



*Conflicting Visions:
War and Visual Culture
in Britain and France,
c. 1700-1830*

Edited by John Bonehill
and Geoff Quilley

Published by Ashgate
Publishing Limited,
Aldershot and Burlington, VT
(2005)

Available in hardcover,
245 pages, at \$99.95

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1. Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, *French Images from the Greek War of Independence, 1821-1830: Art and Politics under the Restoration* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).
2. Ulrich Keller, *Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).
3. Hollis Clayson, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege, 1870-1871* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).
4. David O'Brien, *After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting and Propaganda under Napoleon* (College Station, PA: Pennsylvania State University

Scholarship pertaining to the representation of war – from the time of the Renaissance to present day – can best be described as fragmentary. Scholars have adopted a variety of approaches to deal with the profusion of objects that fit into the all-encompassing category of war representations. Within the discipline of art history, two dominant strategies have emerged. Most often, the representation of war is treated in direct relation to a particular war or as the domain of a specific artist. The field of nineteenth-century European art history has been particularly active in this field of inquiry. Scholars such as Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer,¹ Ulrich Keller,² and Hollis Clayson,³ have examined the cultural production made during particular wars and have, as a result, made valuable contributions to our understanding of the relationship between the visual arts and war.⁴ Art made during times of war has also been studied in relation to individual image makers: David O'Brien and Pierre Duflo have both scrutinized artists' responses to the pressure of making images during times of war. While these approaches have shed light upon the conditions of cultural production during times of war and have been important for considering the larger implications of war for visual culture, they have also led to the compartmentalization of the topic in terms of specific wars and artists. A broader appraisal of the relationship between war and culture which moves beyond individual artists and wars is lacking within the field of art history.

Conflicting Visions, War and Visual Culture in Britain and France, c. 1700-1830 makes a valuable contribution to this effort. The nine essays included in the volume deal with English and French topics and come out of a conference held at the University of Leicester in 2000. *Conflicting Visions* takes on an impressive array of visual materials: drawings, maps, paintings, sculptures, and objects removed by English tourists from the battlefield at Waterloo. As the essays make clear, representations of war do much more than merely document a conflict. Though the nine essays in *Conflicting Visions* are ostensibly focused on militaristic imagery, their implications extend far beyond military concerns. Thus, unlike standard military histories which focus on tactics, battles, and individual military leaders, *Conflicting Visions* allows us to ponder the involvement of war imagery in the culture at large. This is a relatively recent historiographic trend. The authors of the essays featured in *Conflicting Visions* do an excellent job of disassociating images of war from a focus on aesthetic

innovation and “a cannon of great war artists.”⁵ The editors of the volume, John Bonehill and Geoff Quilly, claim that these representations function as mediators between armed conflict and a citizenry that is largely removed from actual combat. For the vast majority of the citizens of England and France, war was something that was experienced through images and not direct combat. As the essays in *Conflicting Visions* argue, war-related imagery played important roles in defining hotly contested issues of “patriotism and the idea of the nation, loyalty and opposition, heroism and masculinity, sympathy and sensibility.”⁶

The essays in this collection are particularly attuned to issues of audience and reception. Two of the essays focus on war monuments and their intervention in the public sphere of eighteenth-century Britain. Both Matthew Craske and Joan Coudu examine the stakes of erecting monuments in honor of deceased officers. Such monuments shaped attitudes about the fallen and, as the authors point out, served the interests of those who erected them. As such, the authors persuasively argue that military monuments do a great deal more than simply honor the dead; they constitute hotly contested sites of public intervention. The issue of commemoration through visual imagery explored by Craske and Coudu, is the subject of Sarah Monks’s essay on a lower officer, Philip Orsbridge. Drawings made by Orsbridge at the Battle of Havana were used to create a series of popular prints, which secured him popular notoriety. The burgeoning eighteenth-century English print market allowed Orsbridge to disseminate his drawings to a large audience and, as a result, garner favor with the public, as well as military elites.

Issues of reception also figure in John Bonehill’s essay which examines John Singleton Copley’s 1791 painting, *The Siege of Gibraltar*. Bonehill considers the public exhibition that Copley staged to promote his painting as well as the role that other circulating texts played in shaping the formal qualities of the picture. Bonehill argues that Copley’s attention to topographical accuracy effectively inserted the painting into an economy of already existing texts, most notably the personal accounts of officers present at the siege. Copley displayed *The Siege of Gibraltar* in a for-profit public exhibition, an idea that Jacques-Louis David would utilize in his 1799 exhibition of *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*. The public display of a large-scale drawing, *La Revue de Quintidi*, made by Jean-Baptiste Isabey and Carle Vernet, is the subject of Tony Halliday’s revealing essay. Halliday posits that the drawing, measuring 4 x 5 feet, was a part of a campaign by Lucien Bonaparte to establish a constitutional monarchy and promote his brother as the heir apparent to the throne. As Halliday points out, the drawing was exhibited to coincide with

Press, 2006) and Pierre Duflo, *Constantin Guys, fou de dessin, grand reporter: 1802-1892* (Paris: Editions Arnaud Seydoux, 1988).

5. Bonehill and Quilly, 3.

6. Ibid.

the one year anniversary of Napoleon's coup d'état of the 18th Brumaire, which secured his status as First Consul. In this early phase of Napoleon's ascension to power, the First Consul's iconography was not yet defined: the drawing participates in legitimating Bonaparte's rule by depicting him as an intellectually astute general rather than as a commander who rules by brute force. In another essay in the collection, Geoff Quilley examines John Singleton Copley's idiosyncratic painting, *Watson and the Shark*, exhibited publicly in 1778. This essay has much in common with Halliday's reading of *La Revue de Quintidi*. Both essays consider the political implications of exhibiting a war-related work in public and are sensitive to the fact that such imagery can play a crystallizing role in shaping attitudes toward recent historical events. Quilley's essay powerfully argues against the historiographic blindness of interpreting the American Revolution without considering the "circum-Atlantic contextualization" crucial in forming cultural attitudes about the conflict.⁷ Through a careful reading of *Watson and the Shark's* iconography and reception, Quilley places the American Revolution in an imperial context, with particular emphasis on the British colonies in the West Indies.

Many of the essays in *Conflicting Visions* take on bodies of visual material that have suffered from scholarly neglect or fall outside the traditional methodological boundary of art history. Julie Anne Plax examines Antoine Watteau's understudied military paintings created during the War of Spanish Succession, a conflict which proved disastrous for France's military self-image. Watteau's images departed from traditional, triumphant battle scenes associated with the France's previous wars fought under Louis XIV and instead relied on a new iconography of *la belle retraite*, acknowledging defeat gracefully. Though the Battle of Waterloo does not suffer from scholarly neglect in the same way that Watteau's military paintings do, two essays in the collection discuss the famous battle in fresh ways. Both Philip Shaw and Susan Pearce examine Waterloo's aftermath, when it became a site of English national pride, and consider the pilgrims who traveled there and the ways that the English public interacted with the material detritus left on the battlefield. Shaw discusses personal accounts of English subjects who visited the battlefield and focuses on the writings of the eminent anatomist and surgeon, Sir Charles Bell, whose point of view shifts between the physical carnage of the battle and longing pride in his nation's triumph. Susan Pearce's essay investigates the commercial exhibition of physical artifacts retrieved from the battlefield. She argues that the materials gathered from the battlefield allowed viewers to encounter history experientially and presented the

7. Ibid., 116.

battle as historical spectacle. Shaw and Pearce's essays demonstrate that the culture of war is not limited to the battlefield alone.

The essays featured in *Conflicting Visions* do an excellent job of forming a much needed methodological and theoretical framework for discussing the relationship between war and culture. Each essay makes its own intervention into this understudied sphere of scholarship but as such, one must question the critical value of so many isolated case studies. Though collections of thematically-grouped essays are a mainstay of academic culture, synchronic analyses of war representations have long dominated this kind of scholarship within the discipline of art history. As Holly Clayson has remarked, "the notion of the case study is not a neutral or unproblematic one, even if its manifold methodological and interpretive quandaries are often overlooked in humanist scholarship."⁸ The academic case study "implies that generalizations about a larger picture will arise - must arise from an exhaustive study of a cluster of selected examples."⁹ One hopes that this more generalized picture will arise from the nine essays collected in *Conflicting Visions*. The study of war imagery as a representational problem in the culture at large demands a more diachronic, *longue-durée* approach. To be sure, *Conflicting Visions* consists of a group of essays that are headed in the right direction.

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8. Clayson, 11.

9. Ibid.