

# GRAND ILLUSIONS

American Art & the First World War

DAVID M. LUBIN



# GRAND ILLUSIONS



**Also by David M. Lubin**

*Flags and Faces: The Visual Culture of America's First World War*

*Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*

*BFI Modern Classics: "Titanic"*

*Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America*

*Act of Portrayal: Eakins, Sargent, James*

# GRAND ILLUSIONS

American Art and the First World War

DAVID M. LUBIN



OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

© David M. Lubin 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form,  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lubin, David M., author.

Grand illusions : American art and the First World War / David M. Lubin.

pages    cm

ISBN 978-0-19-021861-4 (hardback)—ISBN 978-0-19-021862-1 (updf)—

ISBN 978-0-19-021863-8 (epub)

1. World War, 1914–1918—Art and the war.

2. Arts, American—20th century—Themes, motives.

3. Arts and society—United States—History—20th century.    I. Title.

NX650.W67L83    2016

709.73'0904—dc23            2015024857

This publication has been made possible through support from the  
Terra Foundation for American Art International Publication Program of  
the College Art Association.

**TERRA**  
FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART

**caa**  
college art association

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States  
on acid-free paper.

# CONTENTS

	Preface	vii
1	War, Modernism, and the Academic Spirit	1
2	Women in Peril	17
3	Mirroring Masculinity	51
4	Opposing Visions	73
5	Opening the Floodgates	109
6	To See or Not to See	139
7	Being There	171
8	Behind the Mask	211
9	Monsters in Our Midst	243
10	Epilogue	277
	Notes	285
	List of Figures	339
	Index	351



1. | Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, established 1918, dedicated 1937.

# PREFACE

THE WEATHER WAS PERFECT DURING a week in June when I drove through western Belgium and northeastern France on a tour of First World War battlefields, cemeteries, and memorials. My trip began in the Flemish town of Ypres, which had been the site of intense fighting throughout the four-year conflict. While strolling on the ramparts, I came across a tiny British cemetery nestled above a bend in the Yser River. Nearby, and far grander, looms the Menin Gate, a neoclassical monument dedicated to 55,000 British soldiers who died at Ypres. In a nightly ceremony conducted at the stroke of 8 p.m. year-round, a British soldier trumpets a poignantly beautiful “Last Post” in honor of those who fell in defense of the Empire.

Over the next six days, I sought out war cemeteries large and small. All were beautiful, well-manicured, and humbling. I especially remember one little French military cemetery perched on a hillside overlooking a twelfth-century Cistercian abbey. Other graveyards were majestic, none more so than the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery and Memorial, spread out over 130 acres and containing the largest number of American war dead (14,246) of any American cemetery in Europe. Here, in hypnotic row upon row of white marble crosses, interspersed with the occasional Star of David, were the remains of thousands of American soldiers who never returned to their homeland (Fig. 1).

The scene called to mind a slide lecture I heard while in graduate school by the renowned art historian Vincent Scully. Describing the truncated tower that visually anchored another of America’s World War I cemeteries in France, he became suddenly emotional, comparing the tower to the truncated lives of the young men buried there. His voice broke as he said the words, and he had to gather himself before moving on to the next slide. This triggered in me, and I’m guessing everyone else in the darkened auditorium that day, a similar response.

A third of a century later, I found myself questioning the emotions I had experienced in that lecture hall. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, said the ancient Romans. But is it sweet and fitting to die for your country?

A few kilometers beyond Ypres, I visited the Tyne Cot cemetery, permanent home to the bodies of twelve thousand soldiers of the British





2. | Käthe Kollwitz, *Grieving Parents*, 1931–1932, in the German war cemetery, Vladslo, Belgium.

Commonwealth, eight thousand of them unnamed. Their graves, set neatly within herbaceous borders and marked by simple white crosses in undulating patterns on a gentle slope, are surrounded by pastoral farmland that might have reminded family members of countryside back home, thus making good on the plea of the British war poet Rupert Brooke: “If I should die, think only this of me: / That there’s some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England.”<sup>1</sup>

Some fifty or sixty kilometers from Tyne Cot, outside the village of Vladslo in Western Flanders, lies a German cemetery. Getting there is difficult; the roads are small and the signage minimal. When I found the place at last, a German religious group was just leaving, singing a Lutheran hymn at the entrance gate before boarding their coach for another destination. With them gone, I had the graveyard to myself. What a contrast to the British cemeteries. This resting place was dark and enclosed, shaded by large, leafy trees, as if even the sky was to be blotted out. The markers indicated that the bodies were buried eight to a grave; obviously the dead on the losing side did not merit the real estate accorded to their counterparts on the winning side.

In the back of the cemetery was the monument, or anti-monument, that I had come to see. This was the *Grieving Parents* double-statue by the German sculptor and printmaker Käthe Kollwitz, whose son Peter had died fighting in Flanders (Fig. 2). Kollwitz depicts herself and her husband, each stricken with grief for their lost child. They occupy separate plinths. The distance separating them is small but immeasurable, for grief is the most private of emotions. There is nothing noble about it. Nor is there in death for the homeland. That, it seems to me, is what *Grieving Parents* has to say. It haunted me throughout my journey.

IN 1937, CAPPING AN ALMOST decade-long international trend in favor of pacifism, the left-wing humanist French filmmaker Jean Renoir made a movie about a small group of French soldiers from different social classes who serve time together in a series of German prisoner-of-war camps. He entitled it *La grande illusion* (and, in doing so, probably had in mind the title of the British author Norman Angell's 1909 antiwar tract, *The Great Illusion*, which was reprinted in 1933 when Angell won the Nobel Peace Prize). Renoir was a messy, spontaneous, big-hearted artist, and here, in his gently ironic, never assertive way, he calls into question all kinds of "illusions" that, in his view, sustain modern warfare: that one side is morally superior to the other, that humanity can be meaningfully and legitimately divided by national borders, that class divisions are natural, that men must be conventionally manly, that Jews are inferior to Gentiles, and so forth. That warfare can ever lead to a lasting peace is perhaps the greatest illusion of all. After winning a prize at the Venice Film Festival, the movie was banned in Germany by propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. When the Germans marched into Paris three years later, they seized and destroyed every print of the film they could find.

In the spirit of Renoir, this book takes stock of an array of "illusions" that visually defined the First World War experience for Americans. It examines how the war affected American painters, sculptors, graphic designers, photographers, and filmmakers during a period that stretches roughly from the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 to the rise of the Third Reich in 1933—and how, in turn, that period was affected by their art and imagery. Among artists to be considered were traditionalists and modernists, innovators and reactionaries, patriots and anarchists, expatriates and nativists. Together, they reveal diverse creative responses to a notably turbulent era in American history. Sometimes their art specifically addressed war and violence, but just as often it approached the war indirectly, through a collateral concern for, say, the changing role of women in society, the place of minority Americans in a self-consciously white Anglo-Protestant hegemony, and the virtues and vices of isolation, urbanization, and modernization.



Never previously in the history of warfare had visual images been employed so effectively and abundantly. The First World War was the first fully industrialized war, and an important aspect of that industrialization was the mass production and dissemination of war-related images. They informed and misinformed opposing populations about the need to go to war, the nature of war itself, and the consequences of war. In the modern era, notes Paul Virilio, a theorist of war and media, “Images have turned into ammunition.”<sup>2</sup>

Let us reconsider, then, the conventional art-historical wisdom that the First World War had little effect on American art.<sup>3</sup> I want to claim instead that it had a vast impact, but one that cannot be quantified or otherwise measured. A core assumption of this book is that visual images, especially the most persuasive ones, do their work beneath the surface, for who can say, finally, how images are processed in the remoter regions of the psyche? Nonetheless, it is possible to contemplate such images a century later and ask ourselves how they generated meanings, what those meanings might have been, and how these have, or have not, remained relevant. It will become clear in the pages ahead that the war had a tremendous effect on well-known and lesser-known artists across the spectrum of political viewpoints and artistic media and genres. The diversity of their responses prevents us from making any sort of one-size-fits-all encapsulation. That’s the beauty of it, I hope you will agree. American art, we shall see, was no more homogenous or unified than was the nation itself in those fractious and perilous times.<sup>4</sup>

After the war ended and the troops came home, American involvement was quickly disavowed and forgotten or repressed by many American artists and intellectuals, as well as by much of the public at large. The Great Depression and the Second World War further obscured the significance of the First, and with the coming of the nuclear age, those earlier days of destruction seemed practically quaint. But now, after a century has elapsed, the deep geopolitical fissures that surfaced during the 1914–1918 war have proven to be inescapable.<sup>5</sup>

In a sense, this book addresses you from the still-contested ideological terrain of the military cemeteries I visited in Belgium and France. “Who controls the past controls the future,” noted George Orwell, adding, “Who controls the present controls the past.” Each of the following chapters seeks to understand how visual artists and their patrons and audiences strove to control their present—and thus, in effect, their collective past and future—through powerful, provocative, and persuasive imagery. The vastness and beauty of the graveyards are but one example of controlling the past through imagery in the present.<sup>6</sup>

In picturing heroic manhood, vulnerable femininity, blighted landscapes, and monstrous enemies with vivid, sometimes unforgettable, images, image-makers absorbed and recirculated the religious, political, and philosophical doctrines of the day. Doing so they rendered them more accessible to mass audiences, many of whom were recent immigrants or untutored rural folk

with little command of written English but a ready understanding of clearly etched visual archetypes. Other creative artists, as we will see, sought to dissent from or undermine these dominant cultural representations.

The purpose of this book is to show how American artists of a century ago portrayed themselves, their countrymen, and their enemies during the world's first global cataclysm. In examining these works, many of which have long since been forgotten, we can understand with greater clarity how Americans of today—and their counterparts and adversaries across the world—rely on or reject those archetypal images for their own self-definition in equally perilous times. Probing grand illusions of the past can help us understand, if not necessarily break free of, their continuing hold on the present.

WHEN I WAS A GRADUATE student casting about for a dissertation topic, my American Studies program chair, Charles Feidelson, knowing I was intrigued by visual images and their relationship to history and literature, suggested I write on WWI art, posters, and movies. I chose a different subject. Only now, some thirty-five years later, do I realize that I took his advice after all. Just not in a timely manner.

I began working on this book in earnest during a year-long residential fellowship at Harvard University's Warren Center for Studies in American History and completed it (well, not quite) during my next sabbatical, while a residential fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA) at the National Gallery of Art. I thank both organizations for the financial support and lively intellectual atmosphere they provided.

For their full-throttle critical engagement with bits and pieces or entire chapters of this book at various stages, I thank Elena Baraban, Joel Bernard, David Cateforis, Holly Clayson, Nancy Cott, Jay Curley, Charlie Eldredge, Stephanie Fay, Pearl James, Scott Klein, Julia Kleinheider, Jason LaFountain, Gus Lubin, Molly Lubin, Barry Maine, Angela Miller, Alex Nemerov, David Peters Corbett, Jules Prown, Jenny Raab, Jennifer Roberts, Dick Schneider, Joshua Shannon, Cécile Whiting, and the late Peter Brunette, as well as members of classes, reading groups, and lecture audiences at a variety of institutions. Special thanks to Magua, the Wily Fox. Other scholars and colleagues who contributed ingredients to the stew that is this book include Martin Berger, Bob Cozzolino, Randy Griffin, Frank Kelly, Anne Knutson, Michael Leja, Mark Levitch, Bibi Obler, Miles Orvell, Kirstin Ringelberg, Bruce Robertson, Bill Truettner, Alan Wallach, and Jay Winter.

At my home institution, Wake Forest University, the Z. Smith Reynolds library is my clean, well-lighted place, and staff members there, especially James Harper, Kaeley McMahan, and my all-purpose trouble shooter Peter Romanov, have been creative and enterprising in finding me every obscure or

out-of-print book, article, or movie that I thought I needed (and sometimes, it turns out, did not). Wake Forest has also provided me with a string of excellent undergraduate research assistants, of whom I'd like to single out Jordan Anthony-Brown, Mary Beth Ballard, Sarah Pirovitz, Amanda Smith, Emily Snow, and Lauren Woodard for their assiduous information-gathering and synthesizing. Erin Corrales-Diaz, then a Master's student in art history at Williams, volunteered her services to me as a "remote" research assistant and did an outstanding job, as did my former student Laura Minton after she had moved on to graduate school in Kansas. Sarah Pirovitz has been with me on this project longer than anyone; after graduation she went into publishing and has continued to read drafts and make valuable suggestions for improvement.

In the art department, staff members Kendra Battle, Millie Herrin, Paul Marley, and Martine Sherrill have been helpful in countless ways. I also wish to thank my chair, John Pickel, my dean, Michele Gillespie, and my provost, Rogan Kersh, whose father, Earle, it turns out, was the art editor for a Time-Life volume on WWI that was one of the first books I ever owned—and still have with me.

Oxford University Press has been a pleasure to work with, especially production manager Joellyn Ausanka and production editor Claudia Dukeshire, assistant editor Steve Bradley, editorial intern Grace McLaughlin, who was resourceful in tracking down difficult-to-locate images, and my editor, Brendan O'Neill, who showed me his Maxwell Perkins side more than once, for which I'm most grateful.

Finally, my thanks to Libby Lubin, for more than she'll ever know.



# WAR, MODERNISM, AND THE ACADEMIC SPIRIT

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF the conflict, most observers believed the fighting would be over by Christmas. This was one of the first illusions to be dispelled. Another was that the war would be a limited affair, restricted to aggrieved parties, and not suck neutral nations into its orbit. Quickly shattered, too, was a third illusion, that the war would be fought by regulation armies and not spill over into civilian populations. Europe had not seen a full-fledged war since Napoleon surrendered at Waterloo a century earlier and even that pan-European melee was restrained compared to what befell Europe now: total war.

If Europeans found it difficult to imagine what lay ahead, this was even truer for Americans, who were buffered by three thousand miles of ocean and whose own great internal war was half a century earlier. Those who had fought in that upheaval were now white-bearded old men. Full-scale war was too far away, both in space and time, for Americans to imagine that they too would be swept into the maelstrom.

In July, as rumor of war increased, a commercial illustrator named Emmanuel Radnitzsky, who two years earlier had changed his name to Man Ray (using both parts together, à la “Mark Twain”), was studying the work of the early Renaissance master Paolo Uccello. Uccello’s theories of perspective were far less influential than those of his fellow Florentine Leon Battista Alberti, but that made them all the more intriguing to Man Ray, who was attempting to rethink the ground rules of representational painting. He focused his attention on Uccello’s *Battle of San Romano* (c. 1438–55), a large three-part fresco painting whose sections are owned, respectively, by the National Gallery in London, the Louvre in Paris, and the Uffizi in Florence. In its entirety the fresco depicted an eight-hour skirmish between Florentine and Sienese armies outside the gates of Florence in 1432. Man Ray was not

interested in the subject of Uccello's masterwork—chivalric warfare—but rather in its unorthodox techniques of perspective and foreshortening.

He started work on a large, three- by six-foot oil painting using a specially prepared canvas that would simulate the texture of a fresco. It filled the space of his living room in Ridgefield, New Jersey. This as-yet untitled piece was to be his modernist version of the *Battle of San Romano*.

Early in August, as he was finishing the large painting, war broke out in Europe. His wife, Aldon ("Donna") Lacroix, whose Belgian family was uprooted by the German invasion, remarked on the appropriateness of the subject matter, which until then had been inconsequential to him. As he later recounted, "Donna said it was prophetic, that I should call it War. I simply added the Roman numerals in a corner: MCMXIV."<sup>1</sup> The painting, now known as *A.D. MCMXIV (War)*, or, for short, *A.D. 1914*, shows impersonal, faceless, machine-like automatons surging against one another in hand-to-hand combat (Fig. 3). These generic foot soldiers, clad in featureless, rust-colored uniforms attack a smaller unit of blue infantrymen in front of a drab, planar, shard-like forest of the sort favored by the proto-cubist landscape painter Paul Cézanne. Knights on horseback, as stylized as chess pieces, look on impassively. The painting's date is inscribed in Roman numerals on a large rock in the foreground. Beneath it sprawls the body of a dead child.

With the date added in Roman numerals, the painting makes the banal observation that war is timeless: that the conflict of 1914 was, in essence, no different from those that have occurred over millennia. In this view, modern-



3. | Man Ray, *A.D. MCMXIV (War)* ("*A.D. 1914*"), 1914. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

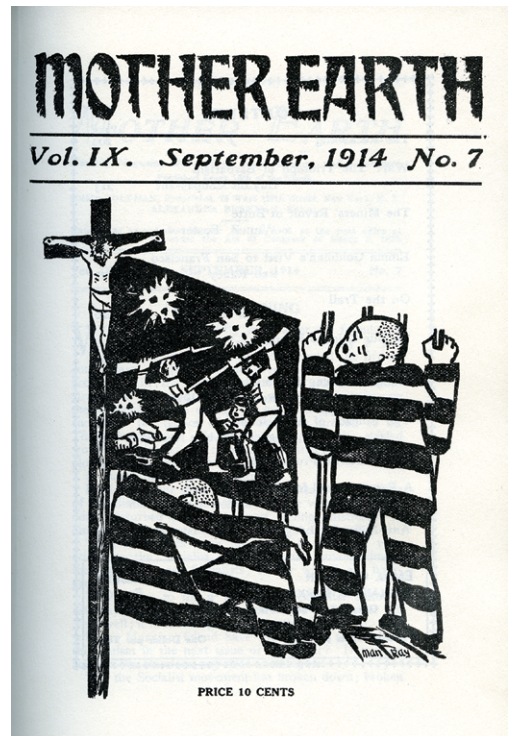


day Belgium simply stood in for Renaissance Florence and ancient Rome and countless other times and places. In the summer of 1914, Man Ray had no idea that the war to come would be unlike anything the world had ever seen.

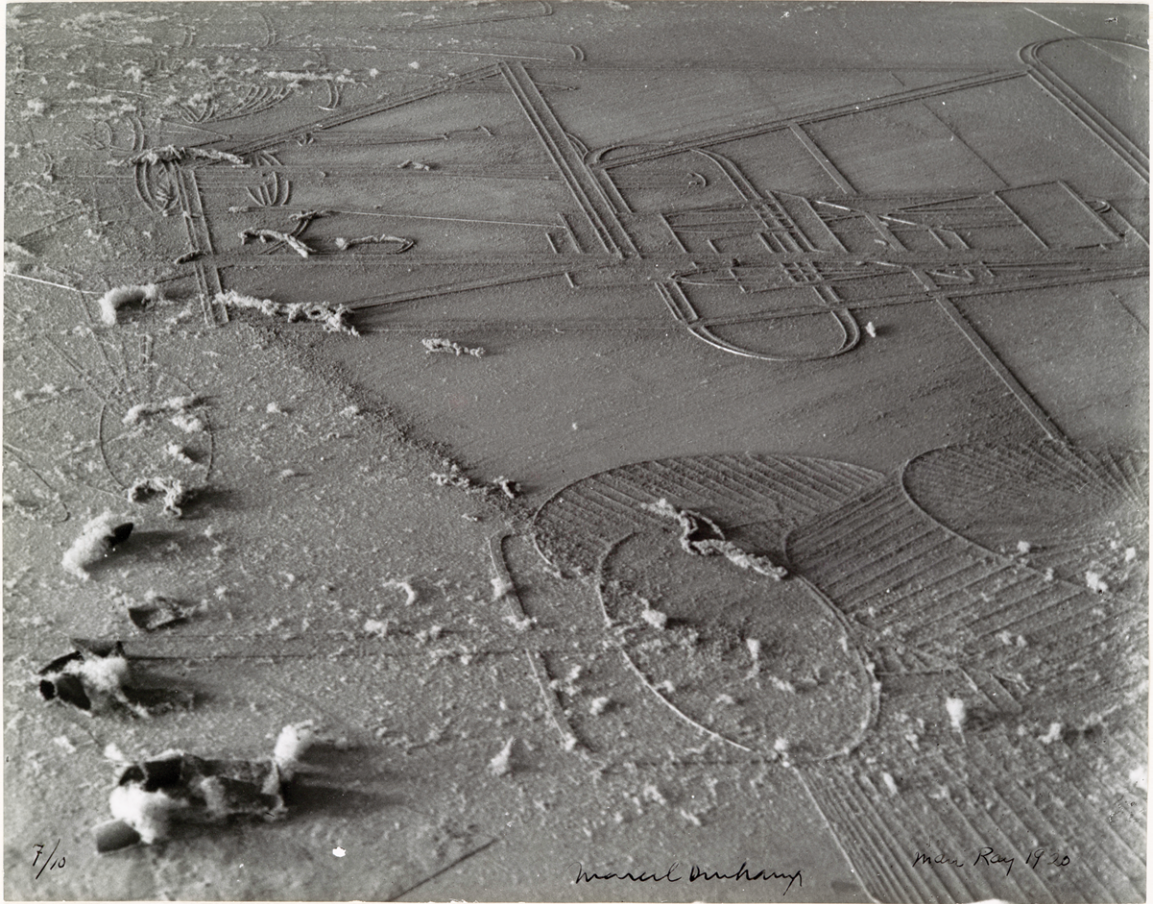
In his autobiography Man Ray describes the impact that the announcement of war had on him and his contemporaries: “It was a field day for the newspapers with accounts of battles and atrocities; Wall Street was booming; speculators were reaping fortunes in a day. During my lunch hour when in town I walked around the streets near the stock market, filled with gesticulating employees shouting to me in the open windows of the offices, transmitting orders to buy and sell. It was like a great holiday, all the profits of war with none of its miseries.” Still incensed about the experience some half a century later, he writes, “Walking home in the evening through the silent wood, I felt depressed and at the same time glad that [Donna and I] had not yet been able to get to Europe. There must be a way, I thought, of avoiding the calamities that human beings brought upon themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

While working on the large painting, Man Ray produced an antiwar drawing for the September 1914 cover of Emma Goldman’s anarchist magazine, *Mother Earth* (Fig. 4). It depicts an abstracted American flag. The stripes of this flag are constituted by the prison apparel of conscientious objectors. In the field of stars, foot soldiers bayonet one another under starbursts of artillery fire. A crucified Christ hangs from the crossbars of the flag pole.<sup>3</sup>

Even here, Man Ray’s understanding of the war is simplistic. He sees it abstractly, in archetypal terms. It was only after the war had ended that he found objective correlatives for its unprecedented strangeness, as in *Elévage de Poussière*, or *Dust Breeding* (1920), a carefully constructed photograph taken in collaboration with Marcel Duchamp (Fig. 5). Working with a close-up lens and strong side lighting, Man Ray photographed dust balls that had accumulated on a lower panel of Duchamp’s mixed-media work-in-progress, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23), which he referred to informally as “the Large Glass” and had been creating over the years in fits and starts (hence the accumulation of dust).<sup>4</sup>



4. | Man Ray, *Mother Earth* cover, September 1914.



5. | Man Ray, *Dust Breeding* (Duchamp's Large Glass with Dust Notes), 1920. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The photo has an eerie look about it, like the surface of the moon—or, more to the point, no man's land. Indeed, it resembles nothing so much as an aerial reconnaissance photograph from the Western front, showing roads, fields, farmhouses, gun emplacements, and troop movements, all from a great height, as seen in Edward Steichen's beautiful photographic views of destruction in the Château-Thierry sector in 1918 or his "straight" (unfiltered and unretouched) but almost apocalyptic *Mine Craters, Combres Hill* (Fig. 6). Steichen's aerial reconnaissance photography, made on assignment for the army, was not shown publicly at the time Man Ray and Duchamp photographed *Dust Breeding*, but they were both acquainted with Steichen personally and ran in the same social circles, as evidenced by their mutual friend Florine Stettheimer's 1917 painting *Sunday Afternoon in the Country* (Cleveland Museum of Art), which depicts, among other friendly exchanges





6. | Edward Steichen, *Mine Craters, Combres Hill*, 1918. Art Institute of Chicago.

in a modern-day *fête galante*, Steichen photographing Duchamp, who sits casually on the edge of table.

The year that Man Ray painted *A.D. 1914*, the new war was equally remote and unimaginable for an artist who was half a generation older, Marsden Hartley, one of America's leading non-representational painters. Hartley was living in Berlin in 1914, having moved there after a brief stint in Paris, where he had become acquainted with Pablo Picasso and other cubists who gathered at the salon of Gertrude Stein. He had also spent time in Munich, where he was befriended by the Blue Rider artists Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc.

Hartley had settled in Berlin in 1913, through the largesse of his art dealer and patron Alfred Stieglitz, in order to pursue his art, but also because, as a gay man, he felt relaxed in the Wilhelmine capital, with its relative sexual tolerance. More specifically, he had fallen in love with a young cavalry officer, Karl von Freyburg, who, at age twenty-four, was thirteen years his junior. Whether or not von Freyburg reciprocated Hartley's affections is not known, but the sojourn proved to be the most fertile period in the artist's long and restless career.

In September 1914, Hartley wrote Stieglitz that it broke his heart “to see Germany’s marvelous youth going off to a horrible death...seeing those thousands simply walk out of homes leaving wives and children.” Early in October, Hartley received the shattering news that von Freyburg had died in battle. The painter tried to explain to Stieglitz what this meant to him: “If you knew Freyburg you would understand what true pathos is—there never was anywhere a man more beloved and more necessary to the social well-being of the world—in every way a perfect being—physically—spiritually and mentally beautifully balanced.”<sup>5</sup>

The death of this one youth whom he cherished in a personal and physical way stood in Hartley’s mind for a much greater loss for humanity, that of an entire generation. “This is for me the most heartrending phase of the war—I seem to have lost all sense of victories and defeats of the great changes in history.... I don’t know how races expect to continue [to] thrive and prosper—I do not yet become used to the atrociousness of the very idea of war.”<sup>6</sup>

The loss of von Freyburg caused Hartley “unendurable agony” and “eternal grief.” Though he himself was not a warrior, his response calls to mind that of Achilles to the death of his companion Patroclus. The *Iliad* recounts that “Achilles went on grieving for his friend, whom he could not banish from his mind, and all-conquering sleep refused to visit him. He tossed to one side and the other, thinking always of his loss, of Patroclus’s manliness and spirit.... As memories crowded in on him, the warm tears poured down his cheeks.”<sup>7</sup>

In despair, Hartley picked up his brush and began painting a dozen or so semi-abstract emblematic portraits. Collectively, they are called the War Motif series. Several of them, including the first and largest, *Portrait of a German Officer* (Fig. 7), refer directly to von Freyburg through an accretion of numbers, symbols, flags, and insignia: the Iron Cross, which he won for bravery in the field; the number 4, which identifies his regiment; the number 24, which was his age at death; black-and-white squares, signifying the chess matches he and Hartley played together; his initials, KvF; a rider’s spur; a Bavarian banner: and so forth. The black, white, and red flag of the Second Reich figures prominently in the lower portion of the painting, but it does so upside down, a comment on the up-ending, over-turning effect of the war on Germany in general and this one German officer in particular. The black background activates the vividly colored objects and insignias seemingly strewn across it, but it also represents a funereal void, a gaping existential darkness, from which they briefly emerge and into which they will ultimately disappear.

Given the long-standing association of riding paraphernalia, such as boots, stirrups, spurs, and leather crops, with sexual fetishism, the painting vibrates with an additional wave of encoded meaning, as do Hartley’s other





7. | Marsden Hartley, *Portrait of a German Officer*, 1914. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



8. | Marsden Hartley, *Painting No. 47*, Berlin, 1914–15. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

symbolic portraits of von Freyburg (Fig. 8). To be sure, the fetishism here is not solely sexual, for the objects depicted are fetishes of another sort: votive items that magically stand in for the deceased. Thus national, regimental, sentimental, and quasi-religious signifiers interact with symbols of physical desire on a two-dimensional surface to form a three-dimensional portrait.

Other paintings in the War Motif series do not allude specifically to von Freyburg. Yet they too both invoke the German officer corps that Hartley persistently idealized and disavow the ugliness and abjection of the warfare that Hartley witnessed from his vantage point in Berlin, a city increasingly tormented by the scourges of death, pestilence, and starvation.

Formally, the War Motif paintings are variations of the synthetic cubism then being practiced in Paris by Picasso and Braque, who similarly arranged flat, colorful, variegated semi-abstract forms on the picture plane. They also call to mind the heraldic devices of medieval chivalry, in which knights rode to battle bearing brightly colored flags and pennants laden with symbolic geometries. Like Man Ray at virtually the same moment in 1914, before anyone realized how radically different the new war would be from all previous modes of waging hostilities, Hartley drew on art and craft of the late Gothic period to enhance his modernist exploration of visual form. As did Man Ray, he could only understand the present by means of antiquated feudal templates.

By the end of 1915, the hardships of living in wartime Berlin proved too much for Hartley. Reluctantly, he came home. He brought the *Portrait of a German Officer* with him and had the rest of his paintings shipped later, when the means to pay their freight became available. Stieglitz celebrated the



artist's return by giving him a solo exhibition at Gallery 291 in April, 1916. Not surprisingly, the response proved cool. Reviewers wrote respectfully of Hartley, recognizing the integrity and verve of the War Motif paintings, but these were, after all, tributes to the German officer corps at a time when America was veering toward war with Germany.

Apart from Stieglitz, who acquired the *Portrait of a German Officer* for himself, collectors were reluctant to buy. Hartley tried to counteract their hesitancy by denying that the paintings contained any sort of extra-artistic meaning. "The forms [in the paintings] are only those which I have observed casually from day to day," he claimed. "There is no hidden symbolism whatsoever in them; there is no slight intention of that anywhere.... I have expressed only what I have seen. They are merely consultations of the eye... my notion of the purely pictorial."<sup>8</sup>

Let us not take Hartley's words at face value. The forms in his Berlin paintings are more than "merely consultations of the eye." They are not "purely" pictorial. They reference, within Hartley's personal symbol system, the German officer whom he loved. But more than that, they reference a cultural system of Belle Époque military codes, displays, and behavior patterns that, in 1914–1915, were about to be obliterated by total war. In the age of machine guns, tanks, and barbed wire, bridles, spurs, and colorful pennants no longer made sense. Some fifty years later, the point was tartly made in the title sequence of Richard Attenborough's satiric antiwar film *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969). Underlying the opening credits are a succession of close-ups of plumed helmets, epaulettes, and shiny breastplates. These give way slowly but inexorably to close-ups of machine guns, gas masks, and hand grenades, arriving at last on a single strip of barbed wire that stretches across the letterbox screen.

Another expatriate American artist who failed to grasp the world-upending magnitude of the new war was Romaine Brooks. A wealthy heiress, she lived in a cloistered environment on the Avenue Trocadéro in the sixteenth arrondissement of Paris. She disdained commerce, practicality, and jockeying for prestige. Aloof from the art world, despite the favorable reviews her work received, she kept to a small circle of similarly rich and refined lesbians and devoted herself to her art. In the later summer of 1914, she painted a war picture to benefit the efforts of the Red Cross, but like Marsden Hartley several hundred miles away in Berlin, she was motivated by romantic or erotic desire and did not have anything especially insightful to say about the war.<sup>9</sup>

Her lover at the time was Ida Rubinstein, a Russian actress and dancer who was described as "a creature of genius with perfect legs." Those legs were, indeed, remarkably long, a characteristic that made Rubinstein a striking, Amazonian figure on the ballet stage—so much so, in fact, that it hampered her career more than it helped, for she was significantly taller than the rest of

her troupe. As a member of the Ballet Russe, she captivated the attention of Parisians when that company first appeared in France in 1909. She danced with Nijinsky in Sergei Diaghilev's 1910 production of *Schéhérazade*, her costumes designed by Léon Bakst. Wealthy admirers flung flowers at her, jewels, and even themselves, but, on meeting Romaine Brooks at a backstage party, Rubinstein fell in love with the reticent American artist.<sup>10</sup>

At the time, Brooks had entered into an intimate relationship with the Italian novelist, journalist, and poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, who lived in Paris. Braggart, narcissist, and self-proclaimed Superman, D'Annunzio—characterized by an acquaintance as “a frightful gnome with red-rimmed eyes and no eyelashes, no hair, greenish teeth, bad breath, the manners of a mountebank . . . and a reputation, nevertheless, for being a ladies' man”—would seem to be the last person on earth to win the heart of an introspective, publicity-abhorring lesbian. Natalie Barney, an avant-garde writer, who later became Brooks's lifelong lover and companion, quipped that whereas she only liked men from the ear to the forehead, D'Annunzio only liked women from the waist down. Brooks herself teased her boastful male friend for his sexual obsessions: “In heaven, dear poet, there will be reserved for you an enormous octopus with a thousand women's legs (and no head) which will renew themselves to infinity.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite or because of D'Annunzio's indiscriminate sexuality, Brooks became compulsively attracted to him. On the eve of the First World War, a romantic triangle developed, in which D'Annunzio was in love with Rubinstein, Rubinstein with Brooks, and Brooks with D'Annunzio. It was at this point that the events of 1914 intruded. Brooks and Rubinstein were on holiday in Switzerland when Germany declared war on France. They hurried back to Paris on an overnight train. Rubinstein went down on her knees to beg God to intercede. Brooks was dismissive of war-making and annoyed by the fuss. Yet once she got home, she turned her basement into a bomb shelter, sent her paintings to Bordeaux for safe-keeping, and established a charitable fund for wounded French artists.

She also painted a fantasy portrait of Rubinstein dressed as a Red Cross nurse (Fig. 9). A tall and angular female with chiseled features stands at three-quarters length against a gray, windswept background. In the distance, across a large, empty expanse, the Belgian city of Ypres, with its famed Gothic spire, is engulfed in smoke and flame. The young woman, beautiful and resolute, wears a sweeping black cape that bears at the shoulder a large red cruciform insignia that directs the viewer's eye to the flaming city on the horizon. Her nurse's headpiece gleams with white highlights, standing out against the grayness of the roiling sky. A tendril of her hair, flying off in a lateral direction, echoes the black smoke billowing out of the distant city. With her dark cloak, her white nurse's gown unbuttoned at the throat, revealing an expanse of bare flesh, her long, elegant neck, and her bleak, almost desolate, facial

expression, she is a stunning avatar of Byronic solitude.

This is a work of high Romanticism, with its towering figure—here, atypically female rather than male—smoldering at the edge of no man’s land. Yet it is rendered in the cool, monochromatic, underplayed visual style of Brooks’s artistic hero, James Abbott McNeill Whistler. The Red Cross nurse burns with feeling, analogizing her to the city in the background, but the emotion is interiorized, suppressed by a palette of icy blues, grays, and blacks.

The painting was called *The Cross of France*. D’Annunzio wrote an accompanying poem, connecting Christ’s suffering to that of France. The painting and poem were reproduced in a brochure that was sold to raise money for the Red



9. | Romaine Brooks, *Cross of France*, 1914. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Cross. In 1920 the French government awarded Brooks the *Légion d’honneur* for her service to the nation. In retrospect, the painting has an aura of propaganda about it. Oddly, the private and professional trajectories of Brooks’s endeavor merged. Her lesbian gaze at a desired love object, coupled with her predilection for Byronic melancholy, the crepuscular monochrome of Whistler, and modernist flatness of composition happen to accord with the newly developing style of propaganda art, in which (as Chapters 2 and 3 will detail) idealized, larger-than-life figures were dramatically set off against spare, visually uncluttered backgrounds.

In the spring of 1915, D’Annunzio, a brilliant orator who stirred the masses with his inflammatory rhetoric, urged his countrymen to go to war with Austria and reclaim lands that had long been in Austrian possession. Curtailing his self-imposed exile in France, he crossed into Genoa and delivered an impassioned nationalistic speech that is credited with persuading Italians, who were still undecided as to which side to take in the conflict, to join the

Allied powers. With Italy at last declaring war on Germany and Austria, he assumed command of an air squadron based in Venice. There he concocted a foolhardy but successful operation to fly across the Alps to Vienna and drop thousands of propaganda leaflets on the sleeping city. Crash-landing his plane on another mission in 1916, he temporarily lost sight in one eye.

Brooks hurried from Paris to be by his side. She took a studio on the Zattere, beside the Giudecca Canal, and painted a heroic portrait of her friend, entitled *Il Commandante* (Fig. 10). Again, her flat, monochromatic



10. | Romaine Brooks, *Il Commandante* (Gabriele D'Annunzio), 1916. Museo Il Vittoriale, Gardano.



style corresponded, certainly without any such intention on her part, to the newly developing techniques of celebrity advertising and propaganda art. Lean and fine-boned, wearing jodhpurs and a gray cape over a black tunic, a pistol holstered at his side, D'Annunzio stands at the water's edge. The phallic spyglass positioned at his groin calls attention to his prodigious sexuality. To the side, a seaplane awaits his command, like the trusty steed of a modern knight errant.

D'Annunzio recovered use of the injured eye and went on to further glory. After the war he became one of the nationalist ideologues most admired by his countryman Mussolini. He epitomized romantic fascism. Long after Brooks had ceased to be romantically entangled with the self-proclaimed man of destiny, she continued to be enthralled by him and remained his confidante to the end of his life.

ALL THREE ARTISTS CONSIDERED HERE were naive about what modern warfare entailed and how total war would radically alter the world they knew. So was virtually everyone else, including journalists, politicians, and seasoned generals. Indeed, the more seasoned they were, the less able they were to see what was coming. One American art-world expatriate who, writing some twenty years later, claimed to have understood the paradigm-wrenching nature of the Great War from early on, is Gertrude Stein. The Pennsylvania-born, Harvard-educated experimental writer and modern art collector established her famous art salon in Paris in 1903 and cultivated friendships with the likes of Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, and, as mentioned above, Pablo Picasso.

In her 1938 book on the Spanish artist, she recalled that one evening in 1914, as she was strolling with him along the Boulevard Raspail, they saw their first camouflaged truck. "It was at night, we had heard of camouflage but we had not yet seen it and Picasso amazed looked at it and then cried out, yes it is we who made it, that is cubism." She uses this anecdote to explore her theory that artists, at least the best of them, are more attuned to the present than regular people are, and that's why modern art seems strange and peculiar to the latter, when all it is doing is capturing the essence of the moment in which they live. The artist, says Stein, is merely "the first of his contemporaries to be conscious of what is happening to his generation."<sup>12</sup>

Conventional, or what she calls "academic" art, is too mired in the past to be able to see and understand the present. She compares academic artists to the generals who blundered through the Great War thinking they were fighting a war of the nineteenth century when they were engaged instead in a war of the twentieth. "That is what the academic spirit is, it is

not contemporary, of course not, and so it can not be creative because the only thing that is creative in a creator is the contemporary thing.”

Unlike the generals, whose perceptions of reality were blunted by habit and routine, Picasso reacted to the present in a direct and innovative manner, able to see things for what they were rather than for what they had been. His contemporaries caught up with him only when the war forced them to “understand that things had changed to other things and that they had not stayed the same things, they were forced then to accept Picasso.” The idea here is similar to her pronouncement in another context about the instability and impermanence of modern identity: “The minute you or anybody else knows what you are you are not it.”<sup>13</sup>

It is a cliché that the public is always fighting the last war instead of the one in which it is currently embroiled. But Stein offers an audacious variation on this theme: “It is an extraordinary thing but it is true, wars are only a means of publicizing the things already accomplished.” War, that is, comes after, and not before, society’s transformation. It simply makes apparent to the masses what has already transpired. Thus, for example, “The French revolution was over when war forced everybody to recognise it; the American revolution was accomplished before the war; the war is only a publicity agent which makes every one know what has happened; yes, it is that.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Stein, the Great War made ordinary citizens recognize the sweeping changes that modern art had already begun to register: the breakdown of hierarchy and the advent of democratic mass culture. She analogizes the war to a cubist composition, in which there is no central viewpoint or outstanding personage: “Really, the composition of this war, 1914–1918, was not the composition of all previous wars, the composition was not a composition in which there was one man in the centre surrounded by a lot of other men but a composition that had neither a beginning nor an end, a composition of which one corner was as important as another corner, in fact the composition of cubism.”<sup>15</sup>

On the eve of Great Britain’s declaration of war on Germany, the foreign minister Lord Grey elegiacally remarked: “The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our life-time.”<sup>16</sup> He was right, for the war changed everything. Art fashioned after 1914 might resemble art of the past by appropriating its forms, as in Man Ray’s neo-Renaissance cubist war painting, Marsden Hartley’s neo-Gothic *portrait d’apparat* of a German officer, and Romaine Brooks’s neo-Romantic and late-Decadent fantasy portraits of a Red Cross nurse and a dashing air squadron commander. But that past was irrevocably gone and its lamps could not be re-lit, certainly not by such feeble attempts to invigorate new art with old.

The most “modern”—in the sense of being radically transformative—cultural act to come out of Europe in 1914 had nothing to do with

art, music, or poetry. It was the war itself. Across the sea in America, the most modern cultural act of 1914 occurred not in New York City, the home of advanced thinking in the arts, but rather in Dearborn, Michigan. There, the industrialist Henry Ford adopted the conveyor belt system used by meat packers. In 1913–1914, before switching over to the assembly line, Ford Motor Company produced a total of 248,367 cars. Less than two years later, with the new system in place, it was manufacturing two thousand cars *per day*. Not unlike the war in Europe, the assembly line in Dearborn changed the world forever.

Gertrude Stein brought modernity, the Great War, and the Ford Motor Company together in her own life in 1916 when she requested that a large Ford van be shipped to her in Paris so that she and her companion, Alice B. Toklas, could take part in the American Fund for French Wounded. This relief organization, which distributed food and medical supplies to military hospitals in outlying regions of France, was sometimes referred to as the “heiress corps” because it required volunteers to supply their own delivery vehicles.

While waiting for the Ford to arrive, Stein asked a friend who owned a taxi to give her motoring lessons. Driving a car in those years, before the introduction of automatic transmissions, synchromesh gears, and power steering, was not an easy affair. It required strength and coordination. “One had to keep both hands and both feet in action all the time,” notes an historian of modern technology. “Gear shifting and steering both demanded significant upper body strength. Furthermore, a full generation of drivers had to use a hand crank to start their cars. . . . Consequently, it was a rather remarkable woman who undertook to drive any of the early motor vehicles.” Such a woman was Gertrude Stein, who “had both the mechanical talent and the muscle. She could field-strip the primitive ambulance, and (although her driving was notoriously hair-raising), she loved doing it.”<sup>17</sup> Stein was an obstinate driver. Insistent on looking ahead and always moving forward, she refused to put her car in reverse, regardless of circumstances, which was a source of consternation for her navigator, Toklas, especially when they missed a turn.<sup>18</sup>

The women adopted quasi-military uniforms for themselves. Their friend Georges Braque, who was recovering in Avignon from a bad head wound, was amazed by their appearance. “They looked extremely strange in their boy scout uniforms with their green veils and colonial helmets,” he later recalled. “Their funny get-up so excited the curiosity of the passers-by that a large crowd gathered around us and the comments were quite humorous.” Toklas wore something like a British officer’s tunic, with patch pockets and a pith helmet. Stein wore a Cossack-type hat and Russian greatcoat that emphasized her already massive bulk. They may have hoped by their paramilitary costumes to provide themselves with a degree of legitimacy that as volunteer

service workers they otherwise lacked. Additionally, though, in terms of lesbian-feminist performativity, they were exerting agency rather than seeking acceptance. Through their fanciful costumes, they deflated military and medical self-seriousness with modernist panache.<sup>19</sup>

After the war, Stein replaced the Ford van, which she called Auntie, with a smaller, sleeker car she named Godiva. Several years later, while she and Toklas were touring the countryside in Godiva, the car had engine problems and needed to be taken to a garage. The mechanic on duty complained that his young assistant, a youth in his twenties, did not have good instincts for car repair, because he had been in the trenches during the crucial years when young men are expected to learn their trade. Throwing up his hands in a gesture of exasperation, the older man said of his assistant and others of his age cohort that they were *une generation perdue*, a lost generation. Stein evocatively borrowed this term to describe her young friend Ernest Hemingway and his fellow expatriates as they roamed restlessly through postwar Europe.<sup>20</sup>

The term “lost generation” caught on. In the aftermath of the Great War, many young people, not simply artists, writers, and expatriates, identified with it. They rejected what Stein called the academic spirit. But that was after the war. At the beginning, as we have seen, the academic spirit remained very much in place. One of the first big blows against it came in May 1915, when a German submarine torpedoed the British ocean liner *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland and killed nearly everyone on board. That was a radically modernizing event. It was the beginning of total warfare. Yet even in the midst of these new, untested waters, the academic spirit would not, could not, die.

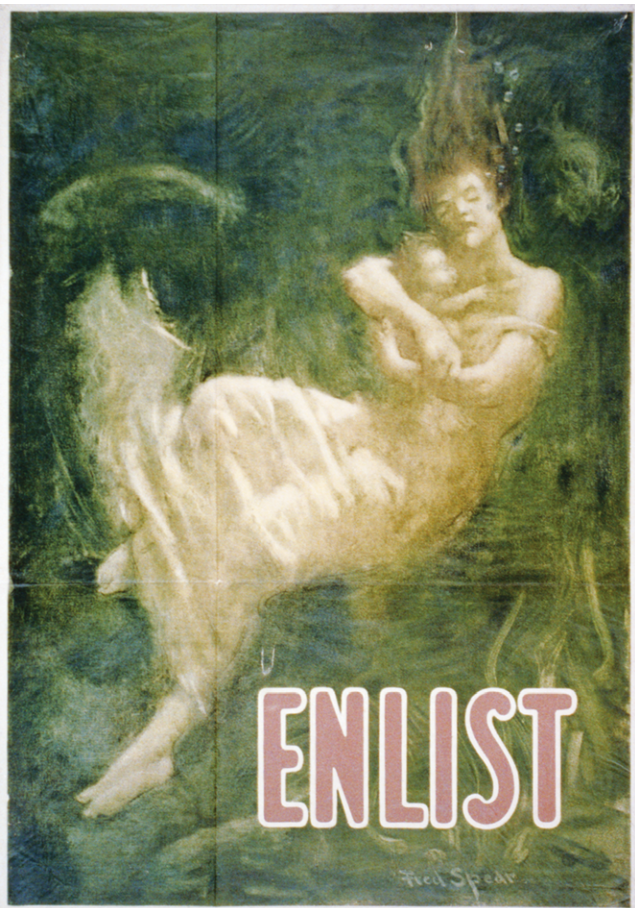
# 2

## WOMEN IN PERIL

A BEAUTIFUL, WRAITH-LIKE YOUNG WOMAN, eyes pressed shut and hair sweeping upward, sinks to the bottom of the sea (Fig. 11). A wet nightgown, bared at the shoulder, reveals her firm, athletic body. Her naked foot touches moss-covered rocks. With a sleeping infant enclosed in her arms, she embodies maternal bliss. Bubbles rise from her lips. The water is dark but translucent. A fish floats by in the depths, an impassive observer.

What a strange, almost surreal scene this is. It seems at once terrifying and tranquil, summoning the viewer's primordial fear of drowning only to merge it with an equally primordial desire to return to the liquid warmth of the womb. It pulls together two of the most powerful pairings in art and literature: Mother and Child and Death and the Maiden. To modern eyes, this image might seem hokey and kitsch. But to thousands, if not millions of Americans who saw it plastered on walls across the land in the late spring and early summer of 1915, it must have been disturbing, even shocking. The historical record does not reveal how many copies of the poster were produced, where it was displayed, and what those who encountered it thought or said about it. Most of the several thousand war-related posters produced in the United States during this period share a similar fate: We simply do not know how many copies were printed, where those copies hung, and what passers-by noticed about them, if they noticed them at all.<sup>1</sup>

Still, we can be certain that in June 1915 few viewers would have missed the poster's reference to the recent sinking of R.M.S. *Lusitania* by a German submarine. At two in the afternoon of May 7th, the Germans fired a single gyroscopic torpedo at the unguarded ocean liner on its return voyage from New York to Liverpool. The vessel went down in eighteen minutes, before life boats could be deployed. Twelve hundred victims drowned, among them 128 Americans. Most of the bodies were never recovered; only two hundred corpses



11. | Fred Spear, *Enlist*, 1915.

washed up on shore. Two of these, according to a widely circulated news report, belonged to a mother and child: “On the Cunard wharf lies a mother with a three-month-old child clasped tightly in her arms. Her face wears a half smile. Her baby’s head rests against her breast. No one has tried to separate them.”<sup>2</sup>

The poster is eloquent in its brevity. A single word, floating in space beneath the descending forms of the mother and child, conveys its message in pastel pink letters: ENLIST. Outlined with soft white contours, these letters epitomize lingering Victorian notions of feminine frailty. By minimizing the text of the poster to one well-chosen, well-rendered word, the artist shows an economy of form that must have been a model for legions of future commercial and political advertisers, whose goal was to scrub ads clean of verbiage and visual

clutter in order to speed up communication and heighten impact. Here, a single, stand-alone word has been “enlisted” to drive home the poster’s message.<sup>3</sup>

And that message was simple: Enlist in the armed forces to help prevent further crimes of this order. In 1915, the United States was not yet at war with Germany, but the poster insists that it *should* be at war with the aggressor nation that committed this atrocity. Designed by an unknown artist named Fred Spear (which, given the appropriately bellicose last name, could have been a pseudonym), *Enlist* was printed and distributed by the Boston of Public Safety Committee, an organization named after the Revolutionary-era civic association on whose behalf Paul Revere made his midnight ride.<sup>4</sup>

The poster addresses male and female viewers alike. Men, join the army or navy. Women, make sure your men join the army or navy. Maurice Rickards, a pioneer in the academic study of ephemera, called *Enlist* “perhaps

the most powerful of all war posters,” and with good reason. Both *Enlist* and an equally inflammatory poster, *Destroy This Mad Brute*, conjured up the historically relevant trope of imperiled femininity to stir visceral emotions. At a time in United States history when more Americans were likely to be troubled by rapidly changing sex roles in society than they were by military skirmishes on a distant continent, posters such as these managed to collapse the two areas of concern into one.<sup>5</sup>

INSTEAD OF LOOKING AT *ENLIST* solely in terms of its direct relationship to the *Lusitania* crisis and the so-called Preparedness Movement (a campaign to expand the United States armed forces and ready them for war), let us first consider it as an aquatic image deriving from earlier depictions of women in the water. There were many of these. Underwater imagery fascinated turn-of-the-century Americans. As the art historian Charles Eldredge points out, “the world beneath the sea was explored and exploited by many imaginative artists toward the end of the nineteenth century and provided writers, composers, scene designers and the like with an attractive alternative to terra firma and its phenomena.” In part, Eldredge surmises, this was because of the scientific and technological innovations that had led to advances in deep-sea diving and submarine exploration. Cultural commodities imported from abroad also stimulated interest in the oceanic unseen. These included Jules Verne’s fantasy novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, Hans Christian Andersen’s popular tale *The Little Mermaid*, Tennyson’s poems “The Mermaid” and “Sea Fairies,” and even Wagner’s opera *Das Rheingold*. At its New York premiere in 1889, the latter was praised for its opening scene, showing, in the words of one journalist, “the gambols of the nixties [mermaids] below the surface of the Rhine.” Before long, the American sisters of the Rhinemaidens were cavorting regularly on stage at the New York Hippodrome in a spectacle entitled *Neptune’s Daughters*.<sup>6</sup>

In 1915, captivity with the watery depths remained strong in American art and popular culture. *Enlist* taps into this imagery but injects it with a tragic tone. In its lugubrious mood (no gambols or cavorting here), the poster invokes august Victorian-era literary paintings such as Sir John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1852), a celebrated Pre-Raphaelite tableau that pictures Shakespeare’s deranged heroine floating fully dressed on the surface of a brook before her weighty, water-soaked attire drags her to the bottom, or James William Waterhouse’s 1894 depiction, which shows the love-stricken maiden seated among water lilies before her demise.

*Hamlet* was Shakespeare’s most acclaimed tragedy and in America the most frequently staged. Nineteenth-century performances by a succession of



illustrious touring actors such as Edmund Kean and Edwin Booth (the brother of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth) were legendary. According to one theater historian, Booth's "100 consecutive nights of *Hamlet* at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York during the 1864/65 season inaugurated the era of the Shakespeare long-run in America, and he played the role, in cities large and small, for more than thirty years." The approaching tercentenary of Shakespeare's death in 1916 further heightened public awareness of the Bard and his slavishly worshipped drama. No fewer than five motion picture versions of the tale had appeared in American nickelodeons by 1913.<sup>7</sup> Despite the obvious differences between Spear and Shakespeare, vague similarities between poster and play may well have reverberated in the minds of viewers.

Ophelia, for example, embodies the unprovoked violation of innocence. She is one of literature's most renowned victims, subjected to an unwarranted attack by the man she loves. Psychologically unmoored by his verbal abuse, she falls into a "weeping brook," at which point, "Her clothes spread wide, / And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up; / ... But long it could not be / Till that her garments, heavy with their drink, / Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death."<sup>8</sup> In *Enlist*, the garments of an innocent victim "spread wide" and "mermaid-like" as she sinks to her "muddy death."

*Hamlet* is relevant in another way. It is the story of a young man who has difficulty fulfilling his father(land)'s entreaty to avenge a crime. The ghost of Hamlet's father calls out to the prince from the battlement of Elsinore castle: "If thou didst ever thy dear father love . . . Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." The ghost, that is, seeks to *enlist* young Hamlet in justifiable violence, as Spear's poster sought to enlist young Americans in authorized revenge against the "foul" Germans. What is Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy if not a call to arms? The prince must decide whether to take action or remain in his shell; whether to "suffer the Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune" or retreat into solipsistic denial, a suicidal "sleep" that would spare him "the thousand Natural shocks / That flesh is heir to." The Ophelia-like drowning in the recruitment poster poses a Hamlet-like question to American viewers, circa 1915: Will you do the right thing and go to war with feudal tyrants, whatever shocks and suffering this may entail, or instead swaddle yourself in a suicidal isolationist torpor?<sup>9</sup>

Shakespeare's play was not the only cultural reference that viewers of *Enlist* might have brought to it. Its dire death-by-drowning imagery harked back to a series of novels, stories, and paintings by proponents of naturalism such as Stephen Crane, whose 1898 allegorical tale "The Open Boat" tells of death at sea, and Winslow Homer, an artist who often portrayed existential loneliness in terms of watery hazard. In *Life Line* (1884, Philadelphia Museum



of Art), for example, Homer pictures a swooning young woman saved from drowning in a sexually charged encounter with an anonymous male rescuer who clasps her in his arms. In *Undertow* (1886, Clark Art Institute), the artist shows two shapely young female swimmers pulled from the deadly surf by muscular male life guards. In preparing these paintings, Homer repeatedly doused his models with water to capture the look of wet drapery, giving his depictions of aquatic endangerment an erotic tremor that complements, indeed, enhances, their life-and-death seriousness. For all its sensationalist melodrama, *Enlist* possesses gravitas deriving from its resemblance to the literary and artistic naturalism of Homer, Crane, and their peers.<sup>10</sup>

Or is that putting it too favorably? *Enlist* is lightweight compared to Homer's work, less engrossed in existential complexity. Indeed, it eschews complexity, for the reasons given above. And yet, if the key to late-nineteenth-century American naturalism is a burning outrage against cruel Darwinian processes of natural selection and the stony indifference of the cosmos (Crane's theme in particular), then *Enlist* shares that mood, only here the outrage is not directed against indifferent gods but rather immoral Germans. In the end, however, the visual roots of *Enlist* can be found less in turn-of-the-century naturalism than in the sort of academic formality (similar to Gertrude Stein's "academic spirit") favored by prominent New England painters such as Thomas Dewing and Abbott Handerson Thayer, both of whom specialized in the depiction of ethereal females hovering in pristine isolation from the manly world of action.

The art historian Ann Uhry Abrams observes of Dewing and Thayer, "Both were responding to uncertainties of a changing industrial society by removing their women from worldly environments and by revising an older image of feminine subservience." As traditional social patterns shattered in turn-of-the-century America, contends Abrams, the "nostalgic idealization of pure, unworldly, and submissive womanhood increased."<sup>11</sup>

Dewing was acclaimed for his monochromatic images of beautiful young women lost in reverie, as in *The Lady in Gold* (1888, Brooklyn Museum), which won a prize at an international competition in Paris. Dewing's typical subject was an attractive, well-bred woman standing or seated alone, her features finely chiseled, her gown long and flowing, her eyes half-closed in a trancelike state, the space surrounding her diffuse and empty. His women are rarefied objects, gorgeous creatures from another planet; they epitomize late Victorian notions of fragile femininity.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, Thayer depicted young women and girls (his daughter was a frequent model) as latter-day Madonna figures or winged angels, idealizations of pure, unthreatened and unthreatening femininity (Fig. 12). Significantly, Thayer devoted considerable attention to the study of camouflage in nature. In later years, his self-directed studies in that area led to him wielding a strong



12. | Abbott H. Thayer, *Stevenson Memorial*, 1903. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

influence on the way that American battleships and transport vessels were painted with camouflage patterns during the First World War, making them difficult for enemy submarines to distinguish from the ocean at large. His rigorous investigation into the principles of camouflage in the natural realm might seem unrelated to his vibrant renderings of women as transcendent mothers and angels, unless one wants to consider that girls and women who willingly adapted such roles were, in a sense, providing themselves with social camouflage.<sup>13</sup>

More than artistic influence is at work in *Enlist*'s depiction of a young, ethereal, heavily gowned mother in airless isolation. In keeping with the presumed mission of the Boston Public Safety Committee, it drives home

an essential point: that German barbarism poses a direct threat to modern civilization, as represented by the Dewing- or Thayer-like incarnation of femininity that sinks into the abyss. Women in war posters allegorize the nation as a whole, and when they come under attack, the nation itself is claimed to be in danger. When the women in such depictions are young, beautiful, and vulnerable, the intensity of concern ratchets up, and the manliness of the man to whom the poster is directed is pressed into service with a simple, unambiguous demand: ENLIST.

In the late-Victorian Cult of True Womanhood, as it has come to be known, middle and upper-class women demonstrated their virtue by remaining at home, apart from the work force and out of the public eye, so as to nurture future citizens, instilling them with poetry, spirituality, and patriotic ardor. In so doing, women, it was widely believed, had enormous power to influence society, albeit indirectly. In the refrain of a popular Victorian

poem that formed the philosophical core of D. W. Griffith's 1916 epic film *Intolerance*, "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." Most admired of all within this cultural value system were elite and refined white women, those who radiated elegance and grace—and thus whose loss, as depicted in the poster, would have cost society more dearly than the loss of a working woman or one who was boisterous and crude.<sup>14</sup>

That the woman in *Enlist* clutches an infant in her arms would have made the assault by the Germans on the unprotected passenger ship seem all the more heinous, for what could be worse than killing babies? Babies are icons of innocence, the epitome of helplessness. They are also symbols of the future: the future of individuals, of families, and, perhaps most importantly, of society as a whole. Their murder forecloses on the future of that society.

When the poster appeared in June 1915, the very notion of national birth and rebirth was a topic of discussion, and nowhere more so than in the venerable town of Boston, proud of its role in the nation's founding. Two months earlier, the city had been embroiled in controversy over the release of D. W. Griffith's incendiary Civil War saga *The Birth of a Nation*. Thousands of Bostonians, white alongside black, had marched down Tremont Street, across from the Boston Common, to protest the opening of Griffith's motion picture at the Tremont Theatre. The Boston chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which had been founded six years earlier, objected to the movie's depiction of black Union soldiers as vile rapists of white Southern women and black politicians as figurative rapists of the Reconstruction-era South. The organization especially condemned Griffith's veneration of the Ku Klux Klan, an insurgency group that he credited with giving new life—or "birth"—to a faltering nation in the aftermath of the Civil War. Street fighting broke out in Boston between detractors and defenders of the film's race-based account of recent American history.<sup>15</sup>

Viewers of *Enlist* in the early summer of 1915 might not have consciously associated it with Griffith's cinematic milestone, which, after all, concerned itself with the American South, not Europe, and with the Civil War, not the Great War. Still, it seems important to recognize that Griffith's controversial masterpiece, as well as other, far less innovative motion pictures, instructed viewers in a melodramatic manner of seeing that would have heightened their indignation in imagining the murder of an innocent mother and child by armed barbarians. Thomas Dixon, Jr., the southern-born author of the two best-selling novels on which *The Birth of a Nation* was based, had already achieved notoriety as a fiery evangelical preacher in Boston before turning his hand to fiction.

As a favor to his fellow southerner and old friend Dixon, Woodrow Wilson screened Griffith's film in the White House. Marveling at its technique,

the president of the United States described it as “history written with lightning.” Spear’s poster, despite its contemporary North Atlantic subject matter, bore traces of the sexual and sectional conflicts germane to Griffith’s blockbuster. *The Birth of a Nation* did \$10 million worth of business in the first year and remained the highest-grossing American film of the following decade.<sup>16</sup> *Enlist* piggybacked on its popular success, transposing to a new time and setting its melodramatic language of violated innocence and barbarous oppression.

It is instructive to compare *Enlist* to a British poster issued in the same year, *Irishmen—Avenge the Lusitania* (Fig. 13). In this depiction, survivors clutch broken spars and paddle about on the surface of the sea while the great ocean liner heaves upward before plunging to the depths. The British poster adheres to the conventions of earlier shipwreck engravings such as *The Sinking of the Titanic* (ca. 1912) by German artist Willy Stöwer: listing ship, passengers flailing in the water, the vastness of the sea with no rescuers in sight. The ur-text for shipwreck art is Théodore Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* (1818–1819), but the genre goes even further back in the history of European art, as in the late eighteenth-century shipwreck paintings of

Claude Vernet. *Enlist*, to the contrary, eschews large-scale spectacle and opts instead for intimacy. In the manner of Griffith’s newly invented psychological cinema, it draws the viewer into an emotionally precise relationship with the female protagonist who plummets to her death.<sup>17</sup>

The brilliance of Griffith lies not so much in his innovative editing techniques or pioneering camera work, but rather in his use of these techniques, along with new forms of dramatic writing, to *enlist* the viewer in an intimate psychological connection with the onscreen character. *Enlist* enjoins the viewer to identify emotionally either with the drowning mother or with the unseen loved ones who will receive news of her death. Although “only” 128 Americans were among the 1,198 passengers and crew members who perished during the sinking—about 10 percent of the total—Americans who read accounts of the *Lusitania* sinking or saw



13. | *Irishmen – Avenge The Lusitania*, 1915.