

The glorification and horrors of war through the arts



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Artists have always painted scenes of war from the Ancient worlds of Egypt and Greece. The relief inside the Abu Simbel Temple showing Ramses in the Battle of Kadesh and of his victory over the Hittites is an excellent example. The Athena Frieze depicting the battle of Greeks against the Persians, which are some of the earliest example of a specific historical event being, sculptured (Greek Art). To the photographs that are coming from the current war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the flagged draped coffins of the dead in the cargo hull on their way home.

In the periods of art, before Goya's the Third of May tended to glorify war and make it seem romantic and heroic without the effects of the bloodshed and horrors that war brings. Benjamin West's The Death of General Wolfe does show the effect of war, however, he has made a martyr of General Wolfe surrounded by his officers making this painting seems to be Romanizing the death (Class Lecture-The Neoclassical 2 of 3). Benjamin West was an American Neoclassical painter who turned art historical order upside down by not depicting a classical theme and used clothing of the time (Gehmacaher).

The Neoclassical period of art was a reaction to the Baroque and Rococo style of art where a renewed interest for classical antiquity of the ancient Greek and Roman seeking the geometric harmony of the time (Kleiner 330). The Neoclassical period of art was during the Enlightenment period where critical thinking of the world and humankind spurred the great political, social and economic changes resulted in Revolutions in France and America (Kleiner 319).

Writers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and Jefferson help the change the critical thinking in political, social and economic toward humankind and what was going on in the world helped inspired the French and American Revolutions (Class Lecture-The Neoclassical 1 of 3). This influenced the people to put a new light on all thinking and question the traditional ideas and ways of doing things whether it was in painting, sculpture, writing, science, politics, and nature (Smart History).

The Death of General Wolfe is the final stages of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, which takes place in Quebec, Canada, when the French and British fought during the Seven Year's War for control of Canada or as it was called then New France (Gehmacher). General Wolfe, a British officer, won the battle but lost his life in this campaign on September 13, 1759, the French surrendered Quebec five days later and by 1760 surrendered in Montreal after a failed attempt to regain control of the capital (BBC).

West has distorted the events surrounding General Wolfe death to heighten the drama in this painting (Gehmacher). West does not depict General Wolfe in armor like that of ancient soldiers but he has paid close attention to the details of the uniforms and the clothes of the Indians (Stacey). To me, West has made a martyr of General Wolfe by having him surrounded by his officers and Indians with the front lines not far off. This also glorifies and romanizes war, everyone around the dying General seem unaffected by the battle that is raging nearby.

Jacques-Louis David preferred the ancient and Renaissance works, and agreed with the Enlightenment philosophy that the subject matter should

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have a moral balance reflect the artwork of ancient times and depicting noble events in history would civil virtues and patriotism (Kleiner 332) inspire. David's Oath of the Horatii is an excellent example of the Enlightenment philosophy and of Neoclassical style. David became the painter of French Revolution and was on the board that voted to behead the King; he also became the official painter for Napoleon (Zucker).

Oath of the Horatii is keeping with the neoclassical style, by the David has used colors and by classicizing contemporary subject matter (Gersh-Nesic). David has used diagonal movements with heroic poses of the father and sons, and grouping the women behind the focus of the painting to give this painting the classic feel, that it has (The Neoclassical 3 of 3). Oath of the Horatii is about three brothers swearing on oath on their swords with their father gives them, the sons swear to fight to the death for their country (Zucker).

David has a group of women that seem in despair over the oath of the brothers, he has also bathed the women in light to show their despair. David has used the dark archways to give depth to this painting and light on the swords and arms of the brothers to show their bond with their father. The one thing I have noticed about David style of painting is that has fluidness about his work and there are no brush strokes visible. David's male figures appear statuesque and virile like the ancient Greek and Roman soldiers; he has also used soft colors to make this painting more alluring and dramatic.

This painting like that of West seems to glorify the act of war. These painting are done in the Neoclassical style but they both have a different feel to

them. West's has the act of dying on the battlefield and has used the clothing of the times and no reference to the past. David on the other hand has depicted an ancient Roman scene. To me this is the last art period that depicts war as heroic and glorifies it. The Romantics were about getting back to nature and the common people to evoke individualism, subjectivism, imagination and emotions (Romanticism).

The Romantics were the first group of artists to turn away from the academic style of the Neoclassical, this movement started in the late 18th century and early 19th century because of the Napoleonic wars (Romanticism). The transition from Neoclassicism was a shift from reason to feeling and uses the social and political climate to draw their inspiration (Kleiner 340). Goya, a Spanish Romantic artist, Third of May is an example of the radical shifts from the Neoclassicism.

Here Goya has used light and dark to emphasize the scene that is unfolding before us. The Spanish King, Charles IV, asked Napoleon to help Spain defend them against Great Britain, Napoleon saw this as a weakness and took control of Spain by putting his brother in control of Spain (Zucker). The Spanish who first liked the idea of the French getting rid of the British, the Spanish people soon realized the French as invaders and on the 2nd of May, the Spanish attacked Napoleon's men in a violent clash (Kleiner 341).

Napoleon's men then responded by executing several Spanish citizens, Goya is painting that massacre. The Third of May is the result and Goya has done an excellent job here is showing the senseless act by the French soldiers.

Goya has used the light on the man in the front with his arms outstretched

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about to be executed to draw your attention to the brutal act of the soldiers and to evoke empathy to common man. Goya has the French soldiers back to the viewer so they cannot see their face to show the injustice unfolding.

He has used the mountain or hill in the background to show the people as trapped and no way to get away from the soldiers and dead bodies around to show how helpless these people are (Zucker). Goya has used several things to draw attention to what is going on in this painting, the rifles pointing at the man in the white shirt on his knees, the blood in on the ground in front of him, the lantern to shed light on the man about to be shot and his face that shows no fear.

All of this helps show the ruthlessness of the French soldiers. He has also used earth tones in this painting with strong brushstrokes and used shadows that show the Romantic styles break from the Neoclassical style. While I find this painting, somewhat disturbing Goya has used his coloring, shadowing, and lines to draw to viewer into this painting and feel the helplessness of the Spanish people and Goya has made a martyr of the man about to be shot.

Realism was a moment the developed out of the Industrial Revolution when artist in France rejected the fantastic and focused on the reality of the world and painted the everyday life (Photography and Realism 4 of 6). Painters like Gustave Courbet and Jean-Francois Millet painted wonderful scenes of the everyday peasant life in *The Stone Breakers* and *The Gleaners* but it was during this time that photography came into the world and could capture life and preserve that moment forever.

Timothy O'Sullivan's photography *A Harvest of Death*, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania shows the true horrors of war; this was taken after one of the worst battles during the American Civil War. The Civil War was due to the Industrial Revolution effects of the northern states becoming more industrial than the south that was still an agricultural society that was using slaves for the work. In this photograph, there is a fog over the battlefield in the distance you can see men on horses, as you look closer at the dead soldiers you can see that the Confederate soldiers' shoes have been removed.

The shoes of the dead were removed for use of surviving soldiers who needed them and it did not stop at the shoes for once again the Confederate soldiers' pockets have been gone through for their pockets appear turned out (Cornell University). This photography shows the true reality of the horrors of war in the awful details this photography has taken. Photographs of other wars also show the horrible reality of war, and the power of the picture speaks for the horrors of war. The photos of the concentration camps after World War II are excellent examples of man's inhumanity to man, and I will not describe any of these here because they are too horrific to look at. The photograph of the flag being raised on Iwo Jima shows six men raising an American flag after a battle for the island. This picture is showing a simple act of raising the flag to show their support for their country. While this photo does not show the horrors of war, it shows that despite the battle that fought and the loss of life there can be a simple act that defines us.

Then there is the photograph of the aftermath of a napalm attack in Vietnam taken by Nick Ut, here you see Vietnamese children running through the streets screaming and one little girl has no clothes on, soldiers are behind <https://assignbuster.com/the-glorification-and-horrors-of-war-through-the-arts/>

the children and in the background you can see the smoke of the bombs. Photographer Ut said that he had seen two airplanes and each one dropped four bombs and minutes later he saw the people running away and the little girl that appears to be the focus of the image yelling for water because she was too hot (BBC News).

The terrified face of the children screaming speaks volumes in this photo and shows how war affects everyone not just the soldiers fighting the battles. Photographs show the reality of war in unflinching view, while painters interrupt what they see. The German Expressionists did just that after World War I. German Expressionists used disorganized outlines and angry brushstrokes to convey their message in their works and to illustrate the injustice of society that was growing during this time of global uncertainty (German Expressionism).

There were several movements in the German Expressionist; the first was called Der Brücke (The Bridge), Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) and Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity). Franz Marc was one of the founders of the Der Blaue Reiter, which got its name from Marc and Vassily Kandinsky's interest in horses and the color blue (Kleiner 386). However, Marc did not paint Fate of the Animals during World War I, but while serving during the war he wrote a letter to his wife that "is like a premonition of this war—horrible and shattering. I can hardly conceive that I painted it" (Kleiner 388).

Here Marc is showing us a forest that is being destroyed uses vivid colors and jagged forms to convey his message (Labeledzki). I have used this painting because I think had Marc lived through World War I, he would have

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painted another form of this to show the horrors he saw during that time. He said to his wife that this was a premonition; I can only image what he would have painted after the war. Wilhelm Heinrich Otto Dix, known for his work under the name Otto Dix, was a German Expressionists in the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity).

This movement formed after World War I by artist that severed in the German army and their experiences military influenced their art (Kleiner 400). Otto Dix's aim was to show the world those experiences with wrenching, ruthless and harsh depictions of the war as depicted in his Shock Troops Advance under Gas and The Trench (Henshaw). The Trench is filled dead bodies at different stages of decomposition did cause a public outcry that the museum director show the painting was forced to resign (WWI, Otto Dix).

Dix said of his work " that life is not colorful at all. It is much darker, quieter in its tonality, much simpler. I wanted to depict things as they really are" (Heller). Dix depicted the war as it actually was and drew great criticism for his works with the war as the subject. Dix's medium for Shock Troops Advance under Gas was an etching, portraying the soldiers need to wear gas masks due to the invention of mustard gas used in World War I. Once again showing man's inhumanity to man. This reminds me of Munch's Scream.