



Portraits of Remembrance: Painting, Memory, and the First World War

ed. Margaret Hutchinson and Steven Trout.

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Portraits of Remembrance: Painting, Memory, and the First World War reminds modern-day art historians and war scholars of the myriad narratives of World War I conveyed in the language of painting. Its editors, military historian Margaret Hutchinson (Australian Catholic Univ.–Brisbane) and English professor Steven Trout (Univ. of South Alabama) state in their introduction that the book

considers wartime paintings both large and small, conventional and controversial, academic and modernist, official and unofficial ... representing cultural activity in twelve different nations—Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, France, Germany, Great Britain, New Zealand, Russia, Turkey, and the United States. (5)

Each of the books' chapters' concentrates on one painting associated with the First World War. The selected paintings are imbued with personal memory, collective memory, national memory, and historical amnesia. The following are some of the questions the editors pose and the contributors seek to answer:

How significant a part did war paintings play in the formation and perpetuation of a shared memory of the war within various nations after 1918? How was the role of paintings in memory construction different from that of photography or film, media that supposedly offered great verisimilitude and a more direct link to history? And how in turn did conflicts over collective memory pervasive during the 1920s and 1930s in nearly every former combatant nation affect even the most personal and idiosyncratic renderings of war experience in two-dimensional art? (7)

The essayists each respond with an object-oriented discussion. Throughout, the influence of relevant seminal works on memory studies and World War I² is clear and productive.

In the book's introduction, editors Hutchinson and Trout briefly examine the monumental panorama, the *Panthéon de la Guerre*, to illustrate the varying importance a work of art can take on, depending on its temporal and cultural context. The 402 x 45-foot panorama debuted in Paris in 1918 and was later shipped across the Atlantic to New York, only to fall into obscurity as global interest in commemorating World War I waned. It resurfaced in disrepair in the 1950s. Its story demonstrates that the effects of display, subject matter, or scale do not outweigh the cultural needs of a given time. The conviction that the same is true of other works is a key justification for the book—*Portraits of Remembrance* explains how the needs of people in differing cultural con-

1. See table of contents below.

2. E.g., Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989) 7–24; Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1975), and Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Univ Pr, 1995; rpt. 2014).

texts affect the subject, size, placement, and function, as well as the commissioning of particular paintings.

The chapters are grouped by specific geographic regions and the type of memory associated with the target paintings. The first three concern American and French interchange during the war. Works by three American painters highlight such personal and shared experiences as sending loved ones off to war, women's roles in the Red Cross, and documenting a significant naval victory in France.

Chapters four to six seek to “examine painting from understudied theaters and break important new scholarly ground” (19). Chapters four and five stress that unimaginable losses were suffered by both sides in the war, despite the fact that memorials were typically produced only by victorious countries. Chapters six and seven shift attention back to the Allies; they explore the effects of time of commission on paintings. Chapters eight to nine consider neglected works, while the last five chapters concentrate on paintings considered successful today.

Art historian Andrew M. Nedd's “Russian Memory, and the Great War: Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin's *In the Line of Fire*” is a highlight of the collection. It elucidates the influence of historical context on the appreciation of a painting. Petrov-Vodkin's canvas, a modernist work created in Imperial Russia, depicts identical, wide-eyed soldiers charging an invisible enemy against an unnaturally colored background. Petrov-Vodkin altered his artistic style after the war and disavowed *In the Line of Fire* because it contradicted the new national image of devoted, strong Russian workers favored by Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union. His “wartime paintings were, understandably, evaluated in the later years according to Socialist Realist principles, and *In the Line of Fire* did not fare well” (131). This chapter, like all the others in the anthology, is enhanced by beautiful color plates.

The essays make it clear that the artists who created the most successful paintings were those who suffered the most pain as a result of World War I. The canvases painted by more detached observers simply fell flat with audiences.

Perhaps the most significant painter of the Great War was Otto Dix. Martin Bayer's in-depth study of Dix's famed triptych, *Der Krieg*, reflects upon a canonical artist who spent long tours of duty on the front lines. By devoting all of his effort to realistic accuracy free of any political agenda, Dix inadvertently allowed viewers to interpret *Der Krieg* in ways that suited their own interests.

Readers will find that *Portraits of Remembrance* certainly answers the questions it poses: its contributors provide wide-ranging and convincing arguments based on perceptive analyses of the paintings' details, techniques, and historical context. The book is most convincing when it lays out the reasons for interpreting the painting of World War I as both an art unto itself and an invaluable supplement to historical texts in remembering the disparate experiences of a global conflict.

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