

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.

The Dadaists were not the first to show that the theorists were wrong about art. A few decades before them, Roger Fry and other formalist painters and critics demonstrated that a painting need not be a representation of something beautiful or meaningful to be itself beautiful or meaningful. Art asserts the “paramount importance of design, which necessarily places the imitative side of art in a secondary place,” Fry announced. People should evaluate the form, not the content, of the work. The pop art movement of the 1960s discarded yet other necessities, such as the originality, “excellence,” and heroism typical of 1950s abstract expressionism. It replaced those traits with parody of mass culture, primitivism, and photorealism.

In a last-ditch effort to explain how people can appreciate, and esteem as art, grisly paintings such as Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), some theo-

rists have argued that at times the beauty is hidden and can’t be seen without adequate training. That’s sometimes true, Danto allows, but sometimes there’s simply no beauty to be found.

Danto, a friend of much that is new in the art world, is known for his austere formula that “x is an artwork if it embodies a meaning.” Anything goes.

Yet he believes that the 20th-century backlash against beauty may have gone too far. Some in the avant-garde now see beauty as *antithetical* to art—even the scandalous photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe seem in some eyes “too beautiful to qualify for critical endorsement.” Beauty, Danto concludes, “is one mode among many through which thoughts are presented in art to human sensibility”—one that deserves to be readmitted to the realm of art.

Looking Downward

“Bellamy’s Chicopee: A Laboratory for Utopia?” by John Robert Mullin, in *Journal of Urban History* (Jan. 2003), Sage Publications, 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, Calif. 91320.

It may strike some as strange that Edward Bellamy’s 1888 utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, was the second-best-selling novel of 19th-century America (after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). After all, its idealized vision of Boston in the year 2000, with citizens organized into a compulsory industrial army and living a blissfully regimented life, would seem an unlikely candidate to capture the hearts and minds of Bellamy’s putatively individualist American readers. No less strange is that the novel was the work of a quiet, polite sometime-newspaperman and former lawyer who had spent most of his life in Chicopee, Massachusetts.

His experience in Chicopee, most critics agree, was central to Bellamy’s vision of the future. But according to Mullin, a professor of urban planning at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, it wasn’t the town they think it was. Bellamy (1850–98) said he saw his boyhood hometown transformed from a New England village where “everyone who was willing to work was sure of a fair living” into something very different. But that can’t be true, Mullin says. Following the mill town model that had transformed Waltham,

Lowell, and Holyoke, the Boston Associates company began to build an array of vast textile mills along the Chicopee River in 1822, nearly 30 years before Bellamy was born. By 1885, when he began working on his famous novel, Chicopee had become the sixth largest town in Massachusetts.

Bellamy wrote *Looking Backward* in his 15-room Greek Revival house on a hilltop overlooking the mills. “His involvement with local citizens was, at best, minimal,” writes Mullin. He seemed to live the quiet life of a country squire. (Yet in Boston, which he visited frequently, his debates and discussions were “renowned.”) The son of a Baptist minister whose downtown landholdings yielded a comfortable income, Bellamy had had a short-lived career as a lawyer, and then as a reporter for *The New York Evening Post*. He returned to Chicopee by the time he was 22, worked for a local newspaper, and eventually cofounded the local *Daily News*.

Bellamy’s hilltop perch put him in the perfect position to “be a dispassionate reporter and observer of the community,” Mullin says. What he saw was social upheaval—the spread of wretched tene-