

THE CENTURIES' TOLL OF ART

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The long casualty list of art is being added to by the present phase of this war in a harrowing manner. Works of art have also fallen victim to former wars, but there is probably no other war which can compare to the present one in its destructive effect. For at no other time have old and new works of art been collected, preserved, and assembled in museums with such painstaking care as in the decades preceding this war; and never before have such concentrated means of destruction been employed. Yet war is only one among many forces ruinous to works of art. In the following we present a well-known German art historian's thoughts on the works of art destroyed throughout the ages.

WHEN we speak about the loss of works of art, we usually think chiefly of war. But if statistics on their death causes were to be compiled, they would show that it is the great natural disasters—earthquakes and volcanic eruptions—which have claimed most victims. During the last two thousand years, the countries of the Mediterranean basin, especially Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor, suffered about ten thousand earthquakes. This soil of the south, exceedingly rich as it was in the fruits of art, knew also no moderation in their destruction. The temple of Olympia, the thermae of Miletus, the sanctuaries of Delphi and Didyma, the temple precincts of Selinus, collapsed in the tremblings of the earth. Seaquakes and tidal waves swallowed up whole cities; the memory of such disasters lives on in the legends about Atlantis and Vineta. The eruptions of Mount Vesuvius and Mount Etna buried Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Catania; conflagrations destroyed parts of Rome and Alexandria. In 1776, a water-spewing volcano destroyed the "Pompeii of America," Antigua, the capital of Guatemala, with its Hispano-Indian baroque churches and convents.

The bowels of the earth dispense blessings as well as ruin. The earth lets rock and ore grow, it bestows wood and pigments on us. The salt of the earth is also a blessing to mankind, but it spells ruin to the work of human hands. For the salts of the soil collect at the base of ancient marble columns, eating away at the stone substance and reducing their girth until the columns topple over. In Palmyra and Karnak the temples suffered this fate. The sand dunes of the North African coast, although burying the major part of the ruins of Leptis Magna, preserved them from final decay. In dry desert regions the natural force destroying works of art is the wind carrying particles of sand. It grinds and blasts. The wind of the desert has gnawed away the face of the Egyptian Sphinx.

Even the gentlest of the elements, the air, hates the creations of the hands of man. The

dampness of the sea air devoured Giorgione's frescoes in Venice. Destructive substances contained in the air, over industrial cities, for instance, caused the building stone of cathedrals to crumble away, as was the case in Cologne until modern science undertook the protection of these monuments against wind and weather with the weapons of chemistry.

THERE is no end to the list of art treasures of which fire has taken toll. It was not always mischance or coincidence which fanned the flames; just as often it was folly, greed, or lust of destruction. Even marble was not safe from these enemies; being a limestone, limekilns were fed with works of art from Roman days up to the late Renaissance period. When German archaeologists excavated the Hermes of Praxiteles in Olympia, they could not find the lower part of his legs. Near by, a limekiln of the Byzantine period was discovered, surrounded by a lot of limbs from statues: they had all been destined to feed the kiln. The right foot of the Hermes statue was found here.

Nor were works made of metal or wood protected from the fate of being thrown into the fire. Throughout the Middle Ages, metal thieves ransacked antique temple ruins for the bronze dowel pins and clamps which joined the stone blocks and the drums of the columns together. The walls of the temples and the columns still show the bore holes of those looters, who stole the metal to melt it down. Sometimes, however, it was imminent peril which made it necessary to return precious metals from the artistic forms given them into the more utilitarian form of bars. In times of war the sonorous bronze of many church bells was transformed into the roaring barrels of cannons. When the plight of his country made it necessary, Frederick the Great did not hesitate to have the silver furniture of the Berlin palace and the silver trumpeters' choir in the knights' hall melted down to replenish his war treasury. Silvered wood replaced the precious metal.

One would think it was useless to burn works of art made of wood. But there have been examples of this, too, wood being, after all, a fuel. How many wooden saints from old churches must have suffered a second martyr's death in the stoves of the Reformation period!

Conflagrations have robbed the history of art of some of its chief monuments. In the Doges' Palace in Venice, Titian's *Battle of Cadore* went up in flames; in San Giovanni and Paolo in Venice, his altar painting *The Death of Peter the Martyr*. Dürer's Heller altar for the Dominican Church in Frankfurt am Main was burned early in the eighteenth century in Munich. Holbein's murals and ceiling paintings in London were devoured by fire, his façade paintings in Lucerne and Basel destroyed. Some fire ruins were preserved, for example Rembrandt's painting of *The Anatomy of Doctor Deymann*.

OF all the powers between heaven and earth, the soul without feeling is the most destructive to art. The Gothic cathedrals were preserved in all their glory because the spiritual yearning from which they once sprung endured. The proud castles of the medieval emperors, on the other hand, crumbled as soon as the need for them vanished.

Every period allows part of that to perish which existed before and which has lost its appeal; but every period has also ignored things for which there was as yet no feeling: that has often enough been the tragic fate of artistic geniuses and their works. The slothful heart, the callous soul, are quick to find the brutal fists which complete the actual work of destruction, as is proved by the history of iconoclasts from the Middle Ages up to the French Revolution. Even well-meant bequests may mean death sentences to ancient art treasures. From 1630 to 1708, for instance, the custom existed in Paris of the corporation of goldsmiths presenting a new altar painting to Notre Dame on May 1 of every year. What became of the old altar paintings and carvings? Later the mania for "reason" and the fury of the mob of the Revolution decapitated the stone saints in Paris, Reims, and St. Denis, as they could not drag them to the guillotine. During the sixties of the last century the Taping Rebellion destroyed the Porcelain Pagoda which Emperor Yung Lo had built in 1403-1428 in Nanking; it was one of the wonders of the world.

To political and religious fanaticism is added an aesthetic fanaticism. It is, for instance, an open question whether in the looting of the Greek temples by the Roman conquerors it was the soldiers or the collectors who destroyed more. Great art collectors such as Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey systematically stripped the provinces and carried off thousands of

works of art to their villas. When Verres, the greatest of these art fiends, was given the choice by Mark Antony either of handing over his (looted) Corinthian bronzes or of dying, he preferred death to the loss of his beloved collection. Private collections have always been more threatened than public ones, since the sense of responsibility of the individual is, as a rule, a protection very limited in duration. After Mazarin's death, his famous collection fell into the hands of the uneducated husband of his niece. This barbarian had the naked statues hacked to bits because they offended his modesty. One of the finest novels in the world's literature, Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, was born out of the writer's indignation over the mutilations threatening the cathedrals from all sides: "The priest covers them with paint, the architect scrapes them, and finally the people come and tear them down."

In the West it was Christianity which, through the commissions given by the Church, became the greatest power since classical times to promote art. During the Middle Ages by far the largest number of all works of art owed their existence in one way or another to the world of faith and the forms of ritual. On the other hand, countless art treasures fell victim to religious fanaticism. The Spanish conquests in Central America were accompanied by the destruction of ancient Aztec, Maya, and Inca monuments of art and culture. The victory of the Cross in the Oriental countries was bought with the loss of art treasures. In 435 A.D. Theodosius II ordered the destruction of all heathen temples. At that time Phidias's gold and ivory statue of Athena disappeared from the Parthenon in Athens, and a soldier destroyed the Serapis statue in Alexandria with an ax. In the days of Constantine the Great there still were in Rome some 3,800 bronze statues and some 6,000 other publicly exhibited works of art. What has become of these bronze regiments? How little has been preserved, and that only because chance, size, or some attributed meaning saved it from extinction, as was the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius (later set up in the Capitol Square in Rome by Michelangelo), which was protected by the legend that it represented Constantine the Great.

The fear of hell and of demons destroyed the naked heathen gods; but sometimes it also surrounded them with an invisible armor, so that many a vandal hesitated at the last moment to touch their noble limbs. Meanness and stupidity, however, have rarely felt any qualms at leaving their murderous traces. After the capture of Milan by the French in 1499, the archers of Louis XII destroyed Leonardo's model for an equestrian statue of Francesco Sforza. But it was not only the folly of laymen, religious fanaticism, and human callousness which sinned against the works of bygone art: