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## HISTORY AND MEMORY IN THE GREAT WAR PAINTINGS OF JOHN SINGER SARGENT

ON A RECENT VISIT TO LONDON, I made my way south of the Thames to the Imperial War Museum, with the particular goal of re-encountering the significant sections devoted to the British experience of the Great War, and specifically those concerning the experience of the Western Front: what my countryman Paul Fussell—author of *The Great War and Modern Memory* and himself a World War II infantry lieutenant in northern Europe—has called “the matter of Flanders and Picardy.” Following Fussell, I was further pursuing the memory of my own combat experience in the Vietnam War, as a young officer of upper-middle-class origins and elite education leading soldiers from a conscript, largely blue-collar, army, and of our shared identification with the British generation of the trenches—Graves, Owen, Sassoon, and others. “Someone had blundered.” Across the decades of the misbegotten wars of the century, we all understood what that meant: when the politicians and generals get to moving lines on a map, it’s the junior officers and enlisted men who pay the price, usually getting sent out to the ass-end of nowhere to die for next to nothing.

All this was on my mind as I walked down Westminster Bridge Road, crossed over the grounds and joined a line of early arrivals moving up the stairs. There I found a banner, stark white, coloured with a single scarlet poppy. I was to see, it announced, a special exhibition on the British experience of the Great War, in commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of the cessation of hostilities on November 11, 1918. At the entrance to the exhibition proper, I encountered a handsome, well-dressed woman, perhaps in her eighties, looking at a violin in a display case. The instrument was described as having been lost in France by its British owner during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and only discovered some fifty years later in a French barn and restored to its owner. His name and unit were given, along with a photograph of him as a young enlisted soldier. “Astonishing,”

I think I must have whispered, or some such thing. She turned and looked at me. “It was my father’s, you know.” There she stood—the daughter of the man in the photo. She went on. “He told me that he was ordered to drive his truck up to Thiepval. When he got to the place where they’d told him to go, there was no one anywhere. Then he looked down and saw that he had been driving over a field of dead bodies.”

Ninety years after a great silence had descended over the trench lines stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss border, this seemed to me a uniquely heartbreaking British Western Front moment, and it prefigured the tone of much of the exhibition, which was largely British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in emphasis. Decent attention was given to other theatres of operation and to the sacrifices of other nations, allied and enemy; the phrase that stayed in my head was Fussell’s—the matter of Flanders and Picardy. A special section conjoined the fates there of Raymond Asquith, a Major in the Grenadier Guards and the son of a prime minister, and the poet Isaac Isaac Rosenberg, an enlisted man and a Jew, both killed in 1916. A poetry treasure was Wilfred Owen’s manuscript of “Anthem for doomed Youth,” with hand emendations, some of them rather peremptory and brutal, by Siegfried Sassoon. The editing had been done at Craiglockhart, a military hospital in Scotland for shell-shocked officers, who called it called it Dottyville. Another Dottyville text was a letter by Sassoon, describing his own journey there—whence he had been committed after publishing a notorious declaration of refusal to serve further in what he described as an insane, immoral war. He was supposed to have been accompanied to Craiglockhart, Sassoon wrote, by fellow officer and poet Robert Graves. Graves, himself on the verge of breakdown, had stupidly missed the train, and Sassoon had made his own way to the loony bin with his unhinged escort officer arriving a good deal later.

Near the end of the exhibit, a small auditorium offered a continuous screening of “The Battle of the Somme,” a purported documentary shown to British audiences at the time. Suffice it to say that the action represented had not the horrific violence which has come down to us as a metonym of pointless Western Front slaughter—with sixty thousand British casualties in that single battle, suffered in the first three hours. But even now this seemed a graphic and disturbing film; how truly awful it must have been then, I thought, if they were willing to show such things to civilians at the time.

I made what I took to be an exit into an art wing familiar to me as part of the permanent collection. And there I came face-to-face with the artefact that would launch me toward the meditations on history and memory that

now become the subject proper of this essay. Had this enormous painting, filling an entire wall, always just been there, I wondered, escaping my particular notice on an earlier visit? Was the shock of it in the juxtaposition with the foregoing exhibit? Whatever the case, it nearly took me to my knees, an extremely large John Singer Sargent canvas from the Western Front, entitled *Gassed*—a canvas, to be exact, twenty feet wide and nine feet high. The figures in a central grouping are roughly life-sized, all of them blindfolded, shuffling and stumbling, some helmetless, often with bandaged wounds, their gear torn and makeshift, a few still with their Enfield rifles, carried in various disorderly ways. They are moving left to right, nine of them in total, each attempting to keep his hands on the shoulders of the man in front of him. The file is further divided into groupings of three and six, interrupted by the figures of two medical corpsmen attempting to keep them organized. They are backgrounded by a vista of sky and bare-ground landscape, where one sees large numbers of other soldiers. One of the men in the main group is stepping notably high, trying to avoid some unseen obstacle. The obstacle, one realizes, is likely one of a vast accumulation of fellow casualties who carpet the ground as far as the eye can see. Off to the right, another such column of the blinded leading the blinded advances, this one attended by two hospital orderlies in white gowns, who look vaguely angelic in outline. Amidst the vast spectacle of humanity, there appears not a single recognizable human face. The dominant colours of the bottom half of the painting are those of earth; the entire top half is devoted to an empty grey sky. A sickly yellow tone—the colour of the gas itself—reflects from every surface, including the human figures.

The date and provenance of the painting turn out to be well known. They follow from Sargent's 1918 commissioning by a quasi-official War Artists Memorial Committee, followed by a personal letter of request from the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, to go to the front as a government war artist. As Sargent himself observed, it seemed initially an unlikely assignment for a figure of his age, background and experience, an American expatriate-cosmopolitan of long standing, in his sixties, a renowned society portraitist enjoying a refined, elegant lifestyle of a kind of Henry James fastidiousness. His trepidation was marked: "would I have the nerve to look," he asked himself, "not to speak of painting? I have never seen anything in the least horrible—outside of my studio." All this notwithstanding, given a proper quasi-military kit he was shortly transported into the area of British military operations, landing at Boulogne, where he was taken to main Army headquarters and a cordial meeting with Haig himself. Next, accompanied

by an appropriately well-born and cultivated escort officer, a friend of long standing, Sir Philip Sassoon, he was sent to a portion of the front occupied by the elite Guards Division. There he enjoyed another orientation meeting with the divisional commander General Fielding, and a briefing on the newest allied breakthrough weapon, the tank, including a test ride. He met up with his acquaintance Churchill, who, exiled from government for his sponsorship of the Gallipoli nightmare, was serving a brief stint in the trenches and, it seemed to Sargent and others, fighting his own war. He got a visit to ruined Arras. Meanwhile, he found himself filling numerous pages of notebooks devoted to troops in various uniforms, poses, duties, attitudes; he sketched gun carriages, supply trains, trench fortifications. He had several dangerous brushes with enemy fire. On August 11 he was alerted to a large party of gassed British being assembled at a casualty clearing station on the Arras-Doullens road; this proved the genesis of the “big” or centerpiece painting that had been stipulated as a part of his commission. It was not, as things turned out, the “big” work most suitably proposed as one of the peculiar expectations of his assignment—the bright idea, no doubt, of some sponsor who saw possibilities in Sargent’s American birth: a large-scale depiction of coordinated activity between British armies in field with newly arrived combat troops of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). To this end, he had spent some time with the American 27<sup>th</sup> Division commanded by General O’Ryan. But the whole assignment ended shortly when Sargent was struck with flu, part of the great pandemic, and evacuated to England at the end of October.

Altogether the experience had made for a lot of art. In addition to *Gassed*, there were countless smaller paintings, sketches, studies, watercolours, drawings. Although he could never seem to get the British and Americans together, as was suggested for his master commission, he did manage to paint the AEF. *Arrival of American Troops at the Front*, for instance, is a large canvas divided into two columns, left and right, one of Americans moving forward into action, the other of French troops being withdrawn. The Americans, generically tall, handsome and healthy, properly uniformed and equipped, all with helmets, gas masks, packs and bedrolls, carry their rifles in ready position at right-shoulder arms. The marching unit moves in orderly rank and file, eight to ten abreast, as part of a column stretching infinitely backward. In middle distance are two officers, both on light-coloured horses. Far more prominent, to the left of the marching column, advancing in parallel, is a double column of trucks. On the right side of the canvas, balancing the advancing Americans, is a disordered crowd of French being withdrawn.



There is the occasional Poilu helmet, but most are bareheaded, several with skull bandages. One carries a rifle carelessly in his right hand; another has his slung over the shoulder. No machine transportation is visible.

Rather more frequently reproduced are paintings with characteristic British and French subject matter, a number of major oils, all painted during 1918. They include *Ruined Cathedral at Arras*; *The Road*; *Army Convoy*; *Shoeing Cavalry Horses at the Front*; and, above all, *Gassed*.

*Gassed*. In any circumstances, on the day I stood in the Imperial War Museum, ninety years after the armistice, the painting would have been a shock. In my case the shock was accentuated by a sense of standing at a further, quite personal intersection of history and memory created just the previous day by a visit to the National Portrait Gallery, where I had viewed another vast war-related painting by Sargent—commissioned a few years later—*Some Generals of the Great War*. The sense of horrific congruencies that overcame me could not have been more exact. I had been looking at a precise counterpart of the painting in the Imperial War Museum. The canvas is almost exactly the same size as that of *Gassed*. The standing figures are of similar proportion. They are not, of course, enlisted men, infantry, medical or support troops. Their uniforms, immaculate headquarters khaki, are clean and red-tabbed. Most wear officers' belts and full decorations. There is the occasional sword. To a man they wear polished riding boots. All seem distinctly middle-aged or older. None are wounded. They are visibly clean, in good health, none of them seeming the worse for their experience of the Great War.

Assembled as if at the portico of some vast edifice—suggesting, perhaps, St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey—and posed so as to take the eye from left to right, as they never would have congregated naturally, are twenty-two figures, all individually recognizable from photographs or personal portraits. Virtually everybody is there. Haig is slightly to the right of centre, surrounded by his major Western Front army commanders—Rawlinson, Horne, Plumer—and Chiefs of General Staff, including Robertson and Wilson. French, relieved after the BEF debacles of the early war, has the consolation of standing as part of the Haig assemblage. But the dominion commands have not been ignored. Birdwood and Monash represent Australia and New Zealand; Smuts, Lukin and Botha, South Africa; Byng and Currie, the Canadians. Nor have the far-flung fighting fronts been neglected. Gallipoli, East Africa, Salonika and Mesopotamia are represented. There is Lambart from Italy and Allenby from Palestine.



John Singer Sargent. *Gassed*. 1918. Imperial War Museum, London.



John Singer Sargent. *General Officers of the Great War*. 1922. National Portrait Gallery, London.





John Singer Sargent. *Arrival of the American Troops at the Front in France*. 1918. Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK.

We know a good deal about the provenance of this work as well. Commissioned by a South African magnate (Sir Abe Bailey) for the National Portrait Gallery, it was part of a massive triple project: major army, navy, and civilian political figures. (Sargent wound up doing the last, as well.) For the artist, there was no concealing his sense of oppression in having undertaken a tiresomely laborious assignment. “How am I going to paint twenty-two pairs of boots?” he wrote. He found his answer in the vintage Sargent way: producing—by conscientious sittings, for which the studies exist—twenty-one society portraits of exactly the sort he had made a career of painting. But it is the overall effect that somehow takes command and mocks the pretense. It is in their faces, hands, necks—the colour of their skin—how pink and plump and babyish so many of them look. They all have the complexion of Winston Churchill in every adult portrait. Or perhaps it is more that they all look like babies the way a lot of babies seem to look like Winston Churchill. They certainly do not look remotely like the men who had been gassed. If one will excuse the cliché—because it is flatly true—they are in the pink. That is the dominant tint overlaying the painting, as obvious as the sickly yellow tone that permeates the surfaces of *Gassed*.

During this commission, Sargent’s work was further complicated, as was customary, by concurrent obligations arising from other large, demanding projects and assignments, some of them transatlantic. He made several trips back and forth to Boston, attending to a late-life pull of home, a certain patriotic connection, in the broadest sense, at least to his own culture and class. The most famous of these later commissions was *The History of Religion*, the lavish mythological murals for the Boston Public Library. But he also agreed to do some work for the new Widener Library at Harvard, a kind of American coda, it turns out, to his British Great War commission endeavours. Specifically, he was asked by the trustees to create murals for the great second-story landing of the vaulted marble entrance hall; the theme was to be the commemoration of the sacrifices of Harvard men who had served in the American forces of the Great War. Two panels were requested. The results are still there to behold on the way to the computer terminals. On the left, almost purely allegorical, is *Death and Victory*. At centre, a helmeted, muscular, immaculately uniformed and equipped US doughboy, stands astride the body of a fallen comrade, albeit neither with visible wounds. With his left arm he holds closely in some final embrace a hooded female death figure; with the right, in presumably a last heroic gesture, he lifts triumphantly heavenward a beautiful nude female figure of

victory. The second painting, on the right, divides subject matter and theme in the middle, counterposing a certain heroic combat pictorialism with a rather more complicated design of allegory. To one who knows the other war-related work, the painting looks a good deal like *Americans Moving Toward the Front*, without the French. At a slight diagonal with the vast Atlantic to their left, a marching column of youthfully fine-featured dough-boys in campaign hats moves relentlessly forward; to the right a few of their number, as if part of some joyous metaphysical victory parade, with a wave, a nod, an outstretched hand, respond to the welcome of figures representing Helmeted Mars (Britain); Death, again shrouded, oddly androgynous, with downturned broken sword (the Hun); and Victory. The latter is female and impossibly beautiful; she is suckling an infant at her breast; she wears the red Liberty Cap. She can only be, of course, France.

One could go all the way back and summarily do a good bit with the grand cultural symbology of Sargent at war, starting with the bizarre schizophrenia of the big British paintings and winding up with the almost ludicrous American jobs. On the British account, *Gassed* must surely still compel us through a vision of twentieth-century, mass casualty warfare, the victims of the weaponry of terror stumbling mutely about a landscape carpeted with the fallen. The individual soldiers comprise scattered parties of the lost, helpless and unmanned, the blind truly leading and led by the blind. The *Generals*, for all the historical interest and, in some cases, genuine distinction of the individual portraits, bears out the great historical cliché of the red-tabbed, champagne-swilling, chateau-dwelling butchers, safe and warm from the horrors of the battlefield, amidst their staff retinues in immaculate isolation. In Alan Clark's phrasing, they are the Donkeys. His source he records as Falkenhayn's memoirs, a purported conversation between the German commanders Ludendorff and Hoffman. (Ludendorff: "The English soldiers fight like lions." Hoffman: "True. But don't we know they are lions led by donkeys.") From the German, "lions" translates rather directly. Donkeys more properly comes out as "asses." The asses. Let it be so written.

The American paintings attempt to chronicle a response to the absorption by Anglo-European cultural traditions of infusions of New World power, confidence and historical idealism. *Americans Moving Toward the Front* shows, one is obliged to conclude, what Sargent genuinely saw to be a new sense of physical energy and hope filling the Allied ranks with the entry of the Americans into the war, their fresh, healthy, spirited formations moving relentlessly forward. (And he was not alone in this. See, for instance,

the moment of watching a group of Americans moving forward recorded in Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, in a passage of parallel emphasis on their energy, optimism, health and even physical stature.)

The Widener murals comprise more of the above. As noted, they are also certainly a response by the old Bostonian Sargent to particular personal imperatives of culture and class. They represent the Harvard of Alan Seeger, who could not dally while America dithered, joined the French Foreign Legion as an enlisted soldier and died at Verdun, but not before leaving the world with possibly the most famous of war-poems in English to come out of the great conflict, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death." They celebrate the gallant martyrdom of pilot officer Quentin Roosevelt, son of a US President, in his dying so revered by the French that his solitary grave, at the site of the fatal crash, for decades remained a shrine apart from the official military cemeteries. It is said that many Harvard alumni remain mortified by the overblown allegorizations. In spirit, there seems little to separate them from Pershing's (actually a staff officer's) "Lafayette, we are here!" The knightly atmospherics seem no more oppressive than the decorativeness of the pre-Raphaelites; the images of marching columns invoke the eye-catching modernist graphics of the better recruitment posters; the illustration of mythological figures appear no more outlandish than those found in fine editions of Milton, Homer or Dante. The hooded personifications of death, if anything, invoke something of the great mystery of the Augustus St. Gaudens "Kwannon" statue commissioned by Henry Adams for the grave of his wife.

An explanation for much of this strange jangle of styles across Sargent's paintings of the Great War must surely lie in the artist's own complex, late-life understandings of cultures at large. A great cosmopolitan, he could not have been stupid about demands of particular national narratives, elevated to the status of what we call cultural myth. And surely his paintings reflect an acute sense of the dynamics of war, history and memory for the British along with the Americans, for the British as distinguished from the Americans, and as certainly for the Americans as distinguished from the British. Yes, he did it all massively on commission. But abroad or at home, wherever that was, audience expectation itself was a problematic question of the highest order for Sargent—an absolute determinant of how one wished to look at a project, to set the terms of its composition and representation and for whom, when, and where. At the same time, it was never a question that couched itself in political or ideological abstraction. It was always an artistic problem. As T.S. Eliot once commented famously on Henry James,

Sargent's art, in its complex cultural cosmopolitanism, was the product of a mind so fine it was never violated by an idea, let alone ideology. James did renounce his American citizenship in protest of his government's refusal to come in on the allied side. Sargent stayed American—though he might have gone over if a knighthood had been in it for him. But he also lived long enough and was able to continue his work as an artist to make a substantial record in his paintings about complex Anglo-European and American attitudes toward the Great War in history and memory. To put it simply, he had been asked to witness and paint history. He also surely understood how, as the work of a major representational artist, his painting would become the basis of memory. How did he do it? Not to put too opportunistic or cynical a construction on it, he did it depending on the terms and requirements of a particular commission. He did the Western Front as he imagined the War Artists Memorial Commission would choose to have it remembered—hewing rather precisely to specific instructions, although he never produced the suggested big painting of combined Anglo-American arms. He painted the British and Commonwealth general officers as he imagined the National Portrait Gallery would choose to have them remembered. He did the American contribution to the Allied cause as he imagined the trustees of the Widener Library of Harvard University would choose to have it remembered. The enterprise was not completely under his control, of course, nor under that of his sponsors and patrons. He could not have known, in the case of *Gassed*, how people visiting the Imperial War Museum would find it remembered; in the case of *American Troops at the Front*, how people able to visit the Gilcrease Museum of Tulsa, Oklahoma (or to access to their website) would find it remembered; or how presumably the Cholmondeley family, still private owners of *American Troops Going Up into the Line*, a counterpart of *Arrival of American Troops at the Front*, must think of it now as having been remembered. Nor can anyone imagine how Sargent must have thought of all those Great War paintings, sketches, studies, among the tens of thousands of other paintings, sketches, studies that must have come out of a long, almost incredibly productive lifetime. In the end, one wishes certain proper ideological conclusions might be drawn concerning the larger cultural resonances of this anecdote about certain paintings of the Great War in history and memory—ranking with those of Paul Fussell, Modris Ekstens, and others, that have become standard, even definitive, in their assessments of its watershed role in twentieth-century culture: Fussell, with his thesis of the signature Anglo-American ironist sensibility of the postwar age; Ekstens,



with his Franco-German argument of the birth of the modern. One might even settle for Jake Barnes and Bill Gorton in *The Sun Also Rises* doing a little chorus of "Give me some irony and pity." Here the complex, enigmatic, art-haunted history of the paintings themselves becomes the point; and the point turns out to be one beyond irony, beyond pity, beyond even sadness. It is the realization that one culture's myth is another culture's absurdity; that one culture's glory is another's catastrophe. On exactly that point, in relation to the visual arts, one is drawn to the brilliant recent novel by Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*, and what may be its central pronouncement on the subject. Never mind that it is uttered by a distinctly confused, morally flaccid, and intermittently unpalatable character, a brilliant, unhappy and confused English art historian, a Rembrandt specialist exiled to an American university in suburban Boston, his post, in one last do-or-die attempt at tenure, the next-best-thing-to-Harvard; that it is a pretentious, carefully-honed post-structuralist zinger, the one he always uses in his opening lecture, hoping to drive off the great undergraduate unwashed who will never rise to the brilliance of his theoretical understandings. He is talking about the faces of art in relation to those of culture and ideology. Prettiness, he says, is the mask worn by power. He goes on: "Art is the Western myth with which we both console ourselves and make ourselves." The comment, that of a pretentious academic making his radical sallies against the privileged young, concerns Rembrandt, but it applies equally to the faces of history and memory in the works of a great establishment portraitist doing the Great War on commission. In either case, the conditions calling for its utterance make it no less true for being so uttered.