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VISUAL ALLUSIONS TO THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR: PAINTINGS FROM THE DÜSSELDORF SCHOOL

IRÉN ANNUS

University of Szeged

Abstract: The Mexican-American War (1846-48) is often described as the first major war in US history inspired by the idea of Manifest Destiny. The significance of this war, however, has not been matched by a rigorous scrutiny of its representation in contemporary visual culture. This study hopes to contribute to filling this void through an iconological investigation of three American paintings made in the Düsseldorf Academy, by now canonized and perceived as ultimate visual treatments of the topic. The paper first discusses the war and the public debates surrounding it in the US, then turns to the visual scene and introduces how the war was portrayed in various art forms. Next, it touches upon the artistic milieu of the Düsseldorf Academy in preparation for the analysis of the three paintings to follow. The study argues that these images depart from the American tradition of depicting war through concrete battle scenes. Instead, they offer symbolic representations or allusions, approaching the war in terms of morality, political philosophy and its potential social and economic consequences, while also employing ambiguity to urge viewers to contemplate on the implications of the war. In the meanwhile, they seem to express little if any consideration for the impact of the war on Mexico, its culture, and people.
Keywords: Mexican-American War, American History Painting, American Genre Painting, Emanuel G. Leutze, Richard C. Woodville.

1. Neighbors at war

Nineteenth-century American history is often described as the era of expansionism: the purchase of the Louisiana Territory by Thomas Jefferson in 1803 symbolizes the ongoing efforts of the young nation to increase its territories through peaceful ways. Two decades later, the Monroe Doctrine (1823) warned against further European colonization efforts on the American continent, at once signaling that Americans consider the American continent as falling under their sphere of influence. The 1844 election of President Polk clearly indicated public support for the understanding that the US has a manifest right to expand to neighboring territories in order to spread democracy and Protestant Christianity. And the President also inherited a situation that soon led to a military conflict with Mexico.

The immediate reason behind the conflict regarded the status of Texas and some disputes over the borderline. Texas gained independence from Mexico in 1836, after the Treaty of Velasco, but no lasting agreement was achieved on its status and the new borderline. Once Texas was admitted to the US, the American government was interested to close the dispute once and for all. It first offered to settle the issue by purchasing the

contested region along with further territories of current California and New Mexico, but the Mexicans, insistent on guarding their newly established independent republic and feeling rather insulted in their national pride by the proposition (Kökény, 2018: 27), refused the offer. An armed conflict to end the border disagreement thus seemed unavoidable. Indeed, the war broke out on May 13, 1846, which ended with the Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo, signed on February 2, 1848. It concluded that the Rio Grande marks the official border between the two countries, which meant that the US annexed almost half of Mexico's territory. In return, the American government was obliged to pay US$15 million in compensation to Mexico and another US$5 million in reparation for losses American citizens had suffered in Mexico.

The Treaty was officially titled the *Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits and Settlement between the United States of America and the Mexican Republic*, which not only captured the intentions of the two governments signing the agreement – even though the Mexicans considered giving up these territories as an amputation that was required to save the life of the patient (Kökény, 2018: 32) – but probably was also a response to some of the public debates and opinion that surrounded the war in the US. In a recent study, Vajda (2018: 45) demonstrates that while the war with Mexico initially enjoyed general support in the US, there were also voices that opposed the armed conflict for a number of reasons. For one, it happened to be the first war Americans engaged in that took place on foreign land: the legitimacy of such a war was viewed with doubt by many, such as the Democratic Congressman Joshua R. Giddings, who in his speech "My Country, Right or Wrong!" (1846) characterized the war as an unjust and aggressive provocation on a peaceful neighboring country. The expansionist attitude inherent in the conflict and its potential effects on American political culture and institutions were major concerns addressed in the Senate by others, including John C. Calhoun. In addition, Northern Abolitionists, among them John Quincy Adams and Ralph Waldo Emerson, protested against the war because they feared it would strengthen the influence of the slave states – after all, Texas was admitted to the Union in 1845 as one of those, and the Wilmot Proviso, a proposal to prohibit slavery in areas acquired from Mexico once the war was concluded, also failed to pass Senate.

2. American visual culture and the Mexican-American War

The war took place at a rather ambiguous cultural period in the US. By that time, historical painting had lost its earlier popularity and the new genres that dominated the art scene were landscape painting and genre painting. In its heyday during the last quarter of the eighteenth and the first quarter of the nineteenth centuries, history painting and portraiture provided significant ammunition in the cultural substantiation of the political construction of the United States as an independent country with a distinct past of enormous sacrifices, supported by a pantheon of heroes dedicated to the creation of a new country and nation (Annus, 2007; Conn, 2002: 23-26; Lemiski, 1995). Portrayals of

outstanding American historical figures, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, along with depictions of the military events leading up to the establishment of the new state, were painted in abundance in the Grand Manner by renown artists, such as Gilbert Stuart, Benjamin West and John Trumbull. As the pinnacle of history painting, in 1817 Trumbull, the Painter of the Revolution, was commissioned by Congress to make four murals for the Capitol to commemorate the Revolution. The installation of these works in the Rotunda nine years later marked not only the peak of Trumbull's artistic career, but also the beginning of the vanishing of grand history painting that gave way to a new phase in American painting, governed by landscape and genre painting.

The leitmotif within the genre of history painting during the 1800s was military encounters, specifically battles, presented in the style of the Grand Manner so prevalent among artists in Europe. In her study of post-revolutionary French military painting, Siegfried (1993) notes that with the establishment of the modern nation state, the rhetoric of war painting had changed: it reflected the new ideology of the state and the "political redefinition of the individual's relationship to government, which had direct military implications" (1993: 235). Citizens were granted certain rights, which they could keep as long as the state remained intact. Thus, it was not only an obligation, but also the self-interest for the citizens to defend their state in case of war. This new rhetoric reflected "a fundamentally new ideology of waging war, which has been called 'patriotic militarism'" (Siegfried, 1993: 235). The launching of the war with Mexico was framed as a matter of national protection –since American soldiers had been killed by Mexican cavalry while protecting disputed territories in Texas– and was thus an apt example of patriotic militarism, resulting in as many as 73,260 state volunteers fighting along with 26,922 regulars in the war (Winders, 2006). Therefore, we may expect to find war paintings that reflected this new form of militarism: representations that glorify the heroism of the American soldiers as patriots, convey their feisty spirit, devotion to the cause, military excellence and eventual success, ultimately conjuring a sense of pride, safety and loyalty towards their nation.

Democracy, however, seems to have intervened. Instead of homogeneous, normative representations of patriotic militarism informed by the aims and convictions of President Polk and his political family, paintings attested to the complexities of the attitudes with which Americans viewed the events. The artists often captured specific aspects of the war and its significance, some painting far away from the events in their studios, while others depicting the events on site. The latter fall within what Siegfried identifies as the "eyewitness tradition of battle painting" (1993: 238), often bringing about images that were also documentary and anthropological in nature. In addition, various other forms of visual communication were in use, with possibly as much if not more impact than painting. For one, popular images were also made available as lithographs issued by successful print making companies such as Currier and Ives in the US, making copies of paintings and drawings accessible to a wider audience at a relatively low price. Initially starting as Stodart and Currier in 1834, the company went through a series of

transformations, but had remained faithful to its original mission of making artistic representation of topical subjects and of public sentiments available to the common people. Indeed, Kistrein finds that lithographs rather than oil paintings "left the most complete documentation of this war" (1944: 8), adding that since lithographs were distributed in high numbers, they were most instrumental in bursting patriotic feelings and drumming up support for the war in the homeland. Two, as Harrington also observed, "the Mexican-American War of 1846-48 may be considered America's first media war. It was covered by the press with correspondents in the field" (2013: 34), and their reports were often accompanied by sketches or political cartoons. They were possibly even more prevailing in shaping public opinion than lithographs because of their high circulation: the US census in 1840 "counted 1,631 newspapers; by 1850 the number was 2,526, with a total annual circulation of half a billion copies" (American Antiquarian Society, 11-3-2019). Moreover, these images were concerned with current news, could convey a plurality of perspectives and reflect on the swift succession of events in the course of the war. Three, this war was also unique in terms of visual representation as it "saw the first use of the camera in a war zone involving US troops – albeit on a very limited scale" (Harrington, 2013: 34).

Although the war events were depicted regularly in the visual reports accompanying the news, paintings during the war years and right afterwards added to a more sophisticated and nuanced interpretation of the war. Some of the paintings that since have become part of the canon are ones completed in Düsseldorf, far away from the actual events, by leading American artists, such as Emanuel G. Leutze and Richard C. Woodville, while other works were painted on site by eyewitness soldier artists, whose personal drives and experiences on the battlefield often colored the representation, as was the case with James Walker and Samuel Chamberlain. In addition to the proximity to the war events, personal background and level of artistic training and abilities, these artists also differed in terms of the nature of the portrayals: the Düsseldorf artists often used symbolism and offered veiled renderings or interpretations of the war, while the paintings completed on site conveyed direct, clear and unambiguous depictions of the events.

The watercolors and sketches made by soldier-artists were often complemented by their diaries which described the war events. Some of these artists were trained painters while others were soldiers with an interest in creating a visual record of their experiences. Their works are early, valuable illustrative examples of inter-American cultural, social and political encounters during the transgression of the US troops into Mexico. By now the cultural study of border-crossing has gained a "peculiar, globalocal" presence, to employ Cristian's term (2015), in the context of the Americas, investigating how certain works of art are characterized by the "display of both personal and public, and of national and transnational" (Cristian, 2017: 167). Many of these paintings, particularly by Chamberlain, are brilliant early examples for this: they convey the unique interplay between American and Mexican people and cultures, drives and expectations, at times portrayed through the

stereotypical representation of masculinities and femininities, making private experiences public and interpreting the public through the private.

3. Battle painting in the Grand Manner

The professional art world in the US was highly influenced by the Düsseldorf Academy till about the end of the 1850s. It was the artistic center where most of the promising and talented American artists would travel to improve their technique, including Emanuel Leutze, Richard Woodville, Eastman Johnson, Albert Bierstadt, George Bingham, etc. The technique associated with the Academy was summarized by Fitz as driven by "perfection and unity" with a focus on "the rules of form and composition [...] the arrangement of space and light, the easily interpretable gestures of the characters, their spatial integration and symmetry, and the harmony between fore-, middle-, and back-grounds" (2007: 19). The paintings were carefully composed as if theatrically staged, characterized by "solid academic craftmanship in the service of visual storytelling" (Truettner, 1995: 70). As for the themes, American artists distinguished themselves by being driven to "an independent American iconographic program rooted in patriotic conviction" (Fitz, 2007: 20).

Among the most influential masters in Düsseldorf at the time of the war was the German-born American artist, Emanuel Leutze, who also called it his home between 1845 and 1859. Although by the 1840s Düsseldorf artists distinguished themselves with finely executed landscape paintings, they were often narrative in nature and offered a platform for allegorical, religious, and historical storytelling. And Leutze, who was among the very few American painters at mid-century still devoted to the depiction of grand historical narratives, took full advantage of this. He believed that illustrious events of the past offer guidance into the future, as illustrated by his most renown work, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1850). His other work, *The Storming of Teocalli* (1848) can be regarded as an allegorical reading of the capture of Mexico City by the American forces in 1847.

Leutze had a reputation for being an "independent modern history painter who scrupulously researched his subject and infused it with a contemporary meaning" (Heyrman, 2012: 12). His *The Storming of Teocalli* takes the viewer back to 1520, portraying the Spanish troops led by conquistador Hernán Cortez storming the center of the Aztec Empire, Tenochtitlan, today's Mexico City. Based on the historical account of the event by William H. Prescott in *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), the image reflects the intrusion of white invaders into the biggest city in pre-Columbian America. The painting captures the grand battle scene on the very top of the pyramid which is heroically being defended by the Native warriors against the heavily armored Western invaders. Pohl describes the image as being obsessed with detail, characterized by a "tight, naturalistic rendering of both figures and setting that implies an accurate depiction of what actually occurred" (2012: 198) – which is perhaps a bit of an overstatement. Nevertheless, the picture does convey a sharp contrast between the two forces in their appearance and

armor, which immediately confirms in the viewer the firm suspicion of Spanish victory, reinforced by their flag appearing on the top of the pyramid.

Pohl also observes that in this painting, "Leutze problematizes the savage Aztec and civilized Spaniard stereotype, promoted by Prescott" (2012: 198). And indeed: while Leutze portrays the Natives as primordial and barbaric, through their clothing, armor and offering of a human sacrifice, he also depicts them as rather light-skinned, fine-looking, dignified, heroic figures, who gallantly fight to protect their home. In this, Leutze may have been inspired by the European concept of the Noble Savage and by the sympathy he felt towards the nations that rose up in Europe to fight for their independence in the spring of 1848. At the same time, the Spaniards are portrayed like wild savages, even though they appear as Western, thus civilized people, properly attired and armed (Pohl, 2012: 119; Fritz, 2007: 30). But their blind drive at colonization, the merciless killings and further intolerable acts they engage in, such as looting of the dead or grabbing a baby to throw it, bring shame to what is perceived as Western, as Christian, and the sense of moral and cultural superiority that these terms have come to signify, particularly in relation to practices of colonization. Ultimately, concludes Pohl, "neither side is morally superior" (2012: 199), an opinion she also shares with Wierich (2001) and Fitz (2007: 29). She adds that in this sense this painting is reminiscent of previous representations of the Spanish conquest in the Americas.

The early depictions of the Spanish invasion that appeared throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries show a great variety. Images in support of the Spanish conquest, such as the ones in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (c. 1550), celebrate Spanish presence in Mesoamerica, along with the cultural, religious and military impact it delivered – in this case for the Tlaxcalans who became trusted allies of the conquerors against the Aztecs, their long-term rivals. But Pohl had other artists in mind, such as the most renowned Flemish illustrator and engraver, Theodore de Bry, who recurrently portrayed the malice of the Spaniards in the New World, such as in his *Spanish Conquistadores Murdering Indians at Cuzco, in Peru* (c. 1590). It captures a scene of Francisco Pizarro's troops fighting against the Incas, ruthlessly slaughtering them all over the town. The cruelty with which the Spaniards turned the streets into bloodbaths dominates the image, making it an example of the Protestant loathing of what they perceived as Catholic moral corruption, and of prevailing anti-Spanish sentiments in Europe, as conceived in the historiographical tradition of the Black Legend. In addition, it also promoted "English Protestant forms of colonial control over those of the Spanish" (Pratt, 2009: 36), a cultural context that remained relevant during the Mexican War as well.

The key issue thus is the symbolic meaning of this painting with reference to the Mexican War: was this rendering of the historical event meant to further anti-Catholic sentiments and thus justify the invasion of Mexico by Protestant America, or was it meant to undermine the war by drawing a parallel between the Natives back then and the Mexicans, both forced to engage in a war in order to protect their homeland and freedom from invaders. Did Leutze wish to use religious bias to convey support for the war, or to

confer political philosophy upon the viewers to oppose the war? Fitz, for one, proposes that Leutze, a "liberal patriot," must have believed that "American freedom, justice, equality would come to the region that fell to America after the war" (2007: 29) – and thus, Leutze expressed sympathy for the war.

This line of argument may be supported further by claiming that Leutze, a Protestant by faith, could also have embraced anti-Catholic views, which might have been another reason for his support of the war. However, the context of his other images allows for the conclusion that he was not a religious bigot: capturing formative moments of the life of Christopher Columbus, his paintings, such as *Departure of Columbus from Palos in 1492* (1843), present Columbus as a hero and are void of apparent anti-Catholic sentiments. Moreover, Leutze expressed his criticism of the Protestant past as well: his painting *The Iconoclasts* (1846), for example, portrays a group of English Puritans desecrating a Catholic church in a rather barbaric manner, conveying his "convictions regarding the threat to liberty presented by fanaticism and intolerance" (Promey, 2003: 581). In addition, Leutze was also known to be a liberal, who supported the 1848 revolutions in Europe and the political values they wished to achieve, such as the right of nations to freedom and self-determination. But would his liberalism have translated into respecting national borders, thus objecting to the war, or into securing the spread of American democracy as the system that guarantees the liberties that so many desired? Hence the ambiguity of the representation, which ultimately may have been his intention to encourage the viewers to carefully consider the war situation; or, as a businessman, to secure the success of the painting among the broad American audience. Either way, it seems to have been in vain. When exhibited in the American Art-Union galleries, people were appalled by the violence it exposed (Wierich, 2012: 45) – as we know from Kistrein's study of American battle paintings made before 1916 (1944), combat images are characterized by the "lack of any physical violence," which Truettner also confirms in a later study, noting that "scenes of violent physical combat were –and are– rare in American art" (1995: 71).

4. Genre painting and the war at home

The theme of the war also appeared in the popular artistic genre of the age, genre painting, particularly in some of the paintings by Richard C. Woodville. Just like many of his contemporaries, he also traveled to Düsseldorf to study at the Academy of Art. There he started working with his earlier master from Philadelphia, Emanuel Leutze, and later with the German Karl Sohn, distinguished by his idealistic, romantic manner of precise artistic execution. Woodville spent six years in Düsseldorf, between 1845 and 1851, and thus he followed the war primarily through the press. He was merely twenty-one years old when the war broke out, thus it is no wonder that he captured the dynamism and perspective of the younger generation in his images. In fact, it seems that the war served as an apropos for him as to address the changing of the guard in America, the apparent

generation gap, the varying understandings of the world and of the course the country should be taking, and the developments that energized the young.

These concerns in particular are addressed in his *Old '76 and New '48* (1849), an intergenerational domestic drama triggered by the Mexican War. This image represented a fresh approach to the visual thematization of the war, which Wierich explains as "history is domesticated and relocated from the battlefield into the comfortable home of a multigenerational American family" (2012: 46). It is perhaps even more vital to recognize that with this choice, Woodville at once also constructed the war in particular and political affairs in general as private, personal matters that would concern citizens in a democratic society. A group portrait in a middle-class home, the picture depicts a young man in a military uniform in the center, who, having just returned from his service in Mexico, animatedly describes his war experiences that left him with an injury on his arm. With him, sitting in a pair of mud-stained pants, his hat, gloves, and sword thrown on the ground beside him, the image conveys the immediacy and excitement with which he is giving his account. His parents and sister are soaking up his words, also expressing concern and a sense of relief on their faces. The composition is rounded out by the figures of the Afro-American house servants who go unnoticed as they listen to his account carefully, standing quietly in the doorway, wrapped up in the shadow forming at the back of the room. The only person who does not follow him with undevoted attention seems to be the grandfather sitting on the left, under the bust of George Washington. He is evidently a veteran of the War of Independence, still wearing the knee breeches that had been in fashion in the eighteenth century. Although the grandson is looking straight at him, he is looking down, sad and self-absorbed, as if lamenting the state of affairs in the country he had once fought for.

The painting authentically captures the ambiguity of the situation, which derives from the tension between the past: the old generation symbolized by the Revolutionary War, and the future: the new generation represented by the Mexican War. The old generation believed in the political values and ideals upon which the nation was built, according to which participation in an expansionist war could not be added to the glorious military history of the country, while the new generation's vision and energy to shape the future of the country was through territorial and economic growth, for which they were willing to engage in a war and make personal sacrifices if required. The juxtaposition of the generations and the irreversible departure from the old ways of thinking is captured symbolically by the crack in the glass that covers the print of Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* (1818) a copy of which is hanging centered above the fireplace. Still, argues Johns, the contrast between the generations, political philosophies and desires is framed by Woodville such that it continues to "offer wares that can fulfill even opposing interests" (1991: 181) and points of views. It is perhaps even more important that the image inspires viewers to consider their own position regarding the war in a broader historical and philosophical context and encourages fellow citizens –who, as it reminds

us, are adult white men of means– to recognize that matters of the state are their own, and that they should form considerate opinions and take actions if seen fit.

Woodville's probably most widely known image entitled *War News from Mexico* (1848) also connects to the war in a subtle manner. This piece is typically praised for addressing the changes in communication: the emergence of the newspapers and their power in creating news, distributing information, and shaping public opinion. In a broader sense, Wolf argues, it also captures changing market forces, their impact on the way knowledge is produced and disseminated, introducing "older ways of seeing in competition with alternative sensibilities, [and] the effort of the artist to consolidate his position within the newer codes" (1984: 334), while Wright reads the image as capturing "the social life of information" (2014: 163). The main character of the painting is undoubtedly the newspaper. The group of people surrounding the reader in the middle signify different parties interested in the news of the outcome of the war for different reasons.

From the perspective of the representation of the Mexican War, the image can be interpreted as reflecting the concerns of the cross-sections of American society, which becomes apparent on their faces and body language as they respond to the news of the Mexican surrender that ended the war. A moment of public drama that exposes personal concerns about the war, the reading of the news is staged on the front porch of the American Hotel, on the column of which we can still recognize a faded recruitment notice. The reader, along with a couple of fashionably dressed young men surrounding him, is the most excited about the news, possibly because of the high stakes he may have in the outcome of the war: potential investments and economic gains, with no more fear of being conscripted. On the right, Woodville grouped typical figures on the margins of society: two young African-Americans, attentively listening to the news that had a lasting effect on their future; an elderly man sitting on a chair, wearing a yeoman's straw hat and knee breeches, reminiscent of the grandfather figure of *Old '76*, who learns the news through the mediation of another man; his attire, goggles, cap and gloves in hand imply that he is a traveler, and thus an outsider; and a woman, whose face appears in the window, possibly a worrying wife or mother. Pohl's observation that this image is not a celebration of "the glories of battle, but the business of war and of the patriotism of US entrepreneurism" (2012: 202) is well taken. However, only the young and the male display celebratory excitement, while all the others seem to be deeply wrapped in thought about what the victory may mean and bring about for them. Woodville leaves it to the viewers to decide where they would appear in the composition.

5. Conclusion

Wars are always caught up in an intricate matrix of specific interests and deeply rooted fears, specific values and grand ideals, unique experiences and powerful ideologies – and so are their representations. The three paintings discussed in this study bear witness to this claim: they are visual allusions to the Mexican-American War that capture faithfully

the vital moral, political, social and economic concerns in the US that surrounded the military action. At the same time, they also convey a sense of civic duty by inspiring viewers to recognize that the personal and political are profoundly intertwined, thus they cannot escape contemplating on matters such as a war with a neighboring state. The American audience at mid-century denounced the violence that faced them in Leutze's charged historical depiction of a decisive colonial battle but was receptive to the narratives through which Woodville's genre paintings demonstrated how war effects may filter into their daily lives. In the meanwhile, they demonstrated no concern for the realities, experiences, and needs of their neighbors, and what the war may mean to this newly established and fragile nation.

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