Depiction of Violence in Visual Art

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The heart is realization of life and its expression is art. An artist is a keen observer, sensitive to changes happening around him, and has the ability to look both inwards and outwards. With his imaginative ability and technique, an artist can create artworks on the issues based on the happenings in his era which can be used as visual documentations of actual events of history or fragments of his imagination.

Art will remain the most astonishing activity of mankind born out of struggle between wisdom and madness, between dream and reality in our mind. The act of violence is also a state of mind. If art is the creative force of the mind, violence is the destructive force of the mind. Man has been a witness and a participant in proclaiming and propagating violence since the advent of mankind. Whether it is in the pre-historic rock-art or the Greek art, the Renaissance period to the Expressionism or Cubism, the western contemporary art or the Indian ancient sculpture, the Mughal miniature to Contemporary Indian Art; the depiction of Violence in art has been seen in the manifestations in sculpture, painting, frescoes, murals, scrolls, manuscript illustrations and most lately in the form of graphics, comic book art, photography, digital art, installations and most recently video installations.

What one considers violent and how one responds to violent images remains culturally constrained. Throughout history, works of art have depicted various narratives of war and violence. Before the 3rd millennium B.C., in the Paleolithic, Mesolithic and the Neolithic age, art was focused primarily on animal hunting as a source of survival and also on the fertility images. The attitude towards war changed or got more focused towards it, when civilization became more centralized towards city and were state based. War and violence became more profound when boundaries became more important than humans. Towards the

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last 5 millennia, the power of the rulers and kings came to be judged by the power and the number of soldiers in their armies. From Ancient Greece to Rome, to Modern America, Europe, Asia and Africa, images of war and violence have always been an integral part of visual arts. Artists have always responded to the aggression in the society by visual manifestations. These were in the form of paintings on Greek vases or Roman Mosaics or sculptures and paintings in the Renaissance period or for that matter in the most recent times in the form of comic books, clip board art and very lately in the form of installations both audio and video.

Although there are innumerable works of art depicting violence, some paintings have become a landmark in the history of art as the most profound visual representations of violence in visual arts. This paper explores the aesthetics of violence in the visual imagination, specifically focusing on violent images as discussed in some selected paintings. In this discussion three land mark paintings of various periods by renowned artists have been chosen, that have projected war and violence in their own perspective, making these paintings a reference point on this issue till today.

The purpose of this discussion is to introduce the depiction of violence in visual art in various periods and the effect art has produced on the people and the society in those eras. The paintings chosen for discussion in this paper are as follows:

1. Paolo Uccello’s painting ‘Battle of San Romano’
2. Francisco Goya’s painting ‘The Third of May 1808’
3. Pablo Picasso’s painting ‘Guernica’

The Battle of San Romano

The Battle of San Romano is a set of three paintings by the famous painter Paolo Uccello. It depicts events that took place at the battle of San Romano in 1432. The perspective used was the narrative of war and violence and it highlighted the theme of war. Uccello’s painting celebrates Florence’s historic victory in war over Sienese in 1432. This was a golden age for Florence. The painting was commissioned by Piero de Medici in 1450, as a decoration panel for a newly built Medici Palace in Florence. As state sponsored art, this painting panel functioned at an ideological level of depicting the glorification of war. Uccello’s painting captures this spirit by portraying a dramatic new type of subject, experimenting with modern perspective. This painting was to be displayed above normal eye level so as to dramatize the effect of figures and the movement of humans and animals. In the 15th century when this painting was made, artists were considered to be little more than craftsmen in early Renaissance times. They were primarily dependant on the support and favors of cultured noblemen and rich people. Presently this painting is in the National Gallery, London.
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Paolo Uccello’s ‘Battle of San Romano’

When this painting was made, during that period war was glorified and velour, knighthood, victory and death in war were highly honourable. Such war scenes were also woven on tapestries, which were even given more importance than the paintings. Warfare was conducted with much ritual and pageantry. The Princes and noblemen were expected to be equally well versed in the art of warfare as in other arts. In this painting all the glorification of war is evident in the way the artist has composed the painting. Paolo Uccello’s painting captured the spirit of war by portraying the subject in a dramatic Way. It depicts a bloodless death - the soldier is shown dropped in the front, yet not a drop of blood is allowed to sully the glorious scene of the battle. The valour of the dead soldier is depicted, without blood, even though there is a huge hole in the back of the soldier.

The Third of May 1808

‘The Third of May 1808’ is by the famous artist Francisco Goya (1746-1828). At the age of 43 he became a royal painter. Goya’s this painting stands as the most memorable images of man’s inhumanity to man. In comparison to the above discussed painting, this painting was made almost 400 years later. It is interesting to understand and analyze whether the narrative of war and violence has changed or is it as it was earlier.

In this painting, the artist has interpreted the subject in such a way that it transcends its national, political and historical settings, making it relevant even in modern times. In this painting, Goya gives us an Anti-hero; not the warrior but the victim whose death becomes, almost by chance a rallying point for those struggling against oppression. This painting seems to be inspired from a real occurrence. Napoleon’s armies occupied Spain, but on the second of May 1808 the citizens of Madrid revolted against the French authorities. This had
serious repercussions, with the French army executing mercilessly hundreds of innocent people and the rebels. Goya however painted this incident half a decade later under the patronage of King Ferdinand VII, who became the Spanish ruler later on. The painting titled as ‘The Third of May 1808’, is an oil painting done on canvas in the size of 105 by 136 inches and at present is in the Museo Del Prado, in Madrid, Spain. This painting is a depiction of war and violence yet is a departure from the earlier painting.

Francisco Goya’s ‘The Third of May 1808’

Goya depicted in this painting the image of an Anti-hero, unlike the painting of Uccello which depicts knighthood and valor, this painting has the central figure in the format of a modern day crucifixion. The central figure hands are raised in the symbolic pose of Christ in His crucifixion. The right hand of the central figure has the same indentations in the palms as are in the paintings of Christ. His arms are wide open, depicting a heart rendering cry, an appeal against barbarity and tyranny and wide spread blood shed.

The painting clearly depicts the horror of violence with the expression of terror in the eyes of the Anti-hero. The white of his eyes glisten with fear and he gnaws his fingers in a childlike expression of terror. The painting depicts many symbolic elements, which give it a universal element and transcendent time and boundaries. For example, the tower at the back does represent the building of authority and perhaps a political institution yet it’s not specific of a particular time and place. The use of light and shade is done very dramatically. It also symbolically radiates the victim’s shirt, making him a Hero. This painting painted almost four hundred years after Paolo Uccello’s painting underlines the departure from the previous style to the depiction of war and violence at the beginning of the 19th century.
The death of a blameless victim had typically been presented as a conclusive episode, imbued with the virtue of heroism. *The Third of May* offers no such cathartic message. Instead, there is a continuous procession of the condemned in a mechanical formalization of murder. The inevitable outcome is seen in the corpse of a man, splayed on the ground in the lower left portion of the work. There is no room left for the sublime; his head and body have been disfigured to a degree that renders resurrection impossible. The victim is portrayed bereft of all aesthetic or spiritual grace. There is no attempt by the artist to soften the subject’s brutality through technical skill. Goya’s procedure is determined less by the mandates of traditional virtuosity than by his intrinsically morbid theme. The brushwork could not be described as pleasing, and the colors are restricted to earth tones and black, punctuated by bright flashes of white and the red blood of the victims. There is a clear depiction of merciless massacre, with the dead bodies lying in a pool of blood in the foreground of the painting.

**Guernica**

The last work of art being discussed in this paper is the famous painting ‘Guernica’ by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). He had artistic talents since his childhood, and worked in various styles during his life time. He was the pioneer artist of Cubism and his remarkable versatility and endless flow of ideas led him to contribute in almost every movement of the 20th century. This painting of Picasso was first exhibited at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1937.

Pablo Picasso’s ‘Guernica’

The painting is titled after the name of the city Guernica which was destroyed in broad day light by Nazi planes killing thousands of innocent people. Within fifteen days of the attack, Pablo Picasso began painting this mural. *Guernica* shows the tragedies of war and the suffering that war inflicts upon individuals, and in particular to innocent civilians. This monumental work has eclipsed the bounds of a single time and place, becoming a perpetual reminder of the tragedies of war, an anti-war symbol, and an embodiment of peace. On completion *Guernica* was displayed around the world in a brief tour, becoming famous and widely acclaimed. This tour brought the Spanish civil war to the world’s attention.
Guernica, painted in 1937 was an 11 feet by 6 feet mural done in black and white. It is in Museo Del Prado, Madrid, Spain. This masterpiece by Picasso depicts the violence and brutality that war inflicts on men, women, children and animals. This monochromatic mural has become an Anti-war symbol the world over. It’s a life size, mural and the colour scheme suggests life and death very symbolically. Picasso’s contribution is the variation in style, narration, and depiction of the same element of violence and war. The absence of colour and the monochromatic colour scheme of the painting were inspired by the newspaper reports of the devastation of war. This painting is in the cubist style of painting, a style introduced and mastered by Picasso.

The black and white painting depicts the awful suffering and horror suffered by the people of the town of Guernica, as it was carpet bombed during the Spanish Civil War – people, animals and buildings are wrenched apart during the senseless violence and different objects within the work of art come together to form a skull.

The composition has some very interesting elements depicted symbolically, which when seen intently somehow don’t appear abstracted. For instance ‘The Bull’ is the National symbol of Spain. In this painting Picasso has not depicted the Bull as fierce or savage but has in a way shown swishing its tail as if contemplating its next move and also seems like surveying what it has done. On one side of the painting there is a mother with a dead child hanging in its arms. The mother’s scream and agony is represented by the dagger like Sharpe tongue of the mother, which also appears like the shard of glass. As in the style of Cubism these shards appear throughout the painting.

In the foreground of the painting a severed arm is shown in the centre holding a broken sword. It is possible that Picasso was thinking back to Uccello’s ‘Battle of San Romano’, for he had interpreted warfare as a ceremonial tournament but Picasso had depicted them as powerful images of mass murder. In the painting he has also depicted an anguished horse, which symbolically stands for people. Above the horses head there is an electric light which also looks like an eye maybe the eye of God. The horror of the war is intensified with even the light shrieking with horror. Picasso in a way gives a reference to Goya in this painting, for the figure on the right side of the painting has the arms raised as in the Goya’s painting. Both paintings depict a savage brutality against innocent people and the transcendent the boundaries of nations and time.

For many people, this painting represents the inhumanity, brutality and senselessness of war, as well as protesting about the bombing of innocent civilians. Despite the horror and the gloominess of war and violence, Picasso has also projected hope and a new beginning with a symbolic flower, a single flower that gives a message that life continues to grow, and there is hope in despair.
CONCLUSION

Art has often been undervalued as a resource of documentation in the history of mankind. So much insight can be gained by viewing the works of art on war and violence. Art can perhaps change and contribute more, if we look at these works of art more intently and analytically. Art is the essence of the realization of life and feelings, an expression of the soul, the understanding of life, honesty and intense belief. This honesty and belief can maintain the desired peace. It is here that the fusion between art and peace takes root.

Art can communicate a universal message. It recognizes no barriers of language, religion, race and tribe. It knows no physical boundaries, sectarianism, constraints of creed and hatred. It knows only the universal mind, love, and the union of hearts. Art sings the harmonious song of humanity. Art awakens human consciousness. Hence to inculcate the awareness of peace, art should be used as a medium of communication. While the pieces of art depicting war make people realize the disaster of violence and help them sensitize about the brutal and violent outcomes of the conflicts, the message of love and peace can be sent through serene and harmonious paintings. An artist cannot solve any problems, but the manifestations in his art sometimes compel the eyes to see, the mind to think and the brain to act. A lot can be learnt from Art, if we want to do so!

REFERENCES

