civil War, Edwin Forbes worked as a special artist for *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated News*, a journal which sought to capture an illustrated history of the events that were unfolding. Forbes traveled with the Army of the Potomac and sketched a variety of images from camp life to battle scenes. Though sketched during his time working for Leslie, Forbes did not publish *Through the Wilderness* until after the war as part of his book *Life Studies of the Great Army*. Former General William W. Averell attested to the authenticity of the book’s etchings and wrote, “Any soldier living who was familiar with those scenes will at a glance appreciate the fidelity of these pictures.” Forbes also won a medal at the Centennial Fair for this group of etchings, though he received little popular acclaim. In the years after the war, battle scenes and war heroes were popular images. It would not be until the turn of the century that Forbes’ work and others like it were recognized for their worth.
This scene shows a supply train battling against nature. Mud sticks to the gun wheels, and the man whips the struggling horses forward. Three men trudge after the gun, their bodies slightly stooped with weariness. While most soldiers were depicted standing tall with straight backs, Forbes let the exhaustion of war show in their stooped figures. The animal carcass in the left foreground is a reminder of death, both the heroic death of dying in battle and the somber death of sickness in camps. The artist seems to convey the longevity of what was supposed to be a short war as the viewer follows the supply train up and up until it blends into the trees.

George W. Colton designed his 1863 guide map for travelers. The map itself folds down into a pocket size book for easy transportation, and the hand coloring of the boundaries made it easier to reading when on the road. The topographical features of the map include state and county lines, cities, towns, and canals; however, railroads are the most prominent feature of the map. This emphasis on transportation, coupled with the fact that the map was popular enough to warrant the publication several other editions (1861-1864, 1867, and 1871), indicates that people were still interested in travel during the war. The extent of the railroads, especial growing sections in the west, reveal the mobile capabilities of the country.

G. Woolworth Colton’s Guide Map of the US and Canada, with Railroads, Counties, etc, 1864, map, 96 x 112 cm, (detail), Special Collections/Musselman Library

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3 My use of the term romantic or romanticized refers to an idealistic perspective.

4 Ibid, 85-86


6 Fahs, 100-101.


8 Neely and Holzer. 77.


10 Neely and Holzer. 81.

Nowadays we take for granted the speed, accuracy, and precision of our news. We can acquire on-the-scene television reports with the click of a button or surf the web for images or articles of the latest global conflict and understand these representations to be seemingly accurate. Realism is seen as intrinsic to a modern portrait of war, even though much is censored or left out of the media’s presentation of armed conflicts.

During the American Civil War, Americans believed they were encountering the real war through popular prints and newspapers. At the commencement of the war glorified images of men marching heroically into combat and leaving the battlefield victorious filled peoples’ imaginations. Pure manliness, above all else, would conquer the battlefield, and Americans believed that combat built and demonstrated true character. This idealistic view of war was reflected in its visual representations, sanitized images that resonated with Northerners and Southerners back home.

As the war progressed the imagery lost some of its idealism and assumed a darker, more realistic feel. Reporters and sketch artists who lived through the war with the troops began to depict more severe and violent scenes. The shift reminded viewers, even in subtle ways, that the war envisioned would not end quickly or gloriously. Both sides were locked in a horrendous blood bath. Sketches of war-weary soldiers began to appear and the terror of combat infused the photographs of mutilated soldiers, strewn across battlefields such as Antietam and Gettysburg, with the brutal reality of war. Even political cartoons exploited legitimate fears that defeat would bring the apocalypse. Nothing was neat and tidy about the war that had engulfed the nation. The images and sketches reminded all Americans of the bloody mayhem that had descended upon their loved ones fighting in the ranks. Once the conflict ended on April 9, 1865 at Appomattox Courthouse where General Robert E. Lee...
surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant, a need to memorialize the brave men who fought and fell for their beliefs was apparent in the representation of war. Post-war images of battles were not completely idealized, but they began to look more like an organized and clean militaristic utopia rather than the messy confusion that was and is the nature of warfare. Essentially, a regression in realism took place following the close of the Civil War. People were ready to move past the bloodshed and memorialize their heroes of war.

_Distinguished Militia Genl. During an Action_ (ca. 1861-1862), a political cartoon, published by the popular Currier & Ives firm of New York, depicts a Union army general in the midst of combat. Confederate cannon fire blasts in the background, yet the general reads a book while astride his horse. Though the lithograph is not in color, it depicts so much about the early wartime period. The Union officer is sitting on a horse with his ears pinned back, feet in the position to back up, and scared expression on his face. The officer has his sword tucked under his left arm and, with reading glasses perched on his nose and heels dug into the horse to keep it from moving, reads a book on military tactics. As he is reading, he says: “Well I declare that last order don’t seemed to have succeeded any better than the preceding one; really I must consult the Tactics. -- Oh! ah! -- I see, -- the next is to retreat.” Also in the foreground are the bodies of the officer’s men with one soldier looking up at him with disdain as blood trickles down his face from a gunshot wound to the forehead. Behind the officer Federal troops hold their flag high and continue aiming and firing at the enemy despite the fact that men are actively falling down around them, adding to the body count on the ground. Directly across from these Federal soldiers are two Confederate men and a battle flag waving behind them. One man is approaching the “aim” position with his rifle while the other man holds up his hand as if to halt the soldier. He says: “Don’t kill that fellow on the horse, we shall never lose while he commands.” Just below these two men are Confederate cannons loosing shells at the Union lines.

The beginning of the war did not yield many victories for the Union troops. This cartoon highlights the inadequacies of the Federal leadership on the battlefield in that the men, though fighting valiantly, cannot win with an officer whose only option is to retreat. In an effort to mock the Union officer, the Confederates would rather keep him alive than shoot him down since he is so incompetent. Even the Federal horse is afraid to approach enemy lines.

This cartoon captures the popular idea that the war would last just a few months. Since Union leadership was severely lacking, it was thought that this war would be an easy win for the newly formed Confederate States of America. According to this illustration, the Southerners would not even really have to fight since it would be so easy to overcome the Union forces.
Currier & Ives was a Union lithographic firm. Perhaps this cartoon was meant to illustrate the grievous inadequacies of the Union forces in an attempt to enact change. If enough people at home realized the weak link in leadership, then perhaps public opinion could enact change in the army. Support for the war on the home front was a vital part of Civil War America. Without their support, victory for either side would be virtually impossible.

A contemporary etching, *Free Negroes in Hayti* [sic] (c. 1861-1864), depicts Haitian slaves sacrificing a young child in a frenzied rebellion that took place in 1791. They are set in a jungle with trees and brush growing in copious amounts. Behind them on the right is a group of fellow Haitians. In the foreground, the closest man on the left is beating a drum while simultaneously dancing, head pointed towards the sky. The man next to him is also very animated and his holding a large stick that extends to the top of the image. A woman nearby holds a tambourine, playing along to the beat of the music. The next man has both his hands above his head as though conjuring a spirit or performing an important ritual. The man closest on the right is seated, observing the scene. All of the people depicted in this image are half-clothed, including the women. They are adorned with extravagant jewelry, and one wears a head dress. On the rock between the figures in the foreground is a naked baby sprawled out in a sacrificial position.

Interestingly, this cartoon does not depict war at all. One might therefore ask what it has to do with images of the American Civil War. With the slave revolt in Haiti resulting in a Haitian revolution and the creation of Haiti out of what once was Saint Domingue, a French sugar colony in the Caribbean, Southern slave holders began to fear the same fate for America. What began in 1791 as a slave insurrection became the largest and most successful revolt in history. With the abolition of slavery in Saint Domingue in 1793 came the decision the following year to eradicate slavery in the rest of the French empire. Concerned that white Americans could lose control to the African-American population in much the same fashion, slave holders in particular became protective of and on edge about not only the institution of slavery but also their economic way of life. What would happen if slavery were to be abolished? Who would work the fields? How would the unofficial aristocratic system in the South remain in place?
The Haitian Revolution inspired some slaves in America to revolt, only adding to white fears of an uprising. In South Carolina the slave population outnumbered that of the whites. North Americans regularly read reports of the Caribbean colony in newspapers, and many refugees, both white and black, freedman and slave, flocked to port cities such as Philadelphia and Charleston. With this constant reminder of the consequences of losing control of slavery, whites became very protective and fearful.

John Brown’s raid in October of 1859 that was meant to capture the United States Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia did little to quell Southern fears. Though the raid was ultimately unsuccessful, southern fire-eaters such as Edmund Ruffin seized the opportunity to capitalize upon these concerns. He took nine of the iron pikes that Brown had made to arm the slaves and sent one to each of the southern governors and inscribed the handles with the words: “favors from our northern brethren.” With the passing of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 and January 1, 1863 marking the release of Lincoln’s official statement making abolition one of the official war aims, this threat became a reality if the South were to lose the war.

This cartoon is number twenty-seven in a series of twenty-nine, with the entire collection having been published at intervals from 1861 to 1863. They were sketched by a Baltimore artist with southern sympathies. When the Federal government suppressed this publication, the artist fled to Europe where he continued to release pro Confederate images. Perhaps it was meant to stir anti-Unionism in the border state of Maryland and elsewhere in the South. After Lincoln’s proclamation, the southern soldiers needed to fight harder than ever so that Haiti’s fate would not become their own.

A stereo view entitled The Slaughter Pen at Gettysburg (July 1863) depicts dead Confederate soldiers at the base of Little Round Top after the Battle of Gettysburg. They fell during combat on July 2, 1863. The photograph shows four apparently dead bodies: one in the foreground and three further back in a staggered position. The man in the foreground is partly covered by a tree and has his back facing the photographer. The three other men lay facing towards the sky. Small trees dot the landscape and two large rocks or boulders flank the photograph.
Photography during the American Civil War was somewhat varied. Most photographers of the time period had photographic studios in which they produced portraits and cartes-de-visite. The equipment necessary to capture images outdoors was costly and difficult to maneuver. Those who ventured to the scenes of battles often arrived long after the conflict was over and focused on capturing the landscape of the field. Few photographers actually sought to take pictures of the dead. Even so, in order to do so, many things had to fall in place. For one, most of the surviving photographs are from northern photographers such as Alexander Gardner and Mathew Brady. This means that they would only be allowed to take photographs on sites of Union victory such as Gettysburg and Antietam since the cities would be under Federal occupation and would thus allow Union artists to take images on the battlefield. Additionally, they would have to be at the field shortly following the armed conflict as the armies buried their dead as quickly as possible. Men at Gettysburg were not left out for more than a few days. Most of the images seen in collections are of Confederate dead rather than Union. The Federal armies removed their own men first and left townsfolk, prisoners, and anyone available to take care of the Confederates after their army had moved away.

Since the bodies were cleared so quickly after battle, photographers relied on this “perfect storm” scenario to capture the dead. What is somewhat unique about this stereo view is that it is not like most; these men are seen as they fell, meaning the bodies had not been moved since July 2. This photograph then can be seen as incredibly accurate. Photographers typically staged their photographs quite often in order to provide dramatic effect or carefully compose the scene. Perhaps one of the most famous of these images is at Gettysburg’s Devil’s Den, where the dead sharpshooter presumably was dragged to the base of the rocks by Gardner. However, this view in the Slaughter Pen is authentic to the battle and thus illustrates the zenith of realism in battlefield photography.

Viewers on the home front reacted with uncertainty and ambivalence to such photographs. As wartime images in newspapers began to depict the war with seemingly more veracity, audiences were not necessarily opposed to seeing these views. However, many of the photographs of the dead were thought too gruesome by some viewers. Those at the Dunker Church at Antietam, for example, showed men as they fell, and reaction was strong against the uncensored images.

But photographic circulation was poor at best during the American Civil War era, and many of the battlefield images did not reach terribly wide audiences. The process of getting an image into a newspaper was long as it had to be put into woodcut before a copper plate could be made of the image and printed in the paper. Regardless, for those who saw these images, battlefield photography had a profound impact on the home front.

Photographs of the war were considered to be the ultimate representation of realism and society’s acceptance of their production exemplifies this shift towards realistic illustrations of combat.
The Battle of Gettysburg (c. 1884), illustrated in a color lithograph as it was remembered twenty-one years after its conclusion in July of 1863, depicts a wide swath of land with units of Confederates on the right hand side of the picture. These soldiers converge in the foreground with Union forces on the left side marching to meet their enemy. In the background are a few rolling hills and distant troops in the midst of armed conflict, though the smoke from the cannons is the only indication of mayhem in the distance. Along a road to the left of the lithograph is a small cavalry charge and a few horses pulling a wagon of a few Union soldiers. Medics carry off wounded Union soldiers. A charge of Federal troops advance in the foreground in very regimented straight lines with bayonets fixed towards an onslaught of a rather disorganized unit of Confederates whose commanding officer is being shot off his rearing horse. Two Union officers wave their troops forward with their swords as they sit atop large horses. In the extreme foreground men and a couple of horses on the Union side have fallen along with an artillery piece. To the right, Federal soldiers escort a sizable group of Confederates off the battlefield under a white flag of surrender. Many of the prisoners are bandaged. Aside from small spots of blood on the captured men, blood is strangely absent on the dead men who have fallen in lavish poses or are actively tumbling to the ground.
Between the two troops, there is an extreme contrast in the organization of the Federals versus the broken order of the Confederates. The land, although littered with the armies of both sides, is very green and lush. A stone wall with a wooden fence separates the two sides.

Compared with the wartime images, even those of the early period, this lithograph is strikingly austere in its representation of war. It can be characterized by tremendous order among the troops (including the Confederates in the distance) and an odd sanitization of wounded bodies that even the early wartime images possessed. Naturally, this image would glorify the North given its victory over the C.S.A. which can be seen in the chaos of the Confederates upon their entering battle. Whereas the Union forces remain regulated even in combat, the Confederates fall apart as soon as they reach the conflict. They are also being escorted off the battlefield under a white flag indicating an element of cowardice that is unseen in the Federal forces. As a whole, the entire scene is greatly idealized and exemplifies a movement away from the realism seen at the height of the American Civil War.

But why this digression if the American public is already aware of the truths of war? After four long years of war, perhaps society was ready to rid themselves of the gruesome images that plagued and confused the nation for so long. They were ready to glorify their friends, husbands, neighbors, and relatives who fought valiantly; they considered their respective causes to be just and worth the price of life. This lithograph certainly accomplishes a sense of glory and heroism in the lines of battle and well as high ideas. War is once again a heroic, majestic, and fantastic feat that gives men character. Though there are Union dead depicted in this image, they are not mangled and bloody but pristine as though they are just catching a quick nap before resuming the fight. In fact the only ones with blood are the captured Confederates but even that is kept to a bare minimum. For a nation tired of war and its realistic brutality, the citizens could turn to this representation and be proud of the actions of their fellow countrymen in the American Civil War.
When I first examined the visual materials of the Civil War era for this exhibition I was struck by what I saw as a glut of oversimplified and unrealistic images that seemingly resembled propaganda. The endless spin, the over the top heroics, the glorification of sacrifice, and the seeming lack of brutality confused me. I selected political cartoons for this exhibition because they provided commentary that seemed more critical and direct than other illustrations produced during the war. Yet, as I began to research and better understand the artwork of the time period, I began to understand the legitimacy and integrity of these heroic portrayals of the war. I learned more about the ways in which pre-war society shamed those who failed to bravely endure pain and suffering that today might be seen as intolerable. Equally, during the war many soldiers felt compelled by society to keep a stiff upper lip and boldly face the trials without complaint or cynicism. War was a means for building character and testing one’s inner strength. This notion seemed incredibly outlandish to me, but I realized these depictions reflected how people lived events. The ideal and reality were not always aligned of course, but what I deemed artificial was real and powerful to Civil War Americans.

It can be easy to look upon past actors with a sense of superiority and assume that they were foolish and unable to critically examine
the contradictions between what was portrayed in art and popular culture and what actually occurred in the war. However, this anachronistic approach obscures a more complicated and nuanced understanding of past events. The pressure to live up to extraordinary standards of bravery during the Civil War was real, and many men's actions were shaped by it. In a letter to his family Nathaniel Bodwell wrote, “I am afraid that the men will think me a coward... I will fire all my carbines if I shall fall in the attempt.”¹ In a modern context Nathaniel's sentiment would seem ludicrous, but at the time his words were meant to instill confidence in his family and show his willingness to die an honorable and brave death. He was in a sense fulfilling his moral obligation to his family, as well as his political commitment to his nation.

This idea of fighting and dying a noble and heroic death is reflected in the lithograph *The Great Battle of Gettysburg, July 1st, 2nd and 3rd, 1863 Genl. Hancock and Staff*, completed most likely in the 1870s. The soldiers are depicted as bravely charging the enemy, advancing with grim determination. Retreat is seemingly not an option. In actuality men ran from the front with startling impunity. Fear vanished in postwar depictions of battle where men were an overpowering force of pure heroism. General Hancock is pictured at the top in a framed portrait that is flanked by a pair of soldiers, one confederate and one union. The placement of these two soldiers close to one another can be interpreted either as a hackneyed attempt to downplay the differences and hatred felt by both sides during the war or as an attempt at portraying the reconciliation between soldiers that occurred after the war. Finally, the brave and heroic nature of Hancock's portrayal must be examined. Research completed by the staff of Gettysburg College's Special Collections after purchasing the lithograph reveals that the print may have had a political use, as Hancock was a presidential candidate in the 1880s. Such a glowing presentation of his contribution at the Battle of Gettysburg surely would be an asset in seeking the presidency. However, since the exact publication date of this lithograph is unknown, the possible political origins remain unclear.
Also seen in this exhibition is a set of three political cartoons which I believe provide great insight into public opinions and the mindset of citizens immediately preceding and during the Civil War. It is important to remember that with all art, but especially political cartoons, one must consider the agenda of the cartoonist. While these cartoons allow a greater understanding of the lives of ordinary citizens during the Civil War, political cartoons both then and now serve to portray policy makers and events in a way that fits into the political narrative constructed by the cartoonist.

The prewar cartoon of James Buchanan as a gas lamp on the wall implies that Buchanan has been nothing more than a wall dressing during his presidency. Instead of using a symbol associated with strong leadership such as a ship’s captain, Buchanan is transformed into an object that is functional, but irrelevant in a larger context. Instead of being remembered at the end of his term as a great leader, he is depicted as a wall fixture only filling space. The caption remarks that the lamp will soon be removed from Washington and returned to Pennsylvania. This cartoon is an indictment of the failed Buchanan presidency. The public had turned against Buchanan because of his inability to resolve the brewing crisis between those who wished to see slavery expanded westward and those who preferred to contain it within its present states. Buchanan’s image has not much improved since this cartoon was published in 1860. His weak and ineffective presidency portrayed in this cartoon would soon be overshadowed by one of the greatest leaders in the history of the United States. This cartoon succinctly captures the public’s opinion of Buchanan’s presidency at the time. The illustration acts as a bridge between the Antebellum and Civil War eras, with the slow moving slavery crisis finally coming to a boil when Lincoln is elected.

The second cartoon shows a slave owner overwhelmed by fears of emancipation. This print is centered around two characters, the first being the slave owner, who sits at his desk while being tormented by the spectre of free slaves and the politicians seeking emancipation. The slave owner appears very haggard and gruff as he delves through the Bible seeking a religious justification for slavery. In the prewar era some of the most prominent
defenses of slavery were constructed using biblical examples to justify slavery. After all, if God never made an issue of slavery to his various prophets and Jesus never confronted the issue, then clearly slavery was right in God’s eyes. At the feet of the slave owner there is a map of the confederacy and the constitution unceremoniously tossed away. The other predominant figure in the cartoon is the African American portrayed as a raven atop a bust of Senator Horace Greeley. The freedman is portrayed in a manner which today which would be seen as incredibly racist. His exaggerated lips and mouth combined with the distorted English are now seen as prejudiced caricatures, but at the time, portrayals of African Americans in this way was not uncommon, even in Northern publications. While the war may have brought more Northerners into the anti-slavery camp, many were still deeply racist and firmly believed in black inferiority. Beneath him is a bust of the outspoken opponent to slavery Horace Greeley. These two figures haunt the slave owner and represent his fear of abolitionism. The entire cartoon is an allusion to Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “The Raven.” Even the accompanying text at the bottom of the cartoon is adapted from the original poem in which the writer is tormented by the raven repeated the accursed phrase “nevermore”. Though, in this context “nevermore” is bastardized to “nebermore,” which feeds into the racist representation of the freedman taking the form of the raven.

I felt that this cartoon was an unintentional representation of the racism that existed within Northern society during the war, even as public opinion turned against slavery as a whole. The text at the bottom clearly shows this contradiction. While the illustrator clearly intended the cartoon as an attack on slavery, it also uses abrasive word “nigger” which shows that the North was by no means devoid of racism during and after the war. By today’s standards this cartoon would be seen as having contradictory messages as we too often link historical anti-slavery sentiment with anti-racist sentiment. However, Abolitionists who believed in freedom and equality for blacks were still a minority after the war. This is further evidenced by the 100 year delay in attaining full
citizenship for African Americans after the war. While it is clear that abolitionists such as Senator Greeley had a profound impact on ending slavery and altering northern opinions, they were not able to attain true equality for African Americans after the war. Thus many Northerners disliked the institution of slavery, but still saw African Americans as inferior. The use of “The Raven” as inspiration for this cartoon neatly encapsulates the illustrator’s northern perspective on this issue. In essence, slavery is on the brink of destruction and though the ideas of Greeley have since passed on, slave owners must know that the institution which had shaped southern society was doomed to fail.

The final cartoon, published in Harper’s Weekly in 1861, features Jefferson Davis looking gaunt and shadowy as he harvests the lives of Americans of both sides. The dark scene portrays Davis as the grim reaper, the man culpable for a nation convulsed in brutal warfare. Interestingly, this cartoon was published very early in the war, before most of the truly bloody battles occurred. However, at the time the cartoon was published, the Northern public remained shocked by the brutality for the war. Just months earlier the First Battle of Bull Run gave the Union citizens a mere glimpse into the savage and bloody nature of the war that was to come. Yet, at this time Bull Run was the bloodiest and largest battle American forces had participated in, though it would later be dwarfed by battles like Antietam and Gettysburg. This cartoon demonizes the enemy and suggests that the Southern people were beholden to a force of evil in Jefferson Davis. Interestingly, the cartoon was cut out of Harper’s Weekly and placed in a scrap book which means that it was seen as worthy of preservation by someone at the time. This is unsurprising as it clearly and concisely captures both the disgust at the loss of life in the war up to that point and focuses the blame on the man they believed responsible for the continued bloodshed.

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