



*War and Art: A Visual History of Modern Conflict* ed. Joanna Bourke.

London: Reaktion Books, 2017. Pp. 391. ISBN 978-1-78023-846-3.

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The traumas and tragedies of war should never be underestimated or forgotten. They change lives—combatants’ and noncombatants’—in unimaginable ways with far-reaching and generational effects. Artists provide visual representations and reminders of the scope and horrors of war. The platitude “a picture is worth a thousand words” is vividly reaffirmed in *War and Art*. The book surveys war art of the last two centuries, from the Crimean War through the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The volume’s editor, historian Joanna Bourke<sup>1</sup> (Birkenbeck, Univ. of London) well understands the cultural dimensions of contemporary warfare and the deep emotional scars suffered by those touched by war. The present anthology contains four broad sections, each featuring essays by specialists in disciplines ranging from art history, archaeology, and cultural history, to military history and film studies. More than four hundred color illustrations depict the work of such artists as Paul Nash, Judy Chicago, Pablo Picasso, Melanie Friend, Marc Chagall, Francis Bacon, Käthe Kollwitz, Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg, Dora Meeson, Otto Dix, and many others. Also represented is the work of overlooked artists, including children, POWs, and non-Europeans or Americans.

In her introduction, Bourke notes that the range of intent in the genre “war art” is problematic and controversial. Some works focus on the gruesome character of combat, others seek to glorify war. Bourke asks whether war art should encompass peacekeeping missions, like those in Cyprus or Northern Ireland. She draws attention as well to the resourcefulness of artists and the remarkable variety of media they employ.

Artists have turned to oil and water paints, pencils and crayons, silk and wool, carved wood, photographic film, digital technologies and blood. The mark of war has been imported on everything from stretched canvases to the fuselages of fighter planes. Cheap and easily reproduced woodcuts and stencils have proven essential to artists everywhere, but particularly to those with a political message to communicate to the masses. Front-line participants in war have carved art from the flotsam of battle—bullets, shell casings and bones—often producing unsettling accounts of the calamity that had overwhelmed them. (7-8)

With a few exceptions—Elizabeth Thompson (Crimean War), Margaret Bourke-White and Lee Miller (both World War II)—women have been excluded from combat zones until after 1945. Hence, “the dominance of male artists has skewed the representation of women in times of war” (16). Bourke is also keenly aware that, “without context, trauma risks being belittled” (33); the volume’s contributors scrupulously provide the settings of the art works they discuss.

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<sup>1</sup> She is a Fellow of the British Academy and author of, among other books, *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1996), *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (NY: Basic Books, 1999), and *Deep Violence: Military Violence, War Play, and the Social Life of Weapons* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2015).

## HISTORIES

“War Imagery between the Crimean Campaign and 1914”

by Sergiusz Michalski

“The Two World Wars”

by Monica Bohm-Duchen

“In the Heat of the Cold War, 1945–77”

by Sarah Wilson

“Contemporary War; Contemporary Art”

by Sue Malvern

The book’s first section offers a valuable panorama of wars and war art since the Crimean War. Though chapter titles may not indicate it, there is ample representation of conflicts like the Anglo-Afghan War, the Russo-Japanese War, and the Rwandan genocide.<sup>2</sup> Though these are very different in geography, types of combatants, causes, and outcomes, the human need to express the violence, values, and experiences of war through art transcends such distinctions.

## GENRES

“Propaganda, Art and War”

by Jo Fox

“War and Film”

by James Chapman

“Trench Art: Objects and People in Conflict”

by Nicholas J. Saunders

“Visions of the Apocalypse: Documenting the Hidden Artwork of Abandoned Cold War Bases”

by John Schofield

The second section is distinctive for its focus on twentieth-century industrial “Total War” and the emergence of film as the dominant mass-entertainment medium.

Even films as poles apart technologically as *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Battle of the Somme* had the same aim: to make audiences feel they had witnessed, even experienced, war at close quarters. What they both demonstrate, in their different ways, is the power and efficacy of film as a medium for representing war. (208)

Whether viewers look to the past in *Gladiator* (2000), the mythical in the Lord of the Rings trilogy (2001–3), or the futuristic in the Star Wars series (1977–2018), the power of film has captivated audiences around the world. That said, Bourke astutely writes of the debate over the realism or verisimilitude of films that “one of the consequences of this emphasis on ocular authenticity is that innumerable acts of war—most notably, ... wartime rape—would rarely, if ever, enter the war canon. By definition, raped women (and men) are rendered invisible” (14).

## ARTISTS

“Kiyochika’s Last Laughs: Satirical War Prints from the First Sino-Japanese (1894–5) and Russo-Japanese (1904–5) Wars”

by John D. Szostak

“‘In front of me is the war, and I battle with it with all my strength’: The Wars of Vasili Vereshchagin and Natalia Goncharova”

by Anna Pilkington

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2. Art from the Arab-Israeli War, the Six-Day War, the Yom Kippur War, or the Palestinian Intifada is not addressed.

“The most gruesome picture ever painted’: Otto Dix and the Truth of War”

by Gary Haines

“Käthe Kollwitz and the Art of War”

by Jay Winter

“A concentrated utterance of total war’: Paul Nash, C.R.W. Nevinson and the Great War”

by Paul Gough

“I Do (Not) Challenge: Nancy Spero’s War Series”

Jon Bird

“My name is David and I will be your war artist for the day’: David Cotterrell Shoots a Video”

by Michael Corris

The third and largest section of the book contains chapters on individual artists. Though they were very diverse in their experiences, subjects, and styles, each portrayed the intensely personal and generically impersonal effects of combat on people and the natural environment.

#### CONTEXTS

“Drawn in Blood and Bone: The Art of Captives of War”

by Clare Makepeace

“The Crayon War: How Children Drew the Great War”

by Manon Pignot

“Rape in the Art of War”

by Joanna Bourke

“Video Games, War and Operational Aesthetics”

by Patrick Crogan

“Art against War”

by Grace Brockington

The book’s fourth section, addressing specific contexts of the experience of war, contains the most emotionally difficult chapters to view and read. In the nearly two centuries since the Crimean War, artists’ conceptions of war have shifted from the celebration of heroic exploits to honest, unflinching representations of its horrors and the price it extracts from individuals and societies. A corollary of this shift has been the rise of art against war.

Readers will be impressed by the sheer scope of the material examined in *War and Art*. Sub-genres like trench art and propaganda receive expected attention, but so do advertising art, the art of children, military medical art, and art in contemporary social media. From frontline to behind-the-lines war art, the experiences of wartime have been portrayed in paintings, etchings, photographs, films, digital art, comics, and graffiti. The multicultural, multigenerational character of this art reminds readers that war is a universal human tragedy.

Naturally, survey volumes must be selective. Thus, for example, such Second World War works as Tom Lea’s graphic *Marines Call It That 2,000 Yard Stare*<sup>3</sup> and Joe Rosenthal’s iconic photograph, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*,<sup>4</sup> are merely mentioned, not illustrated.<sup>5</sup>

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3. First published in *Life* (11 June 1945) 65, portraying a dazed and detached US Marine against the background of “Bloody Nose Ridge” at the Battle of Peleliu.

4. Taken on 23 Feb. 1945 and published in newspapers two days later.

5. Omitted altogether are US Civil War photographer Matthew Brady, Second World War photographer Edward Steichen, and photojournalist David Douglas Duncan, whose work spanned the Second World War, the Korean War and Vietnam War.

Although the volume's endnotes are thorough and helpful, the bibliography is restricted to good beginning resources for readers wishing to learn more. *War and Art* is an ambitious and captivating survey of the art and commemoration of war. Its readers will not be disappointed.