

# INTRODUCTION

**ROBERT COZZOLINO, ANNE CLASSEN KNUTSON,  
AND DAVID M. LUBIN**

NEARLY A CENTURY AFTER IT ENDED, WORLD WAR I remains a stark example of how far modern civilization could descend into violence. The conflict's intensity, size, and duration led its participants and observers to seek a new language and imagery in order to describe it. Much has been written about the important contributions of European artists and their reactions to the war that ravaged their continent.<sup>1</sup> With few exceptions, however, artists in the United States have been left out of this history, as if the great geographic distance that separated them from the cataclysm precluded their having anything insightful or noteworthy to say about it.<sup>2</sup> *World War I and American Art* provides ample evidence to show that this was not the case. American artists developed new ways of debating, promoting, depicting, and memorializing (or, less frequently, opposing) the war. They did so from a broad range of positions, both independently and through official channels, and they gave form to ideas and events that were new to their experience.

World War I was a pervasive presence in the lives of Americans, before and after the United States entered the conflict, and artists of all generations, aesthetic positions, regions of the country, and political points of view took notice and responded. This premise drives the exhibition that this book accompanies and has formed the foundation of the essays that follow. It counters art historian Milton Brown's influential assertion, made more than half a century ago, that "the total effect of the [First World] war on American art was not great. It was more an interlude than anything else."<sup>3</sup>

*World War I and American Art* fundamentally reconsiders the impact of the war on American art at the time of the conflict and in the years afterward. As David Reynolds outlines in his essay for this volume, World War I, though

tending to be “forgotten” relative to the ensuing conflicts of the twentieth century, has had lasting emotional, political, and cultural effects. Nothing like it had been experienced in human history. Although fixing an exact number is not easy, there were approximately ten million combat deaths in the war.<sup>4</sup> When death tolls reach such heights it is difficult to visualize the meaning of the numbers. Ten million is roughly equivalent to the combined populations of Philadelphia, New York City (all five boroughs), and Nashville—the cities hosting the tour of this exhibition—according to 2014 census data. World War I casualty figures rise to more than sixteen million when civilians are included.

Americans paid attention to the news and images that emerged from Europe before and after President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war in April 1917. The war forced positions for or against intervention, made some artists politically active for the first time, and foregrounded the plight of civilians. Joseph Pennell’s *That Liberty Shall Not Perish from the Earth* (1918; plate 3) now looks prescient to a generation that lived through the unreality of an attack on New York City and its apocalyptic results. It is instructive to return to the period of 1914–18 to see how American artists navigated the call to action, the fear of impending threat, and the voicing of dissent. Artists then, no less so than today, were politically engaged citizens who used their special skill set—artistic practices and techniques—to express ideas or feelings about the imperiled world in which they lived: they communicated values and beliefs through a primarily non-verbal language. As this exhibition demonstrates, they often did so with considerable creativity, complexity, and verve.

Aside from the small number of editorial cartoonists who contributed work to left-wing periodicals such as *The Masses* or who drew for German American newspapers, which were relatively plentiful until the declaration of war put them out of business, most American artists eagerly participated in the war effort. The government enlisted artists to make posters and other graphics to encourage recruitment, the purchase of liberty bonds, and food rationing. This work—the organization of the design and printing, as well as the style of the posters—provided a precedent for later Works Progress Administration poster and print divisions, and would guide artists working in the Office of Strategic Services graphics division during World War II. One of the greatest legacies of the world’s first fully industrialized war was the creation of what Pearl James, in her essay, calls “the iconosphere,” an inescapable media environment saturated with seductive, sentimental, nationalistic, and above

all psychologically persuasive images that prompt viewers to take actions in their lives that they might not otherwise have taken.

The government also employed artists in the armed services to create maps, design camouflage, and make medical drawings. The war brought advances in technology—both for destroying and healing—and artists were eager to learn and understand these developments, especially those connected to observational practices. World War I was the first air war, and artists were affected by the extremely distant perspective that aerial views provided. Jason Weems examines how photographers and cartographers presented a novel and exhilarating image of the world after witnessing the view from above. For instance, Edward Steichen, already an accomplished artist and photographer by the start of the war, was the chief of the photographic section of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) from 1917 to 1919. Through his work and expertise, he adapted photography for intelligence purposes, implementing aerial surveillance programs that shaped the role of such practices in modern warfare. Before the war Steichen had favored soft-focus, impressionistic effects in his own camera work, but aerial photography (particularly for military intelligence reasons) demanded highly focused images, and after the war he came to prefer a more crisp and precise look in his photographs.

Artists had important roles in medical units in support of doctors and nurses, documenting from up close soldiers’ wounds and their treatment. The mechanized nature of warfare created different types of injuries and necessitated new medical procedures. This in turn had a broader impact on trauma treatment in civilian contexts. Ivan Albright enlisted in the AEF and spent the war at a base hospital in Nantes, France, drawing wounds and their treatment and visually tracking the healing process; this wartime anatomy lab informed figure paintings he made a decade later and affected his spiritual outlook. Photographs by Lewis W. Hine and by an anonymous Red Cross photographer documenting efforts of prosthetics sculptor Anna Coleman Ladd and her assistants to forge “tin masks” for disfigured soldiers show the reconstructive techniques that aided permanently damaged victims of trench warfare.

Others—most notably the so-called AEF 8, a group of eight professional artists commissioned by the US Army to record military operations at the front—served as embedded witnesses; their success in documenting the doughboys’ daily life in the war zone led to the expansion of this program during World War II. Members of the AEF 8 such as Harvey



Figure 1. Henry Reuterdahl (1871–1925),  
*All Together! Enlist in the Navy*, 1917.  
Poster, 31½ × 43 in. The Library  
Company of Philadelphia

Dunn and George M. Harding saw fighting up close and produced detailed transcriptions of the experience. They themselves, however, were strictly forbidden from engaging in combat, and for the most part their art seems emotionally cool and detached.

Not so the art made by soldier-artists such as Horace Pippin and Claggett Wilson, who went to France not to draw but to fight. Their art, produced in the aftermath of the melee, is haunted by their respective sojourns on the battlefield, where each was severely wounded. Pippin enlisted in 1917 and fought with the African American 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters. Wounded, honorably discharged, and permanently disabled in his right arm, he later produced a detailed illustrated memoir of his battlefield experiences and several idiosyncratic paintings about infantry life. Pippin maintained that the suffering he witnessed and experienced at the front drove his art well into the 1930s and 1940s. Wilson was an accomplished painter and designer who made a series of intensely personal watercolors while serving in occupied Germany after the Armistice. These rarely seen works were shown together in 1920 and published in a lavish volume a few years later, but they are largely unknown today. Dramatically composed and rigorously designed, they emphasize the subjective sensations and psychological dimensions of the death struggle within the contours of no-man's-land.

World War I was divisive, and that tension can be seen in the way artists supported or protested the war effort.

Reports of atrocities and the abuse of civilians, as heightened by specific incidents such as the German sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania*, provoked outrage, and some artists felt strongly that the United States could not remain neutral. Edwin H. Blashfield, Howard Chandler Christy, and Charles Dana Gibson, for example, were members of a patriotic group of artists and illustrators who called themselves the Vigilantes and whose express purpose was to oppose American neutrality and pacifism. Sixteen days after President Wilson declared war, these artists and many others enthusiastically came together to form the government's first art agency in the service of war—the Division of Pictorial Publicity (DPP).

For the dissenters, official censorship efforts such as the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 (which forbade "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" against the United States and its policies) silenced—and criminalized—the kind of work being done by contributors to *The Masses*. Refraining from explicit antiwar statements because of the strict legal prohibitions, these artists and writers spoke out in their work in what might be called "silent protest" against not only war in general but also conscription, profiteering, and mob violence against German American citizens and their cultural traditions. Certain poster designs urged unity among America's ethnic melting-pot communities (fig. 1)—a sentiment that in practice could be volatile in wartime. Amy Helene Kirschke examines the complex wartime experiences and perspectives of African

Americans through the editorials and cartoons that appeared in *The Crisis* magazine and the balance they needed to strike between demonstrating race-pride and patriotism and expressing criticism of the war and continuing segregation and discrimination at home.

One unnerving development during the war that foreshadowed McCarthy-era tactics was the formation of the American Protective League (APL). The APL consisted of civilians that both the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation and the Military Intelligence Bureau recruited to spy on neighbors, coworkers, fellow churchgoers, and other citizens with the intent of reporting back any criticism of the war or hint of sympathy for Germany. Artists specifically were often targeted as inherently suspicious types. During the war years George Bellows, William Hunt Diederich, Robert Henri, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Boardman Robinson, John Sloan, and Paul Strand were either investigated (resulting in surveillance files) or arrested because of alleged suspicious behavior.

The social critique and political urgency of the war years found broad artistic expression under the stylistic umbrella of realism. Much attention has been devoted to the way in which politics and art were integrated during the economic crisis of the 1930s, but it is becoming increasingly clear that this melding of art and politics had already begun two decades earlier, as the crisis of World War I pushed artists to employ realist techniques for radical and visceral ends—to express outrage or to cope with the intensity of emotions such as fear, anger, and grief. Realism became more than description, and this accounts for the brutal tone and details of Bellows's war work or the otherworldly and theatrical mode of combat veteran Wilson's postwar watercolors. As David M. Lubin explores in his essay, realism was inherently volatile in wartime and its relationship to truth-telling could be complicated and even compromised by an artist's personal involvement in the war. Did firsthand experience of battle make an artist's work more reliable? Or did the vividness of his or her creative imagination, regardless of vantage point, override the alleged advantage of "being there"?

Patriotic support of the war effort offered certain groups and civic or commercial organizations the opportunity to legitimize their work. Famous actors made public appearances at Liberty Bond parades and sold war bonds, helping to improve the reputation of the fledgling Hollywood film industry. Advertisers made themselves indispensable to the government as they participated in the campaign to mobilize citizens for war, launching a new era in which the

commercial instruments of mass advertising and public relations became essential weapons of war. Illustrators such as Howard Chandler Christy, Harvey Dunn, James Montgomery Flagg, and George M. Harding occupied an ambiguous status within the artistic field of the early twentieth century. These men, members of the DPP and/or the AEF 8, had been trained as painters in a traditional fine art manner, yet their illustration work for mass magazines, books, advertisements, and posters, while giving them bigger paychecks than their painter peers, also functioned to marginalize them. As a means of offsetting claims that they were overly commercial, illustrators used the gravity of World War I and their government service to bolster their vocation. Both the poster producers and the AEF 8 worked alongside realists, modernists, muralists, and avant-garde artists, achieving an uneasy parity with them during the tempestuous war years and before these various categories of art would be rigidly separated.

As Anne Classen Knutson makes clear, several American modernists, whose work was long thought to reveal indifference to the war, produced innovative responses that marked personal turning points. Charles Burchfield, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and others made images that, though not previously discussed in connection to World War I, reveal its strong impact. O'Keeffe wrote frequently of her conflicted feelings about the fighting and the tense wartime atmosphere. Her abstract drawings and watercolors of 1915–18 are infused with her personal engagement with the war, including references to her brother Alexis, who served in France and would suffer the ill effects of poison gas. Marin made abstractions in 1917 that strongly correlate to rotogravures showing destroyed French towns and aerial views that were published frequently in the *New York Times* that year. Burchfield charted his anxiety about the war and conscription in images of 1917–18 that grew out of his abstract symbols for morbidity, fear, and other sensations. As Alexander Nemerov further demonstrates, in a time of public proclamations for or against the war, Burchfield's paintings resound with personal expression, and the war haunts the very fiber of his art during this period, even when it seems that he has avoided any obvious representation of it.

Another elliptical commentator on the war was Marcel Duchamp, whose notorious *Fountain* (1917), a store-bought urinal that he signed with a pseudonym, is recognized as one of the most influential works of modern art for its bold assertion that art is first and foremost an idea. But *Fountain* was more than simply a thought-piece about the nature of art;



Figure 2. Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946), *Fountain*, 1917. Photograph printed in *The Blind Man*, no. 2 (May 1917). Courtesy of Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, New York

it was also a vehement protest against the war. Duchamp, a resident alien in the United States, submitted the readymade to the first Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York a day or two after his host nation's declaration of war, which he strongly opposed. Alfred Stieglitz, who shared this antiwar stance, provocatively photographed *Fountain* against a backdrop consisting of an out-of-focus swath of *The Warriors* (1913), Marsden Hartley's semi-abstract paean to German military manhood (fig. 2). Seen in this context, *Fountain*—both Duchamp's readymade and Stieglitz's photograph by that name—conveys the idea that war and the military glory associated with it are ultimately purveyors of human waste, a socially sanctioned means of flushing young lives down the drain.<sup>5</sup>

After the war, artists faced new challenges and opportunities through commissions for commemorative works and in gradually processing the emotional impact. Often they worked in a celebratory mode, as in James VanDer-Zee's photograph of heroic Harlem Hellfighters marching up Fifth Avenue on their return from war (1919; plate 140), George Benjamin Luks's tumultuous *Armistice Night* (1918; plate 134), and Theodore Earl Butler's dazzling *Armistice*,

*Times Square* (1918; plate 135), syncopated with the rhythms of jazz and Broadway. But others, as Robert Cozzolino explores, addressed mourning, loss, and spiritualism instead. Artists such as Violet Oakley found new challenges in portrait commissions for families who had lost sons in the war and had to wait years before they could give their loved ones a burial in the United States. Memorial portraiture became one means for finding some closure in a war that caused catastrophic loss. Carl Hoeckner's haunting *The Homecoming of 1918* (1919; plate 138) directly confronted the massive humanitarian crisis of the war. Hoeckner, a German immigrant working in Chicago, tapped into the traumatic effect the war had on humanity by depicting emaciated figures that could be refugees or the spirits of the dead. The sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, founder of the museum of modern American art that bears her name, a disciple of Rodin, and a patron of Duchamp, exhibited postwar "impressions in clay" that showed doughboys in duress—wounded, dying, or, in some cases, being physically rehabilitated. Having organized a field hospital in France in 1914 and witnessing the carnage from up close—she held the hands of soldiers as they died—she used her art to record their agonies and her own.



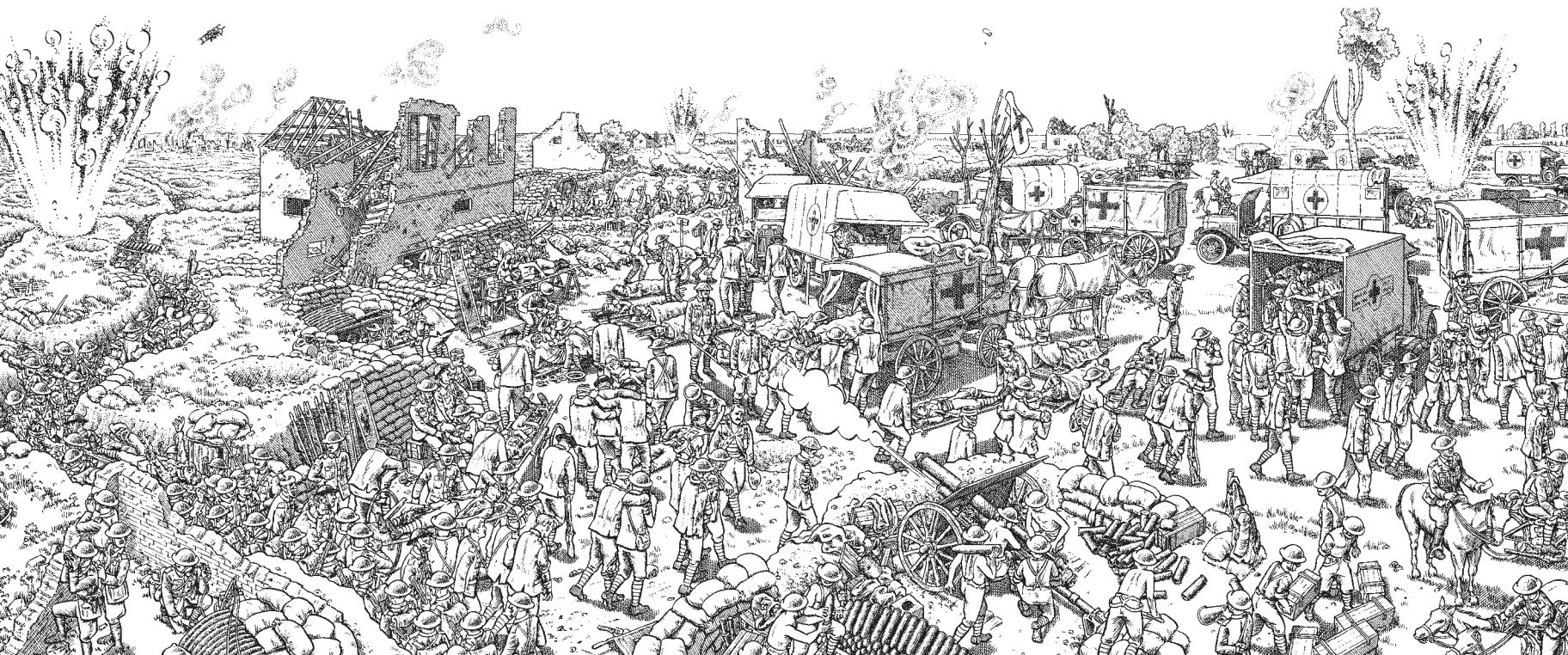
Figure 3a. Mary Reid Kelley (b. 1979), still from *Sadie the Saddest Sadist*, 2009. Video with sound, black and white, 7:23 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Fredericks & Freiser

Figure 3b. Mary Reid Kelley, still from *The Queen's English*, 2008. Video with sound, black and white, 4:20 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Fredericks & Freiser

As we mark the centennial of America's involvement in World War I with this exhibition and publication—with the goal of forging new territory for American art scholarship and opening up new ways to evaluate the impact of that war on the art of the 1910s and 1920s—we are also conscious of how artists working today turn to the precedents set by earlier artists for dealing with the trauma of war. In light of the past century of global conflicts and planet-threatening warfare, it is noteworthy that a number of American artists today have chosen to confront and examine aspects of World War I and its legacy in their work. Sarah McCoubrey's *Guns or Butter* series of 2015, made while the artist was on

sabbatical in Brussels in the midst of centennial commemorations of the war, integrates butter wrappers and lace that had familial associations for her into works reflecting on Belgium's wartime history. Mary Reid Kelley's performative videos about World War I-era nurses and sex workers imagine narratives of trauma and survival that have been lost to history in order to express the untold contributions of women in wartime (figs. 3a–b), while Stephanie Syjuco updates the era's innovative tactic of dazzle camouflage to evoke a twenty-first-century "globalized vision that reflects the complexities of migrations and colonizations."<sup>6</sup> Joe Sacco, who has reported from numerous contemporary war zones and made comics about his experiences, turned to World War I for his extraordinary panoramic drawing of the Battle of the Somme, which crystallizes his commitment to bearing witness to the ravages of modern warfare (2013; fig. 4). "I had no means of indicting the high command or lauding the sacrifice of the soldiers," he explains. "All I could do was show what happened between the general and the grave, and hope that even after a hundred years the bad taste has not been washed from our mouths."<sup>7</sup>

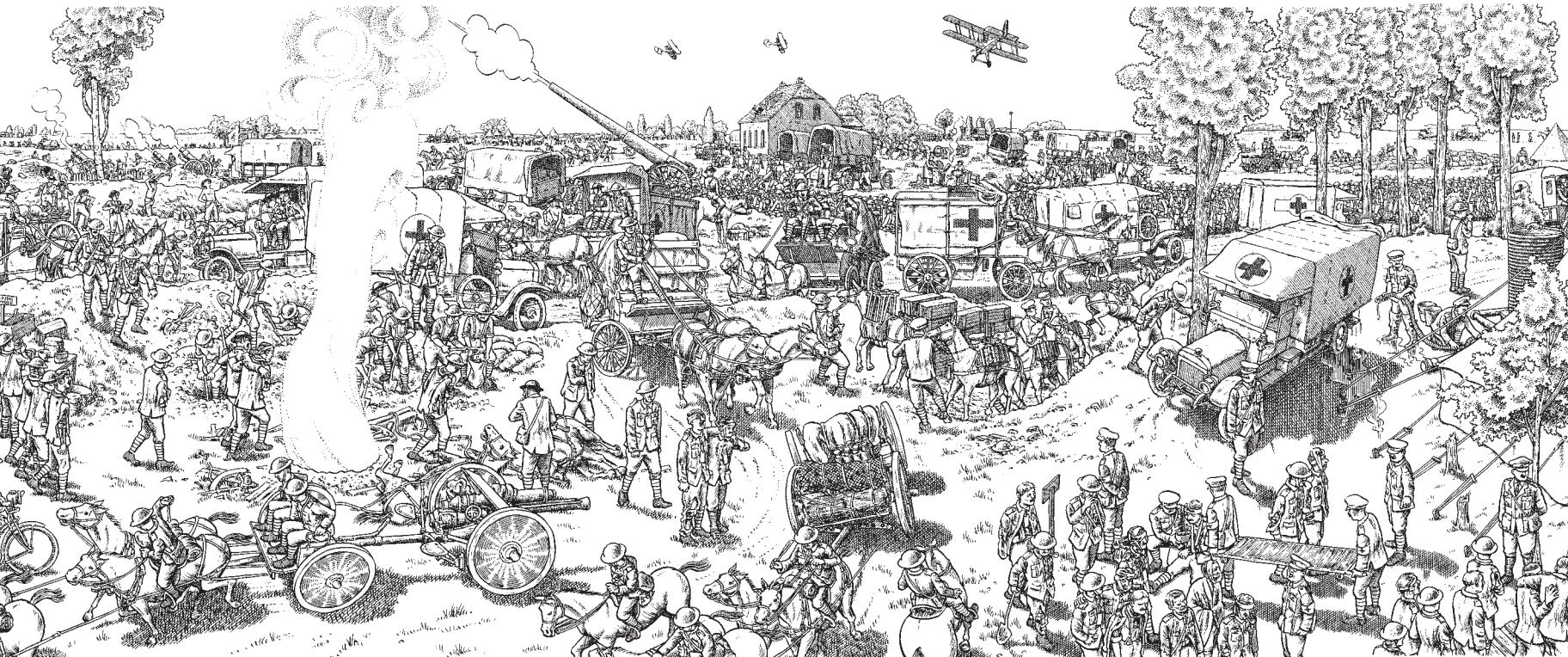
In the end, though, the importance of the art in this exhibition lies not in its ability to inspire artists today, but rather in its capacity to let us feel the deeply mixed emotions—pride, angst, uncertainty, triumph, and regret, among many others—that reverberated widely as Americans pondered for



the first time, but not the last, whether or not to commit millions of lives to an unclear struggle in a far-off land. Art does not provide answers, but it raises important questions. The works in *World War I and American Art* help us see in fresh and unfamiliar ways where we were headed a century ago and, by extension, where we may be headed today.

- 1 For instance, Richard Cork, *A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the Great War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1994); Javier Arnaldo et al., *1914! The Avant-Garde and the Great War* (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2008); Uwe M. Schneede et al., *1914: The Avant-Gardes at War* (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2013); and Gordon Hughes and Philipp Blom, *Nothing but the Clouds Unchanged: Artists in World War I* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute and Museum, 2014).
- 2 An exception with regard to a broad view is David M. Lubin, *Grand Illusions: American Art and the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also Jennifer Wingate, *Sculpting Doughboys: Memory, Gender, and Taste in America's World War I Memorials* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).
- 3 Milton W. Brown, *American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 71.
- 4 John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 421–23.
- 5 Lubin, *Grand Illusions*, chapter 5.
- 6 Stephanie Syjuco, “Dazzle Camouflage Propositions (Effed-Up Eye Hurt),” 2013, [http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p\\_dazzlecamo.html](http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p_dazzlecamo.html).
- 7 Joe Sacco, *The Great War: July 1, 1916, the First Day of the Battle of the Somme—An Illustrated Panorama* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 2.

Figure 4. Joe Sacco (b. 1960), detail from *The Great War: July 1, 1916, the First Day of the Battle of the Somme—An Illustrated Panorama*, with text by Adam Hochschild (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013)



© Copyright, Princeton University Press. No part of this book may be distributed, posted, or reproduced in any form by digital or mechanical means without prior written permission of the publisher.

