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**The Changing Face of Violence in  
Painting: 19th-20th Centuries**

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This paper should be cited as follows:

**Indirkas, Z., (2015) "The Changing Face of Violence in Painting:  
19th-20th Centuries", Athens: ATINER'S Conference  
Paper Series, No: HUM2015-1365.**

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URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)

URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

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ISSN: **2241-2891**

17/02/2015

## **The Changing Face of Violence in Painting: 19th-20th Centuries**

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### **Abstract**

Violence has been—and continues to be—an element of every society and culture. The history of violence in works of art is as old as humanity itself. However the forms in which violence has been expressed in painting have varied conceptually as well as iconographically. Throughout the Middle Ages for example, violence manifested itself as a theme in religious subjects, particularly those dealing with the sufferings of Jesus. Such works are usually concerned with the exaltation of sacred personages while suffering and physical pain are rhetorically and iconographically interpreted as the price which one must pay for espousing the truth.

Major changes in cultural values driven by the French Revolution in the early 19th century also had a big impact on art. The rigidity of the Classical style made it inadequate as a way of expressing the feelings and thoughts of 19th century artists. Artists influenced by Romanticism in particular now wished to express their political convictions and criticisms in their art as well. This not only led to an increase in the number of paintings whose theme was violence but also resulted in greater attention being given to the socially-critical aspects of works.

This paper examines the works of a number of artists in the 19th to 20th centuries for whom violence was an important theme, looking at the details which these works reveal about the artists' worldviews and perceptions of society; the author also considers the evolution of violence as something legitimized by power and authority in the historical process.

**Keywords:** Violence, Painting, Victim, Punishment

*Violence: The Father and the King of All  
Herakleitos*

The objective of this paper is to do consider, through the art of painting, the evolution that the religious, legal, and political (martial) punishment of violence directed towards the human body has undergone, the changes that have taken place in their representation of such punishment. Owing to the broad and complex nature of the subject, issues involving personal violence such as homicide, rape, and duelling are excluded from the scope of this study.

Violence exists in every society and culture and the question of its origins is one that has beset humanity in general and long preoccupied the minds of scholars and scientists, especially psychoanalysts.

Is violence innate?

Ever since the 1920s when Sigmund Freud theorized that the passion to destroy (his “death instinct” was as strong as the passion to love (“life instinct”, “sexuality”), researchers have been investigating this issue.<sup>1</sup>

Researchers like the ethologist Konrad Lorenz<sup>2</sup> and the zoologist Desmond Morris<sup>3</sup> have advanced the view, based on their observations of animal behavior, that aggressive human behavior in the form of war, criminal activity, interpersonal conflict, and all manifestations of destructiveness and sadism are genetically programmed and only need appropriate opportunities in order to express themselves.

Psychoanalysts who espouse behavioristic theories (John B. Watson<sup>4</sup>, B. Frederic Skinner)<sup>5</sup> which hold that the theory of instinctivism is an oversimplified destructiveness, attribute aggressiveness not to human feelings but instead regard it rather as a form of socialization that shapes behavior.<sup>6</sup>

On the evidence of the past, it seems impossible to dissociate violence and history. Violence has existed in all societies and in every process of socialization. Nevertheless one observes different forms of violence arising from different societal conditions. Violence certainly continues to exist in our own day.

The perpetration of violence involving the human body is as old as human history. In Europe, the institutionalization of violence (torture) as a legally-sanctioned practice (which is to say its legitimization by political authorities) makes an appearance in Roman law. While such violence was allowable only in the case of slaves initially, it eventually became permissible in the case of free citizens who “committed treason”.

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<sup>1</sup>Erich Fromm. 1992. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Holt Paperbacks, New York, p.1

<sup>2</sup>For details see Konrad Lorenz. 1974. *On Aggression*. Mariner Books, Florida

<sup>3</sup>For details see Desmond Morris. 1967. *The Naked Ape: A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal*. Delta, New York

<sup>4</sup>John B. Watson. 1914. *Behavior An Introduction To Comparative Psychology*. Henry Holt And Company, New York

<sup>5</sup>B. Frederic Skinner. 1953. *Science and Human Behavior*. Macmillan, New York

<sup>6</sup>Erich Fromm, *Ibid*, p. 3

Violence gradually became a fundamental phenomenon in European civilization; and claimed its place in the Medieval law system as of twelfth century. In this period, the society had already set its boundaries both mentally and socially, having already defined its identity. But the society has also punished the threats which contradict its doctrines and belief system with torture, the most intense method of violence.

The understanding of the relation between society and violence back in the Middle Ages is totally different from that of today. It is considered as an interiorised phenomenon and a cultural reality that is totally tied to social codes. For this reason, the punishments of bodily torture should not be perceived as the rage crisis of the justice system which has lost all its calmness. The character of the pain, its intensity and its duration is related with the personality of the criminal and his social status. The character of the pain is determined according to the crime committed and it has a legal code. The amount of whipping, the place of the branding, the pile of wood and the time that they would stay on the Breaking Wheel is duly practiced. In the words of Michel Foucault “punishment takes place as a ritual”. In this *ritual*, the ruling party is the one who convicts the criminal, and the participants are the witnesses; and the body suffering to death is nothing but an object to watch. “exposure” is perceived as at least the victory of justice.<sup>1</sup>

More particularly if the crime is committed against the central authority or the church, sentencing to death by torture was one of the most essential ways of punishment which was considered as legal. Punishments like burning people alive or tying them to the breaking wheel were applied to religious communities who were adopting new beliefs and opposing the Catholic church.

We usually come across the representations of religious violence in the fifteenth century illuminated manuscripts. According to the medieval people the source of evil is the people going against the church and hence God.

For example the Amalricians, a heretical sect that emerged around the end of the twelfth century, sentenced to death by being burnt alive before Philip Augustus the King of France (1165-1223).

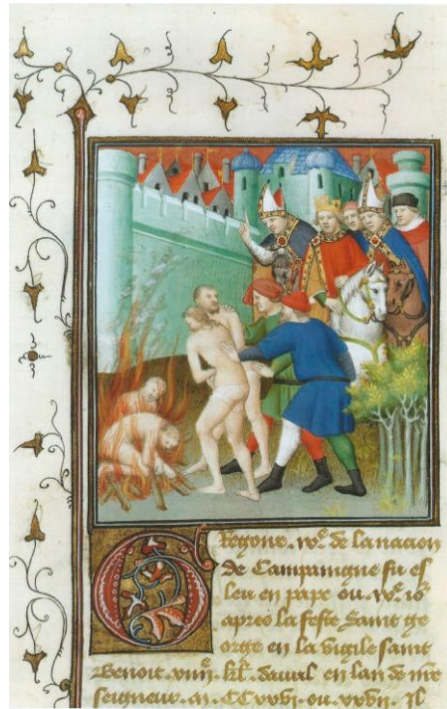
**Figure 1.** *Burning of Amalricians, 15th. C., Illuminated Manuscript, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris*



<sup>1</sup>Michel Foucault. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, New York, pp. 32-73

Another example of religious violence against the Cathar sect which started to appear in the second half of the twelfth century. The church considered the Cathar sect as a heretical movement and the Cathars as rebellious. In fact the attitude of the church against heretics has always been hostile. Because they believed that any deviation from the fundamental principles would break up the unity. However, suppressing the Cathar movement was very brutal, they were attacked many times and all of them were burnt to death alive.

**Figure 2.** *Papa Innocent II burning Cathars, Early 15th. C., Illuminated Manuscript, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris*



In fact the punishment of burning people alive was used before the Cathars. But the punishment was very common and in the collective memory has become the symbol of the violence of the “French” troops and the church.<sup>1</sup>

Wars also cause these kinds of massacres and violence. Starting from the middle of the twelfth century in the Western Europe and in the Balkans, both the attitude of the indulgence committee and the inquisition court and the punishments that the Catholic church inflicted on those who opposed Catholic belief caused growing unrest and reactions. And in the 16th century, under the leadership of Martin Luther and Jean Calvin, a reformation movement against the papacy started and unfortunately this opened the door to bloody and violent wars which continued for years.

The Protestants who were hanged by the Spanish Catholics, and the bodies piling up on the ground show us the dimension of the violence.

<sup>1</sup>Cloude Lebedel. 2011. *Understanding the tragedy of the Cathars*. Editions Ouest-france, p. 66

**Figure 3.** *Spanish Soldiers Killing Protestants in Haarlem, 2nd of 16th C., Colour Engraving, Private Collection*



In Europe, torturing people as a form (method) of execution has continued for ages. For example, breeking wheel was used in France, in Germany and Prussia up to early nineteenth century. In England criminals were hanged, drawn & quartered at this time; public hangings continued into the nineteenth century.

On May 27th 1755 Louis Mandrin the son of a wealthy tradesman in Saint-Etienne-de-Saint-Geoirs, was put on trial as he smuggled goods to France in order to evade the tax regulations and he was sentenced to death. They tied him to an “X” shaped device where they broke both his arms and legs with an iron rod. What was left of Mandrin’s body was exposed to the public on the Breaking Wheel.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 4.** *Louis Mandrin in Prison, 18th C., Engraving, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris*



Michel Foucault’s book of *Discipline and Punish* horrifically relates Damiens’ execution scene who unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Louis the fifteenth King of France in 1757. Damiens was taken to the Grève Plaza and his arms and legs were torn out by hot pliers while he was on the gallows. The

<sup>1</sup>Julius R. Ruff. 2001. *Violence in Early Modern Europe 1500-1800*. Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 11-12



hand he used to stab the king was cut off and the body parts that were pulled out by pliers were burnt by sulphur. Moreover, his remaining body parts were torn apart by tying them to four horses, and they were burnt and the ashes were scattered into the air.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 5.** Robert François Damiens, 18th C., Engraving, *Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris*



However at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of nineteenth century we see the practice of torturing the body; despite all arguments is almost extinct. This practice being no longer valid, the modern judicial system, the politically and morally new regulations in the criminal justice act have established important social changes.

Starting from 1792, an equal form of death penalty (*la mort egalitaire*) for all criminals has been accepted, and the guillotine started to be used in France (continued to be used in other European countries). In this way the painless way of execution without touching any body parts took the place of torture. However, despite all the severe criticism, the “exposure” of the body has continued for some more time. (However, in wars, violence has always been used, especially in Fascist countries, up to the 20th century)

By the end of this era (approx. 1790) enlightenment continued with conflicts, new ideas were developing, painting was effectively being included in the history of thought, an era where the artists could bring to the fore their critical opinions, individual political views, their feelings and their social reactions. In this era a new concentration on the predicament and feelings of the individual began to emerge, resulting in a new concept of the human predicament-the **Victim**.<sup>2</sup> The glory of victory was no longer the only remembrance of war; certain individuals and power groupings started to commemorate the death of “anonymous heroes”. This provides a different

<sup>1</sup>Michel Foucault. *ibid*, p. 3

<sup>2</sup>Pei-Ying Wu. 2009. Visual Representations of Violence in the Visual Arts. In *Cultures of Violence*. ed. Jonathon E. Lynch, Gary Wheeler



understanding of violence and also changed artists' perspectives. And together with pain and death, violence has also become an important theme of art.

Goya (1746-1828) a genius painter and engraver of the century, like many of his contemporaries, believed that the reason for the decadence in Spain was the church and its extremeness.<sup>1</sup>

To that strongly felt decline was added the political climate of the war of independence that provided Goya with his most representative works, concerning the capital role that the artist might play as a witness of his times.<sup>2</sup>

The Painting that commissioned by the Spanish monarchy<sup>3</sup> the execution of the Rebels on *The Thirth of May 1808* was created as a protest against the Napoleonic occupation of Madrid, in which Goya created a visual emphasis on the dynamics of being a victim represented with sensitivity.

**Figure 6.** *Francisco Goya, The Thirth of May 1808,1814, Oil on Canvas, 268 x 347 cm., Prado Museum, Madrid*



The victim in a white shirt who is about to be killed with his arms wide open dominates the dramatic structure of the painting. Still there is neither fear of death nor rage on his face and he is ready to die. This composition with dying people, the darkness of the night and the light of the lantern makes us feel the destructive force of violence. In contrast to the particularly vivid detailed depiction of the victims, the portraiture of the perpetrators is in the form of a geometrical firing line. Their faces are hidden, their guns are in a horizontal position and they are represented as mechanical killing machines.<sup>4</sup> Maybe Andre Malraux's commentary on the painting is the most accurate one.

<sup>1</sup>Marc Restellini. 2013. *Goya et la modernité*. Pinacothèque de Paris, Paris

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>3</sup>The Execution of Rebel on 3rd May 1808 was commissioned by Cardinal Don Luis María de Borbón.

<sup>4</sup>Pei-Ying Wu, Ibid

*An endless procession of misery moves forward from the depth of ages towards these figures of horror and accompanies their torments with its subterranean chorus. Beyond the tragedy to his country, this man who heard no longer wished to lend his voice to the deep silence of death. The war was over, but not its absurdity.<sup>1</sup>*

After this renowned piece, Goya depicted his criticism against the ongoing civil war in his country (1808-1814) in his thematic group of etchings under the name of “Disasters of War”. In his etchings which he completed in 1820, Goya recorded the horror of war and his hatred of violence which was laid bare beyond political justification.

Among these works, the most striking ones are those which depict the firefight between the civilians and the soldiers. *The victim shredded with a sword* (what can be done worse?)

**Figure 7.** Francisco Goya, (*What can be done worse*), 1815, Engraving, 13,7 x 20,7cm., Private Colection, Madrid



*The civilians killing the soldiers (the same)*

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<sup>1</sup>Andre Malraux. 1957. *Saturn: An essay on Goya*. Phaidon Publishers, London, p. 122

**Figure 8.** *Francisco Goya, (The same), 1815, Engraving, 16 x 22,1 cm., Prado Museum, Madrid*



*Three prisoners ...* What is common in these three paintings is that they are nameless, random, depictions of bodies. Goya not only deeply empathized with the victims but also made sure that the pain in the paintings is transferred to the audience.

**Figure 9.** *Francisco Goya, c. 1815, Francisco Goya, 1859, Francisco Goya, 1859, 11 x 8,5 cm., Engraving, 11 x 8,5 cm., Engraving, 11 x 8,5 cm., Engraving, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid*



Emile Friant (1863-1932) The French naturalistic painter who is against death penalty, painted *The Capital Punishment* in 1908 carries a special meaning. It was just about the time when the abolition of the death penalty was being discussed thoroughly. Although the socialist government in power was in favour of the abolition of this punishment act, they mostly came out against it when it was a matter of rape or homicide.



**Figure 10.** *Émile Friant, The Capital Punishment, 1908, Oil on Canvas, 166 x 167,6 cm., Art Galery of Hamilton, Ontario-Canada*



In Emile Friant's painting what is important that the condemned looking at Christ on the cross through the crucifix, while being taken to the guillotine representing that both of them are victims- the son of God and the *condemned*, the son of man himself.<sup>1</sup>

In the 20th century, one of the primary works that discusses the social violence is Pablo Picasso's (1881-1973) *Guernica*. The painting is about the bombing of a small town in Basque Country during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) with the purpose of testing new weapons. Picasso has dedicated his work *Guernica*, to the victims of this arbitrary horrifying ruthlessness.

**Figure 11.** *Pablo Picasso, Guernica, 1937, Oil on Canvas, Newspaper Print, Postage Stamps, 349,3 x 776,6 cm., Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid*



There are no obvious perpetrators in the painting; nor do the bombers or bombs appear in the composition. Technology not only changed the means of warfare but also the relationship between perpetrators and victims. The battlefield is constituted in the implied sound of the victims' wails and their grief.<sup>2</sup>

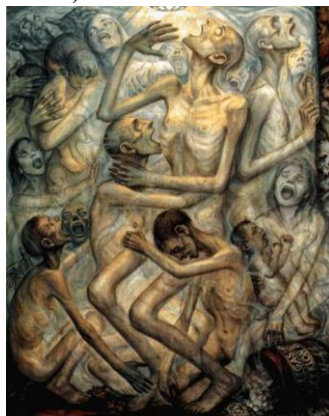
The magnitude of terror and horror practiced in the genocide of Jews during the WWII has been reflected not only in films and documentaries, but also in paintings. David Olère, as an artist sent to Auschwitz in 1943, felt

<sup>1</sup>Robert Badinter, Laura Bossi. 2010. *Crime & châtiment*. Gallimard, Paris, p. 206

<sup>2</sup>Pei-Ying-Wu, *Ibid*.

himself obliged to artistically capture what was happening there. In his works he gave voice to the misery, humiliation, and the mass murders in the gas chambers. These works are very significant for both their aesthetic and documentary value.

**Figure 12.** David Olère 1902 – 1985, *Gassing*, Oil on Canvas, 131 x 162 cm., The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, New York



In today's understanding of the modern state, the concept of citizenship is well established, and it is associated with justice, equality, and universality. Punishments have become more humane. European countries taking the lead, the death penalty has been abolished in many countries. But despite all the efforts, violence still continues. Especially local wars like the ones in Iraq and Bosnia and the terrorist attacks going on all around the world are causing great pain. If we consider art as the representation of life, we can say that as long as violence exists in life, it will continue to exist in art too.

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