

Chapter 9: Art and Power

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9.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe why and how art and artists have in some cultures been considered to have exceptional power.
- Distinguish between images of persuasion and propaganda, and specify characteristics of each.
- Recognize how and why images are used for such purposes as to display power, influence society, and effect change.
- Indicate ways that images establish and enhance a ruler's position and authority.
- Identify changes in images of conflict, heroic action, and victims of violent confrontation in various cultures and time periods, including the artist's intentions as well as the public response.
- Distinguish between and describe the prohibition of images enforced within some religions.
- Describe why protestors or conquerors might destroy images and monuments of a past or defeated culture.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

Art has always been associated with power. At times in history, the individuals who made art were seen as having special powers. They could conceptualize shapes and forms and then bring them into being. They could create images and objects from dirt, ashes, and stone that looked like living creatures. These individuals were set apart—they could transform, they could give life. And the images and objects they created held powers, as well. They were a means of communication with an unseen world, of exerting influence over the well-being and actions of humans. So both the artists and their art were considered to be magical in that they were out-of-the-realm of everyday, common, and shared existence: they were super-natural and extra-ordinary.

The ancient Greeks believed the creativity artists possessed came to them from a **muse**, a personification of knowledge and the arts that inspired them to write, sculpt, and compose. The ancient Romans, who strongly believed in the family as the most basic and essential hub of societal organization, called its guiding spirit the *genius*, from the Latin verb meaning *genui* or

“to bring into being or create.” The word **genius** came to be associated with the arts during the Renaissance, when it took on the meaning of inspiration and ingenuity visited upon the artist, often as a form of possession, setting the artist apart from, and at odds with, non-geniuses.

In addition to the power of the artist, there is the power of the art itself to imitate or mimic life. Again, according to the ancient Greeks, art’s power resides in its ability to represent nature; the closer, more real, and more natural the representation, the closer the art work is to truth, beauty—and power. Among other cultures, especially those that avoid representation, art is still a means of aesthetic expression with considerable power, but with abstracted forms. For example, in Islamic cultures the human figure and forms based on direct observation are not used in religious art and architecture as only God has the ability to create living things. Instead, elaborate ornamentation based on the written word and human, animal, and plant forms is used to decorate surfaces with intricate motifs, or patterns.

The visual force of the image or object, whether representational or non-representational, has been used throughout the ages by those in power to give form to and communicate messages about themselves, their wishes or dictates, their accomplishments, and their very right to rule. Literacy has, until the recent past, in human history been a skill few had the means to develop, but leaders in secular and religious roles have fostered among their subjects and followers a visual literacy, the ability to “read” and understand images through a common “language” of subjects, symbols, and styles. Those who wish to use their art as a means of protest against an established power have traditionally used the same “vocabulary” to visually communicate their messages, as well. Especially in times of war and during periods of oppression, art has been used as a tool to protest, document, provide an alternative version, and communicate to others about people and events that become our historical record.

9.3 PROPAGANDA, PERSUASION, POLITICS, AND POWER

The word **propaganda** has gotten a bad reputation. The Latin origin of the word propaganda is *propagare*, meaning “to spread or disseminate.” As it is used today, the word mainly refers to promoting information—often biased or misleading, sometimes hidden—in order to influence views, beliefs, or behavior. Originally, the word was not associated with politics, as it is generally today, nor did it imply lies or bad faith; propaganda was simply a means of publicly communicating ideas, instruction, and the like. In such a case, we now are more likely to use the word **persuasion**, which has a more neutral connotation and suggests convincing rather than coercing. For example, advertising tries to persuade—or entice—the consumer to make a choice or purchase. To many, however, there is a fine line between propaganda and persuasion. They are

separated more by purpose and intention—good, bad, or neutral—than how they are carried out. Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell describe the fine but crucial differences between the two words:

Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. Persuasion is interactive and attempts to satisfy the needs of both persuader and persuadee.¹

King Darius I (r. 522-486 BCE) had both persuasion and propaganda in mind when he built the Apadana at Persepolis, today Iran. (Figure 9.1) Darius I was the first king of the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550-330 BCE) to have royal structures erected on the site, but construction would continue under succeeding Persian kings for approximately one hundred years. The Apadana was begun in 515 BCE and completed thirty years later by Darius I's son, Xerxes I. Apadana means hypostyle hall, a stone building with a roof supported by columns. It originally had seventy-two columns—thirteen still stand—each sixty-two feet tall in a grand hall that was 200 x 200 feet, or 4,000 square feet. Needless to say, a building of such monumental proportions was an overwhelming sight for those who approached it. Brightly painted in many colors and raised on a platform with the Kuh-e Rahmat or Mountain of Mercy rising behind it, the towering structure could be seen for miles from the sparsely vegetated plain to the east.



Figure 9.1 | Apadana staircase, Persepolis, Iran

Author: User "Fabienkhan"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

¹ Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 6th ed. (California: Sage Publications, 2014), 7

For King Darius I, the Apadana and Persepolis—the city of Persians—as a whole was a statement of propaganda. The hypostyle hall and the city were awe-inspiring and intimidating; they in no uncertain terms let the viewer know the King had formidable power and tremendous resources. Upon entering the King’s hall, the viewer was surrounded by his strength in the form of columns the height of a modern six-story building, holding up a ceiling of incalculable weight. How small and powerless the visitor was in the midst of such force. But Darius I, whose empire stretched from Egypt in the west to the Indus Valley, today Pakistan, to the east, knew that he could not effectively rule through domination and fear. So, he had elements of persuasion included at Persepolis, as well. In addition to the building’s resplendent majesty, it was adorned with sumptuous and masterful frescoes, glazed brickwork, and relief sculpture. Two staircases led up to the platform on which the Apadana was built, on the north and east sides, but only the north staircase was completed during Darius’s lifetime. That staircase and the platform walls to either side are covered with reliefs: figures in even, orderly rows as they approach the Persian King’s hall. (Figure 9.2) They are representatives of the twenty-three countries within the Achaemenid Empire, coming to pay homage to the King during festivals for the New Year, carrying gifts. Accompanying them are Persian dignitaries, followed by soldiers with their weaponry, horses, and chariots.



Figure 9.2 | Reliefs at Persepolis

Author: User “Ziegler175”

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The native Persian and foreign-born delegates are shown together in these **friezes**, or

rows, of relief sculpture. (Figure 9.3) They have facial features that correspond with their ethnicity, and hair, clothing, and accessories that indicate what region they are from. Even the gifts are objects and animals from their own countries. Rather than showing the foreigners as subservient to the Persians, they mingle with one another and at times appear to be in conversation.



Figure 9.3 | The Apadana Palace, Persepolis, Iran

Author: User "Happolati"

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The staircase reliefs, as opposed to the magnificent building as a whole, can be seen as a form of persuasion. It was in the king's better interests to win over his subjects, to gain their trust, allegiance, and cooperation, than to bend them to his will through force and subjugation. Having already demonstrated from a distance that he had the power to defeat his enemies, Darius I could, as the delegates ascended the stairs to his great hall, literally show them the respect with which he treated his loyal subjects.

In more recent history, Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825, France) painted five versions of *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* between 1801 and 1805. (Figure 9.4) David was born and raised in Paris and entered the École des Beaux-Arts in 1866 at the age of eighteen. After eight years of mixed success in his studies there, David won the Prix de Rome in 1774, a prestigious government scholarship that also included travel to Italy. He lived in Rome from 1775 to 1780, studying the art of great masters from the classical past, through the Renaissance, and to the present. But, he was most impressed with the philosophical and artistic ideals of some of his contemporaries, the

Neoclassical thinkers and painters he met in Italy.



Figure 9.4 | Napoleon Crossing the Alps

Artist: Jacques-Louis David

Author: User "Garoutcha"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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When he returned to France, he soon began exhibiting work in this new style; with their somber, moral tones, stories of family loyalty and patriotic duty, fine detail, and sharp focus, works in the Neoclassical style (c. 1765-1830) were in stark contrast to the frivolous, sentimental subjects and delicate, pastel hues of the prevailing Rococo style (c. 1700-1770s). Over the course of the 1780s, as social disconnect and political upheaval were building toward the French Revolution of 1789, the self-sacrificing, stoic heroes from classical and contemporary history David painted increasingly reflected the public desire for *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, or liberty, equality, and fraternity (universal brotherhood).

In the aftermath of the revolution, during the mercurial times of the 1790s, David was first a powerful figure in the short-lived Republic and then a jailed outcast. When Napoleon Bonaparte, named First Consul in 1799, commissioned David to paint his portrait in 1800, however, David's return to official favor was complete. The commission came about this way: in the spring of 1800, Napoleon led troops south to support French troops already in Genoa, Italy, in an effort to take

back land captured by the Austrians. He did so on June 9th at the Battle of Marengo. The victory led to France and Spain re-establishing diplomatic relations eleven years after the French Revolution and, as part of the formal exchange of gifts to mark the occasion, King Charles IV of Spain requested a portrait of Napoleon to hang in the Royal Palace of Madrid. Learning of this, Napoleon requested three more versions from David (and the painter independently created a fifth, which remained in his possession until his death.)

It was to be an equestrian portrait, Napoleon specified, that is, depicting him on horseback, crossing the Great St. Bernard Pass in the Alps, leading the Reserve Army south to Italy. David was to show Napoleon on a spirited, rearing horse as a calm and decisive leader, much like his heroes Hannibal and Charlemagne, who crossed the Alps before Napoleon and whose names are inscribed with his on rocks in the left foreground of the painting. In actuality, however, it did not happen that way at all: Napoleon crossed on the Alps on the back of a mule, in good weather, a few days after the soldiers went through the pass.

What Napoleon was asking David to paint was a piece of propaganda. And, the artist succeeded admirably. With the wind whipping his cloak around him, assuredly holding the reins of his wild-eyed horse in one hand while gesturing the way up and over the peaks with the other, and holding the viewer's gaze with his look of complete composure, David has shown Napoleon as a leader who guides his people to victory and who will be remembered as a hero throughout the ages. That was the story Napoleon wanted told: the timeless ideal of the great man, not the transitory pettiness of his physical likeness. For, as Napoleon is attributed with claiming, "History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon."

9.4 IMAGERY OF WAR

Considering the potential for art to give expressive form to ideas and emotions, it is not surprising that art has often been used to present a wide range of messages about war, one of the most dramatic of human events. All forms of art have been used for documenting war, stating reasons for supporting or opposing it, and showing reflections about its meanings, implications, and effects. On a broader scale, all human activities, of course, may be occasions for people to criticize one another, to condemn ideas, ideals, and actions, to promote or oppose causes that express cultural, societal, or individual values. We will examine a number of works that are concerned with these issues in various ways.

9.4.1 Historical/Documentary

From the earliest times, artists have responded to issues of war and conquest and their implications for the cultures in which they took place. Often, the art appears to have been created to mark a moment of triumph and to interpret the conquest as a validation of a leader's right to rule, established through the victory. Such was the case with the Palette of Narmer. (Figure 9.5) On the two-sided palette are relief-carved depictions of the subjugation of the enemy by Egyptian King Narmer (also referred to as Menes)—under the watchful protection of the deities—and a procession of the King and his attendants toward the decapitated bodies of ten of the defeated. On the first side, Narmer wears the crown of Upper Egypt and on the reverse he wears the crown of Lower Egypt, symbolizing the union of the two regions under one ruler (c. 3,100-3,050 BCE). He is depicted far larger than both his enemies and his own men, showing the figures' relative importance. Narmer is literally depicted as a powerful, firm, and resolute warrior who will be a strong and worthy leader.



Figure 9.5 | Narmer Palette

Author: User "Nicolas Perrault III"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Grand artistic depictions of rulers in battle have always been used to help form their reputations and to bolster the images of their good and wise rulership. Military success has long been equated, correctly or not, with political prowess. The heroic feats of Alexander the Great (r. 336-323 BCE) at the Battle of Issus (333 BCE) with the powerful Persian King Darius III (r. 336-330 BCE) were portrayed in a Greek painting that no longer exists. Like much of Greek art,

though, it was copied by the Romans, so we do have a mosaic version of the tumultuous battle that was created for the House of the Faun in Pompeii, Italy. (Figure 9.6) This enormous depiction, although damaged and now incomplete, gives a lively, somewhat riotous account of the dramatic encounter of these two renowned warriors. Alexander can be seen to the left on his chestnut horse, staring with wide-eyed intensity at the fleeing Darius, who turns to look at his opponent with one arm extended as if pleading for mercy while the driver of his chariot whips the King's horses into a frenzy of motion.



Figure 9.6 | Alexander Mosaic

Author: User "Berthold Werner"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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We should consider to what extent these accounts are **documentary**, based on factual records, and what we can discern that is propagandistic in purpose. In many eras, the glorification of heroes and heroic deeds in war was perhaps paramount, not only from a political and patriotic standpoint, but also because these were the values promoted as part of artistic training in academic settings (values that prevailed for most successful artists at least through the middle of the nineteenth century, when anti-academic rebellions began in art circles). American heroism in war was certainly envisioned in these terms, as evidenced in *Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill* by John Trumbull. (Figure 9.7) As discussed in Chapter 8 Art and Identity, Trumbull was an aide-de-camp to General George Washington. After witnessing Warren's death

in Boston, Trumbull was commissioned by Warren's family to immortalize the event. The Battle of Bunker Hill took place in 1775, the first year of the American Revolutionary War. Although the colonialists were defeated, the British were stunned by their far greater number of casualties, boosting the morale of the young army. In his painting, Trumbull focused on the General's tragic death as the colonial forces retreated, as well as the compassion of British major John Small, who held back one of his men as the soldier was about to bayonet Warren. Doing so, Trumbull could celebrate the heroism of the Americans while also acknowledging the honorable behavior of the enemy, an expectation in eighteenth-century codes of conduct during pitched battles.



Figure 9.7 | *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775*

Artist: John Trumbull

Author: Boston Museum of Fine Arts

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Trumbull's depiction of the battle scene is greatly romanticized: an historically accurate rendering of General Warren's death was neither expected nor desired by viewers of the day. Many questions have been asked, as well, about the accuracy of the grand tableau by Emanuel Leutze (1816-1868, Germany, lived USA) of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, a painting that is an iconic symbol of the American Revolutionary War and the first president of the United States. (Figure 9.8) Leutze created the work in 1851, seventy-five years after the Battle of Trenton occurred in 1776. Far from attempting to reconstruct the scene as it took place, Leutze intended his work to be an evocation of a grand and inspirational event, dramatically pictured.



Figure 9.8 | *Washington Crossing the Delaware*

Artist: Emanuel Leutze

Author: Google Cultural Institute

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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By the time Frederic Remington (1861-1909, USA) painted *Charge of the Rough Riders* in 1898, warfare and depictions of it were much different. Remington gives us the spirit of the fray—more down to earth, momentary, and rough and tumble. (Figure 9.9) The implications are much less aggrandized and heroic, the viewer's sense of the event much more intimate. And by the time of the World War I appearance of *Gassed* by John Singer Sargent (1858-1925, USA, lived England), we see a different tenor altogether. (Figure 9.10) Here, we are privy to Sargent's personal response to the deadly aspects of war, to the after-effects for the individuals who were each physically assaulted by poison mustard gas and are showing its ill effects as they were weakened, nauseated, and felled. The changes in interpretation are due in part to those changes towards realism in art during the nineteenth century that we have explored. Also, they were heightened by the advent and evolution of photography, which had enhanced potential for documentation of actual conditions. But photography did not, by any means, always present the viewer with unvarnished truth, since it could, like painting, be manipulated in its effects. Nonetheless, the potential for a different view of war and its effects was ushered in with the advent of photography.

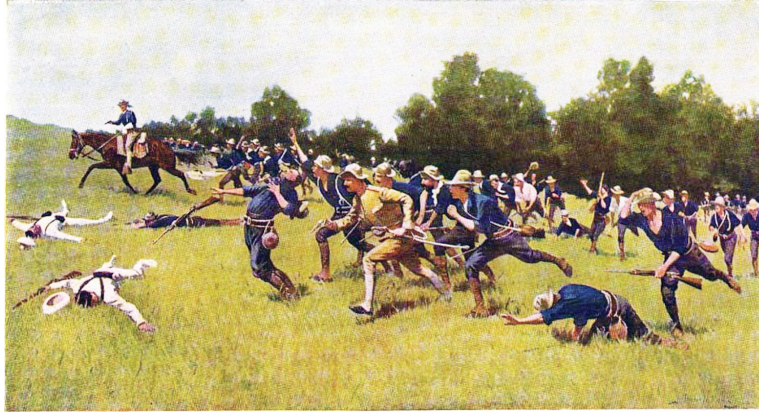


Figure 9.9 | *Charge of the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill*

Artist: Frederic Remington

Author: User "Julius Morton"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain



Figure 9.10 | *Gassed*

Artist: John Singer Sargent

Author: User "DcoetzeeBot"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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The American Civil War provided a venue for photographers to use the new medium in recording exactly what they were seeing, through the lens. But the processes were still not up to the task of capturing the actions, because equipment was cumbersome, and exposed photographic plates had to be developed on the spot in specially outfitted wagons. The result was that most of the photographs were of groups of dead bodies and battlefields laid waste, after the actual event. (Figure 9.11) The sights were nonetheless sobering to the viewers who had never before been privy to views of the result of war on such a scale. Alexander Gardner (1821-1882, Scotland, lived USA) was one of a number of photographers who captured many battlefield scenes, as well as views of campsites and many other details of the deployments, including visits from such dignitaries as President Lincoln. (Figure 9.12)



Figure 9.11 | Photograph of bodies on the battlefield of Antietam during the American Civil War

Photographer: Alexander Gardner

Author: User "Shauni"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

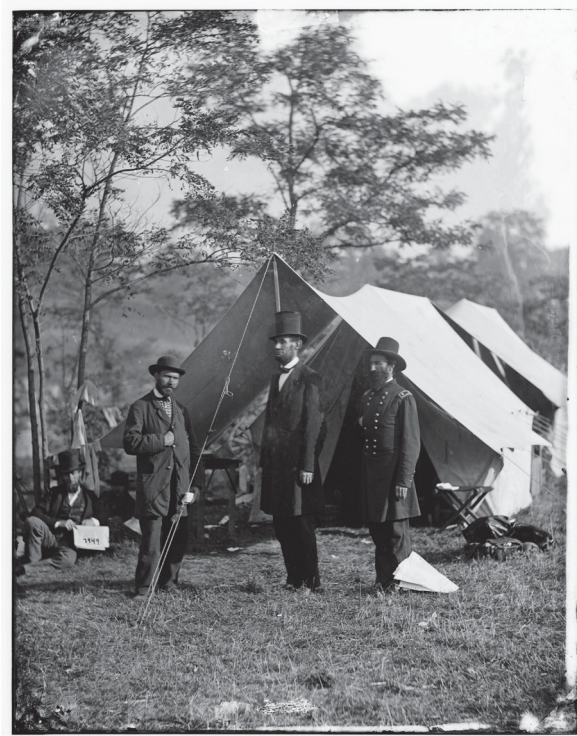


Figure 9.12 | Photograph of Allan Pinkerton, President Abraham Lincoln, and Major General John A. McClernand

Photographer: Alexander Gardner

Author: User "Bobanny"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

The potential for a more critical interpretation afforded by photography had in the past been taken at times, even though not as the norm. Notable examples come from several periods when artists responded to the horrors and agonies of war and injustice in various ways and created memorable interpretations that reveal their protests of conditions. In 1633, Jacques Callot (1592-1635, France) created a suite of panoramic etchings that dramatize *The Miseries of War*. (Figure 9.13) Francisco Goya's monumental *Third of May, 1808*, painted in 1814, showed the fear and horror of an encounter between Napoleon's troops and citizens of the town of Medina del Rio Seco, where 3,500 Spaniards lost their lives. (Figure 9.14) Goya's sympathies are clear in his presentation of a terrified white-shirted martyrlike figure facing a firing squad while in the midst of his equally horrified compatriots.



Figure 9.13 | The miseries of war; No. 11, “The Hanging”

Artist: Jacques Callot

Author: artgallery.nsw.gov.au

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain



Figure 9.14 | *The Third of May*

Artist: Francisco de Goya y Lucientes

Author: Prado in Google Earth

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Similarly, Honoré Daumier dramatized the injustice of a night raid in the home of a working-class family in Paris during protests in 1834. Following a shot having been fired from a window in the building where twelve members of the Breffort family lived, soldiers stormed their apartment and killed them all. Six months later, Daumier created a stark lithograph depicting helpless family members as they fell. (Figure 9.15) Daumier had been jailed two years earlier, in 1832, for **caricatures** (portraits containing features or characteristics exaggerated for comic effect) he made ridiculing King Louis Philippe I (r. 1830-1848). Immediately after the artist created *Rue Transnonain*, the street on which the Breffort family lived, the lithographic stones he used were confiscated by government officials and all copies of the print were destroyed. The following year, political caricatures were banned entirely. This indicates the power Daumier's work was perceived as having and the danger it could hold for those in power. As noted, the potential for a different view of war and its effects was ushered in with the advent of photography. The American Civil War in the 1860s provided a venue for photographers to use the new medium in recording exactly what they were seeing, through the lens. But the processes were still not up to the task of capturing the actions, because equipment was cumbersome and exposure times were still relatively long and slow. Alexander Gardner's photographic corps created many after battle scenes as well as portraits of generals, the president, campsites, and many other details of the deployments. (Figures 5.18 and 5.19) The potential for capturing action and momentary pathos

only increased from then on, and the capacity for documenting graphic events has been used widely ever since. (Figures 5.20, 5.21, 5.22, 5.23) Compare the image of corpses being bulldozed and buried wholesale to the photos of Gardner and the previous painted glorifications of the battlefield.



Figure 9.15 | Rue Transnonain, le 15 Avril, 1834, Plate 24 of *l'Association mensuelle*

Artist: Honoré Daumier

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

9.4.2 Reflective/Reactionary and Anti-war

One of the most powerful anti-war statements ever painted was by Pablo Picasso, created in 1937 following the bombing of the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. He was commissioned by the Spanish Republican Government to create a mural for that country's pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris and, after learning of the attack, designed this poignant abstraction of symbolic and iconic motifs to express the horror of the event. ([Pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the Paris International Exposition, 1937](#)) His knowledge of the details had been gleaned from newspaper reporting, so he elected to create the imagery in the graphic black, gray, and white of the photographs through which he learned of the bombing and its impact. His dramatic distortions of form convey the deep anguish and disgust that had been engendered in him, his fellow Spaniards, and the world.

Over the course of the twentieth century, documentary photography was used not only to capture the brutal events of war, but also to broadcast moments of utter horror in such graphic ways that they have influenced public sentiment, sometimes turning opinion from support to outrage. By the time of World War I, technology permitted the reproduction of photographs in

newspapers, which meant that the average citizen had far greater access to visual news of the war than in earlier conflicts. Some leaders, such as German Kaiser Wilhelm II (r. 1888-1918), were in favor of using photographs as a means of bolstering public support for the war, but others restricted photographers' access and censored photographs, citing security concerns. Shortly before the beginning of World War I, the British Army was the first to realize the potential of photography for aerial reconnaissance, greatly expanding their research capabilities and troop maneuverability. (Figure 9.16)

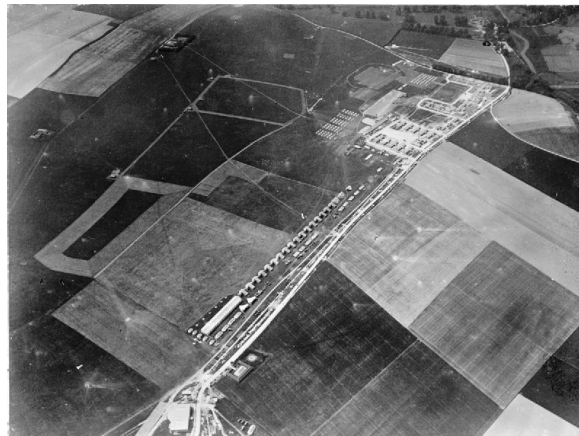


Figure 9.16 | Aerial Photography Before the First World War

Artist: Laws F C V (Sgt)

Author: User "Fae"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

During World War II, American military and government agencies tremendously expanded the use of photography for purposes ranging from conducting espionage and assisting training, to recording atrocities and providing documentation. (Figures 9.17 and 9.18) During the Vietnam War (USA involvement, 1955-1975), the American military gave unprecedented access to non-military reporters and photographers. As the war extended in the 1960s, far longer than the American people expected, images of conflict and suffering in the war-torn country began having an impact on public opinion. ([Women and children crouch in a muddy canal as they take cover from intense Viet Cong fire, Horst Faas](#)) By 1972, when Nick Ut (b. 1951, Vietnam, lives USA) photographed children fleeing their village after it was attacked with napalm, the tide had turned and many Americans no longer supported the Vietnam War. ([Phan Thi Kim Phúc running down a road near Trảng Bàng, Vietnam, after a napalm bomb was dropped on the village of Trảng Bàng by a plane of the Vietnam Air Force, Huỳnh Cong Ut](#))



Figure 9.17 | Bones of anti-Nazi German women in the crematoriums in the German concentration camp at Weimar (Buchenwald), Germany

Photographer: Pfc. W. Chichersky

Author: User "Petrusbarbygere"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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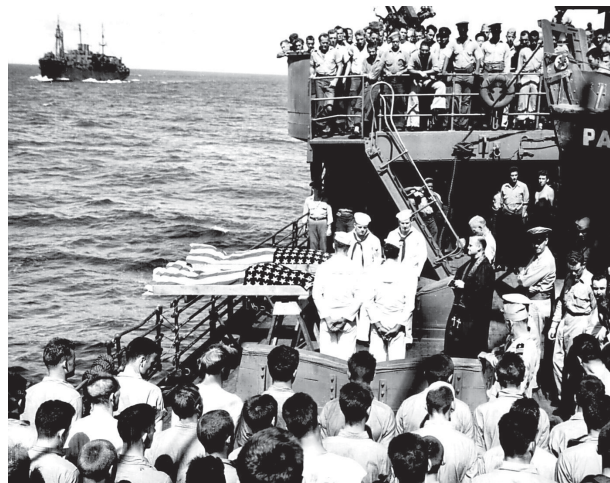


Figure 9.18 | Two enlisted men of the illfated U.S. Navy aircraft carrier LISCOME BAY, torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in the Gilbert Islands, are buried at sea from the deck of a Coast Guard-manned assault transport.

Author: User "W.wolny"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

9.4.3 Prohibition or Destruction of Imagery: Iconoclas

Controversy over imagery and its use, especially in sacred contexts, also has a long history. Debates on the topic have, at times, erupted into deep and bitter arguments. It has often been thought that, because of the Old Testament statements forbidding the use of idols, the Jewish

religion has never allowed pictorial or figural art as part of its religious expression. More current findings, though, lead to the conclusion that the biblical statements were actually pointedly made at times against the real danger of idolatry, or the worship of idol images, rather than being a broad prohibition of images altogether. Dura-Europos was a military outpost in Syria held by the Romans 114-257 CE where the garrisoned soldiers obviously practiced a wide variety of religions. The site has a great number of different pagan temples, a Christian house church, and a Jewish **synagogue**, or house of worship, that is decorated with a great array of lively figural frescoes that depict Old Testament stories. (Figure 9.19)



Figure 9.19 | Part of the fresco at the Dura-Europos synagogue

Author: User "Udimu"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

Early Buddhist art was, according to some, **aniconic**, or characterized by the avoidance of figural imagery that represented Sakyamuni Buddha, its fifth-century BCE founder. Others disagree. We have no examples of Buddhist art until the second century BCE, well after the death of Sakyamuni, probably because early works were of impermanent materials and have not endured. In the earliest we do have, the figure of the Buddha does not appear; rather, we see the seat where he achieved enlightenment and the Bodhi tree that shaded it (Figures 9.20) Scholars disagree as to whether the absence of the Buddha confirms a prohibition of showing his figure.



Figure 9.20 | Mara's assault on the Buddha

Author: User "Gurubrahma"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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On the contrary, we do know there is a general aversion to the use of figural imagery in sacred uses in Islam, although it is not universally heeded. There is no specific prohibition in the Koran, the central sacred scripture for Islam; however, there are authoritative statements among the writings of the Hadith, the commentaries on the Koran that supplement its teachings. The rationale is that the creation of human and animal form is reserved for God and should not be an act of man. Thus, the decorations of mosques and related structures are usually accomplished with lavish linear scripts, embellished with arabesques and vegetal and floral motifs. (Figure 9.21) The script is usually drawn from the Koran or is simple praise of Allah; this sort of design is often also applied to all sorts of goods and décor for the Muslim household. (Figure 9.22)



Figure 9.21 | Mihrab of Mosque–Cathedral of Córdoba

Author: User “Ingo Mehling”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Figure 9.22 | Seventeenth-Century Persian Bowl

Author: User “Udimu”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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A dramatic example of the anti-imagery debate took place in the Byzantine Christian Church in the eighth and ninth centuries CE. Based on the perception of the biblical prohibition, an assault was mounted against all religious images, and much of the existing artwork was destroyed in an effort to eradicate what was considered an evil practice. The defenders of the use of imagery argued that the problem was not the images themselves, which could be positive aids

to spiritual inspiration and religious devotion, but to their improper usage, which resulted in a sort of idolatry, akin to pagan idol worship. The images, according to proponents of their use, should be seen as tools, associated with understanding God and the saints, and as means of furthering the contemplation of Christian mysteries. Further, they argued, to obliterate existing images, to deface pictures and to destroy statues was to desecrate sacred things and, effectively, to disrespect the holy beings which they represented.

This notion was expressed in the mid-ninth-century Chludov Psalter with an illustration that equates the destruction of an icon with insulting Christ on the cross when he was forced to take gall (bile) and vinegar by the mocking Roman soldiers. (Figure 9.23) The controversy was settled in 843 and the use of icons and imagery thrived thereafter. Unfortunately, very little of the religious artwork that was produced prior to this time survived for us to examine.



Figure 9.23 | Miniature from the 9th-century Chludov Psalter with scene of iconoclasm. Iconoclasts John Grammaticus and Anthony I of Constantinople.

Author: User "Shakko"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

Other chapters in the debate over imagery open in later centuries. For some Christians, it was one point of disagreement leading to the Protestant Reformation that began in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517. According to those protesting what they saw as abuses of power in the Roman Catholic Church, the proliferation of images of holy figures and stories from the Bible distracted the

faithful from true worship: reading the word of God in the Bible. As new religious practices spread, there was a widespread removal of religious paintings and sculpture from all churches and public buildings. (Figure 9.24) In the Wars of Religions that raged in many places in Europe (c. 1524-1648), the destruction of images was one of the violent forms of protest by angry crowds that railed against any and all prevailing practices and the powers they held responsible. A great many church portals (doors) were damaged by those who saw lopping off heads of sculptures above the doorways as a fitting expression of their anti-Church sentiment. (Figure 9.25)



Figure 9.24 | Iconoclasts in a church

Artist: Dirck van Delen

Author: User "BoH"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain



Figure 9.25 | 16th-century iconoclasm in the Protestant Reformation. Relief statues in St. Stevenskerk in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, were attacked and defaced in the Beeldenstorm.

Author: User "Ziko"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Throughout history, such destruction has certainly not been restricted to religious controversies. From very early examples, we know of what is likely purposeful defacement of ruler images that were made either in protest or as a sort of proclamation of defeat and superiority. The gouging out of the jeweled eyes in this bronze head of Assyrian King Sargon II might have been for theft of the precious materials, but it may also indicate conquest over the man himself. (Figure 9.26) In recent times, we have seen the dramatic toppling in 2003 of the statue of Saddam Hussein in a public square in Baghdad, Iraq, as a symbolic overthrow of a despised and despotic ruler. (Figure 9.27) Further humiliation of him was clearly intended by the widespread publication of photos of captors picking lice from his head after his discovery in a spiderhole.



Figure 9.26 | Bronze head of a king, most likely Sargon of Akkad but possibly Naram-Sin.

Author: Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: Public Domain



Figure 9.27 | Statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled in Firdos Square after the US invasion of Iraq.

Photographer: U.S. military employee

Author: User "Ipankonin"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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The power of such pointed symbolism in visual terms is employed to fight culture wars, as well. In Afghanistan, in 2001, the Taliban undertook to dynamite two colossal images of the Buddha dating to the sixth century CE that had been carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamiyan valley of central Afghanistan. (Figure 9.28) Arguments came from all over the world, pleading with them to preserve monuments that were considered part of the cultural heritage of humankind. Nonetheless, they completed their task, declaring it a duty to eliminate an image that violated their spiritual beliefs.



Figure 9.28 | The taller Buddha of Bamiyan before (left) and after destruction (right).

Author: User "Tsui"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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A similar scenario unfolded more recently, when ISIS militants went on a destructive campaign to destroy historically and culturally valued artwork in the Mosul Museum, Iraq, despite pleas from curators and art lovers around the globe. ([Extremists used sledgehammers and power drills to smash ancient artifacts at a museum in the northern city of Mosul](#)) This sort of protest is often made on a smaller scale, as well, when symbolic or iconic imagery is defaced or destroyed as a means of mocking its value to those who respect it, as with the Nazi symbols made on Jewish gravestones or the burning of the American flag. ([Desecrated Jewish gravestones](#)) (Figure 9.29) All such incidents reinforce our understanding of the varieties of power that art and visual imagery can have.



Figure 9.29 | Desecration of the U.S. Flag by burning

Author: Jennifer Parr

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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9.5 BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Key Concepts

Due to their ability to create art, throughout history artists have often been considered to have special and mysterious powers. Images can be used to enhance the power of an individual, system of government, or form of religion. Artists can use images to bring attention to and have an impact on social issues. Images of war can be used to validate and strengthen a ruler's authority and power. From the nineteenth century to the present, violent conflicts have been depicted with a greater range of imagery, in part due to technological advances and social attitudes toward the impact of war. Imagery is forbidden within some religions based on interpretations of religious texts. The destruction of images can be the result of religious, social, or political beliefs or protests.

Test Yourself

1. Describe why and how art and artists have in some cultures been considered to have exceptional power.
2. What are propaganda and persuasion, and what are some differences between them?

3. How did King Darius I use images of both persuasion and propaganda at the Apadana in Persepolis?
4. Describe how rulers have used images of them to enhance their authority.
5. How and why did images of war change in the United States from the time of Revolutionary War through World War I?
6. Give an example of an art work that was meant to protest war or social injustice, and describe how it did so.
7. Describe how and why Nick Ut and Pablo Picasso focused on the individual in their depictions of war.
8. Why are images forbidden within some religions? Give specific examples.
9. What prompted the destruction and avoidance of religious images during the Protestant Reformation?
10. Explain why images of a defeated or dead ruler or monuments of an occupied culture might be defaced or destroyed.

9.6 KEY TERMS

Aniconic: the avoidance of figural imagery within a religion

Caricature: portrait containing features or characteristics exaggerated for comic effect

Documentary: in artistic or written forms, work that records actual events as they happened

Frieze: a horizontal row of relief sculpture or painting on a building

Genius: (from the Latin *genui*: to bring into being or create) a person of remarkable intelligence or with outstanding creative abilities

Muse: personification of knowledge and the arts, and inspiration to write, sculpt, and compose

Persuasion: the attempt to influence, convince or entice someone to make a choice (often a purchase)

Propaganda: information (written, verbal, artistic) that promotes a particular viewpoint or set of ideas about a person or event. The word indicates information that is biased, misleading, or sometimes hidden that is used in order to influence views, beliefs, or behavior

Synagogue: Jewish house of worship