

## American art and the First World War

Philadelphia, New York and Nashville

by ALAN WALLACH

THE ONE-HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY of the USA's entry into the First World War furnishes a sharp reminder of how readily a nation can relinquish its freedoms when confronted by real or imagined threats. While more than 116,000 Americans died abroad to make the world, in President Woodrow Wilson's words, 'safe for democracy', democracy itself was under siege at home, where the federal government jailed dissidents, censored the press, raided immigrant communities and encouraged neighbour to spy on neighbour.

*World War I and American Art* at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, where this reviewer saw it, is currently on show as *World War I Beyond the Trenches* at the **New-York Historical Society Museum & Library** (to 3rd September).<sup>1</sup> Only around one third of the works seen in Philadelphia have travelled to New York, but the Historical Society's own substantial collections make up the loss, for its presentation includes further propaganda posters, a soldier's illustrated letters, uniforms and military gear, contemporary sheet music, a battlefield diorama and other highly relevant items.

The exhibition in Philadelphia consisted of over 150 works organised around eight themes: 'Prelude: The Threat of War', 'Hart-



78. *Europe 1916*, by Boardman Robinson. 1916. Crayon, indian ink and opaque white on paper, 48.2 by 68 cm. (Library of Congress, Washington DC; exh. New-York Historical Society Museum & Library).

ley and Hassam: Tenuous Neutrality', 'Debating the War', 'Mobilization', 'Modernists and the War', 'Battlefields', 'The Wounded and the Healers' and 'Celebrations and Mourning'. The curators – Robert Cozzolino, Anne Classen Knutson and David Lubin – did not shy away from confronting the jingoism leading up to America's decision to intervene (war on Germany was declared on 6th April 1917) or the ferocity of Wilson's

suppression of civil liberties. However, the exhibition barely touched on the massive opposition to the War, which was represented by little more than some cartoons from the socialist magazine *The Masses* (cat. pls.15 and 20–21). Nonetheless, the show makes explicit the political implications of such seemingly unengaged works as renditions of flags along Fifth Avenue (pls.10–12) by the Impressionist painter Childe Hassam and Charles Burchfield's Ohio landscape *The first hepaticas* (no.68; Fig.77), which recalls the shattered terrain of no-man's-land.

The curators' decision to emphasise historical context seems inevitable given the subject-matter. They looked beyond the fine art of the period to include posters, photographs (including aerial views taken for the military), draughtsmen's prints showing camouflage designs, and Winsor McCay's extraordinary eleven-minute animated documentary *The Sinking of the 'Lusitania'* (1918; pl.5). Such works were chiefly limited to the first half of the exhibition, which freely mixed high and popular art. The second half consisted almost entirely of works on paper, sculpture and painting, with the last dominating the final four galleries.

Included among the modernist and realist works were three paintings by the self-taught African-American artist Horace Pippin (pls.86, 92 and 106) along with a digital facsimile of his handwritten *Memoir* (nos.87–88). Pippin had fought in the War in the Harlem Hellfighters (369th Infantry Regiment) before taking up painting in the early 1920s to strengthen a battle-damaged right arm. Some of the exhibition's finest works were by artists who suffered personal distress from the conflict, including three of



77. *The first hepaticas*, by Charles Burchfield. 1917–18. Watercolour, gouache and pencil on paper, 72.4 by 69.9 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; exh. New-York Historical Society Museum & Library).





79. *Dance of death*, by Claggett Wilson. c.1919. Watercolour and pencil on paperboard, 42.5 by 57.1 cm. (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington; exh. New-York Historical Society Museum & Library).

the German flag and insignia paintings that Marsden Hartley produced after his friend Karl von Freyburg was killed at the Front in October 1914 (pls.6–9), Boardman Robinson's haunting, Daumieresque drawing *Europe 1916* (pl.22; Fig.78), Susan Macdowell Eakins's affecting depiction of a wounded French soldier (1917; pl.127) and the double portraits, taken in 1919 and 1932 by the African-American photographer James Vanderzee, of Needham Roberts and Henry Johnson, nationally famous war heroes who, like Pippin, had served in the Hellfighters (pls.142a–b).

Whatever pleasure viewers might derive from individual works pales in comparison to the horror induced by the multiple examples of government-sponsored propaganda employing xenophobia and emotional blackmail to sell war bonds, to spur war workers to greater effort and to pressure men to enlist. Howard Chandler Christy's poster (1918; pl.16) shows a smiling young woman in a sailor suit saying 'Gee!! I wish I were a Man, I'd join the Navy' above the exhortation 'Be a Man and Do It'. Harry Bell Hopper's poster, which reads 'Destroy this mad brute – enlist' (1917) depicts a giant gorilla wearing a *Pickelhaube*, or spiked helmet, stepping ashore onto 'America', a blood-stained club emblazoned 'Kultur' in his right hand and a swooning, half-naked blonde woman cradled in his left. Less sensational, but suffused with the contradictions that attended African-American participation in the War, is *True blue* (1919; pl.51), a poster depicting an improbably cosy middle-class interior in which an African-American mother directs her children's gaze to a portrait hanging above the fireplace of their father in army

uniform. At either end of the mantel are portraits of George Washington and Woodrow Wilson – the former a slave owner, the latter the most racist of twentieth-century American presidents.

The curators have also included works by artists who attempted directly to portray the horrors of the War. In 1918 George Bellows, who had served on the editorial board of *The Masses*, broke with his anti-War colleagues. Outraged by accounts of German atrocities that had been saturating the American press since 1914, he began creating paintings, drawings and lithographs picturing rapes, dismemberments and crucifixions. These lurid, nakedly propagandistic works (pls.27–36) are a Goya-esque vision of human cruelty.

Bellows worked from the imagination. By contrast, Claggett Wilson drew from his experience as a U.S. Marine (he was wounded in June 1918 in the battle of Belleau Wood). The exhibition features a dozen of his astonishing long-forgotten watercolours (pls.70–78, 80 and 120–21). David Lubin has rightly observed that Wilson's watercolours are as intense as Otto Dix's *Der Krieg* (1924),<sup>2</sup> a suite of fifty etchings portraying the terror and misery of life at the Front. Wilson's *Dance of death* (pl.72; Fig.79) captures the sheer horror of trench warfare.

At Philadelphia, John Singer Sargent's *Gassed* (1919; pl.133), on loan from the Imperial War Museum, London, along with four of the artist's wartime watercolours (pls.97, 103–04 and 125), was displayed in the exhibition's penultimate gallery. The mural-size *Gassed* shows a line of soldiers blinded by mustard gas, their eyes bandaged, groping their way along a duckboard path towards a

dressing station while, on either side of them, more victims of the attack lie on the ground. The wall text accompanying the painting interpreted it as an allegory of the 'moral blindness' produced by war. Yet because it works by indirection, allegory produces distance, as does Sargent's academic realism. *Gassed* was meant to serve as the exhibition's climax, but coming after the horrors traced by Bellows, Wilson and others, it seemed anticlimactic, its impassivity a testament to the inadequacy of traditional history painting in the face of an almost unimaginable historical catastrophe.

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition will later travel to the **Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville** (6th October to 21st January 2018). Catalogue: *World War I and American Art*. By Robert Cozzolino, Anne Classen Knutson and David M. Lubin, with essays by Pearl James, Amy Helene Kirschke, Alexander Nemerov, David Reynolds and Jason Weems. 322 pp. incl. 214 colour + 31 b. & w. ills. (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, in association with Princeton University Press, 2016), \$60, £49.95. ISBN 978-0-691172-69-9.

<sup>2</sup> At [www.businessinsider.com/claggett-wilsons-world-war-in-art-2017-2](http://www.businessinsider.com/claggett-wilsons-world-war-in-art-2017-2), accessed 9th June 2017..

## The Berlin Painter

Princeton and Toledo

by TYLER JO SMITH

FIGURE-DECORATED POTTERY, produced in great quantity in Athens and other centres during antiquity, constitutes one of the most challenging areas of study for scholars of Classical art and archaeology.<sup>1</sup> The black- and red-figure examples provide the largest surviving corpus of visual material from the ancient Greek world. Although vase imagery supplies abundant information about mythology, athletics, women, drinking parties and religious rituals, and vase shapes indicate particular functions such as mixing, pouring, drinking and storage, rather less is known about the workshops that created these often extraordinarily beautiful forms or the artists who decorated them with varying degrees of success.

Sir John Beazley (1885–1970), the Oxford scholar who classified and attributed many hundreds of Athenian vases, assigned 'names' to unsigned works based on a particular vessel's location, iconography or other factors.<sup>2</sup> Since Beazley first identified the Berlin Painter (initially called 'The Master of the Berlin Amphora') in 1911, the number of works assigned to this red-figure vase painter now totals more than three hundred.<sup>3</sup> Interest in the painter's 'elegant, approachable style has never lessened', and includes publications devoted to individual vases, to associations between the Berlin Painter and other artists and to Beazley's own drawings of the figures on the vases.<sup>4</sup>