

FROM OMAHA TO ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM:
AMERICAN ARTISTS' RESPONSES TO WORLD WAR II*

Stephen Polcari



William Baziotis, *The Parachutists*, 1944. Duco enamel on canvas, 30 x 40 in. The Guggenheim Museum, Gift of Ethel Baziotis, 2004

*Catalogue essay for the exhibition "**From Omaha to Abstract Expressionism** /American Artists Respond to World War II," November 10 to December 14, 1995, Curated by Stephen Polcari.
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During the tumult of the Second World War, Winston Churchill found a rare quiet moment to read Jane Austen. Struck by the contrast between their worlds, he exclaimed aloud: "What calm lives they had, those people! No worries about the French Revolution, or the crashing struggle of the Napoleonic wars. Only manners controlling natural passion as far as they could, together with cultured explanations of any mischances."ⁱ

CatalogueAs this century comes to an end and the last great empire, the Soviet Union, collapses, it is increasingly clear that in this century war has determined the grand sweep of history, politics, and economics. The First and Second World Wars and their coda, the Cold War, shaped the era from 1914 to 1991, and created the landscape of nations and states and the geopolitical assumptions, strategies, and theories prevailing at the end of the century.

The wars also shaped the imagined reality of modern times, as they generated much of what was conventionalized and

mythologized as the nature of modern life. They first destroyed nineteenth century society and then fixed a new world order in which the behavior of men and women in crisis became the platform of understanding and the maker of much of the crucial imaginative landscape in which people act. If the Trojan War was the world war of the Greek world, if the Napoleonic Wars were the epic for nineteenth century Europe, if the Civil War defined the future of the United States, then the cataclysms of the world wars were the twentieth century's Homeresque odyssey by which it was transformed.

Exhibitions and histories seeking to illustrate the power and effects of modern war have most often emphasized the battle and its purposes. Their narratives focus on the traditional verities of nations at war and of men in battle: grand leadership, high purpose, national righteousness, heroism, self-sacrifice, uniformity of behavior, and universal patriotism. Public rituals and the solemn commemorations of the gallant soldiers lost in battle give further significance to events. Social and and political effects are also studied as is the opposition to war.

These standard histories are incomplete, however, for they address, in the words of the renowned military historian, John Keegan, only some "limited stock of assumptions and assertions about the behavior of human beings in extreme-stress situations."ⁱⁱ War, however, is a major laboratory of human behavior, and the changes induced by war, both self-evident and elusive, need to be spelled out for future generations.

A veteran of the First World War defined the central effect for all wars: "Passchendale drew an abrupt dividing line across my experience."ⁱⁱⁱ A veteran of the Second World War notes: "That war was one of the big experiences of my life, you know? Maybe **the** major one. Bigger than my marriage. Bigger than the birth of my kids."^{iv} For many, it was the most emotionally intense and full experience of their lives. As veteran Elliott Johnson self-consciously noted about D-Day, it was "a lifetime in one day."^v And it shaped civilians and war veterans forever in large and small ways: "This war was the most important experience these guys would ever have. Mine too. I think it must have altered [our] . . . character."^{vi}

Recording the impact of the experience of the Second World War is a gargantuan task, as demanding, perhaps even more so, as

recording its battles and historical and political effects.

Additionally, it is especially difficult for this writer who has not gone to war. Indeed, few intellectuals of the generation that came of age in the 1950s-60s -- my generation -- have had, or know many people who have had, direct experience of any of the major cataclysms of modern times -- save one, Vietnam and that was an exceptionally bitter experience. Few have experienced the impact of war as directly as had previous generations. While most of our elders had fathers, brothers, grandfathers, even mothers and aunts involved in large-scale war efforts, few American (and probably Western intellectuals) under forty-five years of age have been through combat or been part of a nation fully and enthusiastically engaged in a war for any length of time. That lack of experience divides contemporary generations from their predecessors in the twentieth century.

In many circles, therefore, war is treated as another bloodless intellectual problem. The lack of sympathetic identification with and moral understanding of war is most acutely felt when many try to explore its most profound casualties: emotional and psychological health, traditional values, and normal

"reality." The wars of the twentieth century and in particular the Second World War, the worst in history, had devastating effects on human beings and human behavior. The most terrible effect of World War, according to the French critic Paul Valery in 1922, was on the mind [which] "has . . . been cruelly wounded . . . It doubts itself profoundly."^{vii}

This exhibition replays the sights and sounds of war, commemorates its casualties, and describes some of its immediate and lasting effects on the mind and heart of twentieth-century humankind. It hopes to sketch aspects of the outer and inner worlds of war and their reverbrations. It will journey from a documentary record of battle and America at war to an investigation of what America thought it was fighting for and against, and then to an examination of how artists sought to grasp and relate its immediate and long range implications.

Documentary Realism

When America went to war in 1941, most of its artists went too. Indeed, by 1939 the American government, which had come to the aid of artists during the Depression, began phasing out art

programs like the Works Project Administration and the Treasury Section. With the looming war in Europe, the programs, which had long been attacked by conservatives for waste and for what they considered "socialism, were repeatedly cut. In 1943 they were terminated. By that time America had entered the war and artists had enlisted or been drafted. While some artists joined camouflage units or designed posters, and still others engaged in homefront industrial and weapons work, at the beginning of the Second World War, the principal avenue of patriotic expression was the new programs established to record the war firsthand. Armed forces artists accompanied troops across the battlefields, seas, and skies of Europe and Asia. In February 1943 the Army established a unit with the Corps of Engineers in North Africa. Nineteen artists moved across and behind the front and created among the first American artistic documents of the war. Less than a year later, as the cost of the war increased and absorbed more and more, and political criticism grew of "wasteful spending," the program was canceled. Fortunately, LIFE magazine offered to pay for the artists, seventeen of whom stayed on. In 1944 Abbott Pharmaceutical Laboratories offered to support artists who would be squired by the Armed

Forces around their respective theaters. Today these works make up the core of the Art Centers of the armed forces.

Perhaps the purposes of the programs can best be explained by a memoir of George Biddle. Biddle was instrumental in establishing the government art programs of the 1930s and was the original director of the War Department Art Advisory Committee before becoming an official war artist or "artist correspondent" himself:

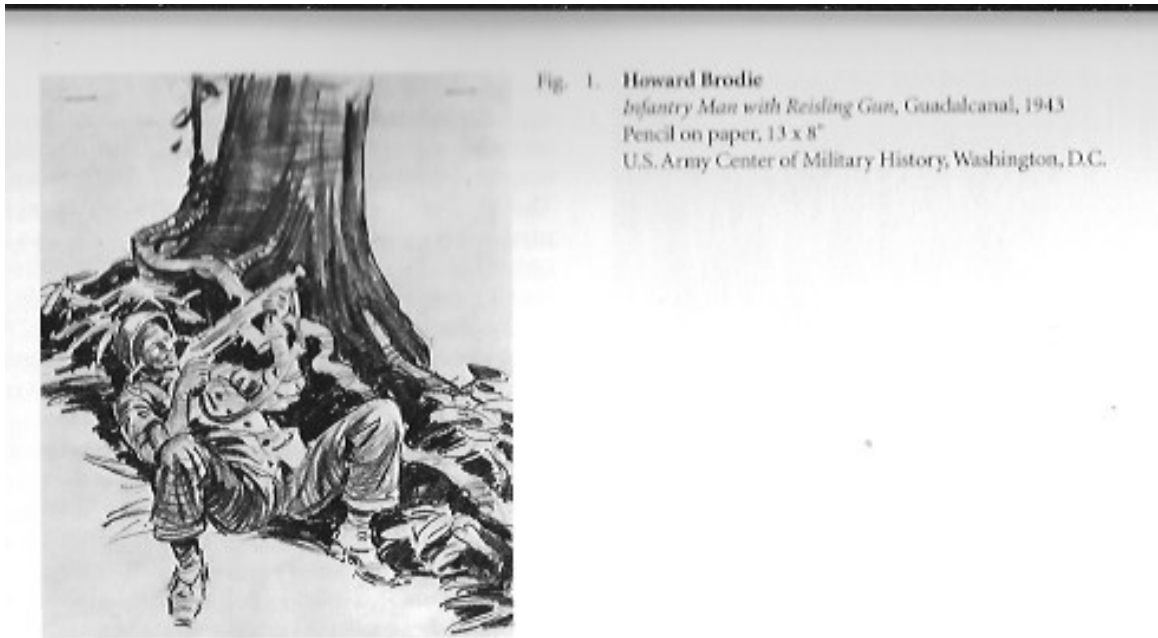
In this war there will be a greater amount than ever before of factual reporting, of photographs and moving pictures. You are not sent out merely as news-gathers. You have been selected . . . [to] record the war in all its phases, and its impact on you as artists and as human beings. . . . Any subject is in order, if as artists you feel it is part of War, battle scenes . . .; battle landscapes; the wounded, the dying, and the dead; prisoners of war; field hospitals and base hospitals; wrecked habitations and bombing scenes; character sketches of our own troops, of prisoners, of the natives of the country you visit . . . the tactical implements of war; embarkations and debarkation scenes; the nobility,

cowardice, cruelty, boredom of war. . . . Express if you can--realistically or symbolically--the essence and spirit of War.

You may be guided by Blake's mysticism, by Goya's cynicism and savagery, by Delacroix's romanticism, by Daumier's humanity and tenderness; or better still follow your own inevitable star.^{viii}

Ultimately, one of the participants, Edward Reep summed up the program's ideals: "I was fighting the war furiously with my paintbrush."^{ix}

Hundreds of paintings, drawings, and watercolors parallel the works of war correspondents and photographers who also accompanied the troops. While most artist-correspondents had no time on the battlefield to finish large pictures, they found smaller media adequate to the task. Often done as quickly as possible, drawings, watercolors, and gouaches form by far the largest number of works. Howard Brodie's INFANTRY MAN WITH REISING GUN, GUADACANAL (fig. 1), for example, presents a classic view of a soldier firing his weapon in a quickly rendered realist style.



Kerr Erby's *BULLETS AND BARBED WIRE* of 1944 is a powerfully rendered charcoal drawing of the Pacific campaign.

To be sure, there were fully developed studio paintings. Griffin Bailey Coale's *DIVE BOMBING JAPANESE CARRIER [at] MIDWAY* and Robert Benny's *THE DEATH OF THE SHOHO*, for examples, consist of descriptive yet dramatized views of the naval battles where the Japanese offensive strategy in the Pacific was brought to a halt (and carriers that attacked Pearl Harbor sunk). The artists employ the traditional artistic devices of solid form, three-dimensional perspective, and chiaroscuro (light and dark) to depict modern battle. These works and others not only record the event

but also provide a sense of the grand sweep of battle: large spaces, powerful weapons, violent explosions, and burning hulks. They offer seascapes of power, conflict, and drama in traditional realist form.

Other artists present the immensity of a conflict in which human beings are but small, interchangeable units. Erby's TARAWA series portrays the sweep of Pacific invasion as jumbles of troops fall and thrust forward on the beaches. Under a huge impersonal, smoke-filled sky, men crawl and rush to their destiny like ants. Erby's drawing creates a sense of men at war as subterranean forces. BEACH ACTIVITY OMAHA by Alexander Russo offers a different but equally immense view. With a bird's-eye perspective, the artist lays out part of the greatest invasion in history. Here troops are hardly visible in the whirlwind of innumerable landing craft, observation balloons, and firing ships all under swirling rain-swollen clouds. Floyd Davis's HAMBURG RAID JULY - 1943 captures the determined movement of the skies of American planes filling the sky.

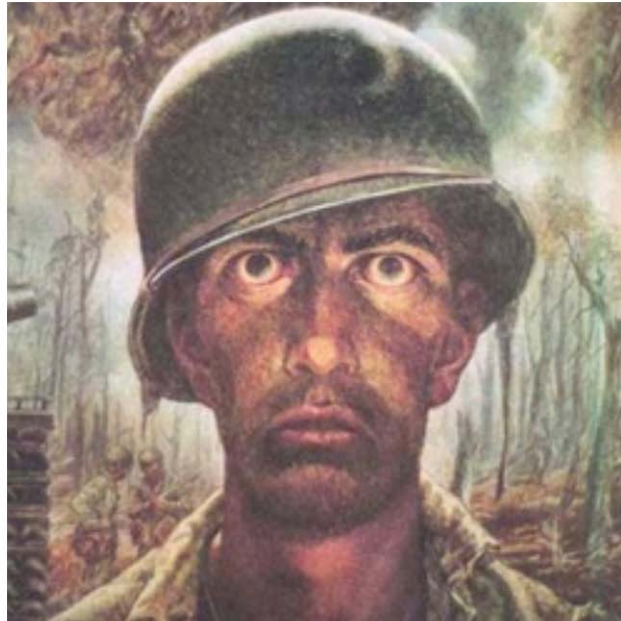
Though some artists captured the epic scale of the war, most followed Biddle's recommendations and concentrated on the

individual event -- a soldier firing, the nursing of the wounded, the discovery of dead civilians. They captured the pathos of the war, and hinted at its psychic costs. Often they addressed the soldier's strain caused by being constantly near death or near to realizing their greatest fear -- dying far from home and family in a strange and inhospitable place "alone and in pain."^x

Rarely recorded are the breakdowns associated with what was called shell-shock in the First World War and battle-fatigue in the Second. Studies after the war noted that, after repeated exposure to battle, most soldiers would eventually break down, as few could handle the stress indefinitely.^{xi} The strain is best



Fig. 2. Tom Lea
Marines Call It That Two-Thousand Yard Stare,
Peleliu Island, 1944
Oil on canvas, 36 x 28"
U.S. Army Center of Military History,
Washington, D.C.



recorded in what James Jones described in a painting as THE MARINES CALL IT THAT "TWO-THOUSAND YARD STARE" (fig. 2). Tom Lea's painting captures a marine who has apparently given up all hope and is so exhausted that he seems not to care whether he lives or dies. He is so disturbed that he looks through the viewer as if he were not there. Steward Broyles's YANKEE JOE suggests much the same state.^{xii}

Sometimes, however, the poignancy of the image alleviated the need for dramatics, as George Biddle's TUNISIA # 1 and DEAD CIVILIANS - ITALY 1944 testify. Works like Ken Bold's THEY DIE HARD treat the brutal, self-evident facts of war as does Joseph Hirsh's NIGHT SHIFT, ITALY. Erby's WOUNDED MAN and Stevan Dohanos's EVACUATING A BUDDY speak eloquently by themselves.

So, too, the representations of the camps. Loren Russell Fisher's DEATH IN BUCHENWALD presents the new image of the dead at the end of the war without comment. As Edward Murrow said at Buchenwald, "I have reported what I saw and heard, but for some things I have no words."

Destruction is as constant as death. From Bohard's AFTERMATH GUADACANAL to Albert Gold's ST. GILES STRONG POINT to Standish Bachus's rather delicate HIROSHIMA, waste and desolation accompany the troops. Yet for all of the death and destruction, the war's desolation and horror were rarely emphasized. That is, for all of the conventional drama of this work, little is outright horrific. Dismembered American troops and scattered body parts are seldom depicted. Neither the armed

forces nor the American public would tolerate such representations as they were thought to be too bad for morale. There were limits to what was to be painted as there were to what was to be photographed and noted in news accounts. Wounds are most often portrayed as clean and death occurs to whole men. On this issue, official war art approached sanitizing and perhaps even romanticizing the war. (Perhaps this aspect should not be criticized too strongly. While the reluctance to represent the carnage of war distorts and misleads, it is in keeping with renderings of horrific events like automobile accidents and plane crashes. There, too, sensitivity and protection of feelings are public policy.)

Furthermore, in these documentary works, there is rarely an attempt to employ modern symbolic and formal devices for additional effect. Conventional pictorial rhetoric was seldom challenged, even in the most gruesome, honest depictions by Erby and Lea, perhaps of the official artists, the most undisguised in their representations. Graphic realism is the most aggressive posture of the artist-correspondent, not expressionist distortion.

An exception to this is the work of Reuben Kadish, a WPA artist and lifelong friend of Jackson Pollock who was a war artist as was

another of Pollock's friends, Manuel Tolegian. Kadish rendered the horrible with modern pictorial devices. JAP BOMBING breaks ground in its portrayal of piles of the dead, while CARRION BIRDS CLEANING CHARRED BONES--BURNING GHAT (fig. 3) underlines the horror of civilian death with modern expressionist force.



Fig. 3. Reuben Kadish
Famine—Carrion Birds Cleaning Charred Bones,
Burning Ghat, Calcutta, India, 1943
 Ink on paper, 23 x 15½"
 U.S. Army Center of Military History,
 Washington, D.C.

Most of the artists of the armed forces thus did not invent new forms nor find a language to present the war as outside previous

experience. To be sure, the work is more realistic than depictions of the work of battle than ever before, and it shows no sign of triumphalism. From the work, it is difficult to determine who won or lost the war. Nationalist stance is virtually absent. No singular difficulties of class or politics or place adhere. Instead, the artist correspondents's documentary realism made martial virtues of efficiency and stoicism, making war, while fierce and heroic, everyday too.

Absent, too, are the paens to nineteenth-century virtues of heroism, sacrifice, honor, and country. These concepts had been destroyed in the First World War and did not return except in very official rhetoric of the Second. Soldiers are mostly anonymous and interchangeable units. Ultimately, what the military artists record is something like what James Jones wrote of American troops who had fought for several years: "The green American outfits . . . passed through all the many and subtle EVOLUTIONS OF A SOLDIER and become . . . a conglomeration of hardy, mean, cynical, tough, canny, knowledgeable troopers and professionals."^{xiii} The young men had become accustomed to war and war was treated as a "normal" professional experience, to be

faced like as any other difficult but doable professional problem. In its way, this art is truly the official view. It documents the normalization of the war in which war was not considered an aberration as the nineteenth century had thought with its ideal of progress. As Jones said, gradually during the war, it became evident that "war was becoming a permanent way of life, a condition that would just go on and on."^{xiv} While the advent of modern war in the First World War was shocking and new to the West, the second, to Americans at least, was familiar. To them, war was habitual and ingrained within. Such an attitude measures how the traumatic had become routine in the later part of the war. The postwar world with its gratuitous delight in violence begins here.

PROPAGANDA POSTERS

The acceptance of war as grim necessity portrayed by the artists accorded with general attitudes across the West as the Second World War began. As opposed to the enthusiasm that greeted the beginnings of the "Great War," there was a singular lack of enthusiasm greeting the Second. Even the Germans had to

manufacture an incident at the Polish border to say they began the war in defense of themselves.

This attitude necessitated that the struggle to win the war had to be carried on other planes. The most important was the battlefield of loyalty, belief, and purpose. The Second World War was a war of the mind as well as of the armed forces. Hitler himself recognized this struggle when he is recalled Lord Northcliffe's words about the First World War: "The bombardment of the German Mind was almost as important as the bombardment by cannon."^{xv} In general, propagandists

adapt their strategies and vary their tactics [according to the audience they are addressing]. To the enemies, propaganda strategy centers around the theme of their ultimate defeat; to the allies, the stress is on loyalty, unity, ultimate triumph; to the neutrals, propagandists stress their righteousness and inevitable triumph; the home front is constantly reminded of the need for effort and sacrifice to achieve victory.^{xvi}

At the beginning of the Second World War, Americans were particularly hostile to propaganda because of their feeling of having

been duped by the British in the First War. Nevertheless, in 1941 the government established an Office of Defense Information for propaganda purposes and in 1942 the Office of War Information. General Eisenhower had a Psychological Warfare Division integrated into his command.

The most effective wartime propaganda was carried on through media not often utilized or even extant earlier: movies and radio.^{xvii} All nations exploited the mass media, from Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats" and the Americans' use of Hollywood to Churchill's speeches and Hitler's radio addresses and recorded rallies. They also used leaflets, cartoons, and means such as bubble gum cards. The American Office of War Information hoped that, ultimately, every adult would hear at least four war messages a week to do everything from buying war bonds to getting a good night's rest so that they could be more efficient in the plant the next day. ^{xviii}

For artists at home,, propaganda through posters offered greatest opportunities to win support for the war effort. The posters conveyed the psychological and political reasons why America had to win. Most concerned enlistment, production,

conservation, unity, sabotage, espionage, atrocity, education, employment, and health.

As opposed to the the complex visual and verbal messages of World War I posters, posters of the Second World War were simple, direct, and concise. These posters followed advertising techniques of the interwar and war periods and the general movement of modern typography toward simple and direct design, bright colors, and few words. For the most part, they were largely unaffected by developments in modernist art.

The underlying message in most American posters is epitomized by the image of Navy guns firing juxtaposed with the words "Let's Go" (fig. 4).

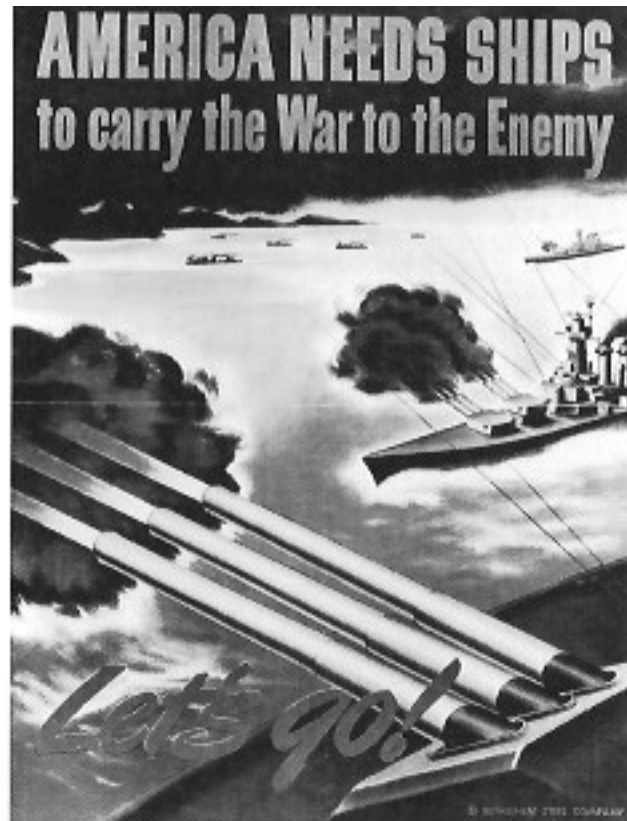


Fig. 4. *Let's Go!*
Photographic reproduction of poster, 20 x 16"
National Archives, Washington, D.C.

American posters played the role of cheerleaders, energizing the nation, explaining its purpose in the war, and exemplifying engaged action. (Posters like LET'S GO represent the American type of "action" poster influenced by photography. They emphasize success by "doing" much like American philosophy [John Dewey] and art of the 1930s.) Few were concerned with articulating a political or ideological argument, such as the Four Freedoms or the

Atlantic Charter for which America was told to fight. Fighting for Poland or against anti-semitism was not stressed. Rare, too, are images of vicious hatred. To be sure, Americans ridiculed and demonized the Axis, as a poster of an innocent mother and child threatened by the Axis claws, indicates. No doubt, as with all warfare, the enemy especially the Japanese, was seen as beasts and animals, and no doubt hatred was stirred up on occasion, as in JAPS EXECUTE DOOLITTLE FLYERS, depicting an actual event. Here Uncle Sam retaliates by choking a caricatured, bestial Japanese. For all the indications of warfare, however, battle in American posters is often a bloodless contest, devoid of the blood lust that reflects an open anger and feverish hatred.

On the whole, American hatred and vengeance Pearl Harbor are rare, at least in comparison to European and Japanese posters, such as one showing Hitler as a hatchet or German planes as the grim reaper. Authorities at the OWI kept a lid on the depictions of the harshness of the war. In a notorious case, Ben Shahn's poster of French workers being subjected to "SLAVERY, STARVATION, DEATH" was deemed too harsh and not distributed despite its being milder than European and Japanese posters.

Nevertheless, as with the combat art, there was a subliminal landscape of the mind and heart portrayed in these posters. It is this new way of imagining the world that came through regardless of authorities and official control, and it is this psychic life to which the public was subjected, so much so that it became their imagined and psychological world despite the government's desire for upbeat messages.

American posters render a world far different from that represented in America ten years earlier. It is a world of struggle and conflict in which, as in BLAST 'EM, the national symbol is engaged in attacks, violence, and savagery as the homefront worker is encouraged to increase production. It is a world of destruction and overwhelming, impersonal forces. It is world that is inescapable and confrontational, as a frontal Japanese soldier in a poster shoots directly at the viewer indicates. Epic, titanic forces are loose as gladiators stand astride the world and fight for it in



Fig. 5. *Give 'Em Hell!*
Photographic reproduction of poster, 20 x 16"
National Archives, Washington, D.C.

GIVE 'EM HELL (fig. 5).

Powerful forces contend and thrust phalanxes of armies and weapons at each other across the screen of the mind. In *DELIVER US FROM EVIL*, evil, a medieval religious concept seemingly out of place in an intellectualized, Freudianized world threatens

innocence and goodness. Fear, sinisterness, chicanery are everywhere. Ghosts of the dead, of the past, and of nightmares



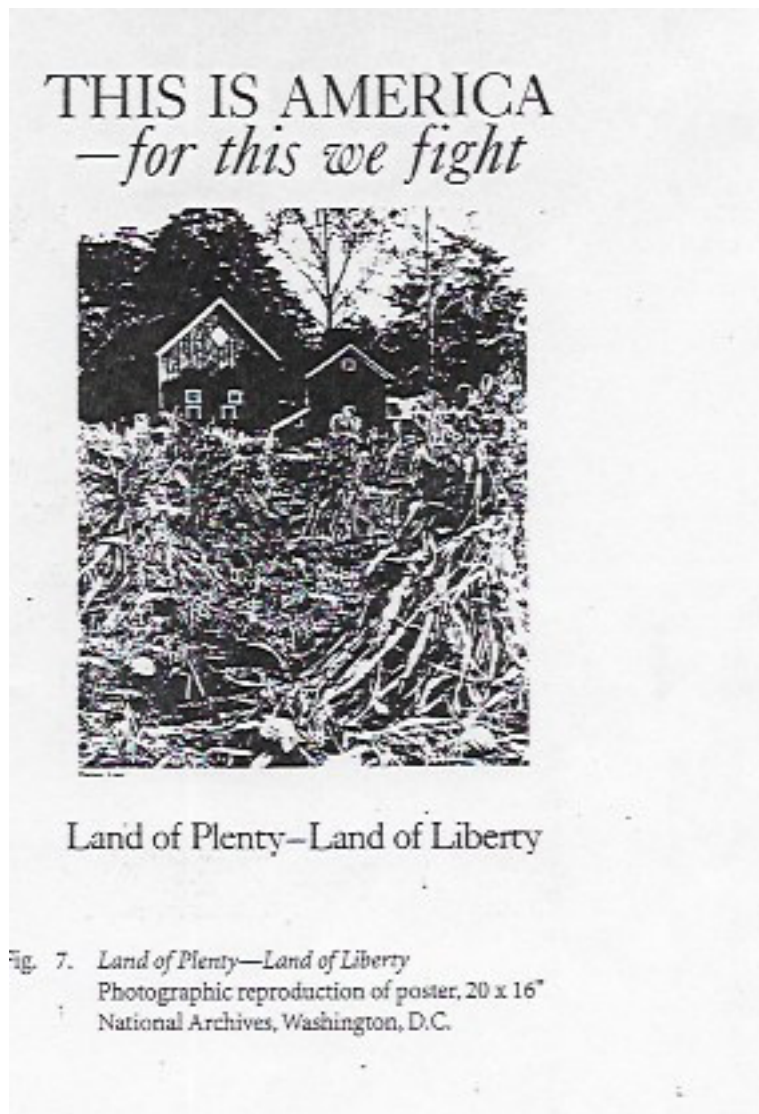
6. "Its Boats, Boats, Boats, Boats!"
Photographic reproduction of poster, 20 x 16"
National Archives, Washington, D.C.

abound fig. 6).

Shadowy

elements lurk in the background and the bizarre and fantastic are loose around us. Spiritual need and religious belief are called on to help where reason, politics, and persuasion fail. Faith -- irrational but necessary -- looms and demands that one make a

contract with the dead: DO NOT BREAK FAITH WITH US. Yet, heroes are demanded and abound, and a future of a rich, green, fertile nation awaits, fusing hopes of the drought-ravished 1930s with the life after the war (fig. 7).



Solidarity and community are sought not only between nation and citizen but between homefront and soldiers. In several posters, the linkage of the present with the past is made as contemporary soldiers seemingly echo the tribulations of Valley Forge warriors. Conflict and struggle, endurance and eventual victory thus cross the ages. Women are called upon to work and comfort in loving ways. However, they could become a threat, too, to the war effort. Because of the new wartime sexuality (James Jones called it a "sea change" in middle-class morality and "Love Among the Riveters"^{xix}), venereal disease lurks everywhere as the American soldier and population were repeatedly reminded in poster and film. Sacrifice and loss abound, binding some, separating others. So does direct male force, strong, free-standing and determined. It creates a sense of male community that excludes women. The world of war is a very pro-masculine world.

For all their cheerleading, for all the simple, emotional posturing, American posters depict a virtually surrealist world, a world of theatrics, of strife and struggle, of the bizarre, bestial, and fantastic, of overpowering, active forces which dwarf and consume all.^{xx} For all the stylistic realism, it is a world that is epic and

extraordinary. And for all the traditional values the posters still espouse -- home, country, nation, they display the mind of the 1940s, a mind and heart engaged in the drama of global war. If Americans, citizens and citizen soldiers alike began the war with their traditional imagination in place as the surface of the posters indicate, by the end of the war, they were changed. They had been through too much to stay the same; a war of thought together with experience had thoroughly altered their mental landscape

METAPHORIC OR ICONIC REALISM

From the first days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the federal government sought to put artists to work arguing the case for America. One of the other most active ways was national open art competitions. Their themes ranged from picturing defense activities to articulating national policy goals to imagining the future, as in the Artists for Victory show of December 1942 at the Metropolitan Museum, and in October 1943 ("America in the War") which opened all over America. The artists themselves formed art groups under the general name "Artists for Victory" with ten

thousand actively engaged under the logo of the classical image
WINGED VICTORY OF SAMOTHRACE.^{xxi}

Independent artists reflected on the war and sought to interpret its larger meaning. Here they were responding not only to competitions, but also to calls in magazines for artists to address the significance of what was happening rather than just the war's day-to-day events.^{xxii} The war was thus presented as "good" for art, as an opportunity to achieve valuable new insights and new visions of man.

I call the artists that responded, the "metaphoric realist" or "iconic" artists, for in seeking to interpret the ultimate significance of the war, they mediated its reality with familiar imagery and archetypes including Christianity, ancient figures and symbols, and eventually nature, in a mostly representational style. In other words, they drew on the great, best-known, and most easily communicable drama of life and death in the West, the suffering, death, and rebirth of Christ, or as it is sometimes called, the Passion or via Dolorosa. Through it, they could confront and sanctify the war, and make it meaningful.^{xxiii}

At least since Raphael and Rembrandt, religious and ritual symbols such as those of the Passion of Christ or ancient mythology had been used to refer to significant history, politics, and people. Such imagery was also employed in American art of the 1930s to raise the suffering caused by the economic crash to the level of the sacred.^{xxiv} The historian, George Mosse, has pointed out that beginning with the French Revolution, this Old Master tradition had been turned toward representing the new citizen wars and conflicts of modern political systems. Jacques Louis David's *DEATH OF MARAT* and Baron Antoine-Jean Gros's *NAPOLEON AT THE PESTHOUSE AT JAFFA* are two examples of the use of Christian symbolism for contemporary martyrs and heroes.

By the First World War, the tradition of sanctifying war and death, sacrifice, and resurrection with sacred, classical, and natural imagery was well-established. National struggle was associated and homologized to the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. In innumerable images from paintings to postcards, the sufferings and hopes for the nation and for the dead were represented in a new kind of secular piety. Especially in war

memorials, Christian and classical imagery was employed to make the war effort and the soldiers' sacrifices as important as they could be. Such imagery, Mosse argues further, was used to overcome the brute fact of death and dying.^{xxv} In other words, images of Christ's death and resurrection were used to suggest the death and rebirth of the nation and its war dead. Through such symbolism the dead were valorized and made martyrs to the glory of the nation. As one soldier said as he joined the German army in World War I, "Now we are made sacred."^{xxvi} Another wrote, "We went over the top [of the trenches] into timelessness."^{xxvii} Such imagery made "heroism visible within a traditional framework."^{xxviii} Modern war was thus emotionally addressed as a sacred and eternal experience.

Although in the Second World War much of the extreme nationalism, romanticism and Victorian moralism were missing, iconic artists continued to address the war through traditional imagery. Classical references seem to define the war in James Daugherty's *FIGHTING THE MINOTAUR* of the 1940s (fig. 8) in which helmeted, idealized soldiers with classical bodies surround

and attack the mythic creature, that is, half-human, half-beast.

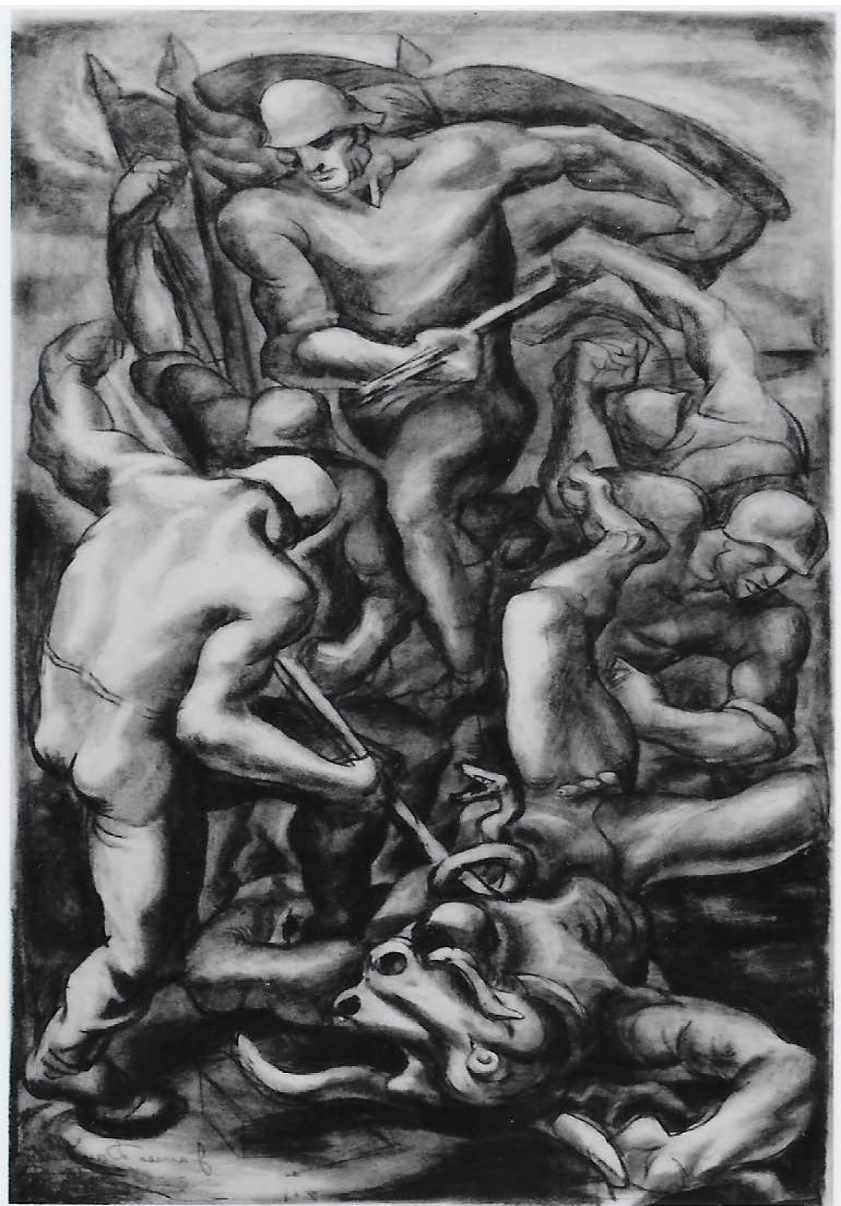


Fig. 8. James Daugherty, *Fighting the Minotaur*, ca. early 1940s.
Charcoal and Chalk, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$. Janet Marquess Fine Arts,
New York.

While drawing on the classical past, Daugherty's charcoal and chalk drawing also alludes to Picasso's many images of the Minotaur. (Greek-like soldiers wearing helmets is also a frequent image on war monuments of the First World War.)

Combining references to nature with the Passion sequence and imagery occurs often in the work of the 1940s. Prentiss Hottel Taylor's UNROOTED STALK fits death within the most sacred mortal image in Western civilization, the Lamentation or Pieta of Christ. Here in a lithotint made for an "Artists for Victory" competition, Taylor fuses the reclining Christ with a helmeted soldier who holds a rifle that has changed into an uprooted stalk. Standing and falling stalks surround the soldier. Mary has been rendered as older woman holding her dead son. Behind them a paratrooper alludes to the ultimate source of the subject. The cycle of nature's growing and dying is combined with Christian imagery to create an allegory in a realist or representational style.

The attempt to elevate the war and give it historical and cultural meaning is also evident in Benton Murdock Spruance's SOUVENIR OF LIDICE. Spruance had been a social realist printmaker in the 1930s, but in the 1940s, like much of the

professional American art world, he turned to mythic and ritualistic symbolism to represent contemporary events. Lidice, of course, was a town in Czechoslovakia that was annihilated and whose inhabitants were murdered by the Nazis in retaliation for the assassination of an important leader, Reinhard Heydrich. Spruance has symbolized the civilian deaths as the recurrence of the three crucifixions on Calvary. There is no Christ singled out here, however. All three figures are equally martyred. It is collective, anonymous humanity that is suffering and sacrilized, not God.

The use of mythic-ritualistic religious imagery can also be found in Karl Schrag's PERSECUTION, another print made for the "Artists for Victory" competition. It translates images of the Flagellation of Christ known as Ecce Homo into contemporary history. Of the print Schrag has said:

The work is one of the deeply etched, dark aquatint etchings with themes which are like somber mediations. . . .

PERSECUTION shows symbolically both what America was fighting for and . . . against. The isolated, dignified figure being shown to the ugly, almost monstrous crowd by the

German soldier . . . represented to me everything of moral and spiritual value that had to be saved from total destruction. The print was also to give the assurance that in the end the spiritual strength of the victim would prevail.^{xxix}

The turn toward mythic and traditional images was fundamental to art of the 1940s. While well-known populist artists like Thomas Hart Benton, the leading Regionalist painter of the 1930s, had turned toward myth in the late 1930s with such works as *PERSEPHONE* and *SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS*, with the advent of the Second World War, Benton's art became even more symbolic as he sought to shape a language that addressed not only the facts of the experience but also its significance.^{xxx} His solution was to fuse references to the war with mythic, Christian, and natural imagery, and modernist form.^{xxxi} The ten paintings known as the *YEAR OF PERIL* series, begun in 1942, became the chief American propaganda paintings and were shown and reproduced everywhere. Posters were made of some of the series, as *THE SOWERS* (fig. 9) indicates.



Fig. 9. Thomas Hart Benton, *The Sowers*, Photographic reproduction of poster, 16 x 20" National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Combining the solidified fluidity of Salvador Dali's Verist Surrealism, a European style of fantastic psychic realism, with biblical allusions to the sower of death who seeds the landscape with skulls, Benton created a powerful if crude image of the modern grim reaper. Other paintings in the series also use

Christian references, from the crucified Christ assaulted from land and air by the Axis in *AGAIN* to the *HARVEST*, where the crop of death emerges.

More apocryphal and traditional still are images like the four horsemen of the apocalypse, which repeatedly appear in war painting. In Henry Simon's *THE THREE HORSEMEN*, Tojo, Mussolini, and Hitler ride forth wreaking havoc. The plight of refugees becomes an allegory of the *EXODUS*, in Daugherty's work of that name, of the mid-1940s while an artist known only by his initials, R.C., wittily satirizes the Axis trio in *UNTITLED (FAMILY GROUP)* (fig. 10), a play on the Adoration of the Magi.



Fig. 10. R.C., *Untitled (Family Group)*, ca. 1945. Pastel on paper, 25 x 19 1/2" Midtown Payson Galleries, New York.

In the latter work, Mussolini suckles a skeletal Christ child (taken from Jose Clemente Orozco's THE EPIC OF CIVILIZATION at Dartmouth

College), while Hitler as one of the Mag Tojo as an angel look on.

American artists used other mythic allusions to the war. The legendary night rider races across the land, stomping and threatening a crowd of refugees in Mervin Jules's THE NIGHT RIDER of 1942 (fig.

11)



Fig. 11. Mervin Jules, *The Night Rider*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 14 ½ x 25" F. B. Horowitz Fine Art, Ltd, Hopkins, Minnesota.

while a Janus-like armored figure representing the Axis stalks the land in FASCISM. Beneath him lie the symbols of Christianity and Judaism, as well as books and instruments of creativity. (The cross and design tools are also taken from Orozco's murals at Dartmouth.) The figure's armor has scales as though it were a man-beast. 1`

Few artists from the 1930s, whether Regionalists like Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood; social realists like William Gropper and Mitch Siporin; or the typical WPA artist, did not do such war pictures. For the most part they combined war themes with their usual concerns. In Ralph Fabri's THE FOUR FREEDOMS, WPA symbols of thriving economic life are combined with one of the few references to a political and ideological program. By the 1940s, WPA images of America redeemed by work were recycled as America winning the war through production. Fabri's image of a full industry, rich land, and fertile future as the reason for fighting the Second World War is a frequent theme in wartime art, as even the poster LAND OF PLENTY indicates. Nature forms a traditional ancient symbol of the richness and fullness of life, if not renewal itself.

Philip Evergood's *THE NEW LAZARUS* of 1927/54 (fig. 12) constitutes a fantastic realist image of war, death, and resurrection.



Fig. 12, Philip Evergood, *The New Lazarus*, 1927-54. Oil on Plywood, 48 x 83 ¼ " Whitney Museum of Art, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn.

At the bottom of the painting is a dead soldier. Above him are a flayed Christian lamb, a Grunewald-like Christ on a cross with others from Calvary, lamenting figures, and a Lazarus emerging from a coffin. Dazzling butterfly angels helps Christ up. Their

intense blues and reds dominate the greyish, decaying tones of the other figures. To the right are soldiers with the stigmata, while behind, Evergood adds his typical, socially critical symbols of a lynching and KKK, capitalist, and clown figures who hear, see, and say no evil. Evergood has fashioned a biblical allegory of his world of suffering and death and its need for resurrection.

By the way, the date of Evergood's THE NEW LAZARUS should be noted. It was completed in 1954, in other words, after the war. When the war ended in August 1945, artists did not stop painting the war. In remaining years of the 1940s until well into the 1950s never mind the rest of our century, new information about the war continued to emerge, so much so that the late 1940s at least should be considered a distinct period of the war experience, the AFTERMATH of World War II. The development of the Cold War has obscured this last phase. In the late 1940s, returning soldiers quietly brought home the bloody details of the world conflict. (Sometimes they acted out the details in their behavior by screaming in their sleep or by sleeping with cocked guns and sharp bayonets under their pillows.^{xxxii}) Wartime censorship was lifted, and information about what really happened filled the newspapers.

The first books analyzing the war appeared, the leading wave of a flood that has never abated, as did the first memoirs, which recounted more than geopolitical and military strategies and events. Gruesome images from the death camps, which were discovered only in the final weeks of the European war, recast the epochal event in terms of an evil almost beyond human understanding.

During the war, as the Abstract Expressionist artist Seymour Lipton told me, people were, in some ways, too busy to think about it: "The war was all around you. You couldn't get away from it."^{xxxiii} Only as the details became known could people begin to grapple with the implications. The artist-correspondent Reep, for example, noted that after the war "numerous philosophical overtones began to dominate my paintings, usually involving the question, "What does war really accomplish."

The advent of the Cold War and the Korean War typically changed nothing. Rather they inspired a feeling that it was more necessary than ever to "protest against war itself--all wars."^{xxxiv} Reep's work became either more symbolic, with new skeletal forms

and similar images, or in the form of joyful landscapes where for once "tranquility and beauty abounded."^{xxxv}

In short, the aftermath of the war forms a distinct part of its history, its most interpretive period. Perhaps artists were especially sensitive to its implications, or at least, more able, whether consciously or unconsciously, to spread them out for the public. What the military historian John Keegan said about literature may be equally true of art: fully understanding the psychic effects of a war requires not so much a search through a nation's archives as a voyage through its literature.^{xxxvi}

In their postwar work, then, many artists dealt with the war as an experience that needed assessment. They absorbed and transformed war attitudes, themes, experience, mood, and atmosphere. Even in works that seemingly have no direct relationship to the war, the imagined reality of the war -- its violence, drama, and hopes -- infiltrates "normal" domestic experience and subjects. The surrealistic conflict became normalized in the postwar period as a basic part of the "human condition," and the transition perhaps can be seen most explicitly in the work of metaphoric realists or iconic artists.

Abraham Rattner was perhaps the best of these artists. In the interwar period, he lived in Paris and painted in the style of the School of Paris -- light scenes of everyday life in a moderate modern style. He hobnobbed with Henry Miller and lived the expatriate artist life. When the war began, he returned home and changed much of his style and themes. His art became much graver and concerned with issues of life and death, salvation, and renewal. GHOST CITY of 1941 marks the change. It is an image of a burning city with barely visible, fleeing refugees in the foreground. The style is much more intense than in any of his earlier work: the colors are stronger and the brushwork more abbreviated and expressive. For all the realism of the scene, however, it is suffused with sacred imagery, for the rows of mostly red flames above the city seem to form a row of burning candles. Rattner seems to sanctify the death of a city. In the mid-1940s, he did a painting of votive candles alone. There was no need to even specify a city.

By APOCALYPSION of 1943, the idea of sacred conflagration is fully developed. Here a head seems made of burning flames from chin to hair. Below and to the right of these flames of hell is a

devil, while to its left is a blond woman whose beaming breasts are matched by the brightness of her yellow hair and the flaming lamp she carries. Rattner has drawn from both traditional associations of illumination with acquiring knowledge and Pablo Picasso's GUERNICA, the most famous modernist image of war, in which a woman bears a light to illuminate what is happening.

Superimposed on or above the orange-flamed head in the Rattner is a combination of geometric forms and rising angels. Medieval masonry fills the triangles and head. Rattner has thus moved fully toward an allegorical art using Christian ritual imagery and symbols to allude to war. There is no direct illustration that gives APOCALYPSION the intensity of medieval stained glass.

Rattner's LAMENTATION extends the use of medieval symbolism and form. LAMENTATION consists of a single anguished figure that looks skyward while wringing its hands. The figure is a traditional image of suffering -- often Mary Magdalene is represented as such a figure in the deposition or lamentation of Christ. We saw such a figure in Evergood's THE NEW LAZARUS. Set against a dark blue - like the deep rich blue of stained glass -- is the bright body of the figure whose faceted bright yellow shapes are outlined in black.

Rattner has rendered the human form as bright light and then as stained-glass shards. For all of the anguish of the figure, it is thus represented as having the power to transfigure its pain into spiritual, Gothicized light, much as had the risen Lazarus, surrounded by sonorous, sacred, colored figures.

The idea of faceted light and form became the basis of Ratter's style for the rest of his career. This legacy of the war informed his well-known, postwar, spiritual probing. Even in works that seemingly have no direct connection to the war such as THE LAST JUDGEMENT of 1953-56, the mood of total conflict persists. THE LAST JUDGEMENT consists of three panels with a central figure and side figures, heads, and eyes. As in APOCALYPSION, Ratner has portrayed the cataclysm of force and form with jumbled, faceted planes and swirling, dynamic axes and lines. Within a work that carries a Christian allegorical message, then, the war experience lives on as idea and form alluding to nothing less than the final act of the "human condition."

Yet unmistakable references to the war do appear even years later. In a series of at least a dozen paintings, SIX MILLION, begun in the 1950s, Ratner portrays the chaos of jumbled bodies found in

images from the death camps. SIX MILLION # 2 of 1963, for example, is a black-and-white jumble of faceted fractions of figures. The words "six million" are repeatedly scratched sfgratto style on the canvas apparently to imitate the words scratched on the walls of the buildings in the camps. The facets of the painting evolved from Rattner's stained glass effects. Here the medieval and gothic effects are joined in a whirlwind of lines that echo the new modern style of the late 1940s and 1950s, Abstract Expressionism. To emphasize this persistence of the war experience in memory and historical imagination, Rattner has intensified the rhythm of the edges of his interlocking, faceted planes. Abstract Expressionist rhythmic power has joined with iconic realism, medieval style, and metaphor to create an allegory of the unspeakable. Rattner was not alone in his use of biblical imagery to represent the war-shaped human condition as it was conceived in the Aftermath. Spruance, Siporin, and many others employed mytho-ritualistic imagery and themes to represent human struggles and life at this time. They form an unrecognized subgroup in American art of the 1950s.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Metaphoric or iconic realists are less recognized and appreciated because the dominant style of the postwar period in America is Abstract Expressionism, which was thought to be an existential art unconcerned with history and its impact. New study suggests something different. While early critics interpreted the art in the context of imported contemporary French theory (existentialism, improvisation, creativity) of individual suffering and personal alienation, today Abstract Expressionism seems more likely a product of the war and its aftermath. It constitutes the last group in our exhibition, work that displays a metaphysical absorption and examination of the implications of the war.

Abstract Expressionism consists of semiabstract and then abstract forms that originated in the 1940s as metaphoric reactions to and interpretations of the war and its effects. While Abstract Expressionism continues to be understood as representing the human condition in its time, some critics now see its conception of the human condition as more than mere subjective or personal responses but as shaped by theatrical, epic suffering and conflict. History is there not as individuals or events

-- there are no soldiers, no generals, no specific battles, not even the half disguises of the iconic artists -- but as a state of mind, reflected in the selection of themes, preoccupations, and dynamic form. Abstract Expressionism expresses the emotions and ideas of its generation, not simply the personal and subjective.

To be sure, some of Abstract Expressionism is concerned with the unconscious and its forms created without a model in a process that is sometimes called automatism. Nevertheless, the subjects much of it ultimately "discovers" in the unconscious -- and its artists repeatedly insisted they were interested in subject matter more than form, even if many in the art world chose not to listen -- are strongly shaped by the war: inwardness, ritual, renewal, brutalized so-called primitivism, and nature. These were simply routed and expressed through metaphysical and formal means.

Abstract Expressionism seems to be made of three things: the crisis in Western civilization and the sacred tradition used to symbolize and allegorize it; modernist writings and ideas shared by both artists like Picasso and Miro and such cultural figures as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Martha Graham, and Carl Jung; and the

individual interests and temperaments of the artists. The result is a metaphysical art engaging the larger implications of modern war and experience. The art did not create the ideas and the emotions it gave voice to, but imbued them a new force and dynamism and helped them to become part of the midcentury definition of the human in the wake of the war. With Abstract Expressionism, modernist American art reached a new level of what Reep called "philosophic" speculation.

The subtle migrations of war themes into seemingly unrelated art is generally acknowledged as a war and postwar phenomenon. In his *GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY* Paul Fussell writes "data entering the consciousness during the war emerge long afterward as metaphor."^{xxxvii} Samuel Hynes recently noted that war motifs from the First World War "continued into the peace, and became the conventions of the Twenties -- of the war literature written then, but also of literature having nothing explicitly to do with the war . . . war . . . remained in imaginations, as a mood, as a motive, as . . . part of consciousness."^{xxxviii} As with the First World War, so with the Second.

In Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture, "war" itself becomes generalized, mythicized, and universalized. War is expressed indirectly. Adolph Gottlieb's PICTOGRAPH-SYMBOL of 1942, for example, conveys the ominous nature of war with the imagery of thuggish, bestial creatures hunting a fox through a forest maze. Death appears as a skull emerging through what should be a laughing clown in William Baziot's early painting UNTITLED (CLOWN WITH APPLE) of 1939-40. Conflict is raised to cosmic and mythological levels in Theodore Stamos's COSMOLOGICAL BATTLE of 1945 (fig. 13), while Adolph Gottlieb's NOCTURE of 1947 represents the mythic struggle of Theseus and the Minotaur. As opposed to even Daugherty's half-mythic, half-representational rendering of the war as the minotaur, Gottlieb presents a total mythic image of conflict and struggle. Now the war is presented as, implicitly, the eternal human penchant for

violence and mayhem.



Fig. 13. Theodore Stamos COSMOLOGICAL BATTLE of 1945, Oil on masonite, Munson Williams Proctor Museum, Utica, New York. 30 x 23 7/8 in. Edward W. Root Bequest.

Sacrifice and death are also mythicized. While poster artists represented sacrifice by a man caught on barbed wire, Erby depicted it as a wounded man in a foxhole, Taylor allegorized it as a pieta, and Rattner alluded to it as a modern lamentation, Mark Rothko presents sacrifice as a modern version of the entombment (fig. 14).

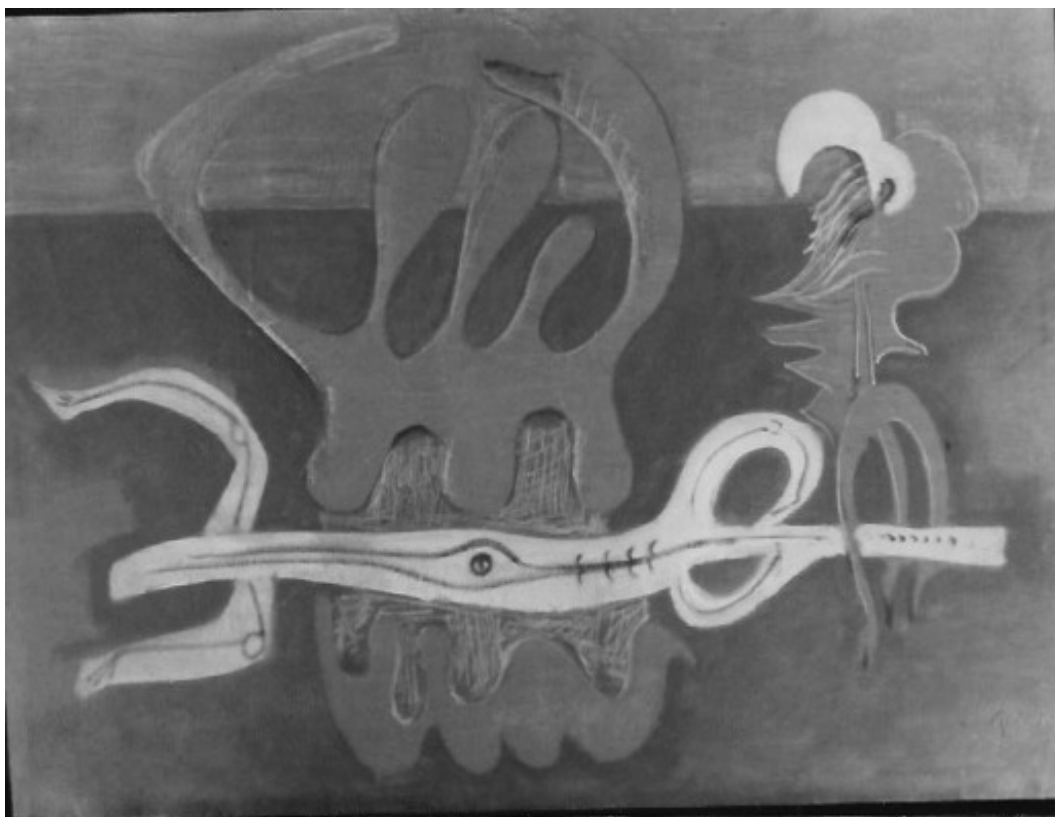


Fig. 14. Mark Rothko, *The Entombment*, ca. 1946. 23 x 40 in.

Collection Herbert Ferber.

In other words, like the iconic artists, Rothko Christianized and ritualized sacrifice and death. In his painting Rothko also "naturalized" the Virgin. Mary and Christ figures are presented in the biomorphic language and continuous curves of the Surrealist artists who influenced most Abstract Expressionists. The Abstract Expressionist Seymour Lipton, too, used the pieta/entombment/lamentation image in sculptures of 1946 and 1948.

Abstract Expressionism took up innumerable themes found in the war and other war art. The idea of a wealth of death--a sowing and harvest of it -- that was part of Benton's YEAR OF PERIL series, was also taken up in more semiabstract form in Lipton's bone ribbed reaper THE HARVESTER of 1945. So too was the idea of the night rider or rider of the apocalypse, a constant war theme. Not only do iconic artists such as Jules and Simon portray it in dramatic, metaphorical style, but also the modernist Abstract Expressionists reworked the theme, as Lipton's NIGHT RIDER of 1945 and Herbert Ferber's APOCALYPTIC RIDER of 1948 (fig. 15) attest. Here the war lurks behind the semiabstract,

arching, biomorphic sculpture, revealing that what was history is now a philosophy of life, the new parameters of human experience.



Fig. 13. Herbert Ferber
Apocalyptic Rider, 1947
 Bronze, 44½ x 35 x 25"
 Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York
 University Art Collection, Anonymous Gift, 1962
 [1962.53]

In posters evil was suggested by a fantastic, threatening Axis hand reaching for a mother and child. It was also verbalized as part of a Christian prayer and visualized as the Nazi swastika in the poster DELIVER US FROM EVIL. In Gottlieb's paintings, such as EXPECTATION OF EVIL and PREMONITION OF EVIL both of 1945,

evil appears as threatening, brute beasts and body parts such as teeth, tusks, claws, scales, and visages locked in labyrinthian space. He thus suggests evil's instinctive and inescapable quality.

Gottlieb's style of the 1940s is known as the pictographic style. It consists of rectangular compartments in a nonlinear, irrational order he says he drew from Renaissance Christian predellas, ancient and non-Western art, and modern Cubist abstractions such as those by Mondrian.^{xxxix} The pictograph not only fuses styles across the ages and thus suggests an eternal cultural paradigm, but also places human action and behavior within a mythicized narrow, compartmentalized space evocative of the labyrinth. As Gottlieb's *THE PRISONERS* of 1947 (fig. 16) suggests, it is clearly the war experience that brings the form and subject to

consciousness.



Fig. 16. Adolph Gottlieb, *The Prisoners*, 1947. #6 x 48 in., 1979. Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York. Walter London Estate.

The theme of imprisonment and entrapment was pervasive among the Abstract Expressionists and other artists in the 1940s. From Jose Clemente Orozco's use of chains around and through human beings in his *DIVE BOMBER AND TANK* of 1940 to William Baziotes's spatial and biological webs in, for example, *THE WEB* of 1946, to Rothko's symbolically suffocating architectural

environmentalism, to Bradley Walker Tomlin's lethal forms in interlocked, combative mazes of the mid-1940s, to Ferber's images and Lipton's *THE IMPRISONED FIGURE* of 1948, imprisonment had been a central wartime theme. Indeed, Keegan has noted that the only new kind of war book the Second World War spawned was the prisoner-of-war story. (The first had inspired many.) He speculates that "to be in a camp -- concentration camp, extermination camp, labour camp, prisoner-of-war camp . . . to have been the enemy's chattel . . . was really dangerous in the Second World War."^{xl} To be trapped, at risk and subject to cruel forces beyond one's control seemed to be a strong fear of the era. In the immediate postwar period Gottlieb himself wrote that human aspirations in his era had been "reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil."^{xli} Sidney Simon's *POW'S AT BILIBID PRISON* gives the viewer the facts, Gottlieb's *THE PRISONERS* the psychological fear.

The war unleashed enormous, incomprehensible destruction, which was recorded by documentary artists like Bohard, Craig, Fredenthal, and Gold, projected in posters, and imagined by iconic artists like Rattner. Destruction is an Abstract Expressionist

subject as well, as Isamu Noguchi's *THIS TORTURED EARTH* of 1942, with its wincing, scarred terrain (fig.17),



Fig. 17. Isamu Noguchi, *This Tortured Earth*, 1943. Bronze, 28, x 28 x 4". The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island City, New York

Richard Pousette-Dart's *ABYSS OF BLOOD* of 1941-43, with its title from Henry James's description of World War I, and Jackson Pollock's *BURNING LANDSCAPE* with its bursting, scattering biomorphic forms tell us. They seemingly evoke Jones's description of the terrain at Anzio: "one long hellish nightmare . . . a pocked, surreal, destroyed . . . landscape."^{xlii} According to his

lifelong friend with whom he often discussed the war, Reuben Kadish, Pollock did several works he referred to as his "war paintings."^{xliii} Pollock's drawing WAR of 1947 depicts, after Orozco, stacks of bodies.

Abstract Expressionism captures the war's violent force in innumerable ways. Besides the displaced battle scenes of Stamos, Gottlieb, and others, there was the general aesthetic of roughness and crudeness. While this is partially a product of the American sensibility -- stereotypically contrasted to the suave European -- the roughness of Abstract Expressionism has more telling, historical conditions. Posters like REMEMBER DECEMBER 7TH!, with its torn and rent flag, BLAST 'EM, with the American eagle attacking and igniting the Axis, and AVENGE DEC. 7 (fig. 18) with its thrusting fists and bursting ships suggest the effects of battle and explosives.



Fig. 15. *Avenge December 7*
Photographic reproduction of poster, 20 x 16"
National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Abstract Expressionism's thrusting or "gestural" force is partially a metaphoric equivalent to and realist expression of such renting force. Lipton's abstract vocabulary from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s, as recorded, for example, in four drawings in the exhibition, evolves from a war-induced bestiary into abstract thrust and counterthrust (perhaps echoing as well the thrusts and

counterthrusts of the army or weapon phalanxes in posters).

Symbolic forms become metaphysical action of a violent, dramatic sort, reflect what Fussell calls the intensified "heavy power" of the late war, with its increasingly vicious weapons such as the Tiger tank, the Superfortress, the V-2 rocket, and the A-bomb itself, which ripped the earth and scattered tree and bone.^{xliv} The fierce dynamism of Abstract Expressionists is partly a testament to the impact of the war as uncontrollable and uncontainable force itself.

Perhaps the most telling example is Gottlieb's abstract series known as the Bursts (fig. 19).



Fig. 16. Adolph Gottlieb
Black, Blue, Red, 1956
 Oil and enamel on linen, 72 x 50"
 © 1979 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc.,
 New York

Here explosive, thrusting, and gestural orbs and strokes face off against one another across a cosmic divide. Gottlieb's Burst series and the accompanying scriptive paintings project the apocalyptic confrontation and polarization of the Second World War and could have been made only by someone sensitive to its overwhelming and

implacable power and terror. His abstractions narrate a tale of terror and conflagration -- BLAST, CONFLICT, and TRANSFIGURATION and thus make up the essential pattern of human drama of his time.

Other representations of visual and vicariously abstract, violent force include Robert Motherwell's THE FIGURE FOUR ON AN ELEGY of 1960, with its scattered paint, and, his entire Elegy series. Violent force lies behind the gestural style of Willem de Kooning and of the New York School of the 1950s, however domesticated as the energy of New York City or the search for self. By the time Franz Kline established his style in 1949-50, violent force had become an aesthetic as well as a historio-cultural or mythic experience.

As the aesthetic of violence was stylized and abstracted, and as technique was coarsened to broad, thrusting gesture, the figurative ideal became imbued with violence. The most popular images of the war period were pinups for the servicemen and "nose" art on the front of warplanes of flimsily dressed women. Women and sex were associated with violence. De Kooning's series of women, with their hallucinatory, aggressive half-human, half- abstract, abrupt

and violent line, also encompass the violence of the war. As with his colleague on the other side of the Atlantic, Jean Dubuffet, de Mooning was both a product and a creator of the new violence loose in the world. It did not recede after the war, but was rerouted into the media and into art. Refined, delicate feeling in art was not supportable to a postwar public having undergone the most violent years in Western history. Earlier modernism still reflects a world where "fineness, accuracy, and subtlety" rein. By the end of the Second World War and in the postwar and after-the-war periods (the 1950s), these were gravely weakened ideas.

Other emblems of force and conflict characterize Abstract Expressionist art. Harry Sternberg's iconic work *FASCISM* presents an image of monstrous beast laying waste to the land. Monstrous beasts appear in the work of most Abstract Expressionist sculptors, too, from Theodore Roszak's birds to Lipton's *MOBY DICK* and *MOLOCH* series of 1946-48. They appear repeatedly in William Baziotes's art, from his drawings of 1939 to major canvases such as *THE FLESH EATERS* of 1952. Here, as with other Abstract Expressionists, including Lipton, Gottlieb, and Roszak, the monsters are drawn from the dinosaur rooms of the

American Museum of Natural History. What better place to find images of the most fearsome deadly, killing machines? The primeval monsters of the Abstract Expressionists indicated the period's belief in what James Jones called an "insanity, a racial evolutionary hangover" in man.^{xlv}

Even the rare political artist among the Abstract Expressionists used bestial imagery. Although some contemporary critics characterize every artist in artists' unions of the 1930s as political artists dedicated to revolution, few Abstract Expressionists were hardcore politicos. David Smith, the sculptor, was an exception. A communist or at least a fellow traveler in the 1930s and probably throughout his life, he at first openly proclaimed his opposition to war and to fascism, which he associated with the Allies as well as the Axis, in his famous MEDALS OF DISHONOR series of the late 1930s. With the outbreak of the Second World War and America's entry into the conflict, Smith's politics went underground. He exploited the mythic, biomorphic, bestial imagery of developing Abstract Expressionism, but instead of attributing such characteristics to human beings as a whole, he continued to lambaste the West and war itself. Works such as SPECTRE OF

PROFIT (RACE FOR SURVIVAL) and FALSE PEACE SPECTRE of the mid-1940s are strong, left-wing ideological criticisms of the war, as is his COCKFIGHT-VARIATION of 1945 (fig. 20), a metal

sculpture of preening cocks fighting among themselves.

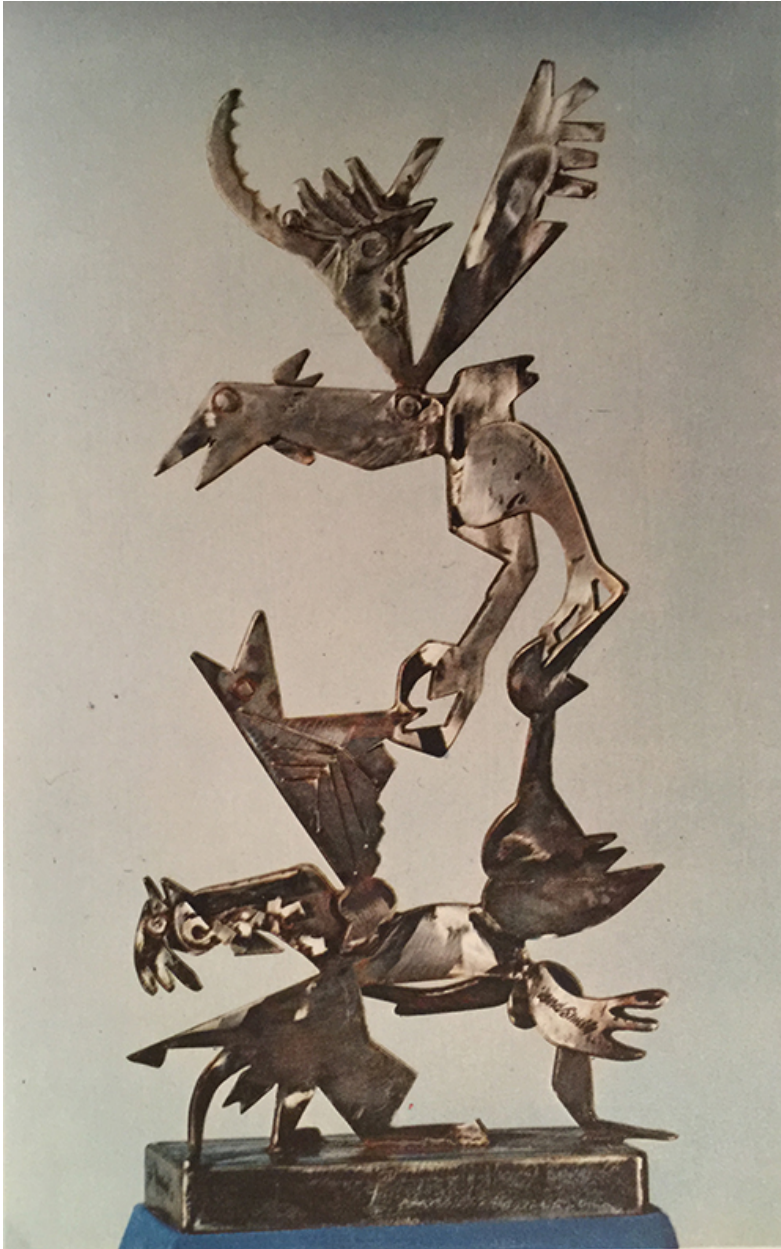


Fig. 20. David Smith, *Cockfight-Variation*, 1945. Steel, 34 1/4 x 16 3/4 x 9 1/2 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

It echoes posters such as GIVE 'EM HECK, in which two gladiators similarly fight for the world.^{xlvi}

In his criticism of both Allies and Axis, Smith was thus unusual among the Abstract Expressionists. The Abstract Expressionists, with the exception of Smith and Motherwell, who saw the war as another quest for empire,^{xlvi} did not explicitly criticize the U.S. government or Allies. What James Jones said of the cartoonists of YANK magazine is equally true of the Abstract Expressionists: "If they were anti-anything, they were anti the human race's policies, not the American government."^{xlvi} What the Abstract Expressionists represented was human misery and terror, not anti-American bitterness.

This is especially evident in the aftermath of the war, in public and private life, when commemoration of the great losses was frequent. Ken Bold's THEY DIE HARD and George Biddle's DEAD CIVILIANS -- ITALY pictured death. A mourning dog on the uniform in a poster sentimentalized it, innumerable local war monuments nationalized it, and Abstract Expressionism again

made it metaphysical. Bradley Walker Tomlin evoked the festival of All Souls in ALL SOUL'S NIGHT of 1947 (fig. 21) with haunting blues and grays.



Fig. 21. Bradley Walker Tomlin, ALL SOUL'S NIGHT, 1947. Oil on canvas, 42 ½ x 64 in. Courtesy Vivian Horan Fine Art, New York

Rothko's GETHSEMANE, consists of a memorial column with a winged goddess on top, a symbol that originated in the classical past with funerary sculpture. Barnett Newman's sculpture

BROKEN OBELISK fuses three funereal and commemorative images -- the funerary pyramid, the broken column, and the obelisk -- and literally turns them upside down to symbolize torn but emerging, new life rising from the proverbial ashes. Isamu Noguchi's tubular and skeletal mourning tower, MONUMENT TO HEROES of 1943, and his monumental BELL TOWER FOR HIROSHIMA of 1950 and MEMORIAL TO THE DEAD of 1952 create commemorative monuments for both Americans and those killed at Hiroshima. Noguchi, of course, was a Japanese-American.

With death comes rebirth and with the commemorative works come those celebrating renewal. Abraham Rattner's APOCALYPTION with its fecund mythic women, and sacred light, and Philip Evergood's rising Lazarus amidst burgeoning color proclaim the emergence of new life and its sacred triumph over death. As earlier artists had done -- recall the poster LAND OF PLENTY -- the Abstract Expressionists used nature to symbolize rebirth. The cornucopia of THE FOUR FREEDOMS poster finds its echoes in Benton's postwar mythic work, ACHELOUS AND HERCULES of 1947, with its cornucopia of the good things of the earth next to two battling, ancient, mythic figures, and in Lee

Krasner's semiabstract, growing, biomorphic CORNUCOPIA of 1958.

Other Abstract Expressionists take up natural and mythic rebirth. Hans Hofmann used cascading, biomorphic forms in his LIFE COMING INTO BEING and RESURRECTION, both of 1946.^{xlix} Abstract Expressionism thus realizes what iconic artist Spruance came to believe (partially inspired by the popular, postwar poet Saint-John Perse), as he became a full mythic artist in the postwar and after-the-war periods: "the inexhaustible power of life to renew itself and triumph over every disaster, natural or human."¹

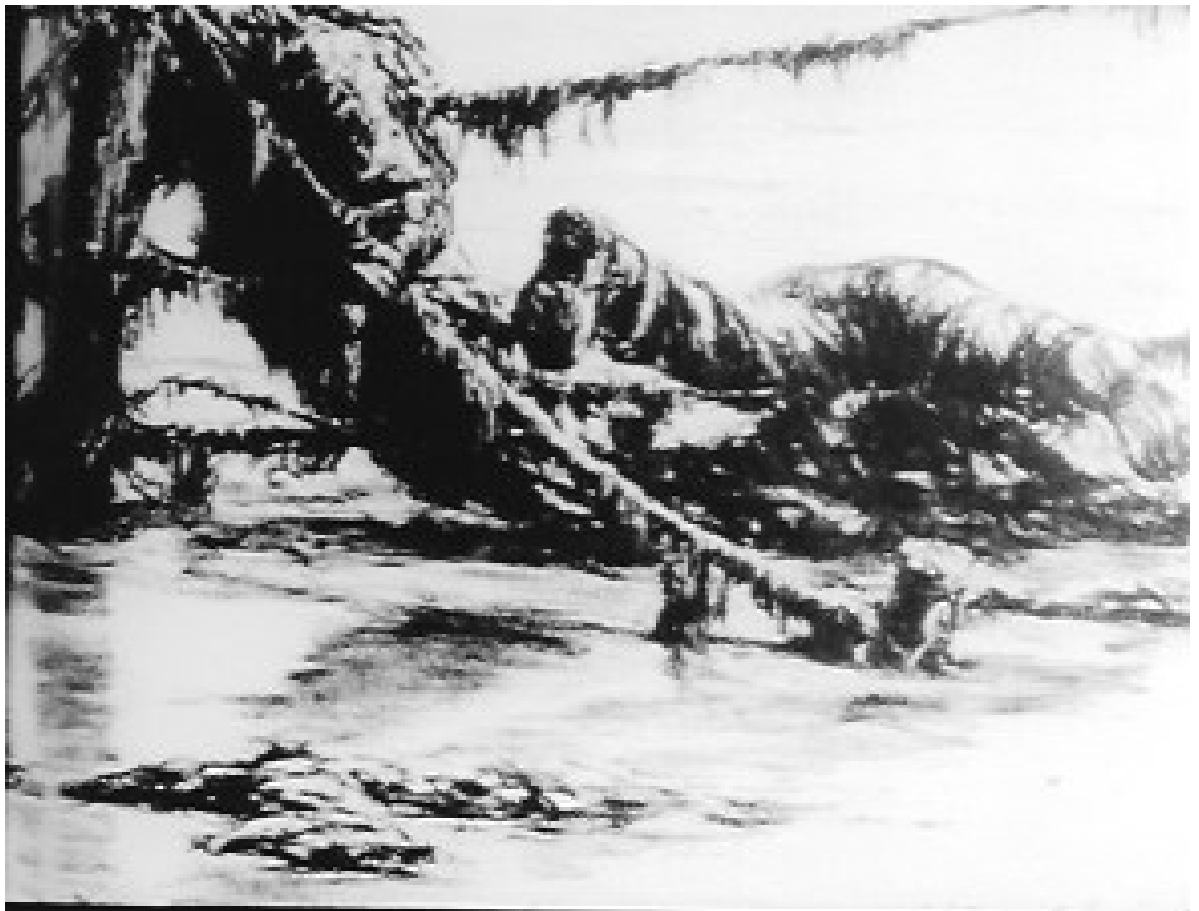
Ultimately much Abstract Expressionism is sacred art. It deploys a range of mytho-ritualistic symbols to sanctify the experience of war and suffering -- tracking it from Gethsemane to the Resurrection. In its way, it condenses the experience of two world wars into a symbolic and allegorical art of death and rebirth that draws from its Christian equivalent, the Passion of Christ. That many of the artists, though not of a particular creed and probably agnostic, created works for religious buildings; that Newman and Rothko evoked the Stations of the Cross for their abstractions (Newman's famous series of the Stations and Rothko's

original plans for the ecumenical chapel in Houston); that Rothko said his mural series at Harvard University represented through light and dark color Easter and the Resurrection; and that Pollock suggested something similar in his EASTER AND THE TOTEM of 1953 provides further evidence of a widespread attempt to make the experience of war a universal religious one.

Abstract Expressionism thus combined traditional and modern artistic devices and ideas to accommodate a new reality. The old idioms provided a foundation for understanding, but the war called for new forms and ideas. The war had to be absorbed through modern art, psychology, comparative mythology, natural history and the like. Abstract Expressionism constituted a modern, secular Passion universalized as the fate of the human race and was thus inspired by more than modern tradition of painting and sculpture alone. With this exhibition, we see that is a part of the American artistic response to history.

Much American art of the war years shapes a modern drama that touches on most aspects of the war. It describes, advocates, and honors the experience and the participants. It suggests the appropriate symbolism and calculates the value, nature, legitimacy

(or illegitimacy) of the death and sacrifice of the war. American artists of all persuasions were challenged by the great drama of the modern world, and they gave it meaning and significance as art. Ultimately, the American artists defined the secular and sacred spaces of human life in a demonic century.



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ENDNOTES

i. Quoted by John Grigg, 1943: THE VICTORY THAT NEVER WAS (London: 1980), 192, cited in Paul Fussell, WARTIME/UNDERSTANDING AND BEHAVIOR IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 229.

ii. John Keegan, THE FACE OF BATTLE (New York: Military Heritage Press, 1986), 41.

iii. Mortimer Wheeler, introd. to Huntley Gordon, THE UNRETURNING ARMY (1967), x, cited in Paul Fussell, THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 81.

iv. James Jones, WORLD WAR II (New York: Ballantine, 1975), 172.

v. Quoted in Studs Terkel, "THE GOOD WAR" (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 255.

vi. Win Stacke, a balladeer, in *ibid.*, 157.

vii. Valery, VARIETY, trans. Malcolm Cowley (New York, 1927), 27-8, cited in Modris Ecksteins, THE RITES OF SPRING/THE GREAT WAR AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN AGE (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 257.

viii. Cited in Edward Reep, A COMBAT ARTIST IN WORLD WAR II (LEXINGTON: UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY PRESS, 1987), xv.

ix. *Ibid.*, 33.

x. Keegan, THE FACE OF BATTLE, 267.

xi. Fussell, WARTIME, 281, writes that this is apparently one of main reasons for the one year only combat rotation in Vietnam.

xii. Jones, WORLD WAR II, 21, tells of meeting veterans in a bar at Pearl Harbor before he went overseas. He noted that "with their sun-blackened faces and hollow

haunted eyes, they were men who had already passed on into a realm I had never seen." He further describes, 25, meeting some veteran pilots who had a "hard, cruel, laughing bitterness. . . . None expected to come back."

xiii. Ibid., 181-82.

xiv. Ibid., 118.

xv. Anthony Rhodes, PROPAGANDA/ THE ART OF PERSUASION: WORLD WAR II Victor Margolin ed. (Secaucus, New Jersey: Wellfleet, 1987), 11.

xvi. David Lerner, "The Psychological Warfare Campaign Against Germany: D-Day to V-E Day, in *ibid.*, 284.

xvii. For a discussion of propaganda films, see *ibid.*, 150-8.

xviii. Ibid., 150.

xix. Jones, WORLD WAR II, 145.

xx. As a rifleman noted, "For me it's B.W. and A.W.--before . . . and after the war . . . I get this strange feeling of living through a world drama . . . I was acutely aware of how really theatrical and surreal it was." Robert Rasmus, later a businessman, in Terkel, "THE GOOD WAR," 36-39. See also Stephen Polcari, ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE MODERN EXPERIENCE (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 221-222.

xxi. Ellen G. Landau, ARTISTS FOR VICTORY (Washington: Library of Congress, 1983), 2.

xxii. For a discussion of the call to arms, see Polcari, ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE MODERN EXPERIENCE, 18-20.

xxiii. For a discussion of the development of the

modern use of symbolism for the war and war dead, see George L. Mosse, *FALLEN SOLDIERS* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

xxiv. See Polcari, *ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE MODERN EXPERIENCE*, 15-16, 195.

xxv. Mosse, *FALLEN SOLDIERS*, 78.

xxvi. *Ibid.*, 25.

xxvii. Joseph Magnus Wehner, *SEVEN BEFORE VERDUN* (*SIEBEN VOR VERDUN*), 1930, cited in Mosse, *ibid.*, 200.

xxviii. *Ibid.*, 101.

xxix. Schrag, March 14, 1982, cited in Landau, *ARTISTS FOR VICTORY*, 98.

xxx. For a discussion of Benton's war-induced mythic paintings, see the forthcoming Stephen Polcari, "Thomas Hart Benton: A Vernacular Mythic Modernist, Too."

xxxi. Benton, however, did not only interpretive paintings but documentary ones as well as a guest of the Navy. See John Barnett and Linda Weintraub, *WORLD WAR II THROUGH THE EYES OF THOMAS HART BENTON*, (San Antonio, Texas: Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, December 7, 1991-April 5, 1992).

xxxii. Jones, *WORLD WAR II*, 250.

xxxiii. Personal communication, December 7, 1983. Primo Levi, *THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New Jersey: Summit, 1986), 76, summed it up when he cited *CONFESSIONS OF ZENO* to the effect that "When one is dying, one is much too busy to think about death. All one's organism is devoted to breathing."

xxxiv. Reep, *A COMBAT ARTIST IN WORLD WAR II*, 172.

Alfred Kazin, the literary critic, similarly noted in *BRIGHT BOOK OF LIFE* (Boston, 1973), 81, cited in Fussell, *THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY*, 74, that it was shortly after the war that, because there were "so many uncovered horrors, so many new wars on the horizon, . . . that 'the war' (that is, the Second) soon became War anywhere, anytime--War that has never ended. War as the continued experience of twentieth-century man."

xxxv. Reep, *A COMBAT ARTIST IN WORLD WAR II*, 185-88.

xxxvi. Keegan, *THE FACE OF BATTLE*, 77.

xxxvii. Fussell, *THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY*, 187.

xxxviii. Samuel Hynes, *A WAR IMAGINED* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 40-41.

xxxix. See Polcari, *ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE MODERN EXPERIENCE*, 157-58.

xl. Keegan, *THE FACE OF BATTLE*, 283.

xli. Gottlieb, in "The Ides of Art," *THE TIGER'S EYE* 1 (December 1947): 43.

xl ii. Jones, *WORLD WAR II*, 135.

xl iii. Personal communication, October 30, 1991.

xl iv. Here art follows life once again, for the armed forces and the war's approach gradually became, as Fussell writes, *WARTIME*, 7-9, one of "intensification," not "precision," or "tactics" as the war dragged on. Fussell calls this the "inexorable progress from light to heavy duty" in war experience and events. Jones notes, *WORLD WAR II*, 81, that the U.S. effort was only gearing up in 1942. "By

May of 1943, after the fall of North Africa, the war had come into its own." Again, 132, "the war of June 1944 was not . . . the same war as the war of April 1, 1942."

xliv. Jones, WORLD WAR II, 30.

xlvi. For a discussion of Smith's politics and his early sculpture, see Paula Wisotszki, DAVID SMITH'S MEDALS OF DISHONOR (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Press, 1988.)

xlvii. Motherwell, conversation with E. A. Carmean, October 28, 1977, cited in E. A. Carmean, "Elegies to the Spanish Republic," in Carmean and Eliza Rathbone, AMERICAN ART AT MIDCENTURY: THE SUBJECTS OF THE ARTIST (Washington: The National Gallery of Art, 1978), 101, n. 39. Smith and Motherwell seemingly parallel the splinter tendency in the left best represented by the literary critic Dwight McDonald who abandoned the radical magazine PARTISAN REVIEW because it eventually came around to supporting the fight against Hitler. McDonald then started his own magazine.

xlvi. Jones, WORLD WAR II, 48.

xlix. Fussell, WARTIME, 139, noted that the theme of new life was treated in the popular press as well. He relates an advertisement for Carnation milk that declares: IT'S A BOY AND HE'S THRIVING ON CARNATION Could any news be better? New Life . . . coming into a new world we're fighting to make ready."

1. W.H. Auden on Spruance, THE NEW YORK TIMES (JULY 27, 1958), cited in Lloyd M. Abernethy, BENTON SPRUANCE THE ARTIST AND THE MAN (Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1988), 107. Interestingly, Jones, WORLD WAR II, 187, described the greatest hope, but also the greatest fear if it was not realized, of soldiers during the war as a "reborn imagination," that is, the awakening of the feeling that one was not inexorably doomed to die but could possibly live and

even flourish.