ART REVIEWS

Seeing the Civil War

Several exhibits mark 150th anniversary

By Mark Feeney | GLOBE STAFF  NOVEMBER 27, 2011

Winslow Homer’s “The Army of the Potomac - A Sharpshooter on Picket Duty.”

THE CIVIL WAR: Unfolding Dialogues


DISUNION! THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR 150 YEARS LATER

At: the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, through Dec. 11. 413-542-2335, www.amherst.edu/ museums/mead
HOME FRONT: Boston and the Civil War

and

TORN IN TWO: 150th Anniversary of the Civil War


THE PURCHASE BY BLOOD: Massachusetts in the Civil War, 1861-1862


You’d think the ongoing observance of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War would act as a prompt for recalling the war and reflecting upon its impact — except for one thing. There’s no need. The war has been and remains a constant presence in the national imagination. The subtitle of “The Civil War: Unfolding Dialogues,” at the Addison Gallery of American Art, acknowledges this ongoing relevance. The exhibition is one of at least five area shows honoring the anniversary.

Nothing in US history lives on as vividly - and unpredictably. Rick Perry mentions (then regrets mentioning) that Texas might secede from the Union. Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly has a number one best-seller about Lincoln’s assassination. Steven Spielberg is filming a biopic about the president, with Daniel Day-Lewis in the title role. “The past is never dead,” said William Faulkner, himself no mean Civil War connoisseur. “It’s not even past.”

That Civil War past may not carry the historical weight around here that it does in Faulkner’s Mississippi. The smile of victory fades long before the
grimace of defeat does. Yet no place farther from the Confederacy played as large a role in the conflict as Massachusetts - from Boston’s nurturing of Abolitionism to the many Massachusetts men who fought in the Union Army. The depth and extent of that role are shown in “Home Front: Boston and the Civil War,” at the Boston Public Library, and “The Purchase by Blood: Massachusetts in the Civil War, 1861-1862,” at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Reminders of the Civil War are all around us. What Harvard’s Memorial Hall memorializes is alumni who fell in the war. A few hundred feet away, Radical Republican Senator Charles Sumner sits in bronze, isolated on a traffic island at the north end of Harvard Square. The statue of a standing Sumner in the Public Garden overlooks Boylston Street and gets a lot more foot traffic. A few blocks up Boylston, Louis St. Gaudens’s lions inside the BPL’s McKim Building pay tribute to the Massachusetts 2d and 20th regiments.

Above all, there is the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial, by Augustus Saint-Gaudens (Louis changed the spelling of his surname to distinguish himself from his more successful older brother). It sits across from the State House, at once inspiration and reproach, as great a work of public art as any on this continent. “Torn in Two,” at the BPL’s Leventhal Map Center, includes some of Saint-Gaudens’s bronze maquettes for the memorial. “There they march,” William James said of Shaw and the men of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment at the relief’s dedication, “warm-blooded champions of a better day for man.”

The eloquence of James’s words is a reminder of how much the Civil War figures in our cultural memory verbally. Say this for war: Few human enterprises are as visually overwhelming, something attested to by works as diverse as Uccello’s 15th-century paintings “Battle of San Romano” and Coppola’s 1979 film “Apocalypse Now.” Yet what helped make the US Civil War a unique crucible of American identity and belief is how the words and phrases associated with it - slavery; equality; house divided; hallowed ground; brother against brother; of the people, by the people, for the people - both encapsulate...
the promise of America and mock it. It’s only fitting that words do so much to define the memory of a war which words did so much to define.

Glenn Ligon recognizes this Civil War centrality of the verbal, braiding together word and image, past and present, the historical and personal in his “Runaways” suite of lithographs at the Addison. Ligon appropriates the format of antebellum runaway-slave broadsides, using various descriptions of his own appearance for that of the slave. The result is a particularly potent example of not just the power of language in this context but also how immediate the war and its related issues can still feel.

Ligon seizes on mundane usage. The Civil War does not lack for more exalted language, courtesy of classic American writers: Whitman, Melville, Lincoln (great political rhetoric is nothing less, and often much more, than great prose spoken), Frederick Douglass, Stephen Crane. Lesser writers have contributed, too, from Julia Ward Howe with “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and Harriet Beecher Stowe with “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (“So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war,” Lincoln supposedly said when he met her) to Margaret Mitchell with “Gone With the Wind” and Charles Frazier with “Cold Mountain.”

Sometimes the war is present even when ostensibly absent. That absence can be overt. The household in “Little Women” lacks its patriarch because Rev. March is serving as a Union Army chaplain. Or it can take the form of an indeterminate urgency. Had Emily Dickinson written the lion’s share of her poetry after the war instead of during it would her verse have had anywhere near the same emotional velocity?

A printed text of Sumner’s speech “The Crime Against Kansas” is in “Disunion! The American Civil War 150 Years Later,” at Amherst College’s Mead Art Museum. The show is something of a curatorial marvel. It includes just 17 items, but they’re so varied and well chosen they afford an impressively informative overview of the period.

Sumner’s speech predates the war, of course, though “bleeding Kansas” was as much a part of the war’s making as Munich was of World War II’s. In this case, the senator’s words matter less than the paper they’re printed on. Dog-eared and slightly torn, this particular copy shows signs of wear and tear. The sheet’s sheer thing-ness is oddly
affecting, as well as a reminder of how much these words mattered to those who heard and read them.

Both the Addison and BPL have copies of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” on display. The Addison also has a watercolor portrait of Stowe as a young woman. The MHS has a manuscript copy of the “Battle Hymn,” and the BPL has a printed version. Both novel and lyrics are, in effect, more artful (and more effective?) versions of the recruiting posters also on display at the MHS.

The role of words in the war went far beyond literature and political oratory. The Union officer Nathaniel Bowditch’s portable writing case at the MHS is handsome and functional but not necessarily exceptional. The Union army was more literate than any previous large military force. Its soldiers documented themselves, quite literally, to an unprecedented degree, as the many letters at the MHS indicate. There were more modern forms of communication, too. Perhaps the two most startling items in “The Purchase by Blood” are the ticker tape of Lieutenant Colonel Wilder Dwight’s telegram informing his father he’d been wounded at Antietam and the telegram soon thereafter from William Dwight informing their father of his brother’s death.

Even as the Civil War was putting to the test fundamental American ideals, the war was being executed with innovative technology: telegraphy, railroads, ironclad ships, breechloaded rifles, rifled muskets and artillery. The BPL shows how radically, and rapidly, battle was changing. “Home Front” includes the prototype for the thousand pikes John Brown had had made to arm the slaves he hoped to lead in insurrection. That’s how little combat had changed from pre-history to 1859. A few feet distant are canister rounds recovered from the field of battle at Gettysburg. A short walk away, in the McKim Building, “Torn in Two” includes a Union officer’s Colt revolver, a weapon only recently patented.

Evidence of modernity can take less belligerent forms. “Torn in Two” offers Charles Minard’s 1866 chart contrasting European cotton imports in 1858, 1864, and 1865. Gloriously lucid, it would warm the heart of information guru Edward Tufte. It’s a reminder that the politics of race went hand in hand with the economics of race - a
reminder offered in a very different way at the Addison by Kara Walker’s moving 2009 video about Reconstruction, based on documents from the National Archives.

(However unintentionally, “Home Front” offers a commentary on this theme of modernity reshaping tradition. A number of flat-screen TVs show images relating to the war. This useful application of 21st-century technology enhances our understanding of 19th-century events. Except that someone had the bright idea to tart up the screens with gilded picture frames. At least the attendants aren’t required to wear frock coats and crinolines.)

Our knowledge of the war owes a great deal to another form of then-recent technology. Photography is the strongest counterweight to words in shaping our collective sense of the Civil War. There are many paintings and prints about the war, prints especially. Another aspect of technology was the growing popularity of mass communications. Newspapers and magazines hired artists to provide visual representations of military life and combat. Winslow Homer was the most famous. The Addison has several examples of his woodcuts for Harper’s Weekly. The best-known, “The Army of the Potomac - A Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty,” is also in “Disunion!” The paleness of the soldier’s trigger hand makes it almost seem to glow, and the placement of his canteen hanging from a branch suggests the presence - and moral weight - of an arboreal eye. Yet not even an artist as skilled as Homer could match the impact of the team of photographers assembled by Mathew Brady, including Timothy H. O’Sullivan, George N. Barnard, and Alexander Gardner.

A few years earlier, in the Crimea, the English photographer Roger Fenton had shown how a camera - despite long exposure times and the cumbersomeness of the photographic process - could convey a sense of war’s reality in a way that painting never had. Gardner dragged into place the dead Confederate in “Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Battle-field of Gettysburg,” then arranged his body and weapon just so. (The photograph is in the Addison show.) Chardin putting berries in a basket prior to painting them could hardly have been more exacting. Such artifice hardly matters. The vividness of the elements - and the unflinching gaze of the camera - are such that the consequences of combat appear immediate and unmediated unto revelation.

The war’s brutality, which technology did so much to exacerbate, brought with it a change in sensibility, which technology did so much to enable. These five shows abound in astonishing items. Some are remarkable because of their historical significance, others because of their intrinsic beauty, still others because of the pathos
attached to them. Nothing, though, is as striking as a photograph in “Disunion!” that bears the “CSI”-worthy title “Specimen No. 2749. Right Humerus and Elbow, Necrosis of the Entire Humerus Following Gunshot Fracture of the Epiphysis.”

The photograph is attributed to William H. Bell. The bone belonged to a 22-year-old Union private, who died of his wounds, Barney White (note that his name is nowhere in the title). Men had been dying in battle for millennia; think of all the many pikes whose use preceded John Brown’s. Among the countless artifacts resulting from those deaths, there had never been anything like this. Bones, yes - too many to bear imagining - but none recorded in such a manner. It’s not just that the means to make such an image, means medical as well as photographic, hadn’t existed. It’s that the sensibility to want to record it hadn’t existed. This sensibility could grasp that a piece of porous bone penetrated by bullets - once it had been mounted, specimen-like, on a pair of stakes - could have the look of a piece of heart-breaking sculpture. Bald, bare, mutely eloquent, clinical yet unaccountably beautiful: It’s Brancusi by way of Saint-Gaudens.

The war’s modernity and the war’s timelessness meet in a single embodiment: Lincoln.

In an era when kings and emperors still flourished, he was a democratic leader in face no less than name. Napoleon, to take just the most obvious example of ruler and traditional representation, had been short and balding and increasingly pudgy. A painter like Jacques-Louis David or Baron Gros, able to fudge those qualities on canvas, did. Even if they hadn’t, the emperor's innate sense of drama insured that no rendering of him would fail to flatter.

Lincoln - who had a sense of tragedy (comedy, too) rather than drama - was different. No artist, and certainly no photographer, could fudge the ungainliness of his features. There was nothing exalted about his homeliness, nothing grand about his attire. The man who stared into the lens of Gardner’s camera on Nov. 8, 1863 (a copy of the photograph is in “Disunion!”), looks like no national leader the world had previously seen - or, rather, been allowed to see. There had been countless ugly kings and emperors (oh, those Hapsburg jaws), but court painters concealed as much of that ugliness as possible. Not here, not now. “Let facts be submitted to a candid world,” the Declaration of Independence had said four score and seven years before. If ever there was a face fit for such submission, for such candor, here it was.

Lincoln’s utter contemporaneity found a match, though, in how he could sound
eternal - or at least biblical. Even as he recast the Sermon on the Mount - “with malice toward none, with charity for all” - he spoke in the rhythms and diction of Old Testament prophets. Stowe’s words had helped start “this great war,” Lincoln had said. His words monumentalized it and sought to redeem those on both sides who fought it. The measure of his success is how eagerly we remember the war. The measure of his failure is that we can’t ignore its lessons even if we wanted to.

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