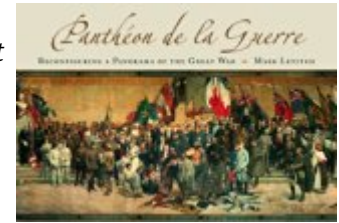


**Mark Levitch.** *Panthéon de la Guerre: Reconfiguring a Panorama of the Great War.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006. 224 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-1678-6.



**Reviewed by** Martha Hanna

**Published on** H-War (July, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Janet G. Valentine (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College - Dept of Mil Hist)

In *Panthéon de la Guerre* Mark Levitch tells a fascinating tale of artistic vision, cultural politics, and Franco-American relations, and he tells it very well. He traces the intriguing, and often sad story of a patriotic work of art, conceived in 1914, completed in 1918, and then reconstructed after 1945 to mean something very different. The piece of art, as his title and subtitle suggest, was the *Panthéon de la Guerre*, a massive panorama of the Great War, imagined, executed (with considerable help from a retinue of artists and artisans), and introduced to the Parisian public by two elder statesmen of the French art establishment, Pierre Carrier-Belleuse (1851-1933) and Auguste-François Gorguet (1863-1927). The finished product was to be a permanent--and enormous--memorial to a nation in arms. Given the intended primary audience, and the patriotic ardor of the artists who executed the project, France's contribution to the war--represented most poignantly by the carefully rendered portraits of countless fallen *poilus*--was to assume center stage. And this is indeed how the *Panthéon de la Guerre* appeared when President Raymond Poincaré officially opened the panorama to public viewing in

October 1918. Yet, this is not how the *Panthéon* appears now in its permanent home in Kansas City, Missouri. Rather, the *Panthéon*, much reduced in size and radically reconfigured, was re-assembled at the height of the Cold War (under the guidance of a one-time doughboy and Missourian artist, Daniel MacMahon) to commemorate the idealistic vision of Woodrow Wilson, and to acclaim the central role the United States played in 1917 (and beyond) in defending the cause of freedom. How a work of French patriotic art became an icon of American political orthodoxy is central to the story Levitch traces with elegance, insight, and intelligence.

Too old to fight, Carrier-Belleuse and Gorguet did what many of their generation did; they chose to contribute to the French war effort by deploying their particular talents to reinforce a message of patriotism. To this end, they created a massive visual tribute to the men (and occasional woman) of France who sacrificed themselves to the national cause; to the nation's gallant allies, and to the statesmen of the Entente cause who supervised the war effort. The noncombatant mobilization of France's cultural elite was a central element of the

national war effort; writers and scholars devoted much of their intellectual energy to defining what was at stake in the war and why unwavering resolve was critical to the nation's very survival. But artists could contribute to the war effort in a way that most writers could only envy; they could provide both a visual representation of the land ravaged by alien, barbaric invaders, and a moving tribute to the men-in-arms and their many international allies who fought to liberate France from the enemy's merciless grip. This, at least, is how Carrier-Belleuse and Gorguet imagined their artistic enterprise. The *Panthéon de la Guerre* would be a work of art of unprecedented scope: "Measuring an astounding 402 feet in circumference by 45 feet high, the *Panthéon* contained about five thousand full-length portraits ... [its] largest section and principal focus was a Parthenon-like 'temple of glory' dedicated to French heroes ... animated portraits of about four thousand figures, mostly bemedaled soldiers, many of whom had been killed." (pp. 5-8). If the "temple of glory" constituted a memorial to some of the 1.4 million French men who died in the war, the rest of the panorama celebrated the multinational alliance that fought on the side of France. The Serbs and Montenegrans, Portuguese and Italians, British, Russians, and Americans: all were given space on this paean to the power of international cooperation. Indeed, as the war lasted longer than anyone had anticipated in 1914, new political alliances and revolutionary upheavals forced the artists to modify their original vision. By 1917, Russia was no longer the secure French ally it had been at the outbreak of war; and if Russia's role, muddied by the Bolshevik Revolution (sinisterly portrayed and with explicit anti-Semitic inflections in the final vision), could no longer be represented as that of a steadfast ally, then America's entry into the war was both cause for celebration and occasion for artistic improvisation. Woodrow Wilson, his wartime confidant, Colonel House, and other prominent Americans had to be inserted into a work of art that was ,and would remain for the

next seventy years or more, always subject to revision.

When the *Panthéon* opened in October 1918, it was housed in a custom-built site large enough to contain the enormous circular structure, and situated in the very shadow of the Invalides. To recoup their costs--this was, after all, a commercial venture as much as an avowal of patriotism--the artists charged admission to all but uniformed soldiers. This did not deter the crowds who flocked in the immediate aftermath of the war to the site; indeed, more than eight million visitors marveled at the display while it was in Paris. Some went to see memorialized the son or husband whose portrait could be discerned on the staircase of heroes. Levitch notes that "the *Panthéon's* portraits ... not only contested the war's facelessness but also offered consolation--private and public--by refusing to treat the war's losses as a mass death.... By making portraiture the touchstone of the entire work, the artists, on an unsurpassed scale, privileged the human face and individual expression as a form of resistance to the anonymity of modern war" (p. 72). Grieving civilians were not the only ones to seek solace or inspiration in this unusual work of art. Many who went to see the panorama were soldiers recently released from the trenches, awaiting passage home to Australia, or America, or, no doubt, Angoulême, Arras, or Arles. Whether French or foreign, these soldiers were (as far as we can tell) ardent admirers of the work of art that rendered homage to their collective efforts. One Australian soldier enthused: "A book could not describe it--the sentiment, the glory and the art it contains" (p. 84).

By the mid-twenties, however, public interest in the *Panthéon* was well near spent, and it was no longer a reliably profitable venture. Perhaps its money-making potential could be best exploited if it were to travel abroad, finding new audiences (with well-lined pockets and a taste for patriotic bombast) across the Atlantic. And thus it

was that the *Panthéon* was dismantled and shipped to the United States in 1927, in a crate so huge as to warrant wondrous headlines in its own right. Not since the transportation of the Statue of Liberty had the French sent America such a vast, and popularly heralded piece of public art. Yet American audiences were not as enthusiastic as the *Panthéon's* new owners had calculated. From 1927 until 1940, the panorama traveled a circuit, like a once-famous lounge singer in search of increasingly elusive applause, from New York to Washington, Cleveland, Chicago, and San Francisco. A proud and dignified work of patriotic commemoration thus became a spectacle that could lure audiences only with the accouterments of vaudevillian entertainment. When the *Panthéon* was displayed at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition in 1933-34, the ticket-buying public was enticed by the promise that for the price of admission they could also wander through a facsimile of a devastated French village, see the car in which Archduke Franz Ferdinand traveled on his fateful day in Sarajevo, and marvel at remnants of the Red Baron's famous tri-plane. By the time the exhibit closed in San Francisco in 1940, American audiences were as weary of the *Panthéon de la Guerre*, and its increasingly irrelevant fascination with an old war as the French had been more than a decade earlier.

Gathering dust in a storage locker in Baltimore, threatened by decay, neglect, and imminent destruction when the financially troubled owners of what was by 1952 an enormous artistic white-elephant could no longer make their payments, the *Panthéon* was rescued by the entrepreneurial vision of Daniel MacMahon, who imagined that the panorama could be restored to patriotic service as decoration for one still-unadorned wall in the Memory Hall of the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City. Reconstituted in its new site, however, the *Panthéon* would be only one-sixteenth its original size and fundamentally reconfigured. In America's memorial to the Great War, it is not surprising that the American contribution to the war,

of peripheral interest to Carrier-Belleuse and Gorguet, became the mural's central focus, and France's valiant *poilus* and the visual rendering of the western front that had been a much-admired feature of the original artwork were either reduced in significance or ignored entirely. Moreover, the participation of leading Democrats in the war was particularly noted when the panorama was installed in Harry Truman's home state. In keeping with a practice that dated to the war years, and continued into the 1920s, MacMahon did not hesitate to cover over some of the original portraits in order to insert likenesses of political heroes of the day. Both Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Truman, rendered in their youthful incarnations as doughboys, joined Woodrow Wilson and other Democratic luminaries in the mural in Memory Hall. Remnants of the original painting that could not be used were either consigned to the dustbin of history or, in later years, that cyberspace emporium of the odd and the idiosyncratic, E-Bay, where a fragment of the work sold for the modest sum of \$99.

As an art historian, Levitch is appropriately attentive to the aesthetic characteristics of the *Panthéon*. He shows how the style of artistic representation evolved with the war itself; thus soldiers whose portraits were recorded in October 1914 were rendered in pastels, with none of the lines and rough-hewn edges that would come to convey the weariness of soldiers who witnessed the interminable horrors of trench warfare. But, Levitch is not interested only in the formal qualities of the *Panthéon*. Indeed, his interpretation is more rightly understood as an exercise in careful cultural analysis, informed by, but not limited to, the artistic dimension of his subject. He notes, for example, both the neoclassical and inherently conservative character of the artwork as created during the war years. Winged Victory acclaimed the *poilus'* sacrifice. The visual practice of panorama, much more associated with the nineteenth century than with the twentieth, reduced the chaos and incoherence of the war by offering re-

assurance that everything could be contained and ordered in one sweeping visual display, and the heroic individual occupied pride of place in a vista that ignored entirely such essentially modern military innovations as tanks, airplanes, and poison gas. Furthermore, like the most conservative commentators of their day, the French artists either refused to recognize the genuine contributions of French socialists to the war effort (Henri Barbusse was not, for example, represented on the stairway of heroes) or portrayed those men of the Left who could not be ignored--the Bolsheviks, above all others--in crude and vicious anti-Semitic stereotype. Yet, for all its conservative intentions, the *Panthéon* acquired a modernist dimension despite itself. Levitch concludes his narrative of the mural's troubled history with a reflection on the quintessentially modern fate of this overtly patriotic undertaking. Physically disassembled, reconstructed, and re-ordered to mean something its original authors could neither have imagined nor intended, the *Panthéon de la Guerre* constitutes not an immutable and eternal vision of the Great War, but positive proof of the plasticity of public art.

Levitch's analysis is well grounded in the relevant scholarship, and is, in the main, very persuasive. That the *Panthéon* became in its sorry passage from Paris to the plains of Missouri a symbol not of French valor and national resolve, but an expression of Cold-War American triumphalism is compellingly argued. I would, however, take issue with his argument that by the mid-1920s the French lost interest in the extraordinary panorama, and the tale it told of collective, heroic resolve largely because the *Panthéon* offered a sanitized and exclusively civilian vision of the war that front-line soldiers rejected once they became capable of finding their own voice: "The *Panthéon*'s unreconstructed, home-front view of the war lost credibility as veterans started narrating their own experiences and increasingly played leading roles in the construction of the war's memory" (p. 79). Without doubt, the work of art articulated--as did

many of the essays, books, and public lectures produced by other distinguished civilians too old to fight--an interpretation of the war often identified as that of civilians alone, an interpretation that denounced the barbarism of the enemy, and consecrated the heroism of the *poilu*. But it is by no means clear that during, and immediately after the war this "civilian" vision was one that front-line soldiers rejected out of hand, or deemed radically incompatible with their own attitudes towards the war. As Levitch demonstrates, front-line soldiers flocked to the site in 1918 and 1919, embraced its representation of their experience, and applauded its respect for their collective sacrifice. And they did so, I would argue, because the message the *Panthéon* presented--conservative, heroic, and in many ways defiantly anti-modern--was not fundamentally at odds with how French soldiers understood the war while they were fighting it. Indeed, in their wartime correspondence and trench newspapers, they made much the same point. The enemy was, they were convinced, a threat to French civilization, and the *poilu* was deserving of civilian respect.

That French soldiers came to embrace a more explicitly tragic and more jaundiced view of the war during the mid-to-late 1920s--a view that questioned whether the war had been a cause worth fighting for; a view that obscured their own wartime consent--was not a function of their ability at last to find their own voice. Whatever might have been the case in Britain and Germany, French soldiers did not wait until the late 1920s to narrate their own experiences of the war. They had been busy doing so from almost the first day of the war; every day, in letters, trench journals, and trench newspapers, they wrote honestly, passionately, and at great length about the horrific nature of the war, and the necessity of French victory. What changed in the 1920s was how French veterans re-imagined their own war experiences. As Leonard V. Smith has recently argued (and, in fact, so recently as to make his argument unavailable to Levitch) in *The Embattled Self: French Sol-*

*diers' Testimony of the Great War* (2007) French veterans--or, at least, those who wrote about the war a decade after its conclusion--did come, by the late 1920s and early 1930s, to represent the Great War as tragedy. But this interpretation was not one that would have made sense to French soldiers during the conflict or immediately after the Armistice. I suspect that the *Panthéon de la Guerre* lost its ability to draw paying French crowds not because it offered a naive, even insulting civilian interpretation of the war. Rather, it represented a vision of the war that French soldiers and civilians alike had once shared, but that a decade later seemed hopelessly dated, and more than a little embarrassing. It was high time to ship this relic of another age to a distant land. And, the story that Mark Levitch reconstructs of that passage, and all that it can tell us about art, the commercialization of war culture, and the arc of international politics in the twentieth century is one well worth reading.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Martha Hanna. Review of Levitch, Mark. *Panthéon de la Guerre: Reconfiguring a Panorama of the Great War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24948>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.