

ART OF THE CIVIL WAR

From "Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History"



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To consider the art of the Civil War is to accept that the North had an embarrassment of riches. With a larger population, some art organizations, and burgeoning art schools, the North had a greater number of men and women practicing art. More European artists immigrated to the major cities of the North, where wealthy patrons lived, and more young artists traveled to European capitals for academic training. More publishing houses flourished, and printing firms employed and trained many engravers and lithographers.

The South had a smaller, more agrarian population and relatively fewer trained artists. Before the war, graphic images were obtained from the North and Europe or from small publishing houses in Baltimore or New Orleans.

Once the North tightened the noose of the blockade, paper, printing ink, canvas, and art materials became scarce. With all able Southern men joining the Confederate army, the Southern government had difficulty finding engravers to print Confederate money, postage stamps, and notes, to say nothing of newspaper illustrations and prints.

Southerners did not lack an appreciation for prints and artwork. However, during the war and after, their energies had to focus on survival. During the postwar period, Civil War prints, paintings, and sculpture would help heal the divisive wounds and glorify the leaders and combatants of both the North and South.

The immediacy of the sketches, engravings, and photographs from the front lines served the purpose of bringing the war to the public as soon as possible. It would be later in comfortable studios, often with the service of paid models, that the large oil paintings of notables and battle scenes would be completed.

At the start of the Civil War, the art and illustrations that Americans saw were derivative and often poorly executed. In the North, publications such as **Harper's Weekly**, **Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper**, and the **New York Illustrated News** hired talented combat artists who followed the armies, witnessed the bloody battles, camped with the soldiers and lived in the heart of the war. However, their talent was poorly served by the primitive printing process of the day.

In the field, artists would sketch and draw what they objectively saw in pencil, crayon, watercolor, and pen and ink. These drawings would be rushed to the editorial offices in New York using whatever mode was available—horse, train, boat, messenger, or bribery. In New York, wood engravers, often less skilled, would quickly copy the drawing on a thick block of wood and carve away the negative areas, leaving the raised surfaces to carry the ink to the newsprint. The sensitive line of pencil and pen, as well as significant detail and information, would often be lost in the transfer to the cruder medium of wood engraving.

At that time, the technique for reproducing photographs did not exist. It was long after the war that photographs were studied by artists and were used to produce paintings, drawings, lithographs, and wood engravings of a higher artistic level.

The most complete visual history of the war was published by the editors of **Century Magazine** in 1887-

1888. Called **Battles and Leaders of the Civil War**, this four-volume set is considered to be the definitive account of the war and has the richest collection of illustrations. **Century** editors used seventy artists who created over 1,000 pictures from their field sketches; former soldiers who became artists after the war; and professional illustrators who used artists' sketch books. Also used were photographs by Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner and the oral descriptions by veterans to produce accurate and skillful representations of the war era.

The artists joined the journalists to risk dysentery, gunfire, deprivation, and the ire of commanders to make a graphic portrayal of war for the rest of the country. Most of the more accomplished artists were from Eastern Seaboard cities, and many had received classical training in the artistic capitals of Europe. After the battles, the artists and journalists enjoyed being considered part of the rakish Bohemian Brigade. They shared information, and often the artists drew maps and diagrams for the writers.

Since salaries were meager (from \$15 to \$35 a week), only Winslow Homer, the best known of the artists, would receive \$60 dollars for a double-page spread. The war provided tremendous impetus to Homer's career. He had completed an apprenticeship in lithography in 1857 when he was twenty-one. At the start of the war he was attending night school at the National Academy of Design in New York. He had published some drawings in **Ballou's Pictorial** and in **Harper's Weekly**. In 1861 the latter commissioned him to make drawings of Lincoln's inauguration. He was then sent to cover the Peninsula campaign when the war began. He sketched countless scenes of battle and the soldier's life in the field. He returned to New York and began work on paintings such as **Sharpshooter on Picket Duty**, **Rations**, and **Home Sweet Home**. Some of these works were exhibited at the National Academy in 1863. He continued with his Civil War themes, with his **Prisoners from the Front** being perhaps his best work. It was exhibited at the Paris International Exposition of 1867 and is now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. After travel in Europe, Homer shifted his art to sea and marine scenes, returning only briefly in 1878 to painting of "negro life" in Virginia in a work called **Visit from the Old Mistress**, which was exhibited in the Paris Exhibition of 1878 and is now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.



A **Harper's Weekly** depiction of their artist, Alfred R. Waud, at work

(Library of Congress)

Many artists, however, were not paid when their work was not published. Artists were also responsible for

travel and accommodations. Many artists carried letters of introduction to commanders. The artists moved about all fronts of the war. For example, Theodore R. Davis of **Harper's Weekly** accompanied General Sherman's march through Georgia and was considered the artist who saw more of the war than any other.

By 1861, Henri Lovi of Cincinnati estimated that he had ridden horseback 1,000 miles in three months. He complained to the editors at **Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper**, "Riding from ten to fifteen miles daily through mud and underbrush and then working until midnight by the dim light of a tallow dip...I am nearly 'played out' and as soon as the Pittsburg landing is worked up and Corinth settled, I must beg a furlough for rest and repairs. I am deranged about the stomach, ragged, unkempt and unshorn, and need the co-joined skill and services of the apothecary, the tailor and the barber and above all the attentions of home...."

Some artists, such as Alfred R. Waud, were gifted writers as well. Waud accompanied General Custer on a raid, and his article "A Day in Camp" was as skillful as his line and wash drawings portraying the scene. Some of the hundreds of Civil War artists became famous after the war. Winslow Homer, George Caleb Bingham, Eastman Johnson, William Morris Hunt, Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, and Thomas Nast are familiar names of artists who covered the Union at war.

Naval artists also had their part. The navies of the North and South launched ingenious warships in the form of gunboats and odd submarines. Xanthus Smith and other maritime artists painted dramatic pictures of fierce battles on the seas and rivers. Unlike life with the armies and access to all the battles, on the seas the artists found a less than hospitable terrain. With close quarters and firm discipline, naval ships did not often carry journalists, photographers, or artists.

On 8 March 1862, at Hampton Roads off Newport News, Virginia, the ironclad Confederate vessel CSS **Virginia** (formerly the USS **Merrimack**), a massive mound of deadly power, shelled and rammed the wooden ships of the Union navy. Xanthus Russell Smith, who had served on a wooden frigate, later painted the 9 March battle between the **Virginia** and the USS **Monitor**. In the painting, the stately wooden ships were a background for the squat and deadly steam-driven ironclads. Julian O. Davidson, who had been to sea, showed marine paintings with close attention to the technical details of the new line of ironclad vessels. Davidson produced a variety of naval illustrations that the Boston-based Louis Prang Company printed in a chromolithography series of Civil War prints. These artists, regardless of their training—classical European or naive primitive—painted large military battles in oil or quick pencil sketches, often drawn in the noisy fury of battle, and brought a dimension of emotion, humanity, and heroic drama of the tragic epic.

More dominant and immediate was the work of photographers. Mathew B. Brady's name is synonymous with photographs of President Lincoln and the Civil War, but he was a single player. While Brady had received permission from the president to privately document the impending war, many anonymous photographers were in the field with the Confederate armies as well.

Brady's colleague was Alexander Gardner. Scottish by birth, he probably met Brady during the 1851 World's Fair, as Gardner was one of the early experts in wet-plate photography. In 1856 Gardner sailed for New York City, his fare paid by Brady. He was Brady's closest associate during the war.

Gardner entered Brady's world of photography when Brady was nationally known as photographer to politicians, millionaires, and visiting royalty. His ornate studios in New York and Washington were hung with a who's who of reigning celebrities. In 1858, Alexander Gardner was manager of Brady's Washington studio. With the start of war in 1861, Brady, "the Lincoln photographer," convinced Lincoln and the war department that it was imperative to record the history of the war as it happened by means of photography. Disappointed at having to finance the venture himself, he believed that it would be a profitable investment.

Photographic technology was only twenty-two years old when the Civil War began. On 21 July 1861, at the battle of First Bull Run there appeared strange-looking hooded black wagons drawn by horses. Called "what's-its" by the soldiers, these black-hooded laboratories were ingenious, efficient photo processing laboratories manned by Brady's photographic artists. Photography in the middle of a battlefield was a daunting task. A photographer would set up the heavy studio camera on the tripod and view the objects to be filmed. In the wagon, the assistant would coat a sheet of clean glass with the liquid collodian, let it dry,

then dip it in silver nitrate. These tasks had to be done in near darkness so as not to expose the plate. The glass plate was placed into a lightproof holder, rushed to the photographer, and slotted into the back of the camera. Then the black cloth was pulled over the camera and the photographer's head, and the plate was exposed for approximately ten seconds, then rushed back to the wagon for developing. Dust, humidity, and timing were all obstacles to be overcome by those Civil War photographers. The entire procedure had to be accomplished within ten to twenty minutes or the image would be lost. Alexander Gardner worked in one of those Brady wagons and reportedly took three-quarters of the photographs of the Army of the Potomac. However, Brady's name appears as the photographer.

Brady had no taste for the war and after a short time at the Bull Run debacle he returned to his New York portrait studio. The cost of supplying and photographing the war, coupled with his poor business practices, caused his financial ruin, resulting in his bankruptcy by 1873. His hope of reaping riches from his Civil War photographs was dashed by a glut of pictures. More than a million exposures were made, and the public could not get enough of the war pictures, but by the end of the horrific conflict the Americans had no desire to see the painful images.

Alexander Gardner left Brady in 1863 and set up a studio similar to Brady's in Washington where, for the remainder of the war, he sporadically photographed battles and the tragic aftermaths. Gardner photographed Lincoln's funeral and the famous pictures of the hanging of the assassination conspirators.

Gardner closed his studio and became a field photographer for the Union Pacific Railroad. His black laboratory wagon followed the covered wagons on the Chisolm Trail into the western frontier. He became famous for some of the best photographs of the western frontier.

Southern photographers were also on hand at the start of the war. F. K. Houston of Charleston, South Carolina, photographed the vanquished Fort Sumter; he was followed by James Osburn and F. E. Durbec. Perhaps because of limited supplies, they did not continue to photograph Civil War subjects.

Brady's failing eyesight led him to relegate the camera work to his talented staff. The bulk of the photos were taken by Gardner, his son James, Timothy O'Sullivan, William Pywell, George N. Barnard, David Woodbury, E. Guy Fox, and others. Gardner's and O'Sullivan's work developed into true art, and they left Brady when he denied them credit for their work. The only official government photographer working for the U.S. Military Railroad was a Captain A. J. Russell, who is credited with work of high quality. These were artists who captured the static scenes of scarred and blasted fields littered with broken equipment, although they would frequently move bodies to improve the composition of a photograph and add drama to the scene. They took thousands of **carte de viste** photos of young, smartly dressed recruits and grizzled veterans in rag-tag uniforms. They captured homey scenes of encampments, barbers working outdoors, cooks stirring pots, soldiers playing cards at their leisure in front of their tents, the dead and dying in field hospitals, and generals whose names are now a part of the American pageant. The results of their work often had an ignominious end. When the demand for Civil War photographs waned, thousands of the glass-plate negatives were sold for use as windows in greenhouses. As the seasons changed, the captured faces in the glass—the corpse-strewn battlefields of Antietam, Fredericksburg, Vicksburg, Gettysburg; the sunken gunboats; the ruined cities; and the heroic and battle-weary soldiers—were burned away by the rays of the sun. These negatives became the ghostly pentimento of this tragic civil war.

To produce lithographs, the artist would draw on smooth stone slabs with a grease pencil. It offered a more sensitive surface for detail and shading than woodcut engraving, but it was time-consuming, as the stone required inking with a brayer for each print. After several hundred prints the original image would fade.

Engravings on copper or steel plates were the most demanding of skill and time. The artist was required to scratch and carve incised lines into hard sheets of treated copper with engraving tools. Ink would be rubbed into these lines, excess ink would be wiped away, and the plate would be placed into a press with a sheet of dampened paper. The plate and paper, sandwiched between felt blankets, would be drawn through the press, forcing the damp paper into the incised lines and creating a richly detailed engraving.

Among the most popular and accessible American art forms—priced for as little as twenty-five cents and

sold in general stores and on street corners—were prints by Currier and Ives. This company, started in 1835, achieved great success through mass-producing familiar American scenes as well as Civil War battle prints. Rare was the household that did not have a Currier and Ives print on the wall.

Established artists would sell paintings to the firm, which then had them copied on lithographic stones and printed as black-and-white prints. In the New York City factory, the prints would move down an assembly line, where workers would dab bright colors on the print through a stencil. Although Currier and Ives prints were not always historically accurate, they filled a demand by the masses for Civil War art. By the mid-1880s, the Louis Prang Company of Boston and the firm of Kurz and Allison of Chicago had also printed a series of battle scenes that are still used today as graphic illustrations for book covers.

None of the art produced during the Civil War was officially sponsored by the governments of either side. It did not occur to these mid-nineteenth-century administrations to utilize art as propaganda, nor could they afford it. Initially it was the artists and the few patrons who documented the war. After the war, the growing number of veterans' organizations continued to stimulate and encourage the creation of Civil War art. Other factors also contributed to these efforts, such as a curiosity about the war by those who had not experienced it directly, and a desire to honor those who had fought.

One defining image from all the art produced for and about the Confederacy is an engraving called **The Burial of Latane**. William DeHartburn Washington, an artist from Richmond, Virginia, completed an oil painting in 1864 portraying the burial of a young doctor who was killed as his unit repulsed the Union forces just north of Richmond. Captain Latane, sword drawn and charging the retreating forces, was killed by a fusillade of gunfire. His brother, a comrade in arms, transported his body to a nearby plantation, where the mistress of the plantation, with the help of the slaves and other women, tenderly put the young officer to rest as if he were one of their beloved sons. Reported by the press and memorialized in a widely read poem, the incident moved the artist to paint the burial scene with the women and girls performing the service and mourning the unknown soldier. This image would strike the heart of all those Southerners who lost a loved one far from home and among strangers. Ironically, it was a Northern engraver, A. G. Campbell, working from a photograph, and a New York City publishing house that produced the print that evoked such an unparalleled response, particularly among the women of the South. Universal sorrow, the skill of the engraver, and active promotion and marketing of the print created a symbol of the Lost Cause. **The Burial of Latane** portrayed a woman's view of the war, sustained the Southern identity, and became an enduring image for decades after the war.

From 1785 to 1903, military cyclorama paintings were a popular art form in the great capitals of Europe. Brought to the United States in 1790, this kind of touring painting was displayed on the interior walls of specially constructed round buildings. Stretching up to fifty feet in height and encircling the viewer for nearly four hundred feet in length, the canvas would envelop the viewer in an immense painting in the round. At first, experienced European artists did the research, visited battle sites, and interviewed the soldiers and officers. Teams of painters would work for months to create the battle scene vistas that would draw millions of viewers in American cities. They paid between twenty-five and fifty cents for admission. Many major battles—Antietam, Second Bull Run, Shiloh, the clash of the **Monitor** and the **Virginia**, and others—were the subject matter of these colossal canvasses. Few have survived, and those that have are rarely exhibited.

Around 1882, Paul Philippoteaux, a Frenchman who had worked on European cycloramas, came to Gettysburg to do research on the battle. With a team of five artists he completed the first of four cycloramas of the battle of Gettysburg. He exhibited the first work to great acclaim in Chicago in 1883. One of Philippoteaux's Gettysburg cycloramas is on display at the Gettysburg National Military Park. Another cyclorama, **The Battle of Atlanta**, by William Wehner and his team of European artists, was restored in 1982 and is on view in modern facilities near the Atlanta battleground.

As an art form the cyclorama never attained the level of museum quality. As a spectacle it was hyped and promoted in the florid language of the time. The sheer size and weight of the canvas, the need for a special building, and the growing distaste among Americans for the illustrated carnage doomed this once-popular kind of painting. The arrival of new technology heralded by D. W. Griffith's movie **The Birth of a Nation** in 1915 closed the door on the cyclorama, a unique form of artistic storytelling.

For decades after the war, to heal the wounds, confront the terrible losses, and glorify the survivors of this national cataclysm, thousands of statues, obelisks, plaques, busts, tombs, canons, and pillars were carved and constructed in twenty-five states and the District of Columbia. In almost every hamlet, town, and city that sent soldiers to the war there are examples of sculpture in parks, town squares, cemeteries, and battle sites. The National Park Service and numerous other organizations maintain and administrate various buildings and battlegrounds throughout these states.

The largest and most imposing of all Civil War sculpture is carved into the granite of a mountain near Atlanta called Stone Mountain. The equestrian figures of Robert E. Lee, "Stonewall" Jackson, and Jefferson Davis were conceived and begun by Gutzon Borglum, who later designed and created Mount Rushmore. This impressive sculpture, later completed by Walker Hancock, measures 90 feet high by 190 feet long. It is a spectacular feat of engineering and carving.

Augustus Saint-Gaudens was commissioned to create a sculptural monument for Boston honoring Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the leader of the 54th Massachusetts, the black regiment that stormed Fort Wagner. A masterpiece, this bas relief took fourteen years to complete. It depicts Shaw on horseback accompanied by a column of his men and is sculpted with attention to detail and honest realism. Saint-Gaudens's equestrian statue of General William T. Sherman being led by the winged female figure of American victory was placed on New York's Fifth Avenue near the entrance to Central Park. The figure of the horse and rider and the striding Victory create an unmistakable feeling of forward movement and progress. This gilded statue rides high above pedestrians, taxis, and hansom cabs on one of the busiest, most affluent, and modern city corners in the world.

The nation's capital, with a wealth of sculpture, is home to one of America's most familiar monuments, the Lincoln Memorial. The white marble sculpture of the seated Abraham Lincoln by America's acknowledged leading sculptor, Daniel Chester French, is a powerful symbol for all Americans. From within the stone emerges the sad but rugged character of the man who held the country together through its bloody struggle.

The Hudson River school of painting, rooted in European themes, was the predominant style of painting in the period before the war. English-born Thomas Cole was painting in this manner in 1825. The majestic American landscape was painted as a vision from a palette arranged by God.

By the 1850s a more natural and realistic style emerged as artists like George Caleb Bingham portrayed the reality of American life and work in everyday scenes. Unlike the Europeans, who had a long art history of military themes, the antimilitary American artists were more likely to paint idyllic landscapes and upon these arcadian backgrounds superimpose the war scene. An example would be a painting by Albert Bierstadt entitled **Guerilla Warfare (Picket Duty in Virginia)** (1862), in which five Union soldiers fire upon Confederate troops in the distance. The rolling hills bathed in summer haze, the carefully painted lush grasses, and beautifully rendered trees provide a theatrical set upon which the soldiers casually play at war.

Conrad Wise Chapman, an ardent son of Virginia, returned from Italy at age nineteen to fight as well as record scenes of camp life. After recovery from a head wound, he was transferred in October 1863 to Charleston, South Carolina. Later, he was to paint a series of thirty-one oils of the harbor during the siege. These landscapes and seascapes are peaceful depictions of the harbor watched over by the lone sentry at his post atop the ramparts. His work, in the Museum of the Confederacy, is considered the most important of the Confederacy.

John Ross Key, who also painted a work called **The Bombardment of Fort Sumter** in 1864, fell victim to the same philosophy that so many Civil War painters employed. They sought to reduce the carnage and destruction to a lovely landscape that just happened to be a background for columns of marching soldiers and prancing horses. Critics were no better in the assessment of these works of Civil War art, much of which was sentimental, idealized, and sanitized views of a horrific national explosion. The artists Gilbert Gaul, Peter F. Roethermel, William B. T. Trego, Walton Taber, and Thure deThulstrup seemed to portray the battle scenes with more visual realism, honesty, and artistic skill than others.

Winslow Homer, considered the greatest of the Civil War painters, after his brief sojourn to the front for

Harper's Weekly, almost exclusively concentrated his paintings' subject matter on genre scenes of the soldiers' life in camp. He had no interest in being a painter of military battles; his forte was being a painter of the people. Perhaps if we strip away the pretensions of glory formed in the idealized portraits of military leaders, the carefully painted rows of nameless soldiers marching to their deaths, the stiff and static generals astride their foaming steeds, safely behind the lines, we would accept Lincoln's observation that it was "the people's war."

See also

Battles and Leaders of the Civil War; Brady, Mathew B.; Cyclorama; Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper; Gardner, Alexander; Harper's Weekly; Homer, Winslow; Nast, Thomas; Photography; Waud, Alfred Rudolph.

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