

Painting History, Badly

"Narrative Trauma and Civil War History Painting, or Why Are These Pictures So Terrible?"
by Steven Conn, in *History and Theory* (Dec. 2002), Blackwell Publishing,
350 Main St., Malden, Mass. 02148.

Most American schoolchildren can instantly identify the painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, although even grownups might struggle to come up with the name of its creator (Emanuel Leutze) or the year of its creation (1851). But why did the Civil War—which arguably played an even greater role than the Revolution in forging the American national character—never produce similarly iconic canvases? Art historians have pointed to many factors, including the advent of photography and the more mundane—though hard to dispute—explanation that there simply weren't a lot of good artists around in the post-Civil War period. Conn, a historian at Ohio State University, suspects two other culprits, one rooted in the conventions of narrative history painting, the

other reflecting changes in the larger American society.

With his famous painting, Leutze was able to evoke a powerful shared historical experience—just as John Trumbull did in his earlier *Resignation of General Washington* (1822–24) and *Declaration of Independence* (1818). These artists were working within a well-defined painterly tradition, which may have reached its pinnacle with the monumental works of Jacques David in France, and often carried echoes of the classical past to suggest parallels with a contemporary event. But by the time of the Civil War, says Conn, such narrative conventions seemed inadequate in "describing or explaining the mass, destructive phenomenon that was the Civil War." In fact, wars in the United States and Europe after the mid-



William Washington's Jackson Entering the City of Winchester (1863) exemplifies much of the Civil War's historical painting: an irrelevant subject, badly rendered.

19th century produced many monuments, but few paintings of real quality.

The history painters' task was further complicated by confusion over the meaning of the Civil War itself. Just as historians have struggled to define the true cause of the conflict—was it fought over slavery? states' rights? economic principles?—so artists of the time found it impossible to identify symbols that would have universal, and lasting, meaning.

Artists still tried to capture significant moments on canvas. Virginian William Washington latched onto Stonewall Jackson's arrival in Winchester, Virginia, as a subject in 1863, but even before the painting was finished, Jackson had died, and, as Conn points out, the artist simply "guessed wrong" about the incident's importance to the outcome of the war. The resulting work, *Jackson Entering the City of Winchester*, is so crammed with theatrical elements, Conn says, that it makes the Confederate general appear "as

if he had just performed a horse trick to a cheering audience."

Other changes were afoot that further doomed history painting, says Conn. "Advances in science and technology, which helped to distance the past from the present, contributed to Americans' enthusiastic embrace of a progressive view of history" and rendered the classical past seemingly irrelevant. Conn sees echoes of such changes in one of the few significant paintings to emerge after the Civil War, Winslow Homer's *The Veteran in a New Field* (1865). Many critics have viewed the painting—which depicts a returning soldier, his back to the viewer, mowing a field of wheat with a scythe—as a symbolic beating of swords into plowshares. But taking into account its deliberate break with the conventions of grand-manner history painting, Conn believes that the work should be viewed as an "act of mourning," not just for the soldiers who died in the Civil War "but for a way of life, the Jeffersonian nation of yeoman farmers."

Bye-Bye Beauty?

"The Abuse of Beauty" by Arthur C. Danto, in *Daedalus* (Fall 2002),
136 Irving St., Ste. 100, Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Just about anything now can be called art: a blank white canvas, a six-foot-high comic strip, a cross-sectioned cow. The artist plays to the viewer's sense of the sublime, the absurd, or the abject. But needn't the artist also evoke the sense of beauty?

Not necessarily, argues Danto, professor emeritus of philosophy at Columbia University and longtime art critic at *The Nation*. And in some circles, it's thought that the artist *shouldn't* evoke that sense. What some consider necessary to a work of art was really just a fad. Great art's fixation on the beautiful had a limited run—in Europe from the Renaissance to the early 1900s. But because of the continuing influence of that era's theorists of art, such as Immanuel Kant and John Ruskin, people don't realize that beauty has run its course.

During the reign of the Beautiful, moreover, looking good came to imply being good. G. E. Moore, the early-20th-century philosopher, thought the beauty of art could be so

enriching that "every valuable purpose which religion serves is also served by Art."

With World War I, however, the ideal of beauty came to be seen as hypocritical. As the German surrealist Max Ernst wrote, "We had experienced the collapse into ridicule and shame of everything represented to us as just, true, and beautiful." From the ashes rose the Dada movement, which defined art, as Danto writes, "as an expression of moral revulsion against a society for whom beauty was a cherished value." Marcel Duchamp wasn't just kidding around when he famously drew a mustache on a postcard of the Mona Lisa in 1919.

Art history shows the ends of art to be more diverse than beauty, according to Danto. Pre-Renaissance cathedrals were designed not to be beautiful but to draw a faithful, awed congregation. Paintings of *vanitas*—rotting fruits, skulls—were meant to humble, not inspire, spectators.