57 War and art.

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ART

by Jean Charlot

Plate #36 from Francisco Goya's "The Disasters of War."

"Blind Beggar" by Spec. 4 Dennis O. McGee

"The Innocent" by Spec. 6 Kenneth J. Scowcroft

"After the Battle" by Pfc. Stephen H. Sheldon

"Dragon Mountain" by Spec. 5 Michael R. Crook.

Army Art

Art is found in many places, not only in art galleries and museums.

Come dawn, last Thursday, I found myself chauffeured in military style to Schofield Barracks. Purpose: to look at an art show.

The exhibition was not meant to be permanent. For all I know, the impressive works were displayed exclusively for my benefit and that of their makers—five artists in uniform who kindly showed me about.

These five were the full contingent of Team No. 3 of the Department of Army Artists.

Not long ago they were in Vietnam, living and taking notes under combat conditions.

The sketches they brought back are in pencil, charcoal, ink or watercolor. As could be expected, all kinds of papers were used, some barely more than scraps.

These hurried notations are a vivid testimonial to what proved to be, for these five young men, a life-and-death experience.

After Vietnam, the team stayed a while in Hawaii, painting. From the sketches, works of a formal nature were evolved, larger in scale and in more permanent media.

The job is done. The artists and their art will be flown to Washington.

An official opening is planned to be graced with the presence of stay-at-home dignitaries.

Art and war

War and art are not two of a kind. In the mind of most, art is made "of sugar and spice, and everything nice." Even the most dedicated hawk will admit that war is not that!

Art is hardly thought of as a camp follower. Yet, throughout history, art and war are seen as bedfellows, though they are an ill-assorted pair.

Wars of past centuries had their certified artists. In the Palace of Versailles, the decor of the Hall of Battles idolizes King Louis the 14th. He presides on its walls over a monotonous succession of victories.

Solidly seated on a fire-breathing war horse, the panached and bewigged sovereign points his baton of command as if it was a magician's wand.

In answer to the royal gesture, panoramic vistas appear, showing the mighty might of the French annihilating the lesser might of the Dutch, the English, the Swedes, or what-have-you.

This 17th century concept of war escapes absurdity only because LeBrun — court painter to King Louis — knew how to transform the fawning cliche into majestic tableaux.

Around 1810, Francisco Goya, outraged at the rape of Spain by Napoleon's armies, etched in anger his "Disasters of War".

The scenes he portrays are not of a kind to bolster the ego of any autocrat. Goya deals instead with the sufferings of the people. In his record of things seen, victor and vanquished alike are crushed under the Juggernaut.

In Mexico

To mention happenings close to my Mexican experience: one-armed Jose Clemente Orozco went to war as staff artist to General Dieguez.

In the seesaw of alliances and treasons that mark most civil wars Dieguez was, at the time, engaged in a search and destroy operation against the agrarian leader, Emiliano Zapata, and his armed peasants.

In Orizaba, Orozco used a corner of a disused church for a studio. Every day before dawn, he was awakened by volleys of shots. These mowed down the blindfolded Indian prisoners, pitiful crop of the night's foray.

After a quick ablution out of a bucket, Orozco, on perpetual K.P., would awake his comrades for breakfast by pealing the church bells.

The resulting series of wash drawings of the Mexican Revolution rank on a par with Goya's etchings.

The kind of war that Orozco witnessed was fought on a small scale and with thoroughly obsolete weapons, that ranged from revolvers to pitchforks!

That was in 1910 and in Latin America.

Today's war

Contemporary war, Yankee style, is fought on an immeasurably larger scale. In it, machines are more in evidence than men.

Machines for making war are outranked only by machines for thinking war.

Computers decide all things. The logistic problems they solve range from soap to butter to guns.

They juggle with algebraic equations that deal with the quick, the lame and the dead. Kill ratios are candy to the thinking machines.

Machines also take care of most visual data. Photographers and cameramen ceaselessly grind routine records. The films are flown to the Army pictorial Center on Long Island, there to be processed and analyzed.

Such a peak of mechanical efficieney would suggest that the awesome link between the Fine Arts and War has at last been severed.

Given this new kind of battle an artist working brush in hand seems a sorry survival of horse and buggy days. Or does he?

As unhurried as it ever was, History writes in longhand in its Book.

The men in Washington acknowledge the invisible presence and do their best to humor the phantom.

Close by the Pentagon resides the Army's Chief of Military History.

As Keeper of the past, it is his job to preserve a collection of over 4,000 art works, a record of previous wars.

And because our present will be — come future generations — the past, the Keeper diligently adds contemporary material.

Deeper vision

An artist can see things that no other man can see, and no machine can detect. Wisely, artists are sought for this job of historical importance.

This is done through the Combat Artists program. It taps out of the ranks at a time scarcely more than a handful of qualified men.

Three successive teams already have completed their tasks. A fourth one is ready to begin.

The works I was bid to look at were those of the third team. Its artists have accomplished important work. The point of view they express in line and color comes close to that of Goya, the friend of the people. It would not have been understood by LeBrun, who fawned upon the mighty.

There are no forced artificial gestures. Uncle Sam does not point an inflexible index finger at some recalcitrant onlooker, saying, "I want you!". No Flag is raised over some farflung Iwo Jima.

What I saw were scenes set in improvised hospitals, religious services held in the open, the gloomy interiors of military brothels, corpses half-submerged in the muck of rice paddies.

No ruling from above taboos essential unpleasantness, such as the lethal game of hide and seek played by women and children caught in the line of fire.

Good conscience

History, dispassionate and never swayed by tactical considerations, can nod in good conscience its approval of policies that make such a truthful report possible.

All five artists approached their task with previous civilian art training. Some were commercial artists. They skillfully modified a technique originally meant to sell cigarets and detergents to meet a higher purpose.

Unfeigned earnestness at putting on canvas what one has seen and felt results at times in esthetic discoveries that do not need the prop of story-telling to be exciting.

I list here the names of the artists in uniform that make up Combat Artists Team No. 3. My military experience having reached its zenith in World War I, I confess ignorance as to the exact meaning of the abbreviations.

The five: Spec. 6 Kenneth J. Scowcroft; Spec. 5 Robert Myers; Spec. 4 Michael R. Crook; Spec. 4 Dennis O. McGee, and Pfc. Stephen H. Sheldon.