FROM OMAHA TO ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

AMERICAN ARTISTS RESPOND TO WORLD WAR II
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CURATED BY STEPHEN POLCARI
BARUCH COLLEGE/CUNY, 135 EAST 22 STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10010
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Allied victory, this exhibition examines the responses of American artists to World War II. The war was one of the most momentous events in modern times, and many artists engaged in it in their work. However, the work was soon put away after the war and largely ignored and forgotten. This exhibition brings together the responses of artists to the war, illustrating how they struggled to depict, comprehend, and make the war significant as art. It consists of four major types of war art: official documentary art by the artist-correspondents; propaganda posters; metaphorical realism; and Abstract Expressionism.

From Omaha to Abstract Expressionism: American Artists Respond to World War II represents the original vision of curator Stephen Polcari, who with this exhibition not only visually documents World War II but expands the context for American Abstract Expressionism. Dr. Polcari is the director of the Archives of American Art in New York City and author of Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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Sandra Krakin
Director, Sidney Mishkin Gallery

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BY STEPHEN POLCARI

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 mishances." How different is our time as compared to Jane Austen's!

As this century comes to an end, it is increasingly clear that war has determined much of the grand sweep of our history, politics, and economics. The First and Second World Wars and their codas, the Cold War, shaped the era from 1914 to 1991 and created the landscape of nations, states, and geopolitical assumptions, principles, and strategies that prevailed.

The wars also shaped the imagined reality of modern times, as much as what was conventionalized and mythologized as the true nature of modern life. The wars first destroyed nineteenth-century society and then fixed a new world order in which the behavior of men and women was remade into the maker of much of the enduring imaginative landscape in which people thought and acted. If the Trojan War was the world war of the Greek world, if the Napoleonic Wars were the epic for nineteenth-century Europe, then the cataclysms of the World Wars were the transforming odyssey of the twentieth century.

Exhibitions and histories seeking to illustrate the power and effects of modern war have most often emphasized battle and its results. 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, and universal patriotism. Public rituals and solemn commemorations of gallant soldiers lost in battle give further significance to events. Social 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." War is a major laboratory of human behavior, and the changes induced by war, both direct and indirect, both self-evident and elusive, need to be spelled out for future generations.

A veteran of the First World War defined the change and central importance of modern war for all its participants: "Passchendaele drew an abrupt dividing line across my experience." A veteran of the Second World War noted: "War was one of the biggest experiences of my life, you know? Maybe the major one. Bigger than my marriage. Bigger than the birth of my kids." 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." 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." United, 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 those who have not gone to war. Indeed, few intellectuals of the generation that came of age in the 1960s have had direct experience of any of the major cataclysms of modern times save one, Vietnam, and that was an exceptionally bitter experience.
have experienced the impact of war as directly as had previous generations. While most of our elders had fathers, brothers, and grandchildren, even mothers and aunts, involved in large-scale war efforts, few Americans (and probably few Western intellectuals) under the age of 45 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 (and accounts for the criticism of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima by younger historians).

In many intellectual circles, therefore, war is treated as a bloodless intellectual problem. The lack of sympathy with and moral understanding of war is most acutely felt when many try to explore its most profound effects: emotional and psychological health, traditional values, and normal "reality." The wars of the twentieth century—in particular, the Second World War, the most in history—had devastating effects on human beings and human behavior, the most terrible effect of which, according to the French critic Paul Valery, was on the [word] "that ... has been cruelly wounded ... It doubts itself profoundly?"

This exhibition seeks to describe some of the Second World War's immediate and powerful effects by sketching aspects of the outer and inner worlds of war and their reverberations. The exhibition journeys from a documentary record of battle and America at war in what is called combat art, to an investigation of the official and subliminal messages of artist-propaganda posters of the period, and then to an examination of how artists sought to grasp and comprehend the war's immediate and long range implications in regard to both Western traditions and the modern world. (I call this latter phase the work of the "metaphoric or iconic realists.") The final participants in this dialogue, the Abstract Expressionists integrate modern metaphysics with the war experience, making the war the modern and the modern war.

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 employment programs like the Works Project Administration (WPA) 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 many 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, many became armed forces artists. Part of the new programs established at the beginning of the Second World War to record the actions 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 criticisms of "wasteful spending" grew, the program was canceled. Fortunately, Life magazine offered to pay for the artists, seventeen of whom stayed on. In 1944 Abbott Pharmacetical Laboratories offered to support artists who would be supervised by the armed forces around their respective theaters. Today these works make up the core of the archives of the armed forces, most of which are located in and around Washington, D.C.

Perhaps the clearest purpose 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 "an up-correspondent," himself.

In this war there will be greater amount than ever before of factual reporting, of photographs and moving pictures. You are not sent out merely as news gatherers. 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 bomb- ing scenes; character sketches of our own troops, of prisoners, of the natives of the country you visit . . . the tactical imple-
ments of war, embarkations and debarka-
tion scenes; the nobility, cowards, 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 inerible star.

Ultimately, one of the participants, Edward Red, summed up the program's ideals: "I fought the war furiously with my paintbrush. . . . Thousands of paintings, drawings, and watercolors were created by the artist-correspondents. They paralleled the works of journalists and photographers who also accompanied the troops. Most artist-correspondents had no time on the battlefield to finish large pictures, so smaller media adequate to the task were most often used. Done as quickly as possible, drawings, water-
colors, and gouache paintings form by far the largest number of works. Howard Brodie's Infantry Man with Reeding Gun, Guadalcanal (fig. 1), for example, presents a classic view of a soldier firing his weapon in a quickly rendered realistic style. Kerr Eby's Bullet and Barbed Wire of 1944 is a powerfully rendered charcoal drawing of the Pacific campaign.

To be sure, there were fully developed studio paint-
ings. Griffith Baily Coxe's Dive Bombing Japanese Carrier, Midway, and Robert Benney's Death of the Shoho consist of descriptive yet dramatized views of the naval battles where the Japanese offensive strategy in the Pacific was brought to a halt (and the carriers that attacked Pearl Harbor were sunk). The artists employ the traditional artistic devices of solid form, three-dimensional perspective, and chiaroscuro 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, and violent explosions. They offer battle scenes of power, conflict, and drama in traditional realism depiction.

Other artists present the immensity of a conflict in which human beings are but small, interchangeable units. Eby's Tarawa series portrays the sweep of Pacific invasion as jumbles of troops falling and thrashing forward on the beaches. Under a huge, impersonal, smoke-filled sky, men crawl and rush to their destiny like ants. Eby's drawing creates a sense of men at war as subterranean forces. Anzio by Edward Red offers a different but equally immense view. Here troops are hardly visible in the whirlwind of immovable land-
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 many 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 his greatest fear—lying far from home and family in a strange and inhospitable place "alone and in pain." 10

More 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 World War II noted that following repeated exposure to battle most soldiers would eventually break down, as few could handle the stress indefinitely. 11 The strain is best recorded in what James Jones described in a painting as Marines Call It That Two-Thousand Yard Store (fig. 2). Tom Lea's painting depicts 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. 12

Sometimes, however, the poignancy of the image alleviated the need for drama. Works like Joseph Hirsch's Night Shift, Italy, treat the brutal, self-evident facts of war. Eby's Wounded Man speaks eloquently by itself. So, too, do 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. For some things, there are no adequate words or images.

Destruction is as constant as death. From Albert Gold's St. Giles Strong Point to Standish Backus's rather delicate Hiroshima 1945, 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.

Furthermore, in these documentary works, there is rarely an attempt to employ modern symbolic and for-
EMEERIAMI NEEDS SHIPS
to carry the War to the Enemy

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

clung to an 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." 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, however graphically real. To them, war was habitual and ingrained. Such an attitude measures how the murderous had become routine in the later part of the war.

PROPAGANDA POSTERS

The portrayal of the acceptance of the war as a grim but unexceptional necessity accorded with general attitudes across the West as the Second World War began. As opposed to the enthusiasm that greeted the beginning 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 that they began the war in their own defense.

The recognition of the necessity of the war belied the fact that the public needed to become convinced and engaged. The struggle to win the war had to be carried out on other planes, the most important of which 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 recognized this struggle when he 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."

In general, propagandists adapt their strategies and vary their tactics according to the audience they are addressing.

To the enemies, propaganda strategy centered 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.

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 World War. Nevertheless, in 1941 the government established an Office of Defense Information for propaganda purposes and a year later, the Office of War Information (OWI). Even General Eisenhower had a Psychological Warfare Division integrated into his command.

The most effective wartime propaganda was carried out through media not often utilized or even extant earlier: movies and radio. 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. Leaflets, cartoons, even bubble gum cards were also used. It was the American OWIs that all adults should hear at least four war messages a week, advising them 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.

For artists at home, propaganda through posters offered the greatest opportunities to win support for the war effort. The posters conveyed the psychological and political reasons America had to win. Most concerned topics of enlistment, production, conservation, unity, sabotage, espionage, atrocity, education, employment, and health. As opposed to 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 interval 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 unaffected by developments in modern 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). 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 and 1950s. Few were strongly concerned with articulating a political or ideological argument, such as the Four Freedoms or the Atlantic Charter, for which America was to be fought. 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. The enemy, especially the Japanese, was portrayed as beasts and animals, with hatred sturred up on occasion, as in Iaps Execute Doolittle Men, which reflects 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 murderous blood lust that reflects an open anger and feverish hatred, at least in comparison to many European and Japanese posters, such as one showing Hitler as a butcher of German planes as the griss reaper. As with American combat art, 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 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 sublime 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 that it became their imagined and psychological world despite the government's desire for upbeat messages.

Many of these posters render a world far different from that represented in America in the 1930s. 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 a world that is inseparable from confrontational, as a frontal Japanese soldier in a poster shoots directly at the viewer, with Epic, titanic forces are loose as gladiators stand astride the world and fight for it in 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, smiteness, chicanery, and destruction are everywhere. Ghosts of the dead, of the past, and of nightmares abound (fig. 6). Shadowy elements lurk in the background, and the bizarre and fantastic are loose around us. Spiritual and religious beliefs 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. Yet, heroes are demand ed 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, too, could become a threat 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")\(^*\), 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 produces a very masculine, or "phallocentric," effect.

For all their cheerleading, then, for all the simple, emotional posturing, American posters depict a virtually surreal world: a world of theatrics of strife and struggle; of the bizarre, bestial, and fantastic; of overpowering, active forces that dwarf and consume all.\(^*\)

For all the stylistic realism, the world of the 1940s is epic and extraordinary. And for all the traditional values the posters still espouse—home, country, family—they display the soul of the 1940s, a mind and heart engaged in the drama of ferocious, 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, at least, subliminally changed. They had been through too much to stay the same; a war of violent thought, together with subversive experience, had largely altered their mental landscape.

METAPHORIC OR ICONIC REALISM

From the very 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. Themes ranged from picturing defense activities, to articulating national policy goals, to imagining the future, as in the Artists for Victory shows of December 1942 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and October 1943, which traveled all over America. The artists themselves formed art groups under the general name "Artists for Victory," with 10,000 actively engaged under the logo of the classical image "Winged Victory of Samothrace."\(^*\)

Throughout the war and after, a number of 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.\(^*\) 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 who responded the "metaphoric realist" or "iconic" artists. In seeking to interpret the ultimate significance of the war, they medicated its reality with familiar imagery and archetypes from such sources as Christianity, mythology, 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 suffering caused by the war and make it meaningful.\(^*\)

At least since Raphael and Rembrandt, religious and ritual symbols, such as those of the Passion of Christ or ancient mythology, have been used to help define significant history, politics, and people. Such imagery was also employed in American art of the 1930s to raise to the level of the sacred the suffering caused by the economic crash.\(^*\) The historian George
Moses 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 Trenches of Acre* are two examples of the use of Christian symbolism for more contemporary martyrs and heroes.

By the First World War, the tradition of sanctifying war and death, sacrifice, and resurrection with sacred, Christian, 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, Moses argues further, was used to override the brute fact of death and dying. 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." Another wrote, "We went over the top [of the trenches] into timelessness." Such imagery made "heroism viable within a traditional framework." Modern war was thus emotionally addressed as a sacred and eternal experience.

Although much of the extreme romanticism and Victorian moralism were missing in the Second World War, 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 First World War* (fig. 8), in which helmeted, idealized soldiers surround and attack the mythic creature that is half-man, half-beast. While drawing on the classical past, Daugherty's charcoal and chalk drawing may also allude to Picasso's many images of the Minotaur. (Classical Greek soldiers also were a frequent image on monuments of the First World War.)

Combining references to nature with Passion imagery occurs often in the work of the 1940s. Prentiss Hostel Taylor's *The Uprooted Stalke* fits death within the most sacred mortal image in Western civilization, the Lamentation or Pietà of Christ. Here in a lithograph made

Fig. 9. Thomas Hart Benton

The Sower

Photographic reproduction of a panel, 16 x 20

National Archives, Washington, D.C.

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 an older woman—a true mother—holding her dead son. Behind them a figure of a paratrooper alludes to the ultimate source of the subject. The cycle of nature's growing and dying is thus combined with Christian imagery to create an allegory of an interrupted and sacrificed life in a realistic or representational style.

The attempt to elevate the war and give it historical and cultural meaning is also evident in Benton Murdock Spruance's *Sower's Sunset Light*. 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 was a town in Czechoslovakia that was annihilated and whose inhabitants were murdered by the Nazis in retaliation for the assassination of their 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 sacritisied, not a god.

The turn toward mythic-ritualistic 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 Greek and biblical myth in the later part of the decade 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. His solution was to fuse references to the war with mythic, Christian, and natural imagery and modernist form. The ten paintings known as the *Year of Peril series*, begun in 1942 because the chief American propaganda paintings and were shown and reproduced everywhere. Posters were made of some of the series (see The Sower [fig. 9]). Combining the solidified form of Salvador Dalí's *Vestor Surrealism*, a European style of fantastic psychic realism, with biblical allusions to the tower of death, who tends the landscape with skulls, Benton created a powerful and cruelly ironic image of modern fertility. Other paintings in the series also use Christian references, such as the crucified Christ assaulted from land and air by the Axis in *Agnus Dei* and The Harvest, where a 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 Simons's *The Four 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 from the mid-1940s, while an artist known only by his initials R.C. witharily satirizes the Axis trio in...
Untitled (Family Group), a play on the Holy Family (fig. 10). In the latter work, Mussolini suckles a skeletal Christ child (taken from José Clemente Orozco's The Epic of Civilization at Dartmouth College), while Hitler as St. Joseph and Tojo as an angel look on.

American artists used other mythic allusions to the war. The legendary night rider races across the land, stamping and shrieking a crowd of refugees in Mervin Jules's The Night Rider of 1942 (fig. 11), while a Janus-like armored figure representing the Axis stalks the land in Faustum. 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 the skin of a man-beast.

Few artists from the 1930s, too—whether Regionalists, social realists, or the typical WPA artist—did not do such war pictures in the 1940s. For the most part, they combined war themes with their usual concerns. In Ralph Fabri's The Four Freedoms, WPA symbols of struggling economic life are combined with one of the few references to a political and ideological program. By the 1940s, WPA images of America redefined by work were recycled as America wanning the war through production. Such images as Fabri created of a thriving industry, rich land, and fertile future as the reason for fighting the Second World War become a frequent theme in wartime art, as even the poster Land of Plenty—Land of Liberty (fig. 7) demonstrates. 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. At the bottom of the painting is a dead soldier. Above him are a flayed Christian lamb, a Grünewald-like Christ on a cross with others from Calvary, lamenting figures, and a Lazarus emerging from a coffin. Christ is helped up by dazzling butterfly angels. 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 savor evil. Evergood has fashioned a biblical allegory of his world of suffering and death and its need for resurrection.

In their war and postwar work, many artists dealt with World War II as an experience that needed assess-
ment. They absorbed and transformed war attitudes, themes, experience, mood, and atmosphere into symbolic yet traditional imagery as they sought to penetrate beyond the surface. The metaphoric realism or iconic artists reached for the grand imagery and themes of the West to make the disaster of the Second World War comprehensible.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Despite their symbolizing mode, metaphoric or iconic realists are not much recognized, never mind appreciated, because the dominant style of the war and postwar period in America is Abstract Expressionism. Once 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 of personal alienation and individual creativity (existentialism, improvisation, engagement), today Abstract Expressionism seems more a product of history and its themes. It displays a metaphorical absorption and examination of the implications of the Second World War.

Abstract Expressionism consists of semi-abstract and then abstract forms that significantly 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 time, some critics now see its concept of the human condition as more than merely subjective or personal but as shaped by the theatrical, epic suffering and conflict. History is present not in the form of 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, images, preoccupations, and form. Abstract Expressionism reveals the emotions and ideas of its generation, not simply the personal and subjective in a historical vacuum.

Undeniably, some of Abstract Expressionism is concerned with the unconscious and its forms—its art created without a model in a process that is sometimes called automatism. Nevertheless, many of the subjects that Abstract Expressionism 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: inwardsness, ritual renewal, brutalized so-called primitivism, and nature. These subjects were simply rooted and expressed through metaphysical and modernist means.

Abstract Expressionism incorporates at least three elements: the crisis in Western civilization and the popular themes expressed as sacred tradition used to symbolize and allegorize it; modernist writings and ideas shared by both artists like Picasso and Miró 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 with a new force and dynamism and helped them to become part of the midcentury definition of human experience in the wake of the war. With Abstract Expressionism, modernist American art reached a new level of what the documentary artist Reep called "philosophic" speculation.

In Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture, "war" itself becomes generalized, mythicized, and universalized. War is expressed indirectly. Adolph Gottlieb's Night Forms of 1950, for example, conveys the ominous nature of war as darkness and confinement, while his Nocturne of 1947 represents the mythic struggle of Thanatos and the Minotaur. Adolph's daughter'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.

Sacrifice and death are also mythicized. While artists and correspondents represented sacrifice as a man caught on barbed wire or a wounded man in a foxhole, Taylor allegorized it as a plier and Abraham Rattner alluded to it as a modern lamentation. Mark Rothko presents sacrifice as a modern version of the entombment. In other words, like the iconic artists, Rothko Christianized and ritualized sacrifice and death. In his painting, he also "naturalized" the Virgin. The figures of Mary and Christ 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 images of a field---inextricably lamentation in sculptures of 1946 and 1948.

Abstract Expressionists 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 semi-abstract 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, metaphoric style, but the modernist Abstract Expressionists reworked the form and theme, as Lipton's Night Rider of 1945 and Herbert Ferber's Apocalyptic Rider of 1947 (fig. 13) attest.

Here the war lurks behind the semi-abstract, arching, biomorphic sculpture, revealing that what was history is now a philosophy of life, the new parameters of human experience.

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. 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 narrow, compartmentalized mythic space evocative of the labyrinth. As Gottlieb's The Prisoners of 1946 suggests, it is clearly the war experience that brings the form and subject to consciousness, for the theme of imprisonment and entrapment was pervasive among the Abstract Expressionists and other artists in the 1940s. The examples of the central wartime theme of entrapment abound: José Clemente Orozco's use of chains around and through human beings in his Dive Bomber and Tank of 1946; Graham Sutherland's Thorn Tree series; William Baziotes's spatial and biological webs in, for example, The Panachists of 1944 (cover) and The Web of 1946; Mark Rothko's symbolically suffocating architectural environment; and Bradley Walker Tomlin's lethal forms in interlocked, combative mazes of the mid-1940s; and images and themes in the works of Herbert Ferber and Seymour Lipton. Indeed, Keguan 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—had been the enemy's chief...was really dangerous in the Second World.
The Little Island is..., New York

The work unleashed enormous, incomprehensible destruction that was recorded by artist-correspondents, projected in posters, and imagined by iconic artists. Destruction is an Abstract Expressionist subject as well, as Isamu Noguchi's This Tortured Earth of 1943 (fig. 14), with its woung, scarred terrain; Richard Pousette-Dart's blood-spattered Chaos and Abyss of Blood of 1941-43, the latter to a title taken from Henry James's description of World War I, and Jackson Pollock's Burning Landscape and engraving entitled War, with their bursting, scattering biomorphic forms, tell us. They seemingly evoke Jones's description of the terrain at Anzio: "one long hellish nightmare," a poaked, surreal, destroyed... landscape. According to his lifelong friend Reuben Kadish, with whom he often discussed the war, Pollock did several works he referred to as his "war paintings." Pollock's drawing War of 1947 depicts, after Oremo, stacks of bodies.

Abstract Expressionism captures the war's violent force in innumerable ways. Besides the displaced battle scenes, there was the general aesthetic of roughness and crudeness. This is partially a product of the American sensibility—stereotypically contrasted to that of the suave European—the roughness of Abstract Expressionism has more telling, historical origins. Posters like Remember Dec. 7th, with its torn and rent flag. Blast 'Em, with the American eagle attacking and igniting the Axis and Avenge December 7 (fig. 15), with its thrusting fists and bursting ships, suggest the effects of battle and explosives. Abstract Expressionism's thrusting or "gestural" force is partially a metaphorical equivalent to and realist expression of such rending force. Lipton's abstract vocabulary from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s, for example, combines a war-induced bestiary of abstract thrust and counterthrust (perhaps echoing as well the thrusts and counterthrusts of the armed forces or weapon phalanxes in posters). Symbolic forms become metaphorical action of a violent, dramatic sort, reflecting what Paul Russell 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, which ripped the earth and scattered tree and bone. The fierce dynamism of Abstract Expressionism is partly a testament to the impact of human aggressiveness as uncontrollable and uncontrollable force. That was an experience and theme unto itself of the war and postwar periods.

Perhaps the most telling example is Gottlieb's abstract series known as Bursts (fig. 16 shows a painting from the series). Here explosive, thrusting, and general orbs and strokes face off against one another across a cosmic divide. Gottlieb's Burst series and the accompanying "scriptive" paintings, which project the apocalyptic confrontation and polarization of the Second World War, could only have been made by someone sensitive to its overwhelming and implacable power and terror. His abstractions narrate a tale of terror and condemnation—Blast, Conflict, and Transformation—and thus make up the essential pattern of human drama of his time.

As the aesthetic of violence was stylized and abstracted and as technique was coarsened to broad, violent thrust, the figurative ideal became imbued with violence. The most popular images of the war period were the servicemen's "pin-ups" and "nose" art on the front of warplanes of flamboyantly dressed women. Women and sex were associated with violence. De Kooning's series of women, with their hallucinatory, aggressive, half-human, half-abstraction quality and their abrupt and forceful line, also encompass the violence of the war and its domestication. As with his colleague on the other side of the Atlantic Jean Dubuffet, de Kooning 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 post-war public having undergone the most violent years in recorded Western history. Earlier modernism still reflects a world where fineness, accuracy, and subtlety reign, for example, in the work of Paul Klee. But by the end of the Second World War and in the immediate postwar years through the 1950s, these were gravely weakened ideas.

Other emblems of force and conflict characterize Abstract Expressionist art. Harry Sternberg's iconic work Fracture presents an image of a 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 Mrloch series of 1946–48 (fig. 18). They appear repeatedly in William Baziotes’s art, from his drawings of 1939 to such major canvases as The Flesh Eaters of 1952. Here, as with the images created by other Abstract Expressionists, including Lipton, Gottlieb, and Rosen, 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 primordial monsters of the Abstract Expressionists exemplify the period’s belief in what James Jones called an “inaclivity, a racial evolutionary hangover” in man. 18

Even the rare political artist among the Abstract Expressionists used belligerent imagery: David Smith, the sculptor, was one such artist. (Although some contemporary critics characterize every artist in artists’ unions of the 1930s as political artists dedicated to revolution, few Abstract Expressionists were hardcore politicians.) A communist at, or at least a “fellow traveler” in the 1930s and probably throughout his life, Smith 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, belligerent 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. 17), a metal sculpture of preening cocks fighting among themselves. It echoes posters such as Give ‘Em Hell! (fig. 5), in which two gladiators similarly fight for the world. 19

In his criticism of both the Allies and Axis, Smith was unusual among the Abstract Expressionists. The Abstract Expressionists, with the exception of Smith and Motherwell, who saw the war as another quest for empire, 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.” 20 What the Abstract Expressionists represented was human misery and terror, not anti-American bitterness.

With death and destruction comes rebirth, and with the commemorative works come those celebrating renewal. Evergood’s rising Lazarus amidst burgeoning color and flowers proclaims the emergence of new life and its sacred triumph over death. As earlier artists had done—recall the poster Land of Plenty—Land of Liberty (fig. 7)—the Abstract Expressionists used nature to symbolize rebirth. The cornucopia of The Four Freedoms poster finds its echo in Benton’s postwar mythic work Aeneas and Hecules of 1947, with its cornucopia of the good things of the earth next to two battling, ancient mythic figures, and in Lee Krasner’s semi-abstract, growing, biomorphic Coruscations of 1958.

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 the mechanisms of modern art, comparative mythology, natural history, and psychology. Abstract Expressionism constituted a modern, secular Passion universalized as the fate of the human race and was thus inspired by more than modern traditions of painting and sculpture alone, that is, more than Surrealism and Cubism. Ultimately, Abstract Expressionism 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. By so doing, they made modern historical art in America.
Notes


9. Ibid., 33.


11. Fussell, *Wartime*, 281, writes that this is apparently one of the main reasons for the one-year-only combat rotation in Vietnam.

12. 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."

13. Ibid., 181-82.

14. Ibid., 118.


17. For a discussion of propaganda films, see ibid., 150-58.

18. Ibid., 150.


20. 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 Rauschen, 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), 221-22.


26. Ibid., 25.


34. Personal communication, October 30, 1991.

35. Here art follows life once again, for the armed forces' and the war's approach gradually became, as Fussell writes in *Wartime*, 7-9, one of "intensification," not "precision" or "lactica," as the war dragged on. Fussell calls this the "inexorable progress from light to heavy duty" in war experience and events. Jones notes in *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."


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William Baziotes
The Penitentiary, 1944
Duoaco blue on canvas, 50 x 40";
Courtesy of Joseph Helman Gallery, New York, and the
Estate of William Baziotes

Herbert Ferber
Apocalyptic Rider, 1947
Bronze, 44 1/2 x 33 x 22"
Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York; University Art
Collection, Anonymous Gift, 1962 (1962.33)

Adolph Gottlieb
Black, 1946
Oil on canvas, 60 x 50"

Adolph Gottlieb
Night Forms, 1950
Oil, enamel, and tempera on masonite, 24 x 30";

Hans Hofmann
Renunciation, 1948
Oil on board, 72 x 48"
Courtesy of Andrew Emmerich Gallery, New York

Seymour Lipton
Night Rider, 1945
 Slate, 25" high;
Courtesy of Maxwell Davidson Gallery, New York

Seymour Lipton
Molech, 1946
Sculpture, 23" high;
Courtesy of Maxwell Davidson Gallery, New York

Isamu Noguchi
This: Terraced Earth, 1943
Bronze, 28 x 28 x 8"
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc.
Long Island City, New York

Jackson Pollock
War, c. 1944–45
Engraving and drypoint, 11 1/8 x 8 1/4"
Printed by Emiliano Sorenson, 1967
Courtesy of Isamu Noguchi Gallery, New York

Mark Rothko
The Envelopment, 1945
Oil on canvas, 25 x 40"
Collection of the Herbert Ferber Estate

David Smith
Geoglyph Variation, 1945
Steel, 34 1/2 x 15 x 9 1/2"
Whitney Museum of American Art, purchase (66.60)

Dimensions are in inches, in order of height, width, and depth.

PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS
Andrew Moore / Censor
Courtesy of the War Department Historical Properties
Section AHC, MDV, Fig. 1
Leah Reinhardt, U.S. Army Photographic Agency, Fig. 5
C. W. Frey, Chicago, Figs. 12, 13, 27
Suelio Seminari, Fig. 16