FROM HIROSHIMA TO THE HYDROGEN BOMB:
AMERICAN ARTISTS WITNESS THE BIRTH OF THE ATOMIC AGE

by

DENISE M. ROMPILLA

A Dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School-New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Program in Art History
written under the direction of
Joan Marter

and approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2008
This dissertation investigates the visual legacy of the atomic bomb as viewed through the eyes of a distinct set of witnesses, American artists who came into contact with the physical and psychological after-effects of the bomb from the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, through the years leading up to the implementation of the partial test-ban treaty in 1963. While technical jargon, metaphorical language, and jingoistic sentiment all helped to shape public attitudes about the bombings, the visual condensation of the atomic experience into a single image, that of the mushroom cloud, offered a limited perspective of the bomb’s unique capacity for destruction. Censorship of photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki shielded the public from troubling images of victims on the ground. Unseen dangers, such as lingering radiation at the bomb sites, as well as the creeping global menace of nuclear fallout from atmospheric testing, were difficult to communicate through visual media. The escalation of the arms race between the United States and Russia gave birth to existential dread over the unimaginable consequences of a large-scale nuclear war.
Living in the shadow of the bomb, a handful of American artists turned to an interpretative visual language to give form to a terror of dimensions impossible to assimilate. Acknowledging that the scope and brutality of destruction of World War II had reshaped their vision of the world, these artists rejected conventional imagery as simply inadequate to represent the uncertain realities of the postwar era. But rather than adopt a language of abstraction that could be loosely interpreted as a reverberation of the anxiety of those years, instead, these artists applied expressive visual styles to highly-charged subject matter that sought to address, head-on, the human fallout of America’s experimentations with the bomb. In a broader sense, this dissertation is an investigation into what it means to be a witness to the first atomic age, both in the historical sense, of being present at critical events in the timeline of nuclear development; and in the ethical sense, of being compelled to bear witness to the use, testing, and proliferation of nuclear weapons.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The origins of this dissertation date back to 1995, exactly 50 years after the world’s first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The controversy over the proposed exhibit of the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. became a topic of conversation in my first seminar in the graduate program in Art History at Rutgers University, Dr. Joan Marter’s “Art and Propaganda” course.

Dr. Marter fostered a lively and inter-disciplinary approach to art history that encouraged me to pursue connections between history and art history, first in the area of Abstract Expressionism, and later, and more germane to this dissertation, in the re-examination of American art of the 1940s, particularly during the war years.

A second, early source of inspiration was Paul Boyer’s landmark study *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. Dr. Boyer’s thorough review of the culture of the atomic age inspired my own painstaking attempts to piece together the story of the artist’s response to the atomic bomb outside the conventional readings of art historical scholarship centered on the period of the 1940s and 50s. I was fortunate enough to correspond with Dr. Boyer after he was ask to pen the introduction to the catalogue accompanying the exhibition “Vital Forms: American Art and Design of the Atomic Age, 1940-1960,” organized by the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2001. Although we communicated only briefly, Dr. Boyer enthusiastically embraced my initial research, and encouraged me to pursue an alternative to “Pollock,” his reference to the Abstract Expressionists who heavily dominated the show at the Museum.
As so much of the territory covered in this dissertation was uncharted before I began, I am deeply indebted to the many families who opened their lives and their homes for me to conduct primary research. Early on, the family of Ralston Crawford – sons Neelon and John, and wife Peggy – provided me with recollections and extraordinary access to the uncatalogued records of the Crawford Estate. I am particularly grateful to John for entertaining me as I spent many hours digging through dusty paperwork in the crawlspace of his apartment. Geoffrey Beaumont shared several amusing anecdotes of his father’s tour of duty at Bikini, and also alerted me to the fact that there were other artists present at Operation Crossroads besides Ralston Crawford. Toward the end of my research, I was fortunate enough to track down Jeremy Gilien, son of combat artist Ted Gilien, whose memories of his father fleshed out the rather sparse details I had uncovered relating to Ted Gilien’s time in Japan. It was ultimately Jeremy’s curiosity to learn more about his father’s role as a combat artist that led to the exciting discovery of photographs that Ted Gilien had taken over 60 years ago at Nagasaki. When a family emergency prevented me from traveling to Los Angeles to view the collection in person, Jeremy was kind enough to take the time to scan each photograph, which allowed me to incorporate Gilien’s provocative images in this study.

I am also thankful to the many individuals who assisted me with research in various military collections. Keith Whittle, director of the Atomic Veterans History Project in Portland, Oregon, sorted through his archive and not only identified, but also generously copied, the military records and personal memorabilia of servicemen who had entered Hiroshima and Nagasaki and had served at the postwar atomic tests in the Pacific. At the Army’s Center for Military Research, Renee Klish, Director of the Army Art Collection,
was instrumental in helping me to unearth official memoranda that documented the movements of those combat artists stationed in the Pacific at the beginning of the Occupation of Japan. At the Air Force Art Collection at the Pentagon, curator Russell Stokes humored my questions about artists who traveled to Bikini, and made phone calls around the globe in order to track down important paintings. At the Naval Art Collection, curator Crystal Polis pulled watercolors, sketches, and journals of the artists Standish Backus, Charles Bittinger, Arthur Beaumont, and Grant Powers, and bettered my understanding of the workings of the Naval Art program during World War II.

All three institutions were crucial in providing loans for an exhibit at the Chung-Cheng Art Gallery at St. John’s University in New York in 2003 that featured my preliminary research on this topic, “Images from the Atomic Front.” I am grateful to the University for providing both the funding and the venue to carry out this exhibit. I also wish to thank the Wall Street Journal, ABC Nightly News, and Newsweek for their positive reviews of the exhibit and the short pieces they ran on the history of the combat art program.

As research for this dissertation occurred in fits and starts over the course of many years, the original makeup of my dissertation committee changed. I wish to thank Dr. Andres Zervignon and Dr. Susan Sidlauskas of the Department of Art History at Rutgers University for agreeing to substitute for two members of my original committee. The thoughtful questions posed by both Drs. Zervignon and Sidlauskas allowed me to both sharpen my thesis and think about the work being presented within the larger context of the artist’s response to war throughout history. I also wish to acknowledge Dr. Mona
Hadler, my outside reader, for the helpful suggestions she made in the final review of my manuscript.

There are also a few members of the administration and staff who deserve special mention. Dr. Barbara Sirman and Dr. Barbara Bender were instrumental in cutting through the bureaucracy of a large institution to allow me to continue to pursue my degree. At the end of this project, Geralyn Colvil, administrative assistant for the graduate program in Art History, handled all necessary paperwork with incredible efficiency and good humor as the physical demands my eighth month of pregnancy brought my trips to the New Brunswick campus to a halt.

No dissertation could be realized without an amazing external support system. I am particularly grateful for Sarah Falls, my fellow graduate student in the department of Art History, for her unwavering support throughout this entire process. Sarah was instrumental in piquing my interest in combat art early on when she handed me a cache of old magazines that featured art of the Armed Services. My dear friend Kirsten Olsen also offered countless words of encouragement along this journey, and cheerfully offered her services as secretary and research assistant as deadlines neared. My partner, Greg Hotaling, provided the emotional and financial support that allowed me to pick up where I had left off in 2003 and finally bring this dissertation to completion.

Finally, I wish to return to Dr. Joan Marter, without whom this project could not have been realized. As inspiration, intellectual sparring partner, editor, and coach, Dr. Marter guided me every step of the way as I molded and shaped an unruly topic into a substantial body of work. For her endless reserve of patience, I dedicate this dissertation to her.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS


Figure 2. Associated Press from the United States Army, “Builder of the Atomic Bomb Picks a Target,” Christian Science Monitor, August 7, 1945, 1.

Figure 3. Associated Press Wirephoto, “Atomic Bomb Sites and the First of the Targets in Japan to Feel the Force of the Powerful Missile,” New York Times, August 7, 1945, 1.


Figure 5. “How an Atom Explodes,” Christian Science Monitor, August 7, 1945, 5.

Figure 6. “Land of the Rising Sons,” editorial cartoon that appeared in the Atlanta Constitution, August 7, 1945.

Figure 7. U.S. Army Air Forces, “Smoke and Fire Reach Toward the Sky as Atomic Bombs Are Dropped on Japanese Cities,” photograph taken over Hiroshima, New York Times, August 12, 1945, 28.


Figure 9. U.S. Army Air Forces, photo, Colonel Paul Tibbets, pilot of the Enola Gay, waves to photographers and film crews before the bombing run at Hiroshima. Library of Congress

Figure 10. “On the Beach,” photo, Life, March 10, 1944, 46.


Figure 12. U.S. Army Air Forces, “Mainz from the air sometimes looks like the excavated ruins of an earlier civilization,” Life, June 11, 1945, 33.


Figure 15. U.S. Army Air Forces, photo, “Hiroshima After,” Life, August 20, 1945, 31.
Figure 16. George Silk, aerial photo of bombed-out Hiroshima, *Life*, August 20, 1945.

Figure 17. George Silk, aerial photo, “A refugee train winds its way through Hiroshima,” *Life*, August 20, 1945.

Figure 18. U.S. Navy, photo, “U.S. Has Paid a Heavy Price in the Pacific,” *Life*, August 20, 1945, 38B.

Figure 19. Gerald Silk, photo, “The Graves of Iwo Jima”, *Life*, August 20, 1945, 38C.


Figure 22. Jack Wilkes, photo, “Scientists Examine the Site of the Atomic Test,” *Life*, September 24, 1945.

Figure 23. AP Wirephoto, American P.O.W., freed from captivity, on the *USS Benevolence*, *New York Times*, September 4, 1945.


Figure 25. Photo of the grisly remains found in the Buchenwald concentration camp from “The German People,” *Life*, May 7, 1945.

Figure 26. Yosuke Yamahata, photo taken August 10, 1945, from the Nagasaki portfolio, reproduced in *Asahi*, August 19, 1945.

Figure 27. Yosuke Yamahata, photo taken August 10, 1945, from the Nagasaki portfolio, reproduced in *Asahi*, August 19, 1945.

Figure 28. Yosuke Yamahata, photo taken August 10, 1945, from the Nagasaki portfolio.

Figure 29. Yosuke Yamahata, photo taken August 10, 1945, from the Nagasaki portfolio, reproduced with an incorrect credit to the Associated Press Wirephoto in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1945.

Figure 30. Yosuke Yamahata, from the Nagasaki portfolio, reproduced uncredited in *Time*, September 19, 1945, with the caption, “At least ours was just a test,” 32.

Figure 31. George Silk, photo, “At Nagasaki, the great Mitsubishi steel and arms works, producing torpedos, ship plates, and munitions, are now a tortured mess of steel, *Life*, September 17, 1945, 37.
Figure 32. Bernard Hofmann, photo, “Steel girders of another factory were twisted into knots…” *Life*, September 17, 1945, 38.

Figure 33. Bernard Hofmann, photo, “Barber shop, by some fluke of the blast, still has its tiled washstand and one enameled barber chair” *Life*, September 17, 1945, 38.


Figure 35. J. R. Eyerman, photo, “Schoolchildren, carrying their books and parasols, walk along a sunny suburban road on their way to school in Hamamatsu…,” *Life*, October 8, 1945, 31.

Figures 36, 37. J. R. Eyermann, photos, “Boxes of ashes, with the names of the atomic bomb victims, are packaged in remains of a Hiroshima Buddhist temple (left); “In a Buddhist temple in Hiroshima, a family kneels to pray during memorial services for relatives killed in the atomic bomb” (right), *Life*, October 8, 1945.

Figure 38. J. R. Eyerman, photo, “The Goddess of Mercy looms over the wooded hills of Ofuna, 29 miles from Tokyo,” *Life*, October 8, 1945, 30.

Figure 39. J. R. Eyerman, photo, “Nose and mouth masks of gauze are worn by Hiroshima girls as protection against infection which spread rapidly through the ruined city after the bombings” *Life*, October 8, 1945, 33.

Figures 40, 41. J. R. Eyermann, photos, “Atom bomb victims in Hiroshima, suffering from burns and fractures, are cared for in filthy, fly-filled bank building” (left); “Mother and child, burned by blast, rest on bank’s floor” (right), *Life* magazine, October 8, 1945.

Figure 42. Bernard Hofmann, photo, “The head of a statue of Christ, severed by the bomb blast at Nagasaki, lies before the ruins of a Roman Catholic cathedral,” *Life*, October 20, 1945.

Figure 43. Illustration that accompanied “The 36-Hour War,” *Life*, November 17, 1945.

Figure 44. George Biddle, *Dead Civilians*, 1943. Oil on board. Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Figure 45. Fletcher Martin, *Bizerette*, 1943. Oil on board. Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Figure 46. Standish Backus, *The First Wave on Japan*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 47. Standish Backus, *Approach to Fort #3, Futtsu Pennisula, Tokyo Bay*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 48. Carey Orr, “Throwing in An Extra Charge,” appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 1941.

Figure 49. “Remember Dec. 7th? Keep America Free”, poster published by the Office of War Information, 1942. Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Figure 50. “This is the Enemy”, submitted to the Museum of Modern Art’s “This is the Enemy Contest” in 1942 and later reprinted in *Life*, May 6, 1942.


Figure 52. “Let the Punishment Fit the Crime”, an editorial cartoon on the murder of the Doolittle Flyers, *New York Times*, April 1943.

Figure 53. “Louseous Japanicas”, a cartoon that appeared in the U.S. Marine monthly *Leatherneck* in March 1945.

Figure 54. Standish Backus, *This Was Hyuga*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.


Figure 56. Mitchell Jamieson, *Battle at Iwo Jima*, 1945. Watercolor and crayon. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 57. Standish Backus, *Following Signing of the Surrender Documents*, 1945. Pen, ink, and felt-tipped pen on paper. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 58. Standish Backus, *Hiroshima*, 1945. Pen, ink, and oil paints. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.


Figure 60. Standish Backus, *Settlers of New Hiroshima*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 62.  Standish Backus, *Garden at Hiroshima, Autumn*, 1945.  Watercolor.  Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 63.  Standish Backus, *At the Red Cross Hospital, Hiroshima*, 1945.  Watercolor.  Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 64.  Standish Backus, *Recent Guests of Japan*, 1945.  Watercolor.  Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 65.  Lt. Wayne Miller, victim of Hiroshima, photographic print, 1945.  Photographic Collection of the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.

Figure 66.  Lt. Wayne Miller, victim of Hiroshima, photographic print, September 1945.  Photographic Collection of the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.

Figure 67.  Standish Backus, *In the Line of Duty*, 1945.  Watercolor.  Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 68.  Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., *Seaplanes at Nagasaki*, 1946.  Oil on board.  Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Figure 69.  Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., *Respect for New Emperors*, 1946.  Oil and tempera on board.  Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Figure 70.  Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., *Atomic Landscape (Japanese Burial Detail)*, 1946.  Oil and tempera on board.  Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Figure 71.  A rare color photograph of Hiroshima taken by an unknown Japanese photographer less than a week after the atomic attacks.  Collection of the Hiroshima Peace Museum, Hiroshima, Japan

Figure 72.  Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, cover illustration, picturing the field of destruction in Nagasaki around the area of the Nagasaki Medical College.  Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.

Figure 73.  Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 3, locating the site of what would have been the equivalent of the D-Day beaches in the event of an Allied invasion of the Japanese homeland.  Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.

Figure 74.  Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 16, with various aspects of destruction of buildings in the Urakame Valley.  Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.
Figure 75. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 13. A considerable collection of Zeros, the feared Japanese attack plane, is set ablaze in Nagasaki as part of the mission to demilitarize the country. Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.

Figure 76. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 12, covering interactions between the Marines and the local population. Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.

Figure 77. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 23. Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.

Figure 78. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 21, with a reference to Nagasaki’s first “atomic bowl.” Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.

Figure 79. Ted Gilien, photograph of a child in Manila (with shadow of Gilien), September 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles.

Figure 80. Ted Gilien, photograph from Tokyo, late September, 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles

Figure 81. Ted Gilien, photograph from Nagasaki, late November or early December 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles

Figure 82. Ted Gilien, photograph of Nagasaki, late November or early December 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles

Figure 83. Ted Gilien, photograph, Nagasaki, late November or early December 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles.

Fig. 84. Ted Gilien, photograph from Nagasaki, Catholic mass being celebrated at the site of the bombed-out Urakame Cathedral, late November or early December 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles.

Figure 85. Ted Gilien, cover of The Price, 1951.

Figure 86. Ted, Gilien, The Price, 1951, frontispiece.

Figure 87. Ted Gilien, illustration from The Price, page 11.

Figure 88. Ted Gilien, illustration for The Price, 1951, page 20.

Figure 89. Ted Gilien, illustration from The Price, 1951, page 27.
Figure 90. Map of Bikini as it appeared in the July 2, 1946 issue of the *New York Times*.

Figure 91. Photograph from the front page of the *Washington Post*, July 2, 1946.

Figure 92. A mock-up of the air operation is admired by Vice Admiral W. H. P. Blandy Technical Direction at Operation Crossroads. Reproduced in *Bombs at Bikini: The Official Report o Operation Crossroads*.

Figure 93. Washington press conference, led by Rear Admiral W. S. Parsons, Deputy Task Force Commander for Commander of Joint Task Force 1. Reproduced in *Bombs at Bikini: The Official Report o Operation Crossroads*.

Figure 94. Cover of *Life* magazine, April 30, 1945, featuring “Life’s War Artists.

Figure 95. George Grosz, *I Was Always Present*, 1941. Oil on canvas. Reproduced in the article “Studio War Art,” in the June 12, 1944 edition of *Life* magazine.

Figure 96. Fernando Puma, *They Will Not Conquer*, 1943. Oil on canvas. Reproduced in the article “Studio War Art,” in the June 12, 1944 edition of *Life* magazine.

Figure 97. PFC. Harrison S. Standley, *A Soldier’s Dream*, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue “Art Exhibition by Men of the Armed Services,” sponsored by *Life* magazine, p. 10.

Figure 98. Ralston Crawford, *Overseas Highway*, 1939. Oil on canvas.

Figure 99. Ralston Crawford, cover for *Fortune* magazine, “The Merchant Marine”, November 1944.

Figure 100. Ralston Crawford, cover for Fortune magazine, “Air Transport”, April 1945.

Figure 101. Ralston Crawford, Meteorological Chart for the D-Day invasion, accompanying the article “Thunder over the Atlantic,” *Fortune* magazine.

Figure 102. Ralston Crawford, Meteorological Chart for the D-Day invasion, accompanying the article “Thunder over the Atlantic,” *Fortune* magazine.
Figure 103. Invitation for “6 Artists Out of Uniform,” an exhibit held at the Downtown Gallery, May 7 – 25, 1946.

Figure 104. Illustration from the June 30, 1946 edition of the New York Times accompanying the article “Expectations at Bikini.”

Figure 105. A more fanciful artist’s rendition, illustration from the June 30, 1946 edition of the New York Times accompanying the article “Expectations at Bikini.”

Figure 106. Photograph of fire-bombed Tokyo at the end of the war.

Figure 107. Photograph of Hiroshima after an atomic bomb was dropped on the city.

Figure 108. A fake certificate from one of the servicemen at Bikini reveals humor in the face of atomic uncertainty. Gift to the author from USN serviceman William Parks.

Figure 109. Handwritten letter of USN serviceman Charles Decker to his wife, with drawings of Test Baker sketched on the deck of one of vessels in the observation fleet. Fascimile given as a gift to the author by Charles Decker.

Figures 110. Photograph taken by the drone plane that flew above the explosion. The hemispherical condensation cloud, lit by the white-hot fireball at the center, outshines the tropical sun.

Figure 111. Photograph taken by the drone plane that flew above the explosion. On the bottom, the fireball starts its swift ascent into the atmosphere.

Figure 112. A blurry AP photograph, transmitted over the wire, of the “fighting Saratoga”, one of two aircraft carriers in the target array. The large “3” in the picture is an inscription on the flight deck, which has been bent in half by the force of the blast.

Figure 113. A more spectacular, if blurry, AP picture, transmitted over the wire, of the second, underwater Test Baker. The small black shapes at the base of the waterspout are naval ships in the target array. Unseen in this picture but witnessed by participants are ships that were literally turned on end and carried high in the air with the upward thrust of the underwater explosion.


Figure 115. Opening page of the article “Bikini: With Documentary Photographs, Abstract Paintings, and Meteorological Charts Ralston Crawford Here Depicts the New Scale of Destruction,” Fortune, December 1946, 156.


Figure 121. Ralston Crawford, Tour of Inspection, Bikini, 1946. Oil on canvas.

Figure 122. Ralston Crawford, Bikini, 1946. Pen-and-ink and tempera on paper.

Figure 123. Arthur Beaumont, Able Bomb Test, Bikini Atoll, Bridge of the USS Fall River, 1946. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 124. Arthur Beaumont, Sinking of the Saratoga, 1946. Watercolor. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Dean Beaumont

Figure 125. Arthur Beaumont, Battle Cruiser HMS Repulse Parts Company with the Giant Company HMS Hood, 1939. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 126. Photograph of Arthur Beaumont painting in Bikini harbor, July 1946. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Dean Beaumont

Figure 127. Charles Bittinger, Baker Test #1, 1946. Oil on canvas. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 128. Charles Bittinger, *Baker Test #2*, 1946. Oil on canvas. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 129. Grant Powers, *0900 Through Protective Goggles on the USS Appalachian*, 1946. Watercolor. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 130. Grant Powers, *How We Looked to the Atom Bomb*, 1946. Watercolor and pencil on paper. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 131. Grant Powers, *Mike Hour*, 1946. Watercolor. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.


Figure 133. Ralston Crawford, cover of *Briarcliff Quarterly*, January 1945.

Figure 134. Ralston Crawford, *Crash*, 1945. Pen-and-ink drawing.


Figures 137 and 138. Photographs by Ralston Crawford documenting the working methods of the artist. Top: A piece of twisted metal (possibly from an aircraft) is placed on a table next to a “blueprint” drawing that resembles the illustration *Mission #1*, 1945; Bottom: A gas mask is set against what looks like the work in progress drawing of *Gas Mask*, 1945, ink.

Figure 139. Ralston Crawford, *Cologne #2*, c. 1952. Pen and ink drawing.

Figure 140. Ralston Crawford, *St. Louis Cemetery*, 1951. Line-cut.

Figure 141. Philip Evergood, *Renunciation*, 1946. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Figure 142. Peter Blume, *The Rock*, 1944-1948. Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago

Figure 143. Ben Shahn, *Red Stairway*, 1944. Tempera on masonite. The Saint Louis Art Museum


Figure 147. Hiroshima factory, Life magazine, September 17, 1945.

Figure 148. Ben Shahn, Allegory, 1948. Tempera on panel. Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas.

Figure 149. Ben Shahn, The Anatomical Man, 1949. Tempera on board. New Jersey State Museum Collection, Trenton, New Jersey

Figure 150. Ben Shahn, Deserted Fairground, c. 1948. Serigraph. New Jersey State Museum Collection, Trenton, New Jersey.

Figure 151. Ben Shahn, Voting Booths (The end of the government is the good of mankind…and which is best for mankind, that the people should always be exposed to the boundless will of tyranny, or that the rulers should sometimes liable to be opposed when they grow exorbitant in their power, and employ it for the destruction and not the preservation of the properties of the people? John Locke, 1632-1704. From the series “Great Ideas of Western Man”, 1950.)

Figure 152. Ben Shahn, Second Allegory, 1953. Tempera on masonite. Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion, University of Illinois, Chicago.

Figure 153. Ben Shahn, Man, 1952. Tempera on canvas mounted on board. Private collection.

Figure 154. Ben Shahn, Burning Building, 1948, drawing. Private collection.

Figure 155. Ben Shahn, Allegory, c. 1954. Watercolor. The Detroit Institute of the Arts, Michigan.

Figure 156. Ben Shahn, Dr. Robert J. Oppenheimer, 1954. Brush and ink drawing. Harvard University Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Figure 157. Christ of the Apocalypse, Portal sculpture on the Abbey Church of St. Pierre de Moissac, France, 12th c.

Fig. 158. Ben Shahn, Blind Botanist, 1954. Tempera on board. Collection Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York.


Figure 163. Ben Shahn, *Demon*, undated, brush drawing. Harvard University Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Figure 164. Illustrations from the Disney Publication *Our Friend the Atom*, p. 20-21.

Figure 165. Photo-montage from a May 3, 1947 *Collier’s* article on the atom’s medical promise.

Figure 166. Ben Shahn, *Beast of the Atoll*, 1957. Illustration for the third installment of “The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon” by Ralph E. Lapp, *Harper’s Magazine*.

Figure 167. Ben Shahn, *Goyescas*, 1956. Tempera on panel. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.


Figure 169. Graphic Artists for SANE, “1 ¼ Million unborn children will be born dead or have some gross defect because of Nuclear Bomb Testing.” Print advertisement/poster design for SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, 1961. Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.


Figure 174. Ben Shahn, The Lucky Dragon, from The Saga of the Lucky Dragon, 1960. Tempera on board. Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan.

Figure 175. Aikichi Kuboyama being examined with a Geiger counter at the Tokyo University Hospital, photograph accompanying the article “First Casualties of the H-Bomb,” Life magazine, March 29, 1945, p.18.

Figure 176. Two backdrops, Nicholas C and Downfall, that Shahn created for Black Mountain College in 1951. Reproduction in the Ben Shahn Taller Archive, Harvard University Art Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Figure 177. Ben Shahn, We Did Not Know What Happened to Us, 1960-61, tempera on wood. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.


Figure 181. Ben Shahn, From That Day On, 1960. Oil and tempera on canvas on board. Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin.

Figure 182. Ben Shahn, illustration for an article by John Bartlow Martin, “The Blast in Centralia No.5: A Mine Disaster No One Stopped,” Harper’s Magazine, March 1948, p. 3.


Figure 184. Ben Shahn, “Ballets U. S. A.,” 1959, exhibition poster.

Figure 185. Ben Shahn, It’s No Use to Do Anymore, from The Saga of the Lucky Dragon, 1961-62. Tempera on board. Maier Museum of Art, Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, Lynchburg, Virginia.

Figure 186. Dr. John Morton, director of the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, examines Sanjiro Masuda, one of the Japanese fishermen burned by radioactive ash. Photography accompanying the article, “Inquiry is Begun in Hydrogen Test,” New York Times, March 20, 1954, p. 3.


Figure 189. Andy Warhol, *Red Explosion (Atomic Bombs)*, section, silkscreen ink and acrylic on linen, 103 ¾ x 80 ¼ in (263.5 x 203.8 cm), 1963. Daros Collection, Switzerland.

Figure 190. Andy Warhol, *Death and Disaster Series*, 1963. Silkscreen.


Figure 192. Still from the “Daisy Ad” made for the presidential campaign of Lyndon B. Johnson and aired on September 7, 1964.


# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract **ii**

Acknowledgements **iv**

List of Illustrations **viii**

Introduction **1**

Chapter 1: Hiroshima and Nagasaki: First Images **21**

Chapter 2: In the Wake of the Bomb: American Combat Artists in Occupied Japan **60**

Chapter 3: Bombs over Bikini: Ralston Crawford’s Mission at Operation Crossroads **152**

Chapter 4: Stop the H-Bomb: Ben Shahn and the Art of Nuclear Deterrence **220**

Conclusion **291**

Illustrations **314**

Bibliography **498**

Curriculum Vita **510**
Introduction

This dissertation investigates the visual legacy of the atomic bomb as viewed through the eyes of a distinct set of witnesses, American artists who came into contact with the physical and psychological after-effects of the bomb from the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, through the years leading up to the implementation of the partial test-ban treaty in 1963. While technical jargon, metaphorical language, and jingoistic sentiment all helped to shape public attitudes about the bombings, the visual condensation of the atomic experience into a single image, that of the mushroom cloud, only offered a limited perspective of the bomb’s unique capacity for destruction.

Building upon existing prohibitions put into place during World War II, tight censorship controls over photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki shielded the public from troubling images of victims on the ground. Moving forward into the postwar era, unseen dangers, such as lingering radiation at the bomb sites, as well as the creeping global menace of nuclear fallout from atmospheric testing, were difficult, if not impossible, to communicate through visual media. In the 1950s, the escalation of the arms race between the United States and Russia gave birth to existential dread over the unimaginable consequences of a large-scale nuclear war.

Living in the shadow of the bomb, a handful of American artists turned to an interpretative visual language to give form to a terror of dimensions that were impossible to assimilate. Acknowledging that the scope and brutality of destruction of World War II had reshaped their vision of the world, these artists, most of who had painted before the war in traditional styles, rejected conventional imagery as simply inadequate to represent the new and uncertain realities of the postwar era. But rather than adopt a language of
abstraction that could be loosely interpreted as a reverberation of the chaos and anxiety of those years, instead, these artists applied expressive visual styles to highly-charged subject matter that sought to address, head-on, the human fallout of America’s experimentations with the bomb. In a broader sense, this dissertation is an investigation into what it means to be a witness to the first atomic age, both in the historical sense, of being present at critical events in the timeline of nuclear development; and in the ethical sense, of being compelled to bear witness to the use, testing, and proliferation of nuclear weapons.

While previous research has been conducted on the artists Ben Shahn and Ralston Crawford with respect to atomic imagery that appears in their work, this dissertation marks the first investigation into combat artists in Occupied Japan. Specifically, it is the first study of its kind to identify the combat artists of each of the four branches of the military who traveled to Hiroshima or Nagasaki in the wake of the atomic attacks. In the case of Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. and Ted Gilien, two artists who were assigned to the Far Eastern Combat Art Unit of the Pacific theater, this dissertation marks the beginning of scholarship into their work. My primary research on Gilien led to the discovery of hundreds of photographs taken by the artist at Nagasaki less than three months after the bombing attacks. As imagery from Hiroshima and Nagasaki was suppressed by both Japanese internal censors and MacArthur’s Occupation press code, the discovery of these photographs significantly expands the very limited visual record documenting the fate of the two cities after the Japanese surrender. The collection will be incorporated into the Center for Military Research in Washington, D.C. and made available to future scholars.
Methods and Scholarship

The 50th anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki prompted historians to retrace the steps leading to America’s decision to use atomic weapons against Japanese civilians. In the anthology *Hiroshima’s Shadow: Writings on the Denial of History*, published in 1998, editors Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifshultz gathered nearly 50 essays written between 1945 and 1997 by scholars, military personnel, political leaders, survivors of the atomic bombings, and recent historians, representing a range of ideological positions on the decision to drop the bomb.\(^1\) Some of the most important materials to be included in the anthology were essays written in the immediate aftermath of the bombings. Shattering the myth that there was a unified consensus among the American public that the bombings were morally justifiable, these essays re-introduced a small, but powerful minority of voices that spoke out in opposition to the atomic attacks in the fall of 1945. The eyewitness testimony of civilians on the ground shifted the historical experience of the bomb away from the perspective of the victor – encapsulated in the grainy photographs of the mushroom cloud and smiling crew of the Enola Gay -- to the grisly human suffering caused by the searing heat and monstrous force of the bomb’s blast. Finally, the inclusion of the photographs of Yosuke Yamahata, the Japanese photographer who arrived in Nagasaki the morning of August 10, 1945, devastatingly exposed the terror and confusion on the ground in the wake of the bombing. The publication of Yamahata’s work – which, in 1998, was virtually unknown in the United States -- was an important step in renewing interest in, and encouraging the subsequent retrieval of, images of the atomic attacks that had been censored by the
Operation press code from 1945-1951. More than 50 years later, many of these photographs still remain buried in military archives, attached to once-classified reports.

In the years and months leading up to the 50th anniversary, several important studies had already begun to ask some of the hard questions that would prove so contentious in the battle to stage the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian in 1995. Gar Alperovitz, in his *Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power* (1985), had controversially introduced the idea that the use of the atomic bombs was directed more at the Soviets as a warning shot rather than out of necessity to win the war.² *In The Rise of American Air Power* (1989), Michael Sherry had effectively argued that atomic bombings needed to be re-situated in the context of the brutal air war that had begun with the firebombing of Tokyo on March 9-10, 1945, and continued through the summer to destroy more than 60% of the urban population in Japan.³ Although he does not state it directly, there is some implication in his text that Japan may have capitulated by late summer without the U.S. having to launch the atomic attack. Barton J. Bernstein, in his January 1995 article for *Foreign Affairs*, “The Atomic Bomb Reconsidered,” perhaps went the farthest of any scholar in presenting the argument that Japan was attempting to negotiate terms for surrender as early as the middle of July.⁴ Stalin reported to Churchill at the conference of Yalta that he had received a telegram asking for peace; Walter Brown, an assistant to Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, also acknowledged this sentiment in a diary entry from August 3, 1945, that Byrnes, Admiral William F. Leahy, and President Truman “agreed [sic] Japas [sic] looking for peace.” Many of the specifics of Bernstein’s argument would be reconfirmed in Gar Alperovitz’s *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb: The
Architecture of an American Myth, released to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the bombings in August 1995.5

John Dower’s groundbreaking War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War, published in 1986, provocatively suggested that in America’s “war of vengeance” against the Japanese for the attacks at Pearl Harbor, race played a crucial role in drafting the political decisions and military strategy of the war in the Pacific.6 As Dower pointed out, “The Japanese were perceived as a race apart – even a species apart – and overwhelmingly monolithic one at that. There was no Japanese counterpart to the ‘Good German’ in the popular consciousness of the Western Allies.” Dower’s analysis of the racial stereotypes that dominated American representations of the Japanese in pithy war slogans, cartoons, propaganda posters and films, as well as his longer view of racist attitudes against Asian immigrants dating back to the threat of the “Yellow Peril” at the turn of the century, persuasively builds a case that, to the majority of Americans, the Japanese were simply inhuman. The lack of sympathy, or even curiosity, about the victims of the all-out aerial assaults of the strategic bombing campaigns aimed at Japan – culminating in the atomic attacks – is therefore better understood when the racial dimensions of the war are taken into account.

Monica Braw’s The Atomic Bomb Suppressed: Japan in the Wake of World War II, published in 1991, was the first, systematic study of the Operation Press Code ushered in by General Douglas MacArthur and its far-reaching implications for controlling information (particularly visual information) about the atomic bomb.7 MacArthur ordered images of the atomic bombings to be suppressed within Japan in order to maintain “domestic tranquility”; the order, however, had the tragic consequence of
preventing the exchange of crucial medical information for the treatment of the atomic bomb victims. Braw documents a history of suppression that even predates the Press Code, marking cases in which Occupied troops were ordered to destroy photographs, cameras, and filmstrips taken by Japanese civilians, as well as reporters, who had taken pictures on the ground of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the same time, through interviews with atomic bomb victims, Braw elicits powerful testimonials and locates new sources of imagery, such as that of photographer Yosuke Yamahata.

Paul Boyer’s landmark study *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, published in 1986, was the first comprehensive look at the cultural reverberations of the bomb from August 1945 to 1950. Taking as his starting point the comment by Anne O’Hare McCormick in the August 8, 1945 issue of the *New York Times*, that the atomic bomb had caused “an explosion in men’s minds as shattering as the obliteration at Hiroshima,” Boyer attempted to track the “cultural fallout” from this “explosion of men’s minds.” Analyzing the bomb from a variety of different perspectives – nuclear proponents; one-world government advocates; the scientists involved in the peace movement and early attempts at nuclear disarmament; voices of the religious community; media spokespersons – Boyer charts the ways in which information about the bomb was disseminated to everyday Americans. In the penultimate chapter of his study, as well as his epilogue, he examines literature, film, and popular music that attempt to grapple with the nuclear anxieties of the age. Although still the most comprehensive study ever undertaken regarding the cultural legacy of the bomb, Boyer does not address painting or photography.
As of 2008, little or no work has been done on the visual culture of the atomic bomb. Although the title of Spencer Weart’s *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images*, published three years after Boyer’s work in 1989, would seem to address this gap in scholarship, Weart’s study is more of an exploration into the symbolism attached to nuclear bombs and atomic science.⁠¹⁰ Weart, a physicist as well as an historian, traces this symbolism back to medieval alchemy, and his study is useful in understanding how dazzling visions of an atomic utopia, particularly the hyperbolic musings of *New York Times* science columnist, Manhattan Project insider, and science fiction enthusiast William L. Laurence, overshadowed, at least temporarily, visions of atomic devastation and the slaughter of close to 200,000 civilians. Weart also devotes a good portion of his text to tracing the development and consolidation of descriptive metaphors of the atomic cloud, analyzing how and why a number of nature-based analogies finally congealed into the singular image of the mushroom cloud.

Kyo MacClear’s *Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness*, released in 1999, is, similar to Weart’s text, more of a psychological and philosophical discussion about trauma and the act of witnessing than an analysis of actual imagery. The few artists and filmmakers that MacClear does introduce – muralists Iri and Toshi Maruki, who began working on the *Hiroshima Peace Panels* in 1948; Alais Renais, who traveled to Hiroshima in 1959 to make a documentary but returned with the fictional film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*; and photographer Tomei Shomatsu, who photographed the atomic-strewn rubble of Urakame Cathedral of Nagasaki in 1961; were removed in time from actual events. MacClear does raise important points as to the limitations of vision
and documentary observation; she asks us “to consider if direct representation is the sole or even the best means for ensuring responsible recollection of the atomic bombings.”

In the field of art historical research, the overwhelming emphasis on the art of the Abstract Expressionists in the postwar era has overshadowed any discussion about art and the bomb.

Much of this work links Abstract Expressionist painting to a general malaise that had been building since the Second World War. This feeling of anxiety arose out of contemplation of the existential human condition, made all the more palpable by the explosion of the bombs and the ensuing arms race with the Soviets. Art historians such as Micheal Leja, in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (1987), and Stephen Polcari, in *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, examine the work of the Abstract Expressionists in the context of larger, existential themes of the time. The artwork has also been discussed in terms of the virility of Cold War politics in Max Kozloff’s May 1973 essay in *Artforum*, “American Painting During the Cold War,” and Eva Cockroft’s June 1974 follow-up, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War”, as the dominantly scaled and forcefully painted canvases were sent abroad for political purposes.

However, few art historians have gone so far as to make visual analogies between the bomb and the actual canvases of the painters; moreover, as Serge Guilbaut argues in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, the emphasis of critics such as Clement Greenberg was on the non-political and non-objective aspects of the art. Only loose, tangential connections can be made between Abstract Expressionism and the actual intentions of the painters to create visual

Jeffrey Weschler and Greta Berman’s Realism and Realities: The Other Side of American Painting, 1940-1960 (1982), remains the best overall survey of non-abstract trends in American art of the postwar era.18 Weschler and Berman’s study is an important counterweight to the dominant discourse on Abstract Expressionism. While realism and magic realism may not have garnered critical or commercial success in the New York art scene, Weschler and Berman argue that the often macabre figurative art that populates their survey conveys a shared sense of humanity with the victims of the senseless carnage of the war period.

Chapter Outline

Arranged chronologically, this dissertation begins with a chapter which examines the first images associated with the atomic bomb, followed by three subsequent chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter one provides an historical overview of the visual information that was disseminated to the general public in the two months following the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Following the flow of information from the first photographs of the explosion taken from the cockpit of the Enola Gay; to the carefully orchestrated press views on the ground in the two decimated cities in the second week of September; to the news blackout thereafter, I will demonstrate how documentation of the bomb’s blunt destruction was distilled into the single iconic image of the mushroom cloud. I will argue that from the very concept of strategic bombing, all the developments – night, pattern, saturation, area, indiscriminate – led straight to Hiroshima; and in turn, how the
visual documentation of aerial bombardment was consistent with that of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In examining the visual prohibitions of the Office of War Information, I will create a context for understanding the lack of curiosity by the American public for any tangible manifestation of the fate of the inhabitants of bombed-out cities.

By focusing on the technological spectacle which led to the dramatic denouement of the Pacific War, the government, aided by a complicit press, shielded the American public from having to confront the human cost of their victory. The implementation of MacArthur’s Occupation Press Code on September 19, 1945, is crucial to understanding why, in light of the thousands of military troops and civilian personnel that poured into Japan during the Occupation, information surrounding the human casualties of the atomic attacks continued to be suppressed. The confiscation of photographs and film taken by Japanese civilians in the days and weeks after the bombings, and the classification of photographs procured by the scientific and medical teams sent in by the Army, Navy, and the Manhattan Project to study the physical and human effects of the bomb, all had the same chilling effect of eradicating visual testimony of the bomb’s human impact. However, in the absence of the bodies of the charred and irradiated victims, I will show how the press put another set of images into circulation – that of emaciated American P.O.W.s who had languished in Japanese prison camps -- to prevent any burgeoning sympathies on the part of the public for the bomb’s victims. Furthermore, photographs and news stories from Occupied Japan in the weeks following the surrender reinforced the rampant stereotypes of the Japanese during the war, seeming to validate the inferiority, if not the complete inhumanity, of the bombs’ unintended targets. It was not
until 1953, a year after the Occupation had ended, that Americans would be presented with a grisly look at what an atomic explosion could do to human flesh.

My research for chapter one depended upon a painstaking review of the daily issues of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Hartford Courant*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, as well as the weekly issues of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* magazine. In analyzing the initial descriptions of the bomb by the crew of the Enola Gay and those present at the earlier Trinity test; the first eye-witness accounts of American press on the ground at Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the scant information available on its victims; and what photographs related to the bombings entered into the public discourse, I was able to piece together the first, systematic review of the visual material released to public in the initial months following the atomic attacks.

In Chapter Two, I will demonstrate that it is precisely the void created by MacArthur’s censorship policies that the artists attached to the military’s combat art units struggled to address. Stranded across the Pacific at the end of the war and seemingly without a mission, the artists of the Army and Navy combat art units were quickly commandeered to accompany the first Occupation troops into Japan. In this chapter, I delve more deeply into racial stereotypes; in particular, I examine the language and imagery propagated by the American military with regard to the Japanese enemy. These stereotypes are contrasted to the relatively nuanced imagery created by combat artists throughout the war. I will argue that, following the dictum of George Biddle, chair of the War Art Advisory Committee, to “omit nothing…[to] express if you can – realistically or symbolically – the essence and spirit of war,” the artists in the Pacific already possessed the instruction to seek out controversial subject matter, resist censorship, and move
beyond documentary realism to arrive at a personal interpretation of the war’s aftermath.

The images of the three combat artists who can definitively be placed in Hiroshima express, to varying degrees, conflicted states over their duty to authority (and the visual prohibitions of the Occupation), and their personal discomfort when confronted with the unfathomable devastation left in the wake of the bomb. The physical trajectory of these paintings – from Japan, to repositories at the War Department for inclusion in a proposed National War Museum, to obscurity – is, in itself, a fascinating study in how the much-vaunted freedom of the American combat artist was eventually curtailed by concerned bureaucrats in Washington.

Primary research was conducted at the three main repositories for combat art -- the Army Center for Military History, the Navy Historical Center, and the Air Force Art Collection of the Pentagon, all in Washington, D.C. -- to identify which artists were in the Pacific at the time when the two bombs were dropped. Pouring over the communiqués of military commanders, I determined that three combat artists could definitely be placed in either Hiroshima or Nagasaki: Lt. Standish Backus, Jr., United States Navy; Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., United States Army Air Force, and Ted Gilien, U.S. Army. A fourth artist, Robert Munsell Chambers, U.S. Army Air Force, created images related to the atomic bombings and could be placed in Tokyo in September 1945, but his paintings are recreations of photographs that appeared in Tokyo and American newspapers. As such, he is not included in this dissertation.

In the case of Backus, I used correspondence between Backus and his fellow combat artist Mitchell Jamieson and his superior in Washington, Robert Parsons; hand-scrawled notes on the backs of his watercolors; official memoranda; and Navy pamphlets.
distributed to USN officers in the first month of the Occupation, to reconstruct his movements in Japan and attempt to assess his feelings about the victims of the atomic attacks. For Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., who had been a protégé of Thomas Hart Benton, I relied on Graham’s letters, official memoranda, his draft for a Guggenheim fellowship in 1946, and postwar correspondence to broaden my understanding of his paintings from Hiroshima. I learned of Ted Gilien’s trip to Nagasaki through official memoranda sent between the Combat Art Section in Tokyo and the headquarters for the Far Eastern Section of the Combat Art Unit in Manila documenting the bi-weekly activities of the Section. Additionally, this material was supplemented by phone interviews I conducted with the artist’s son, Jeremy Gilien, which led to the discovery of a cache of photographs taken by Ted Gilien in Nagasaki that had been hidden away in a basement for over 60 years. I also relied on written transcripts of interviews conducted by Betty Hoag for the Archives of American art with Ted Gilien and his fellow combat artist and long-time friend, Joseph Vogel, which were instrumental.

While most of this research is original, there have been a limited number of studies on soldier artists. Retired USMCR Colonel H. Avery Chenoweth, himself a former combat artist with the Marines, released the first comprehensive survey of combat art, *Art of War: Eyewitness U.S. Combat Art from the Revolution through the Twentieth Century*, in 2002. Chenoweth’s study is predominantly a chronological list of major artist-correspondents who traveled and served with the military. While Chenoweth makes no mention of the combat artist program in Occupied Japan, he does introduce the watercolors and sketches of Naval artist Standish Backus, who painted images of atomic destruction in Hiroshima.
Chapter three focuses on the first – and last – public demonstration of an atomic bomb explosion, which took place at the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands in July of 1946. The War Department announced the idea of public tests in January of 1946, and subsequently, thousands of applicants petitioned for a limited number of berths on the *USS Appalachia*, civilian press headquarters for Operation Crossroads. While major news outlets submitted the names of their scientific and military correspondents, one publication, *Fortune* magazine, made the unlikely choice of a well-known, yet abstract artist, Ralston Crawford, to serve as its single press representative at Bikini. As the work of the combat artists in Hiroshima and Nagasaki appears to have been unknown to the art world at that time, Ralston Crawford was the first recognizable artist who would serve as witness to the bomb’s destructive effects.

The public reception of the paintings and drawings Ralston Crawford made in response to the Bikini Atoll tests is juxtaposed with that of John Hersey’s searing narrative *Hiroshima*, which was published several months prior in the August 31, 1946 issue of the *New Yorker*. The uniformly negative reviews of Crawford’s work exhibited at the Downtown Gallery in December of 1946 gives rise to a discussion of the shifting landscape of painting in New York at the time, as well as the correct stylistic response to the violence of the bomb. Examining Crawford’s career with the Visual Presentation Unit of the Army Air Force, I will argue that Crawford’s abstraction lent itself to a didactic style of visual representation which he applied to the observable phenomena of Bikini. When the sketches and finished oils are analyzed in terms of the objectives of the *Fortune* assignment, and viewed in their proper context – as illustrations for an article on the Bikini Atoll tests which appeared in December issue of the magazine – I will
demonstrate that Crawford’s abstractions are not “artworks” per say but didactic works intended to chart “unique patterns of destruction” that would not only communicate the initial destructive impact of an atomic explosion, but also the far-reaching trajectory of nuclear fallout, in real and understandable terms.

For chapter three, I started with the research begun by Whitney Museum of American Art Curator Barbara Haskell, who organized a traveling retrospective of Ralston Crawford’s work in 1985. Crawford’s sketches and oils from Operation Crossroads figured prominently in the exhibit, and the accompanying catalogue included a small section of Crawford’s weather maps for the Visual Presentation Unit of the Army Air Force. I augmented her research with information found in the Edith Halpert Papers and the Downtown Gallery records (the Downtown Gallery being the site of Crawford’s December 1946 exhibit ‘Operation Crossroads’), located at the Archives of American Art. For critical reactions to Crawford’s work, I looked at the reviews of Crawford’s show at the Downtown Gallery; and juxtaposed the descriptions of the exhibition layout with that of the images printed with the article on Bikini which ran in the December 1946 issue of Fortune magazine. I also conducted interviews with Crawford’s sons, Neelon and John, as well as Crawford’s wife, Peggy, to get a better sense of Crawford’s motivations for traveling to Bikini. Uncatalogued letters, photographs, and ephemera contained in the Crawford Estate helped to flesh out details of the artist’s working methods, and the specifics of Crawford’s assignment for Fortune.

My investigation into the work of Standish Backus at the Naval Art Collection introduced me to other Naval artists who were present at the Bikini tests: Charles Bittinger, Grant Powers, and Arthur Beaumont. A telephone interview with Beaumont’s
son, Richard, revealed that his father had been exposed to radioactive fallout after he had chained himself to a buoy to paint the wreckage of the ships, although this information is not reflected in the official artwork that he produced for the US Navy. As Crawford was touted as the only artist to be present at tests, my comparison between the fairly straightforward, illustrative work of Beaumont, Bittinger, and Powers, and Crawford’s diagrammatic images of the atomic blast and radioactive fallout, offers a new interpretation of Crawford’s paintings of Bikini.

In chapter four, I move away from the specific events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Bikini Atoll tests, to track the reverberations of the bomb in the consciousness of American artists more generally. While the angst-filled canvases of the Abstract Expressionists have been endlessly analyzed in terms of their seemingly transparent relationship to the “Age of Anxiety”, I would argue that mere “explosions on canvas” are not the most viable examples of witness for the era, nor do they necessarily register as acts of protest when the artists themselves scrupulously avoided entering into the political fray. Noting the distaste for painting and politics after the propagandistic use of realism by both the Allied and Axis powers, I specifically set out to identify artists who turned their backs on the fickle preference of New York critics for an “a-political” art of abstraction. The main focus of the chapter is the artist Ben Shahn, who used his artwork as a form of witness to document, as well as protest, the creation of a far more powerful weapon in the hydrogen bomb; and the build-up of the nuclear arsenal and escalating Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Shahn also responded to the alarming presence of radiation on American soil as a result of aggressive nuclear testing in the Nevada desert.
After a brief overview of Shahn’s work as a Social Realist, I launch into a discussion of the artist’s early awareness of the uncertainty which loomed over the future in a world populated by nuclear weapons. Starting with the inclusion of a sliver of twisted steel wreckage borrowed from a photograph of Hiroshima printed in Life magazine in his painting Renascence of 1946, I demonstrate how Shahn assumed a leading role in speaking out against the arms race to deter a nuclear holocaust by moving outside the confines of his studio to being active lecturer and protestor in the disarmament movement. Unlike his contemporaries, Shahn made no secret of his involvement with left-leaning peace organizations -- drawing the unwanted attention of Senator Joseph McCarthy; but his most visible activism came in the form of illustrations which accompanied scientific, political, and journalistic accounts related to the unfolding history of atomic development, and through his paintings. Shahn’s concerns were crystallized in the “The Saga of the Lucky Dragon,” which was a deeply felt response to the irradiation of a crew of Japanese fishermen who had unknowingly strayed into the testing ground for the new hydrogen bomb. With his moving retelling of the story, Shahn questioned the humanity of poisoning the planet for short-term military gain. As one of the founders of the group Artists for a Sane Nuclear Policy, Shahn lent his images and voice to a movement that contributed to inspiring the public to call for end to nuclear testing; the result was the announcement of a ban on atmospheric testing in 1963.

Ben Shahn has been the focus of considerable scholarly interest in the past few years, with no less than four dissertations completed on various aspects of Shahn’s work (although most research continues to focus on Shahn’s painting cycles and photographs from the 1930s). Frances K. Pohl’s study Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War
Climate: 1947-1954, released in 1993, comes closest to examining the political motivations of Ben Shahn during the period under investigation here. Diane Zotti’s 1996 M.A. thesis for the Harvard University Extension School, Ben Shahn’s Saga of the Lucky Dragon, was the first study to focus exclusively on the Saga, although she fails to place the work in the larger context of Shahn’s nuclear imagery of the 1940s and 50s. Laura Katzman’s article “Art in the Atomic Age: Stop the H-Bomb,” published in the Yale Journal of Criticism in 1998, analyzed Shahn’s poster for the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy.

While Shahn’s anti-nuclear imagery and peace activism have been analyzed to a limited degree, this dissertation charts the trajectory of Shahn’s work against the larger movements of nuclear proliferation and deterrence. Aside from these three main sources written by Pohl, Katzman, and Zotti, I looked at the Ben Shahn Papers, the Bernarda Bryson Shahn Papers, the Edith Halpert Papers, and the Downtown Gallery records, all located at the Archives of American Art, for more information on Shahn’s political activity during this period. The Ben Shahn photographic collection at Harvard University, which contains snapshots of Ben Shahn’s trip to Asia in 1960, and the Ben Shahn Taller Archive at the Harvard University Art Library, filled in gaps regarding Shahn’s preparation for the Saga of the Lucky Dragon. The Ben Shahn materials at the Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania contain a small section of papers related to Artists for SANE. Finally, for the story of the Lucky Dragon, as well as the larger issue of nuclear fallout and the disarmament movement, I relied on primary source material from the New York Times, the Washington Post, and Life magazine; in addition, the nuclear disarmament movement is charted extensively in Milton S. Katz’s
For the conclusion, I turned my focus to The Enola Gay controversy which erupted at the Smithsonian in 1995. The protests over the original conception of the exhibit commemorating the 50th anniversary of the end of the war can be pinpointed to a handful of photographs taken on the ground at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and considered by certain factions of the military and veterans groups to be too inflammatory for release. The intense outcry over what was seen as a revisionist attempt to rewrite the history of the war led to the eventual editing out of the offending photographs as well as a complete reworking of its narrative to balance the section on the bombings with the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor.

While the agitators behind the Enola Gay controversy made sure that what had happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki remained unseen, they unwittingly drew attention to the public’s limited exposure to the human impact of the bombings, as well as controls that were still in place over 50 years later to keep those gaps in historical memory intact. At the heart of this dissertation is a battle over atomic imagery that still continues to this day.


Chapter 1: Hiroshima and Nagasaki: First Images

On August 6, 1945, President Harry S. Truman was sitting in his cabin aboard the naval cruiser USS Augusta when he was handed a paper from Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. Truman was on his way back to the U.S. from the Potsdam Conference, the meeting of the “Big Three,” where along with Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Premier Josef Stalin, he had laid out terms of unconditional surrender for Japan. Upon reading the classified memo, Truman leapt to his feet, rushed into the officer mess hall, and breathlessly exclaimed to the servicemen aboard the warship, “This is the greatest thing in history!”1 The “thing” to which the President referred was the successful explosion of a top-secret weapon, the atomic bomb, over the city of Hiroshima. Gathering the officers around him, he announced that “we have just dropped a bomb on Japan which has more power than 20,000 tons of TNT. It was an overwhelming success.”2

The response of the crew was “uproarious.”3 With cheers ringing in the hallway, President Truman, accompanied by Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, proceeded to repeat the news to members of the crew’s mess halls in various parts of the Augusta. According to an AP reporter, “the news of [the] weapon electrified the ship….the word heard on every hand was, ‘I guess I’ll get home sooner now.’”4 A UP correspondent who was also on board reported that “the President said afterward that he had never been happier about any announcement he had ever made.”5

One thousand miles away in Washington, a messenger from the War Department arrived at the White House bearing bundles of press releases. At 11:00 am, Assistant Press Secretary Eben Ayers read a special announcement from President Truman to roughly a dozen members of the White House press corps who just happened to be in the vicinity when the messenger arrived.
The press release came in a little under 1200 words, with the first three paragraphs sketching out what would become the dominant themes of the atomic bomb narrative:

Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of TNT. It had more than two thousand times the blast power of the British “Grand Slam” which is the largest bomb ever used in the history of warfare.

The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet. With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces. In their present form these bombs are now in production and even more powerful forms are in development.

It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic powers of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its powers has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.

By that afternoon, news of the atomic bomb had hit the airwaves and the early evening editions. Truman’s announcement -- which had been months in the making, the work of several hands, and significantly altered in the end to add “more pep” -- was met by some in the media with the same degree of euphoria as the servicemen in the Pacific. Lowell Thomas of CBS Radio exuberantly announced that Hiroshima had been completely destroyed and that the end of the war was in sight, although there was no evidence as yet to support either conclusion. But others struck a more cautious note. Don Goddard at ABC radio had pulled an atlas from a shelf and had discovered that Hiroshima was not just a “Japanese Army base” -- he announced to his listeners that it was a city with the population the size of Denver, raising the specter of significant civilian casualties. NBC Radio news commentator H. V. Kaltenborn wondered out loud to his audience if “we have created a Frankenstein.” Kaltenborn also presciently grasped that the weapon, once brought into existence, might fall all too soon into the hands of the enemy.
“We must assume that with the passage of only a little time, an improved form of the new weapon we use today can be turned against us.”

On the morning of August 7, Americans across the country awoke to headlines of “the birth of a new age – The Age of Atomic Energy.” The fragmented news of the previous day had been replaced by a more cohesive narrative with material culled from the overnight release of 14 separate documents by the Pentagon. These new papers described everything from the history of the atom, to the development of the bomb in top-secret laboratories and military complexes around the United States, to perhaps the most astonishing story of all, the testing of an atomic bomb on American soil in a remote area of the New Mexico desert. Physicists fleeing from the Nazis – who the public was shocked to learn had had their own bomb project in the works – had collaborated with U.S. and British scientists to develop a weapon to end the war. Secret cities had been founded in the states of Washington, Tennessee, and New Mexico to accommodate thousands of workers who were marshaled as part of the great effort to produce the bomb. The work at each site was so compartmentalized that “no one knew what they were producing,” and curious neighbors observed that “huge quantities of materials…went in to the plants, but nothing ever came out.” The Office of Censorship revealed that the press had been duty-bound not to ask questions about the activities of the sites. Even members of Congress had been kept in the dark, as notably Harry Truman himself had, on the floor of the Senate in 1944, demanded an investigation into “extraordinary expenditures” made by the War Department that approached two billion dollars – money that was secretly funneled into building the atomic bomb.

The New York Times aptly summed up what must have been the dominant impression of everyday citizens: “the bomb story reads like some incredible work of fiction” – hardly surprising, as the New Yorker was quick to retort, as science fiction writers from H.G. Wells
right down through the war years had predicted the weaponization of atomic power with terrifying accuracy. Ever since 1896, the year that Henri Bequerel discovered radioactivity in his Paris laboratory, scientists had begun to daydream about “tapping even a small fraction of energy contained in the atoms of [our] planet.” What was beyond the reach of science for nearly half a century fueled the fantasies of great (and not so great) science fiction. H. G. Wells coined the term “atomic bomb” in his 1914 apocalyptic novel *The Last War: A World Set Free*, in which the survival of the human race is threatened by the development of a super-bomb that unleashes the energy of the atom. In the 20s and 30s, science-fiction magazines, as well as the pages of children’s comics, had frequently featured stories involving atomic weapons that expanded upon the visions described by Wells. In 1944, *Astounding Science Fiction* ran a short story that described the assembly of an atomic bomb with such accuracy that the War Department paid a visit to its author, John W. Campbell, Jr., to determine if the author was really an undercover spy.

The very first editorials to address the atomic bomb echoed the bewilderment felt by many that the world of science fiction had leapt off the page and become alarmingly real. Although, as the *Christian Science Monitor* acknowledged, “the world has become almost calloused to the macabre procession of Jules Verne and Buck Rogers devices which with confusing speed has marched through the latest year of the war…the world must stop to catch its breath as it repeats words it finds hard to believe: the atomic bomb is here.” In a similarly-minded editorial, *The Washington Post* remarked that, “if the imagination was numbed by…German rocket bombs, it is utterly paralyzed by President Truman’s revelations concerning the new atomic bomb…the grotesque dream world of the Sunday supplements…has become an actuality.”

In the first few days after Hiroshima, the public could not help but to indulge in wild speculation over the nature of the bomb, as the War Department was slow in releasing any information that might help to visualize what had been unleashed on Hiroshima. As the headlines themselves noted, there was “nothing to see,” as an “impenetrable cloud of dust hides the city after a single bomb strikes.” The Army Air Forces, in competition with the Army for the media spotlight and eager to get out in front of the story, did release an aerial reconnaissance photograph of Hiroshima taken shortly before the atomic attack that ran on the morning of August 7 on page A-1 of the New York Times (Fig. 1). The press, not to be deterred by the visual blackout, offered up other pictures to sketch in the details of the United States’ road to atomic ascendancy. Some enterprising publications ran stock photos of engineering works and power plants in Hiroshima, which, in spite of their utilitarian function during peacetime, were recast as the twin engines of the Japanese war machine in that region. A handful of stories were accompanied by photographs of the principals involved in the decision – one photograph released to the press by Major General R. Leslie Groves, the architect of the War Department’s atomic division, showed the General himself picking out targets for nuclear obliteration on a map of Japan (Fig. 2). Pictures of the “3 hidden cities” – population centers of upwards of 75,000 people that had been hidden in plain sight – also dominated the front pages of many newspapers (Fig. 3).

While Secretary of Henry of War Henry L. Stimson announced that the atomic bomb “has an explosive force that would stagger the imagination,” and Truman himself had described the bomb as nothing less than “the harnessing of the forces of the universe,” the media struggled to describe the new weapon in the only concrete terms that were given to them – a magnification of the power of conventional weapons already in use. The San Francisco Chronicle recycled a
picture of a British “Grand Slam” – the most powerful bomb heretofore in existence – and ran it with the heading “Multiply this by Two Thousand!” The *New York Times* attempted to graphically represent the estimated damage by equating the destructiveness of the atomic bomb to the payload carried by 2,000 B-29s in a conventional raid (Fig. 4). The *Christian Science Monitor* combined a picture of an atom with a small explosion, and then attempted to show the difference of a crater made by an atomic bomb and same amount of TNT responsible for the most deadly accidental explosion on record (Fig. 5). The *Atlanta Constitution*, one of a string of Hearst publications and of a decidedly more sensationalistic bent, jettisoned the graphics altogether, and instead illustrated their news stories with a cartoon of buck-tooth “Japs” being blasted by Uncle Sam with the force of the sun’s power – playing upon both the wording of the press release and the considerable reversal of fortune of Japanese imperial ambitions (Fig. 6).²⁵

In spite of the paroxysms of horror and astonishment over the bomb’s unique capacity for destruction, there was also a continuity established between nuclear bombing and the firebombing raids of other Japanese cities, which continued in the days following the attack on Hiroshima with the same ferocious intensity. By the summer of 1945, the “strategic” bombing campaigns had reached a mind-numbing scale of devastation, as the cities of Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, and Kobe were effectively reduced to ashes under the pummeling assault of thousands of B-29s. Army Air Forces Major General Curtis LeMay, who was in charge of all strategic air operations against the islands of Japan, had abandoned high-altitude precision bombing, choosing instead to run low-altitude air raids at night that targeted entire populations. He replaced the bunker-busters of the European campaign with incendiary clusters, magnesium bombs, white phosphorous bombs, and napalm, because he wanted Tokyo and other “paper cities” of its kind “burned down – wiped right off the map” in order to silence resistance and
“shorten the war.” As there was no attempt to disguise the brutality of the raids, and little in the way of public blowback over the morality of adopting this strategy, dropping the atomic bomb could arguably be viewed as a progression of the air campaign, accomplishing LeMay’s goals with chilling efficiency.

Inter-service rivalries also contributed to a lessening of the bomb’s importance as public relations for each branch of the service shifted into high gear at rumors of Japan’s capitulation. When on August 9 Major General Carl “Tooey” Spaatz, commanding general of the Army Air Forces, remarked that the atomic bomb was “now a comparatively insignificant weapon in [my] arsenal,” – all the while knowing that an atomic bomb had just been dropped on Nagasaki – he was not only subtly communicating that America had used the last bomb in its possession, but the comment itself summed up the ambivalence of many in the military of crediting victory to any kind of technological advantage. The atomic bomb lacked a human dimension: it was technologically-driven and fairly one-sided, a “battle of laboratories” instead of men. Moreover, Japan’s suicidal defense of Okinawa, and its failure to agree to terms of surrender in spite of having 41,000 tons of bombs dropped on sixty-four of its cities, were sobering indicators that Japanese fanaticism would not necessarily be deterred by nuclear attacks.

If the media had a difficult time forming a clear picture of what the atomic bomb did to Hiroshima, the appearance of the mushroom cloud over Nagasaki gave the press an image to rally around (Figs 7, 8). On August 12, one day after the announcement that a second bomb had been dropped on the Japanese city of Nagasaki, surveillance pictures taken from the cockpit of the American bomber Bockscar appeared in publications across the country. AP reporters quoted a number of eyewitnesses who described the bombing as viewed from the air: one flier on a mission 250 miles away saw “a huge ball of fiery yellow erupt”; participants closer to the
blast saw a “bright flash” followed by “a big mushroom of smoke which billowed up darkly to 20,000 feet.” A similar cloud was stated to have appeared over Hiroshima days before.  

Almost lost in this syndicated article was the sole observation of a Japanese farmer, who had witnessed the explosion at ground level -- he described a relatively innocuous flash in the sky that was no more alarming than lightning.

Unique to the atomic experience, with its column of smoke stretching up to the stratosphere, the mushroom cloud told everything and nothing at the same time. It seemed to fit into Truman’s explanation that the bomb was a type of explosive, yet it was so gigantic, so monstrous, that it seemed unearthly; one dared not, or could not, contemplate what had happened underneath it. Notably, the Office of War Information made no effort to censor the image. Suddenly the mushroom cloud became ubiquitous: it appeared everywhere, in endless reprints of the Nagasaki photograph; in sketches by eyewitnesses who had participated in the bomb runs; in illustrations accompanying popular and scientific articles; even in satirical cartoons. More tellingly, in short order it was superimposed on top of American cities in imaginary scenarios of future retaliatory attacks.

In the jubilant first days after the Japanese surrender, the image of the atomic cloud served as an endpoint to the war narrative. Starting with the careful wording of Truman’s press release, in which the use of the atomic bomb was presented as a kind of even exchange for the sneak attack at Pearl Harbor, the targeting of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was viewed by many as a somewhat regrettable but necessary act of vengeance, final payback for the brazen action that had precipitated the war. It could be argued that only revenge for Pearl Harbor could justify the unimaginable consequences of the bomb, since by the first week of August, all evidence pointed to an imminent end to the war without having to resort to its use. The decision to drop the
atomic bomb effectively drew attention away from the Soviet entry into the Pacific War when its tanks crossed into Manchuria on August 5, which, even without the atomic bombings, certainly would have hastened the war’s end. It muted discussions that had played out in the press all summer, in which diplomatic solutions were urged on the editorial pages of every major U.S. publication. It ignored the findings of the Navy, which had publicly reported that Japan was rapidly losing its will because of the effective strangulation of its ports through the naval blockade. And unknown to the public at the time, the use of the bomb rendered irrelevant the top-secret overtures made by Japanese emissaries through contacts in Switzerland to negotiate terms of surrender.31

However, with the announcement of the Japanese surrender on August 14, only two days after the photographs of the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki appeared in the press, a causal link was established between the atomic bombings and the end of the war. The heroes, then, became those in possession of superior technology, and the few who participated in unleashing the weapons on Japan; and, as in any titanic battle between good and evil, there was little thought as to the fate of the defeated after victory had been secured. As John Dower has written:

In the heroic narrative, one rides with the crew of the Enola Gay, cuts away from the scene the moment the Little Boy bomb is released, gazes back from a great distance (over 11 miles) at a towering iridescent mushroom cloud. If by chance one does glance beneath the cloud…one sees a silent shattered cityscape. In this regard, the heroic narrative differs little from a Hollywood script.32

The condensation of material evidence of the atomic bombings into a single iconic image stood in sharp contrast to the media blitz surrounding the aircrew of the two bombing raids. Colonel Paul Tibbets, pilot of the Enola Gay, reported that U.S. Army camera crews were so numerous the day of the bombing run on Hiroshima that he had to urge them to get off the
runway to prepare for takeoff. A military observer compared the scene to a Hollywood premiere because “amid brilliant floodlights, pictures were taken and retaken by still and motion picture photographer.” One of the more memorable pictures released to the public showed Tibbets waving cheerfully from the Enola Gay before he was to depart on a bombing raid that would snuff out over 100,000 Japanese lives (Fig. 9). In the weekly newsreel “The March of Time” which played in movie houses across the country, thousands of Americans saw Chaplain William Downey bless the crew of the Enola Gay before it departed on its historic flight. The Chaplain prayed that “armed with Thy might they bring this war to a rapid end” – words that echoed Truman’s own that the bomb had been a gift of “Divine Providence” that might help to secure the peace.

For the remainder of August, little information was released to the public about the fate of the two cities, with the exception of Japanese protests of “brutality”, “inhumanity”, and “war crimes” that were roundly dismissed as propaganda spawned by bitter defeat. Photographic evidence of the material and human costs of the atomic attacks was not anticipated by the public, nor was it seemingly desired. The lingering vehemence towards the Japanese enemy over the early humiliations of the war, the Bataan death march, the execution of the Doolittle raiders, the atrocious treatment of American POWs and rumors of medical experimentation, all prompted little in way of sympathy or even the most basic curiosity about the condition of the cities’ inhabitants. The lack of physical evidence as to the true targets of the bombing -- women, children, the old and the infirm -- allowed endless reproductions of crude Japanese stereotypes to appear in American newspapers, which seemed to be geared towards drowning out a small but vocal chorus of dissent. Homogenized to the point that all Japanese were reduced to a single
image – branded enemy – for the majority of Americans, the enemy was comprised of the entire population, and fair target.

Yet the dearth of images in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had as much to do with the stringent censorship code that had been put in place during the war. During the twenty-one months after Pearl Harbor, the Office of Censorship (which in 1942 came under jurisdiction of the Office of War Information) had forbidden the release of any images of American war dead to the public. In 1943, with morale flagging at home, the Office of War Information did an about-face: pictures of dead soldiers began to appear, but often in ones or twos, with their features totally obscured (in some instances the faces were airbrushed out) and bodies frozen in heroic last gestures in order to blunt both the emotional impact and overwhelming scale of death in the war’s bloodiest battles. A handful of notable exceptions – such as the mangled bodies of dead American paratroopers in Sicily – were released to drum up support for war bond drives and other national appeals.38

Rules also governed the image of enemy dead: the enemy had to appear in uniform; the body could not appear to be desecrated; and although represented in greater numbers than Allied casualties, there were no fields littered with the bodies of dead German or Japanese soldiers as such images through their sheer numbers might evoke a sympathetic response.39 These rules, however, were at times almost casually discarded, particularly when it came to the war in the Pacific. Acts of violence against Japanese soldiers and extremely grisly images of what remained of their corpses were occasionally published after battles where the loss of American life had been great (Fig. 10). Perhaps the most shocking image to appear in a mainstream publication was a full-page photograph displaying the severed head of a Japanese soldier in the March 16, 1945 issue of Life. Blackened and shriveled by the heat of a flamethrower, face fixed
in a perpetual scream, the head adorned a tank in operation at Iwo Jima, a ghoulish war trophy symbolizing the American forces’ hard-fought victory for a sliver of an airstrip in the Pacific (Fig. 11).

While, occasionally, the impact of the war on ordinary citizens made its way into the picture magazines, what was absolutely forbidden were images of mass carnage rendered by the hands of the Allies – particularly when it came to the bombing of civilians. There was good reason to bury this class of imagery deep within the recesses of the OWI’s self-described “Chamber of Horrors.” In April 1937, Americans had been stunned by the publication of grainy photographs of fleeing, terror-stricken civilians that had been shot on-site during and in the immediate aftermath of the aerial bombardment of the small Basque town of Guernica. The leveling of 80% of the city by the Nazi Condor Legion with the assistance of Italian Fascist Aviazione, both operating under the direction of Spanish Nationalist forces, was all the more despicable in that the town contained no specific military targets. Guernica was followed up by the brazen Luftwaffe attack on Coventry in November 1940, which generated an even more gruesome photographic record of blown-out flats, dazed citizens, and dead bodies after 500 tons of bombs fell on a city with a population of 320,000, resulting in the destruction of 60,000 buildings. After photographs of the Coventry blitz dominated the pages of U.S. newspapers, sparking universal outcry and inching the country ever closer to war, Roosevelt proclaimed that the U.S. would take the lead in denouncing “the inhuman barbarism that has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity.”

However, by January 1943, all such sentiments were swept aside when the Allies agreed to massive aerial assaults on Germany’s most populous cities to “undermine the morale of the German people to the point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened.”
After the firebombing of Dresden between the 13th and 15th of February 1945 -- which claimed upwards of 70,000 lives -- the campaign of saturation bombing shifted to the East, with incendiary raids of Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe, and Yokohama. With strategy shifting to an escalating air war, the attention of the media shifted too, from the ground – where Americans would have been forced to confront the uncomfortable realities of mass slaughter – to the massiveness of the new Superfortress and a new cache of deadly bombardments dropped from the sky. The distance between the airman and his target was similarly represented by the minimization of the city to an impersonal point on a map. As George Roeder, author of The Censored War, has noted “Americans at home and abroad were taught to see the enemy through the narrowly focused lens of the bombsight, which reduced all things to two categories: that to be spared, and that to be destroyed.”

While American newsreels and Hollywood features assured wartime audiences that advances in radar technology allowed U.S. aircrews to carry out bombings with precision, blaring headlines trumpeted the loss of life in these raids in the tens, sometimes hundreds of thousands. As the names of familiar cities began to be attached to what had been described as “purely military targets,” it became clear that the violence of the war had engulfed what would have been, prior to this war, an unconscionable number of non-combatants.

In such cases, illustrations, maps, or stock photographs of the targeted cities often replaced actual photographic documentation of the raids. Little, if any documentation was made public about the experience of the attacks by those on the ground. Towards the end of the war, and notably after the Nazi surrender, aerial views of bombed-out cities in Germany did appear in newsreels and the popular press – but the distance from which the cities were viewed was so great, and the level of destruction so complete, that it was difficult to determine what, exactly,
had been targeted and destroyed (Fig. 12). By the time of the atomic attacks on Japan, Americans had acquiesced to full-scale assault on civilians as a gruesome but necessary tactic of modern warfare.

*Life* magazine photographer George Silk, a veteran of several campaigns who had been captured by Erwin Rommel’s forces in Libya and later walked three hundred miles with Allied soldiers across New Guinea as a correspondent for the Australian Department of Information, accompanied a pilot from the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey on some of the first reconnaissance missions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki just days after the attacks. On August 20, 1945, days before MacArthur’s ground forces had even reached the mainland, aerial photographs of the two cities were published in *Life* magazine. Silk’s photographs were prefaced by an illustration of an atomic explosion, which noticeably obscured the view of Hiroshima (Fig. 13); there were also reproductions of images taken by the U.S. Army Air Forces, before-and-after shots of the cities which offered little in the way of comparison (Figs. 14, 15). Graphics attached to the AAF photos pointed out an army transport base, ordnance depots, docks, and textile mills, but taken from the distance of 20,000 feet, the military’s claims were hardly verifiable.

The shots taken closer to the ground, however, yielded relatively uniform rubble, with absolutely no indication of the presence of houses, apartment blocks, neighborhoods, streetcars, schools, or any of the infrastructure that supported everyday living (Fig. 16). These strange desert landscapes in fact offered very little in the way of actual information, as ghostly outlines merely hinted at the possible existence of former buildings. Although Hiroshima’s citizens were noticeably absent, Silk did manage to capture an engine pulling a long line of open-air freight cars crammed with Japanese refugees and defeated soldiers as it wound its way through the denuded landscape (Fig. 17). This affirmation of life in the midst of a nuclear wasteland
certainly in some sense must have assuaged any small trace of guilt that Americans felt over the collateral damage to the bombs.

Despite efforts to render the world’s first nuclear weapon in somewhat comprehensible terms – likening its power to 20,000 tons of TNT or linking it as an extension of the previous bombardment campaigns – there was a consistency the to overall field of destruction, an indiscriminate eveness, that to the reader must have seemed simply impossible. The image was no different from photographic evidence documenting the aftermath of the firebombing of Tokyo, but Tokyo had been accomplished by a squadron of 200 bombers. The incongruity between two aspects – a sprawling city swept clean of its contents, grid by grid, by the blast of a solitary weapon – rendered what happened at Hiroshima beyond the scope of human comprehension. That readers could become unhinged seems to have been understood all too well by Life’s editors, who followed up the photographs of the two bombed cities with gruesome close-ups of maimed soldiers from the Pacific War under the headline “The U.S. Has Paid a Heavy Price.” Concluding the piece was a full-page photograph of a cemetery where the 5th Marine Division had buried their dead on Iwo Jima (Figs. 18, 19). Although the crosses and whitewashed stones seemed to stretch on forever, it was just a fraction of the 175,000 soldiers killed in the Pacific whose bodies would never return home. Bringing a kind of finality to any lingering questions of whether or not the bomb should have been used, the field of stark monuments reminded the viewer in unequivocal terms that in precipitating the Japanese surrender, the bomb had saved countless numbers of American lives.

In the gap between the surrender of the Japanese and the arrival of MacArthur’s troops in Japan, the atomic narrative was further tamed and domesticated. The most estimable spokesman in the government’s pocket was William L. Laurence, a science writer for the New York Times.
Three months before Hiroshima, Laurence had been hired by General Leslie R. Groves to become the official propagandist for the U.S. War Department’s nuclear program. Laurence was given unprecedented access to the laboratories and production facilities of the Manhattan project, bouncing from the University of Chicago, to the secret city of Oak Ridge Tennessee, to the nuclear reactors of Hanford, and finally Los Alamos; he was allowed to witness the first atomic test in the desert at Alamogordo, New Mexico; and had even flown in one of the three bombers in the mission to drop the bomb on Nagasaki. Laurence was also the ghostwriter behind Truman’s initial statement to the press after the bombing of Hiroshima, and continued to pen the “pounds of official reports and bales of War Department ‘handouts’ designed to enlighten the layman on the working of the atomic bomb.” At the end of August into early September, in a series of articles for the *Times* that was syndicated across the country, Laurence would almost single-handedly craft the story of atomic power for an American audience, shifting attention away from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the ascendancy of the United States as the dominant military power on the world stage.

Groves could not have picked a better advocate. In the years leading up to World War II, Laurence had become the most respected scientific journalist in the country. Arriving at the *New York Times* in 1930, he started pouring over technical journals, attending lectures, and gaining the trust of some of the nation’s leading physicists. It was Laurence who first introduced the concept of nuclear fission to a broader audience in 1939, after he had met Enrico Fermi and Niels Bohr at a conference of the American Physical Society. Coming away from the meeting “a frightened man,” he set out to write a series of articles for the *New York Times*. These articles were followed up by a more sensational “scare” piece for the *Saturday Evening Post*, in which he proposed that this discovery might somehow be incorporated into the design for a bomb,
probably by the Nazis -- not knowing that in that same month, Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard had approached President Roosevelt with this same concern. Although the scientists and technicians involved in building the bomb were sworn to secrecy under the 1943 Espionage Act, and all members of the press were in a virtual blackout over information about the nuclear program during most of the war, Laurence continued to speculate over the possibility of weaponizing nuclear fission. As *New York Times* historian Meyer Berger writes, from the beginning Laurence “had the inside track on the atomic bomb story . . . and he had kept it.”

Perhaps Laurence’s most valuable skill was his ability to translate complex scientific ideas into language that was both captivating and accessible to a general audience. Commenting on his profession, Laurence wrote that science writers were the “true descendents from Prometheus,” who “take the fire from the scientific Olympus, the laboratories and universities, and bring it down to the people.” He borrowed heavily from the language and plot lines of the science fiction magazines he had been obsessed with as a child in Lithuania – and despite earning a technical degree from Harvard after he emigrated to the United States, his boyish fascination with the fantastical possibilities of science never left him. Before he was tapped by the government to be its chief spokesman, his vivid and hyperbolic prose had, on several occasions, prompted rebukes by Hanson W. Baldwin, the more objectively-minded science editor of the *New York Times*.

It was Laurence’s intense and creative contributions to his articles for that newspaper, later condensed into his runaway best-seller, *Dawn Over Zero*, that would profoundly influence the way that average Americans would come to see the bomb. The static image of the mushroom cloud, now condensed into an abstract symbol, could hardly compete with the thrilling, technicolor language of Laurence’s eyewitness accounts. Perched on a hillside in the desert of
New Mexico, putting himself --as he was quick to remind his readers -- at terrible risk, Laurence allowed others to see what he had seen at the moment of the world’s first atomic explosion:

And just at that instant there rose from the bowels of the earth a light not of this world, the light of many suns in one. It was a sunrise such as the world had never seen, a great green super-sun climbing in a fraction of a second to a height of more than eight thousand feet, rising ever higher until it touched the clouds, lighting up earth and sky all around with a dazzling luminosity.

Up it went, a great ball of fire about a mile in diameter, changing colors as it kept shooting upward, from deep purple to orange, expanding, growing bigger, rising as it expanded, and elemental force freed from its bonds after being chained for millions of years. For a fleeting instant, the color was an unearthly green. It was as if the earth had opened and the skies had split. One felt as though one were present at the moment of creation when God said, “Let there be light.”

While Laurence was painting images of technological transcendence, and promoting peacetime applications of atomic power, the Occupation press corps had been assembled in Washington and flown directly out to Tokyo to become the first foreign journalists to enter Hiroshima. Although there were some veteran war correspondents among them, most of the journalists hand-picked by the Pentagon had been stateside during the war. They were rewarded with this plum commission for being faithful servants of the government; some had worked directly for the Office of War Information, others had simply passed off the government’s propaganda by thinly disguising it as their own prose. Among them were W.H. Lawrence of the New York Times, often later confused with his colleague William L. Laurence; Homer Bigart of the New York Herald-Tribune; and reporters and photographers for the Associated Press, Hearst news services, and Henry Luce’s publications. Rounding out the group were members of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, officers from the United States Strategic Air Forces, a military photographer, and a government censor. It was understood from the start that all stories filed from Hiroshima would be vetted before release.
The group was carefully shepherded to the site of the bombing by Brigadier-General Thomas F. Farrell, the executive officer to General Groves and Chief Engineer for Field Operations of the Manhattan Project. Farrell had supervised the Trinity test at Alamogordo, New Mexico, and despite his initial enthusiasm for the project, after witnessing the actual test he immediately expressed reservations over the awesome power that had been put into the hands of military. Having cowered before the thunderous sound of the bomb as the reverberations rolled over the desert hillside, Farrell remarked to an aide that the sound “warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty.”\textsuperscript{53} Less than three weeks later, he was asked to hand-deliver the executive order from the White House to Colonel Paul Tibbets, the pilot of the Enola Gay. Once reaching Tinian, he seems to have put his misgivings behind him. Before the bomb was loaded into the bay of the B-29 Superfortress, he grabbed a marker and playfully signed the casing “To Hirohito, with love.”\textsuperscript{54}

On September 5, the \textit{New York Times} published its first report out of Hiroshima by William H. Lawrence, a 29-year old reporter who had covered skirmishes in Europe and the Pacific. Describing Hiroshima as the site where “the power of the universe” was unleashed, Lawrence was clearly in shock. Struggling to grapple with the enormity of the event and its aftermath, he attempted to describe the wreckage in terms his audience could understand. The city was “worse than Warsaw or Stalingrad, which had held the record in Europe” for the most devastating block-by-block obliteration by the Nazis; the comparison was an important one, as unlike the news blockades surrounding the Allied bombing targets, pictures of annihilated Warsaw and Stalingrad were eagerly circulated as examples of the Nazis’ utter brutality.\textsuperscript{55} There had been an avalanche of public outcry over the indiscriminate shelling of those capitals, but now, with mile
after mile of landscape flattened around him, Lawrence speculated that Hiroshima had surpassed them as the “world’s most damaged city.” Lawrence confessed that never during his time as a war correspondent had he “looked upon such scenes of death and destruction,” and concluded by saying that “a visit to Hiroshima is an experience to leave one shaken by the terrible, incredible sites.” Somewhat inexplicably, the article was accompanied not by a photograph of Hiroshima, but bombed-out Tokyo – which, unlike Hiroshima, had a far greater number of buildings still standing after its attack (Fig. 20).

Although Lawrence’s report had clearly been through the censors – the byline noted that the report had been filed on September 3rd, but had been “delayed” – there were a number of tantalizing items that were buried in his descriptions of utter ruin. Lawrence’s report was the first to refer to the actual local time that the bomb was dropped – 8am -- making it clear that at the moment of the attack, people were out on the streets commuting on their morning routine. Counter to the perception that the Japanese had been warned in advance of the attacks and yet had defiantly refused to surrender, numerous witnesses testified that there had been no leaflets, no communications; in fact, the appearance of a single bomber over Hiroshima had actually reassured the population that an attack was not imminent, as all previous raids had been carried out by enormous squadrons. And then there were the people that Lawrence encountered. One survivor came up to the press corps and introduced himself by making the sign of the cross, and identified himself as a Christian “like themselves.” Perhaps most surprising of all, the group’s Japanese interpreter, who had been picked up two miles outside of Hiroshima – still within range of the bomb’s blast -- was actually an American citizen who had been born in Sacramento and later taken to Japan by his mother. The interpreter’s father had remained on the West coast of
the United States – and presumedly, although the article failed to mention it, had been relocated during wartime to one of the Japanese internment camps.

What was perhaps the most disturbing element of Lawrence’s dispatch was the verification of Japanese claims that had been dismissed as mere propaganda -- that the citizens of Hiroshima were still dying nearly a month after the attacks. Since late August, reports of radiation had been trickling out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in broadcasts from Radio Tokyo. One such report stated that “many persons are dying daily from burns sustained within the raids ... but many of those who looked quite healthy at first, weakened after a few days for some unknown reason.”

Given the magnitude of destruction that surrounded him, it is quite telling that Lawrence would choose to lead his article with the bleak observation that “the atomic bomb is still killing Japanese at nearly a hundred a day.” According to his report, Japanese officials had simply stopped counting the number of casualties after August 20, and the death toll continued to climb. Lawrence remarked upon the fact that “persons who only had been slightly injured” had lost “86 percent of their corpuscle count”, “shed clumps of hair”, suffered from extreme bouts of vomiting, high fevers, internal bleeding, and eventually died. Lawrence noted that an “expert” interviewed by an ABC radio correspondent in Tokyo had acknowledged that symptoms were consistent with radiation exposure, but had dismissed the possibility that levels could remain deadly almost a month out from the attacks. Seemingly unconvinced by the testimony of the “expert,” Lawrence quoted Japanese medical experts on the ground: “Some [doctors] said that they thought that all who had been in Hiroshima on that day would die as a result of the bomb’s lingering effects.”

Dwight Macdonald, editor of the left-wing journal *politics*, had been the lone voice in the press denouncing the use of the atomic bomb because of the unknown human impact of its
radioactive properties. In an editorial titled “Descent Into Barbarism,” published in *Time* magazine on August 20, Macdonald pointed out that the “real horror of the Bomb is not its blast but its radioactivity,” and backed up this claim by pointing out that “so feared was radioactivity at Hanford that the most elaborate precautions were taken in the way of shields, clothes, etc . . .” For the “unlucky” inhabitants of Hiroshima, “no such precautions were taken, obviously . . . the plane dropped its cargo of half-understood poisons and sped away.” Macdonald denounced the emphasis on secrecy over safety, pointing to the case of Dr. Harold Jacobsen, a prominent radiologist enlisted with the Army Medical Corps, who had attempted to speak out against radiation released by the bomb. After being quoted that radiation in Hiroshima could linger in the soil for 80 years, he promptly received a visit from the F.B.I., after which he immediately retracted his statement. Macdonald correctly predicted the list of excuses that would be trotted out to justify the use of the weapon: the Japanese refusal to surrender; the barbarity shown to the American POWs; Japanese cruelty against its neighbors; the right to end the war at any cost to save American lives. For Macdonald, the lesson was clear: “The flimsiness of these justifications is apparent: *any* atrocious action, absolutely any one, could be excused on such grounds.”

MacArthur’s top brass was so incensed by the press junket to Hiroshima that they ordered all journalists out of Tokyo on September 5, and relocated them to Yokohama, where they were kept under constant surveillance. Although journalists were allowed to travel to Nagasaki with a military escort, the chill seemed to have the intended effect. Bill Lawrence, the young *New York Times* reporter who had unquestionably been moved by what he saw at Hiroshima, cast off his uneasiness and fell in line with the meme that only the atomic bomb could shake the Japanese from the delusional belief that they were winning the war. Moreover, there were now new
allegations that American P.O.W.s had been killed by the atomic bomb – Lawrence reported that an unknown number of prisoners of war had been moved to the Mitsubishi Factory in Nagasaki, the bulls-eye for the Bockscar bombardier and the one structure whose image had frequently been reproduced and labeled ground zero of the second attack. Reporting from Nagasaki five days after the expulsion, exposed to the same, rubble-filled vistas that he had seen in Hiroshima, Lawrence wrote that “horrible as the bomb undoubtedly is, the Japanese are exaggerating its effects in an effort to win sympathy for themselves …[in order] to make the American people forget the long record of cold-blooded bestiality.”

Back in the United States, in an effort to counter growing speculation from experts around the country about the cause of the mysterious illness, thirty journalists and photographers were invited by General Leslie Groves to tour the Trinity test site on September 9. Reporting from New Mexico, William Laurence wrote that “the Army opened the closely guarded gates” to “give lie to the claims” of deaths caused by the presence of lingering radiation after the atomic attacks. Robert Oppenheimer, who had written a memo warning of radioactive fallout after Trinity, and other scientists from the Manhattan Project certainly aware of the dangers of radiation associated with the bomb, were now asked by Groves -- who himself had insisted on multiple safety precautions at the Trinity test -- to support his claim that lingering radiation was a “Japanese hoax” or “propaganda.” Radiologists were also on-site with Geiger counters to measure levels of radioactivity; leading the press to the site of the crater, they demonstrated that surface radiation had, according to Laurence, “dwindled to a minute quantity, safe for human habitation.” Buried within the article was the caveat that the visitors had been asked to don white canvas booties to make sure that radioactive particles present in the soil would not stick to the soles of their shoes. The photograph that accompanied the Times story edited out this telling
piece of information by cropping the figures of Leslie Groves and Robert Oppenheimer just above the feet (Fig. 21). Life magazine would run a similar, but unedited picture, on September 24 (Fig. 22).69

As U.S. Occupation troops pushed into Japan, and following in their stead, members of the U.S. Army Air Forces’ Strategic Bombing Survey began to assess the damage of the aerial campaigns, an Army Air Forces public-relations officer urged General Curtis LeMay to suppress updated casualty tallies from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, lest the Americans be viewed as “barbarians.” The officer urged Le May to postpone the release of the figures until the U.S. had collected “atrocity stories about what the Japs did to our B-29 crews when they were shot down.”70 Similar advice must have circulated amongst various government agencies, as the same day that the first accounts out of Hiroshima by Western journalists hit American newspapers, Secretary of State George Byrnes released a report documenting more than 200 atrocities committed by the Japanese against American POWs during the war.

On September 6, photographs of emaciated soldiers dressed in tatters, evoking memories of the sickly and dead at the Nazi concentration camps, dominated the front pages of every major news outlet in the country. (Figs. 23, 24). The “coincidence” of this juxtaposition was seized upon by Time magazine’s editorial board, which denounced the heavy-handedness of Byrnes approach:

In a week when the first U.S. newsmen entered Hiroshima and Nagasaki and made plain to U.S. readers the appalling devastation of those cities, the State Department issued a formal report on atrocities committed by the Japanese. The timing was not missed by many readers.”71

In early September, Americans would have had the shocking images of the liberated concentration camps fresh in their minds. Since April 11, 1945, when Americans triumphantly
rolled into Buchenwald, newspapers, picture magazines, and newsreels had made the nauseating images all-too familiar to their audience. Unlike the carefully composed pictures of death that were released sparingly during the war, those from the concentration camps were unedited, raw, and shockingly direct. The dead were stacked up like “cordwood”, or scattered over the floor of a warehouse; close-ups captured bodies frozen in the agonized poses of their violent deaths. Skeletal figures stared out at the viewer behind barbed wire (Fig. 25). Anticipating objections to its May 7th issue, which exposed its readers to “what the Germans really did” in all of its stomach-churning brutality, Life’s editors wrote that “the love of peace has no meaning or stamina unless it is based on a knowledge of war’s terror…Dead mean have indeed died in vain if live men refuse to look at them.”

For many, the discovery of the concentration camps was final validation that in spite of the massive death toll wrought by the bombing campaigns, Americans had fought “the Good War” against state-based fascism abroad. Any sympathy directed at the German people quickly vanished as soon as it became known that country’s leaders, with the seeming complicity of its citizens, were immoral and depraved enough to have stripped millions of individuals of their last shred of human dignity and their lives. By visually linking the American P.O.W.s in Japan with the prisoners of the concentration camps, Secretary of War Byrnes attempted to establish that essentially, Japanese militarism and Axis fascism were one and the same battle that needed to be fought at any cost – with the implication being that if the Japanese power had been weakened instead of annihilated, millions of enslaved Americans might have suffered the same fate of the Jews. But not everyone bought the analogy. A number of commentators noted a degree of hypocrisy in the self-righteous attitude of Americans for holding the German people collectively responsible for the atrocities of the Nazi camps in light of their own complacency over the death
toll at Hiroshima. Had not Americans been utterly indifferent to the callous policies pursued by their own government during the war? Felix Morley, writing for *Human Events*, pointed out that:

> At Nazi concentration camps, we have paraded horrified German civilians before the piled bodies of tortured Nazi victims. We have drafted German women to bury these pitiful dead. We have forced German prisoners in this country to witness pictures of these abominable deeds. It would be equally salutary to send groups of representative Americans to Hiroshima. There, as at Buchenwald, there are plenty of unburied dead.73

Others hinted that the injuries inflicted against the American P.O.W.s made it that much easier to dehumanize the Japanese enemy, and by extension, the thousands of casualties of the atomic attacks. Some editorialists went so far as to suggest that the attacks were racially motivated, and not all that much different from the sentiments underpinning the mass extermination of Jews or the Japanese dream of an all-Asian empire. Norman Thomas, also writing for *Human Events*, commented that “although Japanese cruelties to prisoners were less terrible than Nazi destruction of whole peoples, American racial feeling makes us bitter toward the Japanese.” Referencing the Japanese internment camps in the United States, Thomas made the uncomfortable point that American government policy had been shaped by the same racial hatreds. Thomas reminded his readers that “our bombs killed not people but “yellow monkeys”; in a language attributed to some of the top generals, “bestial apes” whom it was equally a “pleasure to burn or drown.” Those Americans who could not feel guilt over the atomic bombings because of their insistence that *all* Japanese were responsible for the torture of prisoners of war:

> completely reversed Jesus’ emendation of the ancient law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, so as to extract for each maltreated American prisoner the lives of countless children guilty only of being born in Japan.74
Well before the press arrived in Hiroshima, thousands of Americans who flowed into Japan as part of the Occupation force, as well as a gaggle of press, politicians, specialists, and scientists, received their first exposure to the human effects of the bomb through various outlets of the Japanese media — although ironically, wartime censorship in Japan also carefully controlled information surrounding the human carnage of the aerial bombardment campaigns.

Following a precedent of barring the release of photographs from the sites of the firebombing raids, Japanese censors also forbid the circulation of images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the last nine days of the war. On August 19, the first photograph of the atomic bombings, an image of the destroyed Mitsubishi factory that straddled the Urakami river in Nagasaki, appeared in the popular Tokyo newspaper *Asahi*. On August 25, two photographs by Yosuke Yamahata, a correspondent from the News and Information Bureau of the Japanese Western Army Corps, were reproduced in three Tokyo newspapers. The two images — one of several people walking through a smoldering landscape, the second of a few dazed figures grouped around a blasted tree — were conservative choices totally in keeping with the spirit of Japanese wartime censorship (Figs. 26, 27). Removed by the click of a shutter from the devastation surrounding them, the people in the photographs communicate nothing, as they are cut off from the enormity of their experience. Due to the ruthless process of selection by the censorship board, then, the photographs fail to capture the nature or magnitude of the injuries, suffering, and death imposed on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Yamahata, accompanied by writer Jun Higashi, painter Eiji Yamada, and two unidentified military escorts, had been dispatched to Nagasaki in order “to photograph the situation so as to be useful for military propaganda.” Traveling by train and for the final two hours on foot, the group arrived in Nagasaki on August 10, just in time to witness the sun coming up on the full
first day after the nuclear attack. The two photographs that were published by *Asahi* were hardly representative of the body of Yamahata’s work as a whole; in his portfolio are snapshots of fields scattered with charred corpses, carts loaded with the bodies of dead children, and in an image reminiscent of Picasso’s *Guernica*, a dead horse crushed by a collapsed building (Fig. 28). Out of hundreds of images taken by Yamahata – some of which were incredibly graphic - only a handful would reach a Japanese audience.

Yamahata had methodically and unflinchingly looked directly at the violence of the bomb, yet subsequent releases of his work in late August and early September obscured this fact. Japanese censors selected photographs that would downplay the scale of the death, as well as the gruesome effects of radiation on the living, in order to mold and shape the public’s perception (and no doubt, that of their American occupiers) during this time of bitter defeat. Yamahata’s best known image, that of a young boy grasping a rice ball with his battered and bandaged mother hovering protectively in the background, bolstered the idea of a quick return to normalcy in the two cities after the attacks (Fig. 29). Not surprisingly, then, this picture, as well as a handful of other Yamahata photographs already pre-screened by Japanese censors, also managed to make it into at least one American newspaper in mid-September before the new Occupation Press Code went into effect. There was one shocking exception – an appearance of a Yamahata photograph, uncredited, buried on the “Health” page of *Time* magazine. The picture was that of a woman breast-feeding a dying baby with the remarkably subversive caption “Ours,” referring to the test at Trinity, “was only a test” (Fig. 30).

Unlike reports out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ground level images taken by American photographers only began to appear in the press after the half-way point of September. With rare exceptions, the photographs were concentrated mostly in *Life* magazine in roughly a month-long
period, starting with a pictorial spread in the September 17th edition of Life and tapering off to a single photograph in the October 20th edition. Notably, after the first flyovers of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no government photographs of either city were released to the press for publication.

Many of the first images of the bombed-out sites focused on the industrial ruins of both cities, the supposed munitions factories and military installations that Truman had assured the American people were the targets of the two bombings. Although most of the industrial works crucial to the war effort were in actuality located outside the city limits and beyond the range of the blasts, the planes from the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey had hovered over a few prominent carcasses – like the Mitsubishi Steel Plant in Nagasaki -- in the weeks following the explosions (Fig. 31). Now viewed from ground, often from a low vantage-point, the charred and twisted hulks of metal rose up menacingly from their pummeled surroundings (Fig. 32). These close-ups were pared with two more indelible images: a remnant of a barber’s sink, glistening porcelain white against a field of rubble and scorched trees; and the empty hulk of a trolley-car, blown, as the caption put it “straight across Hiroshima” by the bomb’s blast (Figs. 33, 34). The calculated misrepresentation of conventional bomb raids had reassured ordinary Americans that “precision” and “strategic targeting” prevented the bomb’s use as murderous weapons. At Hiroshima, however, the juxtaposition of pictures clearly exposed the fact that large urban areas, rather than specific installations, had been the primary targets.

While a few prominent writers argued that Japanese military power was nearly exhausted by the time that the bombs were dropped, there can be no doubt that the pairing of the photographs worked to undermine voices of dissent. To a war-weary American public only too glad to have the boys home, it was not hard to imagine that these few remaining factories would have churned out the mass deaths of American soldiers in the event of a full-scale invasion. The fact that they
continued to stand, almost defiantly, after being hit by the most terrible weapon in existence, served as an indictment of the code of *bushido* and the runaway ambitions of the Japanese warmongering machine.

If Hiroshima was, as *Life* informed its readers, “a typical Oriental congestion of modern industry, rickety dwellings, shrines, and quaint teahouses,” then one of the unspoken rules of the new censorship code was to prevent images from surfacing that would contradict the official narrative of the enemy as savage, backwards, and pagan. In the pictorial essay “The Tokyo Express to Hiroshima”, published in the October 8th issue of *Life*, staff photographer J. R. Eyermann turned his attention to the unbroken rituals of Japanese existence in the midst of their shattered city. Seemingly unbowed by their recent defeat, Japanese women flocked to the markets, farmers tended rice fields, and in one particularly striking image, a family worshipped emotionlessly at a Buddhist temple with the ashes of their incinerated loved ones stacked in boxes in the background (Figs. 35, 36, 37). Other photographs zeroed in on a wooden gateway – miraculously still standing – in front of a pulverized Shinto shrine, and a looming pagan god that towered over its surroundings (Fig. 38). Far from evoking sympathy, these images reinforced how alien Japanese culture was to the Western observer, as well as how resistant the Japanese mindset was to change – justifying, in some part, the drastic campaign of incendiary raids leading up to the atomic attacks to clear the way for the new world order of the Occupation.

Context was crucial, as Eyermann’s pictorial essay did include three of the only images that would appear in the press of human afflictions related to the bomb before the Office of Censorship in Japan was dismantled in 1952. There is a fairly large picture of young Japanese schoolgirls, adorned with parasols and wearing the government-issued pantaloons (Fig. 39). The most striking element of the picture is the gauze masks that cover their noses and mouths.
While it would be hard not to speculate that the masks are in someway related to radiation poisoning, the caption reassures that they are protection from the spread of communicable (and more understandable) diseases that occur after natural catastrophes. In the most graphic of the photos, an elderly couple displays ugly red blast marks on their face and shoulders; its companion records a mother and small child, lying side-by-side on blankets, with a section of the child’s head bloodied and burnt (Figs. 40, 41). Once again, the captions work to undermine the seriousness of what is being portrayed. Eyermann deflates the emotional punch of the images of the bomb survivors by stating that “the burns were similar to those that I had seen at Pearl Harbor.”

On September 19, 1945, Supreme Commander General Douglas MacArthur ushered in a new Occupation Press Code, that banned the publication of anything “which might, directly or by inference, disturb public tranquility.” Specifically, it prohibited the publication of all reports and studies of atomic bomb damage, including medical and scientific studies, both within Hiroshima and Nagasaki – where this information was desperately needed to treat victims -- and also the rest of Japan. The Japanese characters for atomic bomb – genshi bakudan, or genbaku -- were even forbidden to appear in print. A second prohibition, issued on October 15, 1945, barred the release of most images of atomic destruction both within and outside of the country during the seven year occupation. Perhaps most disturbing of all, the far-reaching effects of the Occupation Press Code discouraged the hibakusha, the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, from telling their stories – thus silencing the most important source of information about the bomb.

Even before the implementation of the Press Code, however, U.S. troops had been ordered to confiscate damming material from both domestic and foreign journalists and Japanese civilians.
Wilfred Burchett, an Australian reporter who on September 5 would dispatch the first story out of Hiroshima documenting evidence of radiation poisoning in the targeted population, found his camera, “with the historic pictures of Hiroshima in its intestines,” whisked away during a “mandatory” examination in a U.S. Army hospital upon his return to Tokyo.⁸⁶ Foreign correspondents entering Japan had to immediately register with the American General Headquarters (GHQ); many out of habit sent their stories through Tokyo, only to have their reports disappear after their arrival in the capital. Yoshito Matsushige, a 32-year old photographer for the *Chugoku Newspaper* and the only known person to have taken photographs the day of the bombing of Hiroshima, had his prints confiscated by the Occupation forces – although he managed to hide the negatives and his images were later published once the censorship office was dismantled.⁸⁷ A Japanese film crew headed by Akira Iwasaki, a dissenter who had been imprisoned during the war for his anti-militaristic views, was arrested by American military police in Nagasaki and had its film seized. The crew had been sent by a pacifist Japanese research council to document the physical and medical effects of the bomb.⁸⁸ Ironically, after the group was released, its members were forced to work as the film crew for the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey.

In spite of the Occupation Press Code, the censors could sometimes be lax. In order to feed the insatiable demands of the weekly pictorial magazines, occasionally, the board allowed a photograph to be published. Less than two weeks after “The Tokyo Express to Hiroshima” appeared in *Life*, on October 20, 1945, the magazine chose as its “Picture of the Week” an image that staff photographer Bernard Hoffman took on his journey to Nagasaki. A gigantic head of Christ, severed from its body by the terrific blast of the bomb, lay at the feet of the oldest and most magnificent cathedral in East Asia. St. Mary’s Cathedral, which had been built by the
persecuted Christians of the community of Urakami at the turn of the century, and had catered to the largest percentage of Roman Catholics in any city in Japan, sat in ruins in the background of the image. A wide-eyed Christ stares out at the viewer with a deadened look, reminiscent of the blinded Oedipus from Greek tragedy (Fig. 42). Another photograph, taken from the same journey, displayed a crucifix that had been blown out of the cathedral and had come to rest on a hillside, like a grave marker, overlooking the total devastation of the city’s main business district, 18,000 buildings literally reduced to a pile of splinters. These photographs, unexpectedly breaching the chasm between Japanese culture and the Western way of life, seem to have stirred the consciousness of some of America’s Christian leaders (and presumably their followers). Suddenly circumspect, the editors of *Life*, pondered “whether the urgencies of war should permit such violation of individual life as the atomic bomb had committed.”

Yet few Americans seemed troubled by the morality of dropping the bomb on a defenseless population if it served as a means to an end. Surveys taken by *Fortune* magazine in October 1945 recorded that the public was overwhelmingly in favor of dropping the bomb – in fact, a sizeable contingent – 33% – had wished that more bombs had been dropped. Americans were far more concerned with having the weapon turned upon themselves. Norman Cousins, writing in the *Saturday Evening Review*, had perfectly expressed the common mixture of emotions after the Japanese surrender in his classic essay “Modern Man is Obsolete”:

> Whatever elation there is in the world today, is severely tempered by . . . a primitive fear, the fear of the unknown, the fear of forces man can neither channel nor comprehend . . . Overnight, it has become intensified, magnified. It has burst out of the subconscious and into the conscious, filling the mind with primordial apprehensions.

The fear resulted in the imagining of a number of apocalyptic scenarios, the most chilling of which appeared in the November 15, 1945 issue of *Life* magazine. In “The 36-Hour War,” the
United States has been hit by a surprise atomic attack, wiping out ten million Americans in an instant. The article was illustrated with a picture of a mushroom cloud rising over Washington, and missiles descending upon 13 major American cities. There were also illustrations of recognizable institutions, like the New York Public Library, in ruins (Fig. 43). At the end of the narrative, “the U.S. is fighting back…U.S. rockets lay waste to the enemy’s cities…U.S. airborne troops occupy his country…The U.S. wins the atomic war.” But the threat of lingering radioactivity is represented in an illustration of heavily protected soldiers with Geiger counters walking the streets of New York City.92

After the initial rush of doomsday stories, however, Americans fear over the atomic bomb peaked quickly in the months after the war. Rather than the bomb holding “the world in the grip of terror for the next one hundred years” as the editor of the *Christian Advocate* had predicted in September, with the United States in sole possession of nuclear technology it receded from public consciousness as an overriding concern.93 It was not long before the “Atomic Age” was assimilated into everyday life. In late October, *Life* ran a photograph of an Indiana University fraternity house that had adopted an atomic-bomb motif before a big football game with Nebraska State.94 In November, an air show at Oshkosh, Wisconsin, featured a mock Enola Gay that dropped fake bombs on an enthusiastic crowd. After Thanksgiving, department stores offered “atomic sales” just in time for the holiday season, and to kick off the New Year, General Mills offered an atomic bomb ring for fifteen cents and a cereal box top.95

After October of 1945, images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki stopped appearing in the press, and the bombed cities receded in collective memory. It would not be until 1952 that Americans would “really know what happened” at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In that year, the Occupation Press Code office was dismantled, and more graphic photographs were allowed to be published
in *Life* magazine. But at this point, the revelations hardly mattered. The legacy of Hiroshima was not an image, but an internalized feeling – the atomic age being transformed into the age of anxiety. This rootless sense of dread could hardly be encapsulated by the mushroom cloud, or even a photograph of a child burnt in an atomic attack. As *Art News* would comment in passing, “the effects of the bomb live on for us, beyond the reach of the representative arts.”

---


15 Truman came to prominence during the war years by heading the Preparedness Committee (popularly known as the Truman Committee), which investigated the scandal of military wastefulness by exposing fraud and mismanagement. See “Billion-Dollar Watchdog,” *Time*, March 8, 1943, 31-35. The investigation into the expenditure for the amount of money that would fund the development of an atomic bomb is mentioned in Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 86-87.


18 H. G. Wells, *The Last War: World Set Free* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001). The novel was originally published on the eve of World War I in 1914.

19 This story is recounted in Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, 257.


23 A picture of Hiroshima’s main power station was labeled as a possible target in the *New York Journal-American*, August 7, 1945, A-1.


25 The cartoon first appeared on August 8, 1945, and circulated in several of the Hearst family of publications thereafter, including the week’s Sunday supplement.


30 See, for example, “The Thirty-Six Hour War,” *Life*, November 19, 1945, 22-35. In this fictional account of an atomic attack on the United States, a mushroom cloud is superimposed over Washington, D.C.


34 The quote is from Merle Miller, one of the other crewmen who participated in the bombing of Hiroshima, from his memoir *We Dropped the A-Bomb* (New York: T. Y. Crowell Company, 1946), 141.


Some of the most moving protests come from letters to the editor; see “Letters to the Times,” *New York Times*, August 11, 1945, A-12.


The restrictions are laid out in Roeder, Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience during World War Two*, 86-87.

For more information on the Chamber of Horrors, a special archive that was kept in the Pentagon to house the grisliest pictures that passed in front of the censors, see George Roeder, Jr., “A Note on U.S. Photo Censorship in World War II,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 5, (1985): 192-216.


For example, in 1943, RKO made a picture, *Bombardier*, with the assistance of the Army Air Force, which gave the impression that the new bombsight allowed bombers to precisely target munitions factories from high altitudes, allaying the concern that the air campaigns were killing women and children.


Laurence’s collaboration with the government was announced in the *New York Times* on August 7, 1945; see “War Department Called Times Reporter to Explain Bomb’s Intricacies to the Public,” *New York Times*, August 7, 1945, A-5.


“To Hirohito, with love”, appeared as a caption on a number of political cartoons that also described more “conventional” bombing. See Roeder, Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience in World War II*, 18-19.


59 Lawrence, “Visit to Hiroshima Proves It World’s Most-Damaged City,” A1.


61 Dr. Harold Jacobsen, a minor player in the Manhattan Project and professor at Columbia University, was quoted as saying that “Hiroshima will be a devastated area not unlike our conception of the moon for nearly three-quarters of a century.” His predictions were distributed widely through an International News Services story. See “Death Will Saturate Bomb Target for 70 Years,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 8, 1945, A-1.


75 For a discussion of the limitations of reporting both within and from Japan during the period of the Occupation see Monica Braw, *The Atomic Bomb Suppressed: American Censorship in Occupied Japan* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991).


77 George H. Roeder, Jr. discusses the ban on images of dead animals on the Allied side in *The Censored War: American Visual Experience during World War Two*, 92.

79 See “Nagasaki a Month after the Blast,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, September 17, 1945, 23.

80 The photo accompanied a report from the press conference held at the Trinity test site to dispel rumors of radiation poisoning. “Report from Trinity,” Time, September 19, 1945, 39.


82 Eyermanm, “The Tokyo Express to Hiroshima,” 44.


84 Braw, The Atomic Bomb Suppressed: American Censorship in Occupied Japan, 42.


87 Yoshito Matsushige’s photographs from Hiroshima, five in total, can be seen in Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Atomic Bombings as Seen through Photographs and Artwork, vol. 4, Let it Never Be Repeated (Tokyo: Nihon Tosho Senta, 1993), 188-193.

88 Iwasaki Akira’s footage was confiscated by the U.S. Strategic Bombing survey; however in November, Akira and his crew were hired by the Survey to shoot, and then edit thousands of feet of new footage in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that were later incorporated into the documentary The Effects of the Atomic Bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The film was classified until the late 1970s; some of the original confiscated footage can be seen in the documentary Hiroshima/Nagasaki 1945: The Case of the A-Bomb Footage (Electric Arts Intermix, 1982).

89 “Picture of the Week,” Life, October 20, 1945, 14.


91 Norman Cousins, “Modern Man is Obsolete,” Saturday Review of Literature, August 18, 1945, 5.


94 Boyer, By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age, 9-10.

95 Boyer, By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age, 10.

Chapter 2: In the Wake of the Bomb: American Combat Artists in Occupied Japan

In the months following the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, few individuals seemed to question that, for the most part, information about the bomb had mostly been presented to the public on two vastly different scales: from the airborne view of the bomber at 20,000 feet, or the microscopic level of an atomic reaction. Americans who had wildly imagined their own nuclear terrors in trumped up scenarios of atomic attacks never really bothered to question the dearth of images that showed exactly what happened to a human population when a bomb was dropped on its city. It would seem logical that the circulation of the same, sanctioned images from Hiroshima and Nagasaki would prompt some, particularly the members of the media, to question the reach of the censorship code, yet no one clamored for photographs that undoubtedly existed with the presence of thousands of troops, as well as civilian, medical, and technical experts, pouring into Japan. Instead, there was an unusual silence.

The Combat Art Program and World War II

There was, however, one group of individuals who were uniquely positioned to witness the aftermath of the bomb. Since the beginning of the war, the combat art units of the United States military had been specifically tasked to be the eyewitnesses of history without the interference of censorship. The origin of the program dated from late 1942, when the Department of War assembled a War Art Advisory Committee composed of museum directors, curators, and critics to identify artists for a special unit that would not only record the war, but interpret its events through a human lens. The suggestion for the new Art Unit had come from George Biddle, a prominent muralist and member of the Associated American Artists Group. It was Biddle, after a painting trip with the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, who suggested to his boyhood friend Franklin Roosevelt the possibilities of putting artists to work that would result in the creation of
the Federal Art Project under Roosevelt’s New Deal. In 1942, the money for the WPA had all 
but evaporated, but once again Biddle petitioned the government for a role for the artist in the 
expanding international conflict. Of the 42 individuals that the Committee selected, 23 were 
already on active military duty and 19 were civilians.

In a memorandum addressed to the first recruits of the Combat Art Unit, George Biddle 
explained the mission of the artist in wartime:

You have been selected as outstanding American artists who will record the war in all 
it phases and its impact on you as artists and human beings. You are not to report just news . . . any subject if in order, if as artists you feel that it is part of the war: battle scenes and the front line; the wounded, the dying and the dead; wreaked 
habitations and bombing scenes; character sketches of your own troops, or prisoners of war; the nobility, courage, cowardice, cruelty, boredom of war; all of this should be part of a well-rounded picture.

Express if you can – realistically or symbolically – the essence and spirit of war. 
You may be guided by Blake’s mysticism, by Goya’s cynicism and savagery, by Delacroix’s romanticism, by Daumier’s humanity and tenderness; or better still, follow your own inevitable star. We believe that our Army’s command is giving you an opportunity to bring back a record of great value to your country.

Biddles’s rousing address to his first batch of recruits directed them to move beyond the 
stock imagery of heroic battle to address the human cost of war, particularly images of mass 
suffering. “Images of dying and dead” followed shortly by “wrecked habitations and bombing 
scenes” suggest that the artist must place himself in situations that, through their very instability, 
would make it difficult for the artist to objectify his experience. Even more telling is the fact that 
Biddle invoked the names of artists who were compelled to witness the atrocities of their time; 
and in doing so, often found themselves questioning the acts of their own people, especially their 
leaders. Far from an appeal to patriotism, Biddle encouraged his recruits to find inspiration in a 
visual catalogue of brutalizing acts that blurred the line between aggressor and victim.
While Biddle insisted that the artist could provide a unique viewpoint in times of crisis, to others, photography seemed to render the artist’s role in wartime obsolete. In 1942, a short-sighted Congress failed to appropriate funds to the Combat Art Program, threatening to eliminate the project shortly after its inauguration. However, the popularity of the sketches and watercolors submitted by their artist-correspondents overseas encouraged Congress to rethink its position. By 1943, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy ordered that official artists be deployed to cover the various theaters, and thereafter, each branch of the military assembled its own "Art Unit" to commemorate its glorious contribution -- whether by land, air, or sea - to the campaigns.

Francis Brennan, Director of the Graphic Bureau of the Office of War Information, justified this move when he commented that the decision to send artists to the front was an assertion of freedom in the face of tyranny – specifically, the degrading servility of the arts under totalitarian regimes. Moreover, the fact that the artists were encouraged to work in their own individual styles, to paraphrase an idea first set forth by Stuart Davis at the American Artists’ Congress in 1936 was the surest evidence of democracy at work and rejection of fascism abroad. Clearly referring to the book burnings orchestrated by Goebbels, the arrest of intellectuals, the purging of collections of questionable artworks, and the “Degenerate Exhibits” of art and music in Munich and elsewhere, Brennan made a point of distancing the activities of the American artists at the front with the more overt forms of propaganda. “The issue of art is freedom – this is what the enemy is trying to destroy. He has longed chained together his men of talent . . . we saw it when he destroyed the works and lives of artists that we hold dear…”

By the middle of the war years, American artists could only be committed to the war effort in two ways without facing public reprisal: either they could continue to paint what they had
always painted (landscapes, abstract compositions, etc.) with no reference to the war; or, they had to be physically engaged, preferably shoulder-to-shoulder with the soldier in a combat zone, in order to comment upon it. While the former continued to be highlighted for the sake of “carrying on” – much in the tradition of keeping open the doors of the museums in spite of blackouts and air raid warnings – the latter continued to dominate in importance, as art from the front fed the public’s insatiable desire for information.105

The critical and commercial success of the combat artists trumped any attempts stateside to grapple with the complexities of the war.106 Exhibits organized around war themes featuring American artists – but lacking any actual combat art – often met with derision, in spite of the good intentions of artists themselves and there fervent desire to help with the war movement in some small way. The toughest criticisms were leveled by the art publications of the period. In a typical wartime review, a critic writing in Art Digest mocked the faux patriotism of an Art Student League exhibition titled “This is Our War”, which, according to the accompanying press release, was “dedicated to the indelible and uncompromising theme that ‘we’re in it and bound to win it’”. Featuring over 100 works of painting and sculpture, including submissions by such notables as George Grosz, Rockwell Kent, Joseph Hirsch, and a “simulated on-the-spot” oil sketch of the battle of Guadalcanal by Reginald Marsh (made even more ridiculous by the fact that the artist never saw combat), the exhibition was judged to be an “absolute embarrassment.” Not only was the reviewer pained that “artists of some reputation . . . must be judged by these entries”; but moreover, the shoddiness of the exhibition as a whole, with some of the pieces actually reworked from earlier showings in New York to include material which catered to the theme, was an “affront to the servicemen who had been especially invited to see the show”, and
for the USO who had vigorously promoted it based on the superlatives of the advance publicity. 107

Peyton Boswell, editor for Art Digest, dedicated the first two pages of the March 15, 1943 issue to further attack the exhibition, which he deemed to be “an all-time low in aesthetics…” Upon his visit to the Wilderstein Gallery where the show was held, he had encountered a group of soldiers being “herded through the galleries attended by photographers”, and had this to say:

The expressions on their faces hurt; you could almost read their minds: ‘So this is the way that civilians play while we fight.’ I wanted to talk to them, to defend art, but I knew that I was unarmed. When you hitch a show to patriotism, either be good or don’t be at all. 108

Yet, in spite of George Biddle’s call for imaginative responses to the war that would distinguish themselves from the “factual reporting of cameras and moving filmstrips,” the reception of these paintings as eyewitness testimony tacitly shaped the rules for representation. Aspiring to remain faithful to the soldier and his experience, the combat artists as well as the civilian recruits that accompanied the military did, for the most part, suppress avant-garde tendencies. Biddle himself, who went with Fletcher Martin to North Africa and then to Italy, did stay true to his word and paint the civilian casualties of war, but his victims are “artfully” arranged: there is no blood, no bullet holes; the bodies are intact; it is as if the dead have simply fallen asleep (Fig. 44). Fletcher Martins’ paintings of bombed-out buildings seem to revel more in the concreteness of form rather than tell any kind of compelling story of the war spilling over to the villages and countryside (Fig. 45). The irony is that the brutality and ruthlessness of the war machine guaranteed that these artists encountered incoherent and destabilizing images that pushed the limits of conventional representation. No matter how accessible or appealing, a traditional approach to painting could, paradoxically, render destruction neat and manageable.
However, any artistic flourish could leave the artist wide open to accusations of self-aggrandizement at the expense of memorializing the men and the moment at hand. The challenge facing the artist was twofold: what responsibility did the artist have as an historical witness? And what style and pictorial forms could breech both the representational void instituted by the censors and the immeasurable impact of the war on the physical environment and human psyche?

The increasing reliance on mechanized warfare to win battles – particularly the saturation bombing campaigns towards the end of the war – rendered the familiar conventions of wartime storytelling obsolete. The courage of the soldier, willing to sacrifice his life for the principles of the nation and the security of its people; the civilians supporting the troops with naïve tokens of faith, like planting victory gardens, volunteering their nylons, or hording scraps of tin metal; had all been dwarfed by the cold calculations of munitions experts, rendering human agency on the battlefield almost irrelevant. The frequent replication of photographs taken from an elevation of 20,000 + feet of the aerial bombardments of cities reduced their targets to dots on a map – enemy targets that needed to be wiped out whatever the cost. The blurry surveillance pictures conveyed little about the character of those cities – nor did they do anything to alert the viewer that hundreds of thousands of individuals would die unimaginable deaths.

What role, if any, could the combat artist play in this new world of push-button warfare? For the artists who found themselves stranded in the Pacific after the Japanese surrender, it would seem that they had the opportunity to once again contemplate Biddle’s dictum to paint a “well-rounded picture of war.” For the first time, the combat artist had the opportunity to examine the human cost of the all-out aerial assaults that had brought about the peace. The war was over, but many artists of various military branches of the Far Eastern Combat Art Section sensed that their
mission was just beginning. For a select few, the journey would take them through Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

**Navy Artist at Hiroshima: Standish Backus**

Commander Standish Backus was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1910, and moved shortly after to Connecticut. He graduated with a degree in Architecture from Princeton University in 1933. The following year, he went to Europe with the intention of studying painting, stopped in Paris and the Netherlands to take in the collections of those cities, and eventually arrived at the University of Munich, where he would formally enroll as a student in Fine Arts. Around this time, he made the acquaintance of Eliot O’Hara, a watercolorist from Maine who was also living abroad, and began taking informal lessons from him in this medium. When he returned from Europe, Backus relocated to California, where he worked on developing his skills in aqueous media, and in 1936, found employment as a painting instructor at the Santa Barbara School of Fine Arts. Settling into his new environment and gaining confidence in his technique, he quickly gravitated to a group of California watercolorists who painted regional scenes of the outdoors.

The California Style watercolorists were part of the wider movement of American Scene painting that emphasized the geographic and cultural particularities of regions across the United States; they focused on the vast agricultural tracts of California, as well as the breathtaking beauty and abundance of its landscape, the vertiginous plunges between its altitudes and coastline, and the unique spirit of the people called to both domesticate and revere the land. Their style was evocative of the grandeur of the territory they had set out to chart - dominated by large paper formats, bold confident strokes, and strong use of color that defiantly set out to validate a realistic approach to painting.
In 1941, Backus was called to active duty after serving as an Ensign for one year in the Naval Reserve. In spite of the fact that he had carved out a successful career for himself as an artist, and had gained nationwide recognition and critical acclaim as one of the certifiable leaders of the California Style, he was not part of the original core of artists sent into combat as part of Operation Palette. Rather, it was his training as an architect that caught the attention of the draft board, and over the next four years he worked as a specialist for the Net and Boom Defenses, first in the Pacific and then at its domestic headquarters in Washington, D.C. The Net and Boom Defenses was responsible in part for devising strategic defenses against torpedo attacks targeting ships and harbors, and it appears that Backus helped to draft engineering blueprints for some of these devices. In February 1945, he was transferred to a special graphics presentation unit in the Bureau of Naval Personnel in Washington, D.C., although little is known of his activities during his brief stint with this Unit.

Backus was finally assigned to the Combat Art Unit in May of 1945. Because of the denouement of events in Europe, the Combat Art Program was only interested in recruits for destinations in the Pacific. The timing of Backus’s deployment seems to have coincided with the approval of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on May 25, 1945 of an overall plan for war in the Pacific theater and the next wave of military operations in Japan. Central to the successful conclusion of this plan was a directive to General Douglas MacArthur, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, and General Henry H. Arnold of an amphibious landing on the island of Kyushu, the target date of which had been set for November 1, 1945. In private consultations with Truman, several of the Chiefs had weighed other military options that might lead to Japan’s capitulation, such as naval blockades of its port cities or sustained bombing campaigns; yet it was obvious by the ferocity of their counterattack, and the swelling numbers of the Imperial Army, that neither
seemed capable of breaking the country’s resistance. The terrible devastation rendered on Tokyo in the fire-bombings, resulting in a death toll of an estimated 100,000 civilians, only seemed to strengthen the enemy’s resolve.\textsuperscript{110} If President Truman continued to insist on terms of unconditional surrender, nothing less than an invasion by U.S. forces, possibly with the ominous threat of Soviet backing, seemed capable of wrenching the Japanese people away from their unshakable belief in the suicidal course of their Emperor, and completely eradicating Japan’s military program after the war.

Although he had frequently aired his concerns about minimizing the number of causalities to a war-weary public, Truman momentarily seemed to renege on his promises when he announced in a speech made to Congress on June 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1945 that if the Japanese:

> hope that our desire to see our soldiers and sailors home again and the temptation to return to the comforts and profits of peace will force us to settle for some compromise short of unconditional surrender. They should know better… We are resolute in our determination – we will see the fight through to a complete and victorious finish.\textsuperscript{111}

On June 1, 1945, Backus received his orders for deployment from Robert L. Parsons, Commander-in-Chief of the Combat Art Section who had come to the Navy by way of the Deputy Director’s chair at the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D.C. Parsons had been personally approached by Admiral Nimitz to take a temporary leave of absence at the Corcoran to assume this wartime position, and under Parsons’ direction, a recruitment campaign for trainees targeted some of the most prestigious facilities of art education in the country, pooling talent from faculty and their students at institutions such as Parsons’s own and the Art Institute of Chicago, the New York Art Academy, and Yale University, among others.\textsuperscript{112} Backus had come to Parsons’ attention through a personal introduction from Mitchell Jamieson, a Naval officer who worked in a surrealistic style and one of the most prolific of the combat war artists. Backus
was required to submit a portfolio to Parsons for consideration, and upon review of the artist’s work, a verbal agreement was reached that Backus would be considered for transfer to the Combat Art Unit when an opportunity arose.

The letter drafted by Parsons on June 1st informed Backus that he would be one of six Naval artists to be sent to the Pacific on an undisclosed mission. Backus’ orders were to proceed to the Chief of Naval Information of the Pacific Fleet in Honolulu (who typically dispatched both journalists and artist-correspondents attached to this branch of the service), who would hand him more detailed instructions after he assessed the areas in need of coverage in the theater. Afterward, it was expected that he would be transported to Advance Headquarters in the Pacific, now stationed in Guam. Backus was issued the standard equipment given to every combat artist for his assignment – sketchbooks, pencils, charcoal, and a camera. To these military “rations” he would add his own supply of brushes, watercolors, and large-format sheets of paper in the hope that his scribbles would metamorphosis into mature works (just as other combat artists before him had lugged canvas and stretchers to the front lines). Departure for the mission was delayed until the 18th, undoubtedly to give the officers in the Pacific time to regroup after the exhaustive Okinawa campaign -- the unexpectedly bloody battle for that island (which did finally result in sullen capitulation from the enemy) had seriously tested the physical resources of the American forces and the mental limits of the troops.

Standish Backus arrived on the island of Guam in mid-July, where he was assigned to document the activities of one of the most battle-hardened Regiments in the Pacific theater. The 4th Marine Regiment had played a distinguished role in reclaiming the island for the U.S. as a critical staging ground of operations in a swift and decisive encounter in the summer of 1944. The recapture of Guam was particularly symbolic, as it had remained in Japanese possession for
close to three years after it was seized less than 24 hours after the spectacular Pearl Harbor attacks. The Regiment itself had temporarily ceased to exist after the original 4th had fought heroically to defend the island fortress of Corregidor after their retreat from Bataan. Surrounded on all sides, the Regiment was bitterly forced to surrender to the Imperial forces on May 6, 1942 – but not before U.S. Commander in the Philippines General Wainwright ordered his soldiers to burn their colors before they were taken into custody as prisoners of war. The Regiment was reactivated in memory of those soldiers on February 1, 1944 out of the 1st Raider Regiment that had fought at Guadalcanal. In July, Divisions of the Regiment were just beginning to return to the island from Okinawa. Backus began sketching the soldiers as they immediately plunged into their training exercises for the Kyushu landing in November.114

Back on the domestic front, Truman was weighing the projected casualty rates for the upcoming invasion of Japan after the massive human costs of the latest battle at Okinawa poured into the war room in Washington. By July 1st, the administration began actively considering using the atomic bomb, possibly in a demonstration near Japan. However, according to accounts from both administrative and military officials, this change in strategy seems to have had little to do with bringing the war in the Pacific to its denouement. To cite but one example, shortly after a meeting on May 30, 1945 between Secretary of State William Byrnes and atomic scientists Leo Szilard, Walter Bartky, Harold C. Urey, Szilard recorded that:

Mr. Byrnes did not argue that it was necessary to use the bomb against the cities of Japan in order to win the war. He knew at the time, as the rest of the government knew, that Japan was essentially defeated and that we could win the war in another six months. At that time Mr. Byrnes was much concerned about the spreading of Russian influence in Europe; it was his view that our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable…”115

In the days leading up to Potsdam, all high-level administration, and Truman himself, had knowledge of the content of key intercepts between Togo, Foreign Minister of Japan to Sato,
Japanese Ambassador in Moscow. These messages verified that by all accounts, the Japanese had only been willing to sustain their campaign because, according to information relayed to the President by Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal “the unconditional surrender terms of the Allies were the only thing standing in the way of termination of the war… and if this were insisted upon then of course the Japanese would have to continue to fight.”116 In further intercepts, it was revealed that Emperor Hirohito was willing to send his son, Prince Konoye, to Moscow as a Special Envoy with proposals beseeching Soviet help in reaching an agreeable end to the war. The American public, unaware of these secret communiqués and their government’s interception of them, nonetheless received the message from several different sources that a diplomatic solution appeared possible. On the first day of Potsdam, *Life* magazine noted that “the big problem confronting the U.S. with regard to Japan is no longer a military problem; it is now essentially a problem in statesmanship.”117 A number of high-ranking Republicans called for clarification in the terms of surrender. On July 13, the *New York Times* ran large excerpts of a speech made by Senator Homer E. Capehart, Indiana Republican, from the floor of the Senate:

> The publication of a definition of “unconditional surrender for the Japanese not only would have the effect of shortening the war in the Pacific materially, saving numerous American lives, but also would mean that those who hereafter must die will know exactly what is to be accomplished by their sacrifice . . . our nation, in cooperation with her Allies, should proceed to formulate, and when formulated, should announce to the world, the exact minimum terms required of Japan.

However, in the excitement over the test blast in the desert at Alamagordo, New Mexico, on July 15, 1945, the question changed from whether to use the bomb during the war to when it should be used. Detailed accounts of the experiment at Trinity were telegrammed to Truman at Potsdam during the drafting of an ultimatum to Japan, and seemed to have set the course thereafter. At the last minute, Byrnes and Truman eliminated a crucial portion of the 12th paragraph of the Potsdam Proclamation that would have provided the crucial assurances of the
preservation of the national structure – the Emperor and the Imperial system – if not in actual
authority then in ceremonial reverence. Upon receiving the Potsdam Proclamation, Japanese
leadership in the final week of July scrutinized its language as it frantically sought out
alternatives for peace.

On August 6, 1945, with the Japanese having been given “fair warning” of the terms of their
surrender, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima at 8:45 am. On August 9, shortly
after Soviet tanks rolled across the border into Manchuria, a second bomb was dropped at
Nagasaki. Forty-eight hours later, Truman presented Japan with a carefully worded statement
that technically adhered to the rhetoric of “unconditional surrender” but implicitly set forth the
same terms that had been contained in the eliminated portion of the Potsdam Declaration –
namely, that the Emperor might continue to exist as long as his authority would be subject to the
Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. On August 15th, a voice foreign to the Japanese
people - that of the Emperor himself - announced that the Japan had accepted the terms of
surrender.

**Backus Goes to Japan**

Immediately after Radio Tokyo carried the announcement, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz
requested a regimental combat team for immediate occupation of Japan, and the 4th Marine
Regiment was chosen to answer his call. As part of what General MacArthur called “the greatest
military gamble in history”, the 2nd Batallion was ordered to make the first amphibious landing
on the Japanese home island and to seize military positions held by the Imperial Army on the
Futtsu Peninsula, across Tokyo Bay from Yokosuka, in order to secure safe passage for the
procession of the fleet into the harbor and proceed with the movement of the occupational forces
to Tokyo and beyond. The great gamble was that there was no guarantee that the Japanese
would accept the terms of the Emperor’s surrender. As Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson had written to Truman in a top-secret memo during the Okinawa campaign:

If we once land on one of the main islands and begin a forceful occupation of Japan, we shall probably have cast the die of last ditch resistance. The Japanese are highly patriotic and certainly susceptible to calls for fanatical resistance to repel an invasion. Once started in actual invasion, we shall in my opinion have to go through with an even more bitter finish fight than in Germany. We shall incur the losses incident to such a war and we shall have to leave the Japanese islands even more thoroughly destroyed than was the case with Germany. This would be due both to the difference in the Japanese and German personal character and the differences in the size and character of the terrain through which the operations will take place.\textsuperscript{121}

Mere hours after the Japanese surrender, Standish Backus was hurriedly transferred to the Third Fleet and the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Batallion of the 4\textsuperscript{th} Marine Regiment. Although there were a number of journalists in tow, there was no photographer among them – Backus’s pictorial record is the only one that survives of the momentous beginning of the post-war occupation.

The start of the invasion is recorded in Backus’s dramatic first image, \textit{The First Wave on Japan}, in which the spectator is placed squarely in center of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion as it launches out under moonlit skies on the evening of August 30, 1945 (Fig. 46). Over the silhouettes of Marine helmets, a fleet of seal-like Higgins boats churn the ocean as the crafts chop through the waters at accelerating speeds to minimize the possibility of early detection by the Japanese. Although Japan has offered its surrender, enemy troops are assumed to be stationed at the fort glimpsed in the far distance. The diagonal thrust of the composition mimics the rush of the adrenaline of the Marines as they bear down upon their target, seemingly undeterred by possibility that they might meet with the bloodiest resistance since the landing at Dieppe after they moved to occupy the island. The soldiers that wrap around the bottom perimeter are crowded together and viewed from the back, with hands gripped tightly to the side of the boat or clutched expectantly around their rifles. Their lack of individuation stresses their uniformity as members of the regiment and
their steely determination to carry out orders. The watercolor technique of the California Abstractionists is fully evident here: in the large scale of the work – nearly two by two feet – in the churning brushstrokes, the rich palette of dark hues that indicate the color of objects in the pre-dawn hours, and most tellingly, in use of the vast roiling ocean as a metaphor that matches the scale of human events. The gripping immediacy of the image can be credited to the fact that it was executed shortly after landing from sketches made during the advance – the Marines had met with no resistance, and incredibly, the beachhead was secured without conflict, as documented in a watercolor by the artist (Fig. 47). Backus’s dramatic first painting would set the tone for the remarkable series of images that would be generated out of his historic mission.

On August 29th, 1945, Backus finally had the opportunity to write to his supervisor back in Washington, Robert Parsons, since the remarkable series of events that had catapulted him from the relative banality of day-to-day operations in Guam to the exhilarating landing on Japan. It is clear in this letter that Backus was clearly torn between loyalty to completing his first assignment – a documentary account of the routine activities of soldiers on Guam - and the unknown possibilities of what lay ahead on the main island. A more pressing matter requiring his attention, however, was that the point system that the Navy had recently announced seemed to indicate that those with sufficient number of points must be out of the theater within 120 days from August 15 - the middle of December - and Backus had already acquired 54 of the 49 points required. It was an anguishing decision, because “although”, as Backus writes, “I would like to resign from the service at the earliest opportunity, I would also like to finish the assignment”, meaning, at the very least, the development of certain sketched ideas observed at the Naval Operation Base in Guam. However, he presciently noted that “there is undoubtedly a wealth of subject matter becoming available what with the coming occupation of more of this country,
Korea, China, etc. It will be good stuff for several months more anyhow.” He concluded the letter with a request for an extension to the beginning of the next year.122

In the chaotic days and weeks after the surrender, not only was Backus’s original assignment in question, but so too was the continuing existence of the Combat Art Program itself. Robert Parsons was eager to return to his duties at the Corcoran, and although Backus approached his subjects with ample enthusiasm and fresh eyes, other artists, particularly Backus’s comrade Mitch Jamieson (who had sent word of his imminent arrival in Tokyo Bay),123 were undoubtedly war-weary having maintained a grueling schedule criss-crossing the globe over the past three years. The likelihood that Congress would continue to appropriate funds for a Combat Art Program without an actual combat situation seemed unlikely. Indeed, by the time Backus’s letters reached Washington, the Combat Art office was already in the process of being physically dismantled.124

If surprisingly the initial wave of the army of occupation met with no resistance, the troops were even more shocked by vast panorama of destruction that seemed to stretch out endlessly before them. Even to those bleary-eyed soldiers who had become numb to such matters, the destruction witnessed on the Japanese mainland still had the power to shock. Sixty-six major cities in Japan had been heavily bombed during the Allied air campaigns, with close to 40 percent of each targeted urban center pummeled into ruins. Besides Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Tokyo had been one the cities that had been hardest hit, the object of a vicious three-day firebombing campaign in May of 1945 that killed an estimated 100,000 people. Russell Brines, the first foreign journalist to enter Tokyo, remarked that “everything had been flattened . . . Only thumbs stood up from the flatlands – the chimneys of bathhouses, heavy house safes, and an occasional stout building with heavy iron shutters.”125 As Japanese historian John Dower notes,
“The first photographs and newsreel footage from the conquered land captured these endless vistas of urban rubble for American audiences thousands of miles away who had never really grasped what it meant to incinerate great cities.” Ghostly devoid of people, these hollowed-out cities struggled to communicate the hundreds of thousands of lives that had been snuffed out in the ruthless pursuit of unconditional surrender.

To an American press bent on vengeance, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were interpreted as justice meted out not just for the butchery at Nanking, but for the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor and the embarrassing defeats of Allied forces at Singapore and the Philippines early on in the war. The tone of the war in the Pacific was set when less than three days after Pearl Harbor, an editorial cartoon in a Chicago paper declared that the retribution against the Japanese would be a “War Without Mercy” (Fig. 48). Without question, the fury the United States unleashed on its enemy had much to do with the sheer audacity of the Japanese assault. With a healthy proportion of the American population claiming German ancestry, Nazi sympathizers could be “pardoned” for being brainwashed by a maniacal dictator; much of the country’s hatred was directed not at the German people but at Hitler himself. By contrast, Japanese immigration affected only a handful of Western territories, with the bulk of the immigrants being only of the first or second generation. The Japanese, as well as the geographic location from which they hailed, were unknown quantities to most of the country -- save for the stereotypical depictions of their race as a childlike, ineffectual people in Hollywood productions and comic books. While Emperor Hirohito was caricatured in the press (Fig. 49), it was the homogenous “Jap” that posed the greatest threat to the security of the homeland.

The physical and psychological distance between the United States and its attacker had a crippling effect on the American psyche. The bloody sieges in the Pacific took place across an
archipelago of far-flung islands whose names were heretofore unknown to the American public. Thousands of soldiers were lost and left to rot in unmarked graves thousands of miles from home. The legendary zeal with which the Japanese fought to the death, and the bizarre practices of kamikaze dive-bombings and mass suicides in the face of surrender, drove home the point that this was an inscrutable enemy. As a result, fear of the unknown raised the level of vitriol to hysteria.

It is hardly surprising, then, that, due to their “alien” features and a mass mentality that was so different from an individualistic spirit, the Japanese would be collectivized and labeled as bestial or subhuman in wartime propaganda. In an effort to widen the gap between the Allies and the enemy, the Japanese were routinely referred to as various types of insects such as ants, cockroaches, or worms; creatures of the jungle, particularly monkeys or apes; sheep for their “herd-like mentality” (although more commonly used for the “brainwashed” Germans); or an almost mythical hybrid of man and any of the above.130

This tendency was remarked upon by Howard Pyle, the indefatigable American journalist who served as the eyes and ears for the public in reporting the war. Pyle was transferred in 1945 to the Pacific theater, and in a dispatch sent out shortly after his arrival, commented that:

in Europe, we felt that our enemies, horrible and deadly as they were, were still people. But here I soon gathered that the Japanese were looked upon as something inhuman and repulsive, the same way some people feel about cockroaches or mice.131

In spite of Pyle’s acknowledgement of this prejudice, he was noticeably taken aback at the similarities between himself and the opposition in his first encounter with the enemy at Okinawa. Of two Japanese males who were present on a beach at the time of the correspondent’s landing, Pyle wrote with noticeable consternation that “they were wrestling and laughing and talking just like normal human beings.”132 By the end of the war, the dehumanizing rhetoric had become so
thoroughly entrenched that clearly even a seasoned journalist like Pyle half-expected to come face-to-face with another species.

The labels would have lacked punch without images. The onslaught of visual information in World War II penetrated every area of society. Posters, leaflets, drives for war bonds, illustrations in magazines, and editorial cartoons, sold the idea of the Japanese as something monstrous. In color illustrations of the Japanese, the skin tone was keyed up to a nerve-jangling yellow. Squinty or slanted eyes – often accentuated by round spectacles – and buck-toothed, sinister grins warped natural features and exaggerated racial differences. A submission to the Museum of Modern Art’s “This is the Enemy” contest in 1942 that was later reprinted in *Life* magazine, highlighted exactly what was at stake in this epic struggle (Fig. 50). The poster, which depicted a Japanese soldier carrying off a naked white woman with lynched figures in the background, exposed fears of impotence in the face of a voracious enemy, and implicitly linked the cultural nightmare of vast multitudes of Asians advancing on America to the horror of miscegenation already present in the deep South in the mixing of blacks and whites.

While many of the Japanese stereotypes were recycled from an earlier era of anti-Asian rhetoric surrounding the perceived “Yellow Peril” brought about by waves of immigration from China in the 19th century, there was a good deal of discussion that engaging in such anti-Asian slurs would have the unintended affect of uniting the entire Orient against the West. Churchill himself discouraged such talk on the basis of what he felt to be a “looming shadow of Asiatic solidarity.” These images were quickly overtaken by ones that stressed the bestial character of the enemy – especially in contrast to other Asians. In a March 1943 reprint of a British cartoon in the *New York Times Magazine*, a hulking oversized ape figure – a Japanese King Kong – lumbers forward over a Chinese landscape, scooping up innocents in one hand and crushing
bodies with another dragging on the ground (Fig. 51). In another cartoon published in the New York Times in response to the execution of the Doolittle Fliers, blood-soaked ape with the words “Murderer of the American Fleet” stares into the barrel of a cocked handgun with the word “Civilization” inscribed over the strong arm of the law (Fig. 52). More blatantly offensive images appeared in publications specifically targeted to soldiers like Yank and Stars and Stripes, instruction manuals for each branch of the armed services and the do-it-yourself publications that cropped up within units. In the May 1945 issue of the Marine publication Leatherneck, the Japanese were depicted as a hideous insect – the “Louseous Japanicas” – “whose breeding grounds around the Tokyo area must be completely annihilated” to prevent a worldwide infestation (Fig. 53). Backus may have received a booklet prepared by the United States Navy Command in the last months of the war that cautioned the soldier not to cavalierly dismiss the enemy as a “buck-toothed, near-sighted pint-sized monkey” and instead be on the lookout for an “atrocious beast.”

There is little in the way of Backus’s own correspondence that clarifies his own feelings on the racial component of the war. In the same letter that he wrote to Robert Parsons shortly after the invasion, he expressed relief that the stereotypical Japanese warrior willing to fight to the death for his Emperor had not materialized. Backus regaled Parsons with an amusing anecdote of the battalion landing in full force on the beachhead, only to be greeted by one or two Japanese scrambling back and forth at the edge of the surf “like crabs”. But unlike Pyle’s earlier comment which painted the two Japanese writhing in the sand as some kind of sub-species, Backus’s comment was no doubt pure comic relief. The letter addressed from Tokyo Bay would be the only mention of the island’s inhabitants for the duration of his assignment, even though undoubtedly, the demoralized population, particularly the shell-shocked ex-soldiers he must have
encountered in the streets, bore no resemblance to an enemy that had been enlarged to mythical proportions. Backus’s additional letters to Parsons would be written in a jaunty conversational tone that yielded little in the way of personal revelations, other than Backus’s desire to keep working in his capacity as a combat artist.

Hailing from California, though, Backus could not have been ignorant of the strenuous debates in labor circles, political parties, and particularly the pages of the Hearst newspaper chain, over Japanese immigrants and their threat to the prosperity to the white population. Even before Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942 which would forcibly removed Japanese-Americans and immigrants to internment camps behind barbed wire, race relations on the West coast had been simmering for generations. At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, nearly 112,000 individuals of Japanese descent were living in California, Arizona, and the coastal areas of Oregon and Washington, one third of which had come to the United States before the Immigration act in 1924 limited immigration from Asia. Although the Japanese were still a tiny minority in California, the Nisei and the Sensei owned nearly ninety percent of truck cash crops in the state.

The landscapes that Backus painted before he was tapped for the Combat Art program were intimately connected to this issue of race relations in California. The large plots of well-tended fields (admittedly a staple in other American Scene painting in the thirties) could hardly be referenced on the West coast without some thought of the Asian population which dominated agricultural production. Rather than viewing landscape paintings as simply an articulation of a uniquely American heritage, there is a possibility that Backus, in painting agricultural landscapes, was inserting himself into this debate over the “rightful” ownership of property and the reclamation of the bounty of the land for the white settlers of the state.
While Californians, out of any of the American population, had reason to worry about an imminent Japanese invasion, the attack at Pearl Harbor merely justified nearly a century of racial hatred and allowed that hatred to be bandied about freely as the enemy abroad coalesced with the enemy within. It is no wonder then, that General DeWitt could unabashedly remark to the Los Angeles Times in May of 1943 that “a Jap’s a Jap…it makes no different if he is an American citizen or not…I don’t want any of them…they are a dangerous lot. There is no way to determine their loyalty.”

Once Backus disembarked from his ship and arrived in Tokyo, he appears not to have strayed too far from his original assignment; indeed, the sketches and paintings that he did complete are of American military subjects, primarily related to U.S. Naval activity, or once-mighty Japanese vessels now sunk in their graves (Fig. 54). Backus’s friend and fellow combat artist Mitch Jamieson finally arrived in Tokyo Bay at the end of August, and immediately assumed duties as the official artist of the Occupation. Jamieson, who had accompanied troops into Sicily, had worked in Brittany and Normandy, and had been transferred to record the battle at Okinawa and later surveyed the ravages of Iwo Jima, was far more experienced than Backus and had seniority in the job. He was also something of a celebrity, as his work had regularly appeared in Life and Fortune and other national publications throughout the war.

As one of George Biddle’s hand-picked recruits for the combat art program, Jamieson perhaps best exemplified what an artist could contribute to the visual record of wartime. He was known for his highly Surrealistic and emotional style, such as the Goya-esque charcoal Low Tide, American Sector or the dream-like Battle of Iwo Jima. Unlike famous photographs and newsreels that show wave after wave of Marines fearlessly storming the beaches of Normandy, Jamieson reduced the D-Day invasion to the sacrifice of a single soldier, whose limp body has
been washed up by the surf and laid to rest across an x-shaped, tank trap barrier buried in the sand (Fig. 55). The symbolic reference to the crucifixion in the central figure, the tangle of limbs and ignoble poses of his two dead comrades, the sense of isolation and the bleakness of the landscape -- all rendered in Jamieson’s expressive charcoal line -- are all in mournful contrast to the patriotic flag-waving of propagandistic imagery. In Jamieson’s *Battle of Iwo Jima*, 1945, the immutable forms of the island’s mountainous terrain dwarf the epic battle. Emphasis is placed not on the soldiers themselves, but on tanks, grenades, and controversial flamethrowers, whose fiery streaks puncture the grey-green mist (Fig. 56). Like in *Low Tide*, Jamieson seems to raise ethical questions about the cost of victory, in this case contrasting a sublime landscape with the unnatural technology used to conquer and subdue its Japanese defenders.

However, after Jamieson arrived in Tokyo, he was tapped to depict the formal surrender of the Japanese on the *U.S.S. Missouri* on September 2nd, 1945. In this large-scale painting, an uncharacteristic oil (Jamieson primarily worked in watercolor and charcoal), Jamieson subverted his more avant-garde tendencies to render a near-perfect photographic image for history. He also completed a series of straight-on portraits of the principle characters of the Occupation. Backus seems to have attended the surrender on the U.S.S. Missouri by merit of his connection with Jamieson, but perhaps served as his assistant or stood by as a spectator, although he made at least one sketch of the ceremony (Fig. 57).

Nonetheless, Jamieson’s tenure as artist of the Occupation would be brief. Given his opportunity to leave by that same point system that Backus was attempting to buck with his urgent letter to Robert Parsons, Jamieson gladly returned home in late September. During his time abroad, Jamieson had been awarded two Guggenheim prizes, and an award from the National Academy of Arts and Letters, and was eager to get back to work stateside to capitalize
on his critical and commercial success. Backus, still awaiting orders that would never come, would finally be forced to chart his own course of events out of this vacuum.

The first Americans to arrive at Hiroshima were prisoners of war from a nearby camp, brought in by the Japanese to help clean up the debris. Shortly after the bombing, General Leslie Groves sent in a medical team to measure levels of radiation, and in a quick two-day survey found no radioactivity levels. A more careful survey in the next few weeks determined that there were levels of radioactivity underneath the point where the bombs had exploded, but that these levels were considered acceptable for human exposure. U.S. Marines and Army Seabees arrived in Hiroshima on September 8th, after the area had been declared safe for occupation. Backus, who seems to have remained in Tokyo for the duration of September, notes in the last piece of correspondence contained in the Navy Art Collection that he intended to “somehow make it up to Hiroshima,” traveling by foot if he had to (although it should be noted that rail service had been maintained between Tokyo and Hiroshima). No written records exist of Backus’s actual period in Hiroshima – however, his extraordinary body of work attests to the fact that he witnessed these scenes firsthand.

**Journey to Hiroshima**

Although the series of paintings that Backus executed lacks a definite chronological structure, one can imagine that *Hiroshima, 1945*, mostly closely approximates Backus’s own approach to the city (Fig. 58). In this pen and ink drawing rendered in subtle tones of brown, grey, and black, a panorama of destruction unfolds across a large piece of rectangular paper. From this distance, one is immediately struck by the contrast between the precision of the gridded city and the individual plots of chaos. Clear borders neatly demarcate where buildings once stood, although most are now piles of rubble or simply imprints left in the dirt. A few
notable buildings that withstood the blast can be made out: near the center, the once-soaring form of a clock tower, rising above the second story of a clock store in Hiroshima’s central business district, now lurching precariously to one side; the to the left of the painting, a rare three-story structure, the police department, still fairly intact because unlike most of Hiroshima’s construction, it was made of ferroconcrete instead of paper and wood. The few vertical elements in the picture emphasize the shocking horizontality of everything else.

The immediate landscape is ashen, nearly colorless, yet in the background, the sky opens up and illuminates the sea and a chain of green mountains, and the island of Ninoshima with its “miniature Fuji”, as if life beyond Hiroshima remains unchanged. The haunting quality of the picture owes much to this disturbing duality, revealed through the artist’s choice of bird’s-eye view. Although it is logical that Backus would position himself on a hillside to take in the topography of the city, it is nonetheless an unsettling viewpoint – the viewpoint of those fleeing Hiroshima, glimpsing it one last time; the unfortunate who have come home to this disaster; and in its hovering position from above, it is impossible not to think that this is also the viewpoint of the crew of the bomber as it circled back around to gauge the “success” of its mission.

One could accuse Backus of an almost clinical approach to his subject, much in the way a photojournalist has to look unflinchingly through the viewfinder of the camera and record whatever grim realities pass in front of one’s lens. There is almost a deadening effect to the illustration, a kind of matter-of-fact finality that speaks of a dispassionate observer bent on recording the scene for posterity. Yet because of the overwhelming scope of the destruction, it is hard to imagine that a drawing of such exactitude could simply be a by-product of human observation. One suspects that Backus relied upon his government-issued camera to block out a section of the city and cement the details of the streets therein. In fact, panoramic photographs
taken by Japanese photographer Shigeo Hayashi from the roof of the police building of Hiroshima’s central business district in November 1945 confirm the accuracy of Backus’s rendering in this piece (Fig. 59).  

While the similarities between Backus’s drawing and the photographs are convincing, Backus was not in the habit of using his camera as a preparatory tool. The camera, a Leica, only produced one-inch by one-inch negatives from which the combat artist made contact prints in the field – obviously wholly unsuited for a project of this scale. Nor is it realistic to think that Backus, as a Lieutenant in the Navy, had access to either the panoramas of Hayashi or aerial photography of the bomb site commissioned by the Army’s United States Strategic Group in November of 1945. It is probably more likely that just as in the case of Jamieson’s ceremonial portrait of the Japanese surrender, Backus was ordered, or perhaps at least felt obligated, to create an official record of the bombing of Hiroshima from a neutral standpoint. This would convincingly explain the differences in style and emotional tone between this work and the remaining body of images from Hiroshima.

Moreover, Backus himself took great pains to distinguish his contribution as a combat artist as something distinct from the role of the documentary photographer. A year after he returned from Japan, he commented that:

*The Navy appreciates the artist, in reporting his experiences, has the opportunity to convey to his audience a larger sense of realization of a subject, than has the photographer, with his instantaneous exposures, or the writer, who lacks the advantage of direct visual impact. Concurrently, it is to be understood that the artist is obliged to contemplate the subject reflectively, seeking to penetrate beyond the surface of factual representation, in order to present the true nature of the experience.*

If one is to believe, then, that even in this most factual of representations, Backus is manipulating his subject in such a way to communicate his personal impressions, one needs to
investigate the subtlety of his language. In the horizontal format of the piece, Backus’s use of pen-and-ink rather than his customary watercolor, and soaring vantage-point, *Hiroshima 1945* bears some resemblance to traditional Japanese picture scrolls. The cultural appropriation appears to be intentional. Certainly the condensation of the field of destruction in front of a silhouette of green mountains against open sky invokes the use of open space, bird’s-eye perspective, and simplified block form of Japanese brush painting. Backus’s mark-making does not simply record data like a stenographer -- one can see that the surface has been worked and reworked, generating layers of textural complexity. As in calligraphy, spiritual states and deep feeling can be communicated through the use of line. Thick, languid strokes become mournful; small wiry strokes burn with intensity. And with little more than comma-like brushstrokes rendered in black ink, Backus projects the viewer into the midst of the destruction and leaves him or her to grapple with the presence of survivors, who scurry to find shelter in this shattered city. Examining the picture with greater sensitivity, then, one realizes that Backus has depicted the external appearance of Hiroshima, while at the same time symbolically interpreting the energy of the bomb blast and channeling the muted voices of its victims. What is hard to determine is if the similarity between Backus’s work and the Japanese aesthetic is out of reverence for the subject, or if the resemblance is a cruel mockery of the enemy’s predicament.

That the latter could even offer itself up as a possibility seems unthinkable, yet Backus’s next painting, *Settlers of a New Hiroshima*, a watercolor, pen, and ink of October 1945, almost aggressively flaunts the racial divide between the Japanese survivors of the atomic attack and the American soldiers who have been called in to restore order (Fig. 60). In the foreground to the left, a woman with her back to the viewer displays a heavily bandaged hand as a small infant peeks his head over her shoulder. In the middle of the painting, a man and a woman shuttle
water back and forth from the river in heavy wooden buckets. In the lower right-hand corner, two children, attended to by a barely visible young man in a cap, take shelter against a crumbling brick wall. Two women, one old, one young, walk out of the picture in the foreground, while on a road leading into the background, a man attempts to balance his life’s belongings on his shoulders as he tries to steady himself on his bicycle. Two American soldiers perched on the wall overlooking the water casually take in this scene as they stand guard, rifles slung over their shoulders, and smoke cigarettes.

The image seems to have been painted on the outskirts of the city, as a flattened field of debris jutting up against the now-familiar mountain range can be glimpsed over the G.I.’s shoulders. Although there is some suggestion of damage, the location is obviously far enough from the epicenter that one telephone pole remains in an upright position. It is not hard to imagine that Backus encountered this type of scene as he descended into the valley, as the majority of the survivors had fled across bridges from Hiroshima’s center to outlying areas and encamped along the banks of the river. Indeed, the language of the painting borrows some conventions from photography to give the image a diaristic feel. The cropping at the borders and the strong massing of figures in the foreground suggest both immediacy and physical proximity. At the same time, there is an almost languorous feel to the use of line, the subtle wash of color application, and the relaxed poses of the soldiers, that suggest none of the nervous intensity of the artist’s panorama. If Backus had all the time in the world to compose this image – as the pictorial language would seem to suggest – why did he resort to blatant caricatures for the Japanese victims?

It is hard not to ignore that in this climate of chaos and desperation, the women and children whose faces are shown are inexplicably smiling. They stare out at us dumbly, like animals, with
their idiotic grins – a combination so often repeated in visual stereotypes of Asians. Their physiognomy is contorted in such a way that they appear subhuman. While youth and ignorance may shield infants and toddlers from criticism, the women in turn are pathetic and despicable, perhaps even preening for attention from the artist as the world is falling apart around them. The enigma of the women’s smiles allows for the projection of the viewer’s own cultural presuppositions. However, as their happiness in such a situation seems so unlikely, the women’s mirthful appearance could be chalked up to blatant propaganda – one is reminded of the myth of “liberation” preached by the Allied forces, that enforced democracy was a gift that would liberate the Japanese from the old Imperial mindset of blind subservience to the emperor and open their eyes to better possibilities. Perhaps, then, this is an ideological vision of the new Japan, symbolically built upon the charred remains of the old order.

According to the line of reasoning of the architects of the Occupation, the bombings, as terrible as they were, would usher in a new era of independence by removing the burden of consolidated power off the backs of the Japanese people. War-weary citizens would be only too glad to deal with minor inconveniences during the state of transition, if it meant finally being able to secure the peace that had eluded them for over a generation. The early Occupation reform agenda promised to end food rationing, increase other civil liberties, usher in elections and grant universal suffrage. If the women, then, appear content with the lot they have been handed, it could be because they believed, rightly or wrongly, that the presence of the American military marked the beginning of these reforms. The New Japanese woman, in turn, would have a special role to play in “comforting” the Occupation forces entrusted with spreading democracy throughout Japan.
The hands-off approach of the American soldiers in *Settlers of a New Hiroshima* illustrates the paradox of the Occupation – while the military was there to revolutionize Japanese society, there was no thought to assist with its physical reconstruction when America’s own Allies were still reeling from the devastation of air-raids and protracted battles on their own soil. In fact, the immediate aim of the Occupation was to pull out by the roots any remaining trace of the militaristic culture that had led the country to war. Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson formulated that the goal of the Occupation was to ensure that “the present economic and social systems in Japan which makes for a will to war will be changed so that the will to war will not continue.” Misery was the lot of the people, and as gruesome as the crises of the postwar environment were – nonexistent health care, homelessness, malnutrition, disease, starvation, just to name a few – more often than not it fell upon individual resourcefulness to deal with such problems. In *Settlers of a New Hiroshima*, the survivors literally stand on the dividing line between life and death, while the American M.P.’s are above such misery, towering over the huddled group yet in a completely different world, engaged in the simple pleasures of cigarette drags --and one could imagine -- off-colored banter about their charges. Ironically, while the Japanese were starving for lack of money and food, their government was forced to pay the majority of the costs of feeding and sheltering the Occupation soldiers.

One of the most intriguing facets of the painting is the juxtaposition between American and Japanese males. The comparison is ripe for exploration, as both in the case of the man carrying water in the center, and the individual shown only in profile to the right against the brick wall, the men’s caps identify them as demobilized soldiers. Shortly after the formal surrender ceremony on September 2, 1945 aboard the USS Missouri, General MacArthur would famously remark to the world that the Japanese armed forces had been “thoroughly beaten and cowed and
tremble before the terrible retribution the surrender terms impose upon their country in punishment for their great sins.”151 While their humiliation at the hands of their enemy was great, the treatment they received at home was unimaginable. Reviled upon their return, stigmatized even among the outcasts for their utter failure, the soldiers roamed the streets like ghosts of the war and bore the burden of the follies of their leaders. As many of them were homeless, and left with nothing but the uniforms on their backs, they were forced to suffer the indignities heaped upon them through the public display of their military affiliation.152

One would expect that a Japanese soldier would come up for particular scorn in the eyes of an American serviceman, particularly one who had the tools to visually satirize. A cartoon on the cover of Leatherneck was typical of this treatment – the once awesome beast, who had left a trail of carnage throughout the Pacific, now sat cooperatively on a Marine’s shoulder like a trained monkey.153 However, in Backus’s painting, it is noticeably the Japanese men who are depicted in the most sympathetic light. One ex-soldier protectively watches over a group of children who must have been terrified in such an environment, even if their own facial expressions belie this. Although partially obscured from view and turned to the side, his facial expression and gestures appear to be genuine and loving. Most tellingly, Backus positions an ex-soldier carrying water at the center of the painting, a beam of wood stretched across his shoulders, arms stretched out to the edge of the beam, with buckets weighing down each end. It is impossible not to relate the scene to images of the Passion, as the man, with head bent down, is resigned to carrying out his fate like Christ on his way to Calvary. It is shocking that Backus, surrounded with so much rhetoric about the Japanese soldier, and himself weighed down by the pressures of his position, would blatantly flout convention and humanize the enemy. That he would do so with his
assignment on the line – and the possibility of censorship looming on the horizon – is even more unusual.

The equation of the Japanese soldier with Christ – surely not a coincidence – might approach blasphemy to those in the States confident of America’s God-given right to freedom. Yet in an editorial “The Christian’s View of the Arms Race”, written in the weeks shortly after Hiroshima, *The Christian Century* would comment that:

> The readiness to use nuclear weapons against other human beings – against people whom we do not know, whom we have never seen, or whose guilt or innocence it is not for us to establish – this is nothing less than a presumption, a blasphemy, an indignity…offered to God.\(^{154}\)

By placing the most “detested” of the Japanese at the center of the picture, and humanizing his condition, Backus opens up a space for compassion. Beginning with this image, then, Backus would begin to break down the stereotypes that kept Americans from confronting their own complicity in a murderou act.

*Still Life, Hiroshima*, perhaps the next in Backus’s series, foregrounds an urn and skull, with a windswept plane stretching out to the mountains (Fig. 61). Backus seems to have moved deeper into the landscape that was first presented in *Settlers of the New Hiroshima*, is now wandering along the path of annihilation. Through a seemingly endless repetition of scorched trees, one can imagine the force of the bomb blast as it rips through the countryside. The monotony of the landscape leaves little for the mind to grasp on to, other than the fact the destruction seems to stretch on forever. At the same time, one could argue that the scene seems a bit contrived – the trees recede in a almost perfect diagonal from right to left, while the curvature of the limbs themselves seems forced into the recognizable swirling patterns of Backus’s watercolors. The space is more dream-like than real, and the bright, inner-light seems inconsistent with the clouds
overhead. The skull and urn, filled with ashes and what appears to be a ribcage, is as much
shock factor as true memorial. Again, the conscious stylization of the image, and the tongue-in-
cheek title, makes the viewer question Backus’ sincerity. One could even imagine a macabre
scenario where Backus’s dragged his “props” to this location and placed them side by side to
create a more evocative tableau.

While certainly other combat artists, being presented with an endless stream of death, no
doubt deadened to its effects and broke its representation down to a science, this was,
presumably, Backus’s first contact with the subject. What, style, then, was best suited to
communicate the irrationality of the bombings and the unfathomable scope of death at a mass
scale? As Backus no doubt arrived after the initial clean-up – records tell us that the ground was
initially littered with dead bodies as far as the eye could see – one is left to believe that Backus
honestly chanced upon the skull and urn, the juxtaposition of which sparked the idea for his title.
Like still-life paintings of the 17th century, which frequently incorporated skulls amidst flowers
and fruit to remind viewers of the transience of life, Backus may be trying to fashion his image
as a 20th century vanitas.

While other combat artists looked to Delacroix or Goya for inspiration, the fact that Backus
would draw upon the memento mori pieces of the Dutch tradition is not that unusual in light of
the fact that the bulk of his work up until that point had been landscapes and still-life. The
staged quality of the painting is no different from the conscious arrangement of flowers in states
of bloom and decay, the combination of ripened and rotten fruit, and moths and larvae
consciously placed within these arrangements just to undo the work of nature. The addition of
skulls to any of these motifs often appears heavy-handed. But for Backus, it must have been that
much more ludicrous to be confronted with a ready-made still life that resonated so powerfully
with this theme. It provided him with the means to talk about death, even if the effect feels somewhat staged.

Featured in an unforgiving light, the still life thrust into the viewer’s attention is far less ambiguous than a Dutch painting – nature has been consumed, and almost as a joke, a plank of wood sits next to the skull. In fact, the whole natural structure upon which civilization rests has been annihilated seemingly without much forethought as to the effects for the future. (Indeed, there is something about Backus’s painting that reminds one of an archaeologist stumbling across the remnants of a lost civilization or striding into a ghost town). The inevitability of death as part of the natural cycle life, the central theme of the Dutch tableaux, is morphed here into the irrationality of death for hundreds of thousands through an unnatural act. It is not riches, material goods, and worldly position that are rendered irrelevant by death’s finality, but it is precisely because of the unquenchable thirst for power that death has occurred. The natural order of things has been suppressed, the current of life cut short by the greedy interests of a generation.

If the painting is meant to be a true vanitas, one must ask to whom its message was directed? The vanitas may refer to the arrogance of the Japanese, who, as a result of their ruthless pursuit for domination in the Pacific, and even more unthinkable attack on Western powers, have been struck mute. Perhaps it subversively relates to the arrogance of the American scientist, attempting to harvest the energy of nature; or the military for its application towards destructive ends? Whatever Backus’s motivations, one thing is clear: that suffering, pain, and death of warfare are most keenly felt by the innocent. Human bones, the body stripped down to its basic biological components, placed in a non-descript background, bear no traces of racial or national affinities and as such, are a memorial to fruitless cycle of violence that plays itself over
generations. The skull and bones, then, are reminiscent of another standard prop of the vanitas -- that of the mirror. Confronted with the horrors of Hiroshima, both sides may be inspired to reflect upon the idealized view of their own cultures and each’s presumed moral superiority.

*Garden at Hiroshima, Autumn* attempts to simulate the artist’s disorienting plunge into the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust (Fig. 62). In the foreground of the painting, a broken column to the left becomes a makeshift gateway to a scene of utter devastation. At first, it is difficult to make out the identity of anything in this fragmented, upside-down world. One scans for anything recognizable, but the murkiness of the atmosphere makes objects difficult to grasp. As the eyes adjust to the dimness, it becomes clear that the identity of each form has literally been blasted into obscurity by a terrific force. Pieces of debris and twisted metal litter the scorched earth, as burnt tree trunks stand against the grey sky in ugly defiance. In the midst of this chaotic destruction, two miniature figures, viewed as if from a great distance, seem to wander aimlessly like ghosts in a preternatural twilight.

The delicacy of this painting is striking in comparison to the customary bold and confident strokes of Backus’s mature work. It is as if an uncertain hand moved its way across the paper, awakening naked sentiments. Curiosity and revulsion play themselves out in the spatial discontinuities of the picture. At times, Backus brings an object into focus, only to drop it at the horror of recognition; while the realities of the living cursed to wander this infernal landscape are too painful to be rendered at human scale. Backus’s subtle watercolor technique barely registers the once-solid forms, adding to spectral quality of overall scene.

The abandonment of a purely documentary impulse is strikingly acute in the way Backus handles the familiar. While the artist seems unable to break free entirely of the urge to render the more exotic aspects of Japanese culture in terms of the picturesque, one can also read the
impulse as a gesture of self-protection. The strange pagoda form of a broken incense burner in the garden, the doll-like appearance of the mother and child, even the miniaturized scale of the city itself, while originating from conventional stereotypes of Japan as a land of enchantment, now appear sinister and alien surrounded by clouds of dust choking off the pathway of light from the sun. If anything, it is a vain attempt by Backus to fix these disturbing images in a world suspended by myth. Yet, after this initial layer of exoticism the landscape reverts to the familiar language of the urban street. With its layers of transportation and cluster of tall buildings, Hiroshima at first looks no different physically from any other metropolis. However, there are two notable exceptions: the inhabitants of the city have literally vanished, and its workings have been eerily arrested in time. A stranded trolley car prompts memories of its incinerated passengers; an adult’s bicycle becomes a touchstone that is turned over and scrutinized. Once the gap between the primitive and the modern has been breached, all the contradictions in the painting become comprehensible. The upheaval in Backus’s own pictorial language enacts the unexpected: that the lives snuffed out in an atomic flash were not altogether different than the American soldier’s own.

If Backus’s painting veers dangerously off the path of the innocent travelogue to Japan rushed into publication by the U.S. Navy in September, it all the more forcefully combats the initial announcement of the Truman administration that the bomb had been dropped on a military target, resulting in minimal human casualties. In rendering aspects of urban life in such painstaking detail, Backus provided irrefutable evidence of this deception. The racial tableau is a smokescreen to the cold hard facts – that the Japanese were not a crude and rudimentary people. Rather, they lived and worked in mirror-images of modernized America. In light of this disclosure, even the most caricatured aspects of the painting deserve further examination. The
“woman in her kimono” is really wearing a standard-issued piece of clothing – a monpe jumpsuit brought about by rations. Her aimlessness recognizes the plight of nearly nine million individuals who found themselves homeless at the time of the Japanese surrender. The absence of men in the picture – instead of playing to any imperialist fantasies – tells of soldiers yet to be repatriated, or perhaps just as likely, the huge numbers that had been lost some time ago on another front. Against the scarred ruins of the once-bustling city, the mother and her children become isolated and humanized in their predicament. The individuals are reduced to dependency on the primal connections common across cultures – the family unit bound up in the most basic struggle for survival. It was not until the U.S. Strategic Bombing report released in June of 1946 that Americans would fully understand that the target of the weapons had been populous centers with modern amenities no different than their own.156

At the Red Cross Hospital, Hiroshima, 1945, is the only painting by Backus to investigate the physical afflictions of the Hiroshima survivors from the atomic attack (Fig. 63). The Red Cross Hospital was located at a distance of 1,650 yards from the atomic explosion. As the largest and best public hospital in Hiroshima, in the chaotic aftermath of the bombing it quickly became the epicenter of the life and death struggle of an entire city. Casualties overwhelmed the 600 beds, tens of thousands of survivors pressed against the doors from the courtyard outside, and lines of bamboo mats stretched out for blocks in every direction. This scene was vividly documented in John Hersey’s “Hiroshima”, a journalistic account of six survivors in the hours and days following the attack that first appeared in the New Yorker on August 31, 1946.157 Of the six people interviewed for “Hiroshima”, one of the eyewitnesses was Dr. Terefumi Sasaki, a surgeon who arrived for his shift at the Red Cross hospital just minutes before the roar of an American B-29 bomber plane would be heard overhead. After the bomb’s blast ripped through the corridors
of the hospital, he was one of only six doctors and ten nurses left to attend to thousands of injured and dying.

On his visit to the Red Cross hospital in early November, Backus witnessed a strange combination of illnesses and ailments, including symptoms of a so-called atomic plague. The existence of a mysterious illness which in some abruptly terminated in death had been dispatched in Morse code by Wilfred Burchett, the first Western reporter to reach Hiroshima, to the London Daily Express and published in a front-page story on September 5th, 1945. Burchett filed a report that provided outsiders with a first glimpse of what had happened to those pedestrians who had been moving purposely to the destinations of their morning commute but whose movements suddenly became arrested by a blinding flash of light. The furnace blast from the thousand-degree inferno that followed the explosion had seared the clothes to their bodies in a fraction of a second. For those closest to the blast, blistered layers of epidermis were shed like snakeskin, while in the worst cases, whole body parts had disintegrated into charred ruins that failed to conjure up ghostly images of their former selves. As macabre as the scene must have been to the observer, the damning physical testimony may have appeared no worse than the Dresden or Tokyo bombings; under the steady rain of fire, the asphalt had literally melted into bubbling pools of tar, and the individuals unlucky enough to have been standing on it reduced to grossly misshapen piles. Yet Burchett reported that for those who had escaped immediate incineration, added in quick succession to their burns were grotesque swellings of the body, clumps of hair loss, and uncontrollable fits of vomiting that rattled the victims to their bones and often rendered them permanently unconscious. Once these symptoms had set in, a fair number simply expired within 24 hours, their limp bodies laid out in clusters along the river banks and on the roads to
the countryside. For his observations, Burchett was swiftly denounced as an agent of Japanese propaganda, and as of September 15, on the ground reporting from Hiroshima was silenced.\footnote{158}

While Backus must have dutifully jogged down similar observations at the hospital, there are no sketches to move this belief beyond tantalizing speculation. The single image resulting from his visit is entirely unexpected – the composition is dominated by a young, attractive Japanese woman who glances flirtatiously over her shoulders. She seems to furtively grab at the kimono that has settled around her hips with an air of disingenuous modesty, as the brunt of the viewer’s attention comes to rest on the exposed pink flesh of her back. Swirling around this central figure are disembodied heads that seem to be cast as “types” for the rest of the afflicted population: a figure of indeterminate sex with erratic patterns of baldness; a buck-toothed, enigmatic old woman with hair piled high atop of her head in an enormous bun who seems to smile knowingly at the observer. The details of the hospital so memorable in Hersey’s \textit{Hiroshima} - the thick choking dust of the pulverized ceilings and partitions, the razor shards of glass carpeting the corridors, the blood-spattered walls - have all been sanitized with a whitewash of the bleached oversized paper that serves as the figures’ backdrop and effectively occludes any particulars of the environment. If anything, in its non-specificity, the setting appears closer to the neutralized environment of a modern day hospital with its pristine surfaces and stripped down interiors – instead of traditional straw mats, off to the left a shiny tubular bed bounces off reflections in its polished rungs of steel.

Unlike every other image of Backus from Hiroshima, the scene is direct but not neutral observation, as the viewer is implicated through the direct gazes of the two women, extending the boundaries of the painting to include the viewer’s space and psychologically binding the viewer to figures’ curious reactions. With the white surface of the paper acting like a drawn
hospital curtain, and the strong lighting source illuminating the looming frontal figure from above, the scene seems to vacillate wildly between the uncomfortable intimacy of a probing examination and the lurid attractions of a peep-show.

*At the Red Cross Hospital, Hiroshima*, is especially disturbing when contrasted to Backus’s unrelenting focus on the withered features and skeletal frames of the American P.O.W.s he had sketched just weeks prior in Tokyo Bay. In his watercolor *Recent Guests of Japan*, the walls of the floating hospital ship had been peeled back to allow the viewer peer inside and witness the unspeakable atrocities inflicted on the captured soldiers, their pathetic bodies laid out for merciless scrutiny on its berths (Fig. 64). More than 50 years later, the image still has the capacity to shock -- yet there was no doubt something particularly inflammatory in 1945 to embark on a figure study that flew in the face of every heroic depiction of the American soldier at the front. Unlike those who had been offered their apotheosis on the battlefield for their acts of bravery through the transcendent vision of the artist, there was nothing particularly heroic about the figures in Backus’s watercolor who had been lain to waste by the enemy. Rather, the soldiers were exposed as vulnerable, dependent, and psychologically battered; the muscular grit of a battle-hardened soldier was replaced by a childlike fragility and “feminized” features brought on by the starvation tactics of their captors. Backus commented upon these details repeatedly both in his correspondence and the work’s actual caption, and perhaps more than the physical scars rendered to the bodies of the servicemen, the implicit suggestion of their emasculation through torture was the ultimate condemnation Japanese of brutality.

By contrast, *At the Red Cross Hospital, Hiroshima* is an almost unabashedly sensuous image - the realities of bandages and radiation burns are telescopically distanced while a voluptuous woman’s body is brought into extreme close-up, transforming her from victim to fetishized
object of visual contemplation. One cannot help but think of the formulaic depiction of Geisha girls, those hostesses and raconteurs of Tokyo nightlife who seductively beckoned to American audiences from celluloid screens in darkened movie houses across the country. The exotic allure of the Geisha rested partially on the fascination of the outsider to the peculiarities of an alien culture, but specifically as targeted to men, the geisha, in her accommodating charm began to acquire the easy air of sexual acquiescence in contrast to the increasingly stringent prohibition of white sexuality on screen. Yet in the postwar period this harmless frisson between cultures evolved into a more complex relationship - as Gina Marchetti has written of the explosion of geisha imagery in films postdating the war, for a time the geisha seem to become “chief emblem of postwar reconciliation”:

Although on the surface she might appear cool, distant, mysterious, or morally suspect, underneath she was seen as docile, eager to please, malleable, childlike, and vulnerable. Metaphorically, a bellicose Japan, through the figure of the geisha, became a yielding and dependent nation.159

While such imperialist fantasies may have played themselves out in the interactions between G.I.s and geishas in the movies, it is questionable whether the artist in the earliest days of the Occupation was consciously constructing an image of Japanese containment in the pliant body of a woman. There is something undeniably sexual about the “yielding” expression of half-clad geisha with eyes downcast and lips slightly parted as if to offer an invitation. Yet just as the viewer begins to be drawn in by this seduction, entering into the visual field from the periphery with dogged insistence is the more aggressive and unsettling stare of the old woman -- who appears to mock the viewer’s arousal with a smirk -- and further eroding the possibility of self-contained fantasy is the almost-surrealistic border of bandaged and burned floating heads. The
unresolved tensions between center and periphery and competing clash of emotional content seem to suggest that there is a very thin line between voyeuristic pleasure and repugnance.

The issue is further complicated when it is taken into account that the problematic expressions of the Japanese themselves can also be said to have some basis in the often surprising range of emotions of the survivors who came in contact with members of the Occupation Forces. Lt. Wayne Miller, one of the most recognizable Combat Photographers who hopped around the globe covering the most significant events of World War II, entered Hiroshima in mid-September of 1945 and embarked on a remarkable series of large-scale portrait studies of patients in various stages of radiation sickness. Because of the censorship code put into place by MacArthur in late September, they are the only known photographs to have been made by a combat photographer of victims of atomic bombings; and they were subsequently classified and buried in the military archives for over 40 years. The portraits are tightly cropped around each individual, rendering the backgrounds dark or illegible – through this device, the patients are inexplicably removed from the environment of the hospital in which Miller found them (Figs. 65, 66). As a result, each one appears to be simply abandoned, and the viewer is forced to witness such excruciating moments as a young man reaching futilely for a bowl of water or an old woman too feeble to brush away aggressive attention from flies.

Undoubtedly, there is a fleeting pull of exoticism that is located in the racial features of the individuals pictured or the occasional incidental detail such as a bamboo straw mat that could offer the photographer comfortable reminders of the “otherness” of his subjects. But difference here in the photographs fails to harden into caricature as other visual treatments of the enemy were wont to do - if anything, these distinctions soften under the muted light of the interiors. Instead, it is the quiet dignity of the figures who allowed themselves to be posed by the Combat
Photographer that makes the most forceful lingering impression on the viewer. Miller’s photographs manage to express what Backus’s painting of the Hiroshima hospital never could - haunting portrayals of individuals hovering between life and death that in their loneliness and isolation were able to reach across a seemingly unbridgeable divide to remind one of the civilian costs of war.

In spite of the fact that Backus recorded separately that “the Japanese Director pointed out the various types of casualties: the fractures, the contusions, the loss of hair, the blood degeneration, the dysentery-like effects of radiation poisoning, and mostly the burns,”160 *At the Red Cross Hospital* fails to register his horror. It was as if Backus could not help but fall back on exotic parody of the enemy in order to distance himself from being implicated in their mysterious afflictions. One could argue that this caricature was necessary in order to maintain the psychological distance of a continuous onslaught of images too horrible to imagine. It may also have been a conscious attempt to circumvent the censorship controls of Guam and Honolulu, for surely a catalogue of atomic atrocities would have violated the government’s ban on text and images that could result in criticism of the use of the bomb against a civilian population as inhumane or barbaric. But if, as Backus would later contend, the Navy appreciated the fact that the painter filtered reality through his emotions rather than the lens of a camera, the painting may offer a subversive twist. Only on closer inspection of *At the Red Cross Hospital, Hiroshima* does one realize that he or she has been seduced into viewing one of the more gruesome curiosities of nuclear warfare that would only be revealed a year later in Hersey’s text: “On some of the undressed, the burns had made patterns, of undershirt straps and suspenders, and on the skin of some women…the shapes of flowers they had had on their kimonos.”161
In the surviving collection of Backus’s work from the Occupation period, there is only one other image that addresses an individual within a hospital setting. *In the Line of Duty*, a watercolor of 1945, is a half-length portrait of a young fair-haired soldier dressed in a hospital garment and confined to a bed (Fig. 67). The bed is enclosed by a canopy of draped plastic forming a cellophane oxygen tent, with the heavy apparatus of the tank and its tubing clearly visible off to the left. To the right, seams of metal sheeting stitched together by metal studs and what appears to be a rectangular porthole point to the hallmarks of ship’s construction. The painting appears to be a companion piece to watercolor of the hospitalized POWs, *Recent Guests of Japan*. Clearly, the individual portrait study of *In the Line of Duty* is a more intense meditation on the condition of the patients on the floating hospital ships of Tokyo Bay.

Backus described the soldier as fighting “two great battles”. First, he noted that the soldier had “fought against the enemies of his country and he has won.” Behind the soldier’s bed someone has placed a small silk flag emblazoned with the Japanese red sun, a token of America’s victory over the enemy. Backus identified the soldier’s second battle as “cancer and he is not winning”. The grayish-green pallor of the soldier seems to confirm his grim prognosis. His eyelids are puffy and crusted over, his mouth grimacing with sores and the tongue swollen like cotton. His head appears oversized and lolling, and the neck strains to holds its weight. He seems to be struggling to draw in great gasps of air as he swings in his arms in from the sides and clenches his hands in front of him into crossed fists. The pain is so immediate and excruciating, one can almost imagine the soldier desperately attempting to relocate his pain by digging his nails into his closed palms. Shortly after Backus had painted his portrait, the artist recorded that “Arnold Arvin, S 1/C, USNR of Kentucky, age 20, died in the line of duty – and I was glad.”162
The Navy Art Collection where the painting is housed inserts this work of Backus sequentially between *Recent Guests of Japan* and a lighthearted watercolor sketch, *American POWs and the Red Cross Girl, Yokohama*, in which recently liberated servicemen jostle for the attention of a pretty young hospital nurse assigned to their care. Unlike these two subjects, the window of opportunity for Backus’s encounter with Arnold Arvin can narrowed considerably to a two week period - sometime between Backus’s arrival in Tokyo Bay on August 30th, and September 16th, the date that Arnold Arvin died. Backus recorded that Arvin had been hospitalized after the surrender, which would place the onset of the young soldier’s symptoms sometime from the beginning to the middle of August. The information here is contradictory - if, as Backus claims, Arvin spent most of his service on an aircraft carrier and sustained no injuries from battle, why is he described as expiring “In the Line of Duty”? Backus and his fellow artist Mitch Jamieson had filled their correspondence back home with anecdotes of the overflowing trainloads of liberated POWs arriving from the North - and undoubtedly, some of the thousands of soldiers estimated to have been held in captivity had to come from vicinity of the two bombings. Father Kleinsorge, the German Jesuit missionary whose story was documented in *Hiroshima,* reached the Catholic International Hospital in Tokyo the first week of September where he was “one of a handful of atomic patients who had reached Tokyo.” Therefore, it is tantalizing to suggest another diagnosis - that the illness running its ruinous course through the body of Arnold Alvin could be a result of the rapidly progressive spread of radiation poisoning. The grotesque swelling, the greenish-gray pallor, and especially the destruction of white blood cells, mimicked the symptoms and may have been conveniently passed off as “cancer” to Backus, who had yet to witness the disease of the afflicted at Hiroshima.
The idea that Americans, and soldiers at that, had been injured or killed in Hiroshima was vigorously denied by the U.S. government for decades. As part of the Freedom of Information Act, in the 1960s independent researchers began to petition the government for records of American servicemen who were being held in Japan as POWs at the time of the Japanese surrender. In a top-secret memo discussing the merits of using the bomb on July 31, 1945, a member of the War Department noted that although there were not thought to be any prisoners of war in Hiroshima, “other information suggested that there are prison camps in virtually every major Japanese city.” A document from the American Red Cross dated September 25, 1944, indicated that an airman that had been shot down over Hiroshima on July 28th had subsequently died as a result of exposure to the bomb blast. Other fliers, in 1974 and 1975, described seeing two servicemen dying from the effects of radiation poisoning in Tokyo at the end of August. It is possible, then, that Arnold Alvin was one of these radiation victims; certainly if he was, it adds just another complex layer to Backus’s already charged experience of Hiroshima.\(^{164}\)

The images of Standish Backus from Hiroshima paint an ambiguous journey of one serviceman’s struggle with the nationalistic and ethical concerns surrounding the use of the atomic bomb. The conventional wisdom – that the bomb hastened the end of the war; that it prevented the loss of thousands of lives; that it was necessary because Japan was ruled by maniacal rulers who would not back down, even if overwhelmed by U.S. forces through the act of invasion – was complicated by the humanitarian impulse that welled up in Backus when he actually visited Hiroshima. While Backus, at times, seems to pander to racist sentiments in his inclusion of stereotypical features of the Japanese, there are elements in his painting that work, ever so subtly, to expose that rhetoric as hollow. As Hanson Baldwin wrote on August 16, 1945, perhaps the chief cost of Hiroshima was the one “suffered in our own souls.”\(^{165}\)
Army Artists in Nagasaki

MacArthur’s Support of the Combat Art Program

While Backus chartered his own course in the days following the Japanese surrender, the members of a larger and far-more organized combat art program -- the Army’s Far Eastern Section of the Combat Art Unit -- awaited word on their mobilization from their headquarters in Manila. There was no doubt that, although the war was over, the Section would play an important role in the Occupation of Japan.

General Douglas MacArthur had always taken a strong, personal interest in the activities of the combat art program, dragging a number of artists with him on his retreat from the Philippines in March 1942 while leaving others behind to document the miseries of what would come to be known as the Bataan Death March. Not surprisingly, the man who had introduced poetry to the cadets at West Point eagerly embraced the combat artist; yet, however sensitive MacArthur was to the aesthetic merits or salutary effects of such an enterprise, he valued the artist-correspondents chiefly for the role they played in the promotion of his sometimes questionable military strategy. Coming off the success of several land grabs in Operation Cartwheel – MacArthur’s strategic plan to seize airstrips on tiny islands in the Pacific and starve the Japanese on Roglap with a naval blockade -- he facilitated an exhibition of 67 works of art by Captain Barse Miller, Captain Frede Vidar, and Lieutenant Sidney Simon, the three artists who had accompanied him on his New Guinea campaign. Starting with the Queensland National Art Gallery in Brisbane, which had become the new headquarters of the MacArthur’s command of the Southwest Pacific Area, the exhibition, *U. S. War Paintings from MacArthur’s New Guinea*...
Campaign, toured every major art museum from Brisbane to Melbourne, Adelaide, and Sydney. MacArthur even went so far as to provide copy for the illustrated catalogue.166

In the July 1945, in response to an inquiry sent by Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy regarding the status of the combat art program in the Pacific, MacArthur once again expressed his enthusiasm for the unit, and hinted at the continuation of the program into peacetime:

The personal interest in the program of the War Art unit of this theater which you have expressed in your letter of 21 June is extremely gratifying. This unit has, as you are probably aware, accomplished an invaluable documentary mission in the face of unusual and trying circumstances. It is my intention that the program will continue in the Pacific, and will receive from other Army units whatever cooperation and assistance may be required.167

Creation of the Historical Properties Division and the National War Museum

MacArthur’s belief in the documentary importance of the combat art program was backed up by two other developments that summer. Proposals for a National War Museum, modeled after London’s Imperial War Museum, had begun to circulate within the War Department, and the paintings and sketches of the soldier-artists would have a significant, illustrative role to play in educating the general public about the grand panorama of war. With the denouement of events in Europe, and the hoped-for peace with Japan on the horizon, the War Department recognized that without an orderly system of collection and processing, the fate of thousands of combat art paintings, as well as other objects of historical value was in jeopardy. On June 11, 1945, the Department established the creation of the Historical Properties Section in the office of the Army Headquarters Commandment for the purpose of:

collecting, processing, preserving, and controlling war paintings, photographs, maps, trophies, relics, and objects of actual or potential historical interest or value produced during the present war which are or may become the property of the War Department.168
As the world recoiled from news of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the bureaucracy in Washington continued to turn its wheels and began to lay the groundwork for interest in the museum. A little less than two weeks after the bombing at Hiroshima, a brief, two-day exhibit of Army combat art was held on August 21 and 22 at the headquarters of the United Services Organizations in the Empire State Building in New York. Judging from the register of the first press view, the local art critics were eager to survey a sampling of the nearly 2000 works recently amassed by the newly created Historical Properties Section of the War Department. Edward Allen Jewel of the *New York Times*, Emily Genauer of the *New York World Telegraph*, Carlyle Burroughs of the *New York Tribune*, Rosamund Frost of *Art News*, Hilda Loveman of *Newsweek*, along with representatives from the Associated Press, and a handful of gallery owners, filed into the makeshift gallery space on the building’s 57th floor. The work had been selected by a distinguished panel of judges that comprised the new War Art Advisory Committee for the Historical Properties Section: David Findlay, Director, Magill James, Assistant Director, and John Walker, Chief Curator, National Gallery of Art; C. Powell Minnigerode, Director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art; Duncan Philips, Director of the Phillips Memorial Gallery; and Forbes Watson, Art Consultant for the Treasury Department. Some of the larger paintings by combat artists were presented formally on walls, but the sheer amount of work and the limitations of space necessitated more creative arrangements: pieces were propped up on windowsills, and spilled over onto tables and chairs; the works on paper were so numerous that they had been placed in stacks on desks, inviting leisurely examination.

In his review in the *New York Tribune*, Carlyle Burrows noted that the exhibit was “different from most art displays, in that it was not intended to show merely what the combat art program has produced, but was planned to stimulate interest through inviting a liberal use of the facilities
of the section.” Burrows acknowledge that although plans were in the works for a National War Museum, it was not the intention of the War Department to warehouse the paintings with other trophies and trinkets of war to be dusted off at a future date; rather “since the paintings executed by Army artists and belong to the people, the most appropriate way of dealing with them is to provide every reasonable opportunity for their appreciation and use.” To that end, the Historical Properties Section had sent to New York two museum-trained professionals from its staff, Captain Hermann W. Williams Jr., formerly a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Lieutenant Edwin L. M. Taggart, former lecturer and supervisor of Radio and Television programming at the Metropolitan, to begin to promote the Section. In addition to coordinating the two-day press view, Williams and Taggart had been busy contacting journalists, art directors, and critics to inform them that “works of combat art were available to them for the asking.” The Section would accommodate requests for reproductions of works of art; assemble educational packets on the combat art program; and continue to facilitate the loan of artworks for large-scale thematic exhibitions, such as the Section’s recent involvement in the well-received traveling exhibition “War Against Japan” which was currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.172

Normandy and Burma, Anzio and Cassino, Guadalcanal and the Leyte landings – all the major battles of the war were represented in the fleeting artistic impressions of men under fire. However, the collection was by no means complete. The most up-to-date work -- lent to the exhibition “War Against Japan” -- had only covered operations in the Pacific up until May. Moreover, artwork by the official Army war correspondents (as well as the other branches of the armed forces) continued to pour in from the various theaters as troops began to demobilize. While no mention was made of the recent bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Burrows
intimated that there was plenty of interest on the critic’s side for the continuation of the combat art program into the period of the occupation. “With Japan and other enemy-held territories to be occupied, it is likely that stimulating subjects relating to the peace will be documented, taking their appropriate place in the panorama of art’s record of the war.” Although the peace had been won, Burrows remarked that “it was too early to write finis on the Army’s combat art program.”

On September 6, 1945, Army Memorandum 345-45 was issued to specifically address the collection of war paintings, and provide further instruction to the combat artists still in theater. With regard to completed paintings relating to operations of the war, all work was to be sent immediately to the Historical Properties Section in Washington for processing. The Chiefs of all sections of the Combat Art Unit were to respond immediately with a detailed roster of artists who had been attached to their section in the past year. More importantly, the memorandum contained specific orders for the remaining members of the Far Eastern Section of the Combat Art Unit: the Army was to “initiate and maintain maximum coverage of operations or activities of the theater by proper geographic distribution of personnel assigned to duties as documentary artists.” The memorandum prescribed a rotation of four months on site followed by two months stateside in which the artist would complete “work previously forwarded which has been selected by the Historical Properties Section as being of special historical importance.” Once these canvases had been completed, they were to be forwarded to the Historical Properties Division within 60 days, so that “such material will maintain its news value.” After the work was catalogued and photographed, there would be a screening process for inclusion in the permanent collection (and presumably, the proposed National War Museum). “Material not considered by the War Department art committee as suitable for permanent retention” would be returned to the artist at his stateside address.173
**Far Eastern Section, Combat Art Unit: Reassignment to Tokyo**

In compliance with Memorandum 345-45, Sidney Simon, Captain, CE, Combat Artists Section, reported back to the Historical Properties Section on September 29, 1945, that apart from himself, there were five artists remaining in the South Pacific theater: Barse Miller, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., Joe Kidd, Frank Cassara, and Frede Vidar. Captain Miller and Lieutenant Graham had departed with the Sixth Army Advance to cover the occupation of Southern Honshu. Corporal Kidd had departed with the 24th Corps to cover the occupation of Korea. Tech 4 Cassara departed with the 77th Division to cover the occupation of Hokkaido and Northern Honshu. Captain Simon, who had been the only Army artist on board the *USS Constitution* at the time of the formal Japanese surrender, and Captain Frede Vidar would return to Washington with the OCE War Department to “complete and finalize material now on hand.” Additionally, Simon noted that two artists were being sought out to cover the occupation of China.\(^{174}\)

**Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. in Nagasaki**

With the benefit of the weekly activity reports filed with the office of the Chief Engineer, the movements of the remaining artists in the Pacific theater can be tracked with some certainty. While no official correspondence places Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. specifically in the areas of atomic devastation, the work record that the artist submitted to the Historical Properties Section after he returned to the States lists a number of paintings, watercolors, and sketches that document American troops pouring into that area, as well as images specific to Nagasaki itself.\(^{175}\) However, during his time in theater, all that can be discerned from the correspondence filed by the Chief of the Combat Art Section, Leslie Anderson, and later from his colleague in
Tokyo, Hans Mangelsdorf, is that Graham and the artist Barse Miller accompanied the Sixth Army Division from September through November 1945.

Although troops did not officially entered into Nagasaki until September 23, 1945, the port of Nagasaki – which was thought to be far enough away from the hypocenter to have escaped the bulk of the destructive effects of the bomb -- was used as early as September 10th by the 2nd Division Marines as a processing center for former Allied prisoners of war. MacArthur had made the recovery of these soldiers an immediate priority, and in mid-September, the Sixth Army Advance, to which Graham and Miller were assigned, was sent to Nagasaki to assist with this operation, and overall, more than 9,000 POWs were processed over the course of 11 days. Aside from the POW mission, a small expeditionary force of twelve personnel, including a group of American scientists, had also arrived in Nagasaki on September 16, 1945, but with the express purpose of carrying out a radiological survey of the areas destroyed by the atomic bomb. Aside from POWs who had wandered into the city after the bomb was dropped, the force remained the sole military presence in the heart of the city until Occupation troops arrived; in deference to the victors, a full security detail was provided by the local Nagasaki police.  

In all, the number of Occupation troops in Nagasaki would swell to 27,000. Their mission, as stated in a government paper, was:

> to establish control of the area, ensure compliance with surrender terms, and demilitarize the Japanese war machine. The mission did not include the cleanup or any radiological contamination of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, [or] any other areas…

Thanks to the detailed, eyewitness accounts of journalist George Weller, one can assemble a good picture of what Nagasaki must have looked like to the first troops entering the city. Weller had evaded his military detail, jumped a train to Nagasaki with three liberated POWs, and became the first American to enter Nagasaki on September 8, 1945. Weller had every intention of
“scooping” his colleagues who had stayed behind in Tokyo to cover the official surrender ceremony. He began his first dispatch describing Nagasaki as “an island roughly resembling Manhattan and running along a north/south axis,” which meets the ocean on three sides. At its southern tip – five miles from the explosion – the Mitsubishi and Kawanami shipbuilding plants remained relatively unscathed, while two miles north lining both sides of the island, more Mitsubishi shipbuilding plants, as well as electrical engine plants, were undamaged. In the interior, the buildings of Nagasaki’s downtown area “suffered some freakish destruction but were still sound.”¹⁷⁸ But just two miles north from the downtown area, where the Nagasaki harbor narrows to the 250 foot wide Urakame River, the pulverized train station served as a kind of gateway to the awesome field of destruction of the Urakame Valley:

For two miles stretches this line of congested steel and some concrete factories with the residential district “across the tracks.” The atomic bomb landed between and destroyed both, along with perhaps half the living persons in them. The known dead number 20,000…¹⁷⁹

After the radiological team arrived, they chartered the boundaries of the uninhabitable sections of the city roughly in this same area. Command posts and billets established in the city itself were located along the waterfront, in the vicinity of the Dejima Wharf and the Mitsubishi shipyard about one mile from the hypocenter, although the majority troops were stationed about 8 to 10 miles outside of the perimeter of the city. While historical documents claim that those areas thought to be affected by residual contamination were scrupulously avoided, as Lieutenant Colonel George L. Cooper later recalled:

Ground zero appeared to have been a rather large sports stadium, and all of us were categorically ordered to stay out of any place within pistol shot of this area. The result of this order was that everybody and his brother headed directly for ground zero as soon as they could, and in no time at all had picked the area clean of all moveable objects.¹⁸⁰
After the area was cordoned off, however, patrols and V.I.P. sightseers only occasionally ventured into areas of atomic devastation.181

Although he had never been to Japan before the war, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. had spent time in Asia prior to his deployment. The son of an Army cavalry officer, he had traveled most of his life; after a relatively prosaic start in upstate New York, he spent most of his early childhood on military bases in the Far East, first in China, then the Philippines, before returning to the Nebraska panhandle around the age of 10. After graduation, he moved with his family to a farm in Kansas City, Missouri and enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute, where he quickly became one of Thomas Hart Benton’s favorite pupils. During the time that Graham was enrolled as a student from 1937 to 1941, Benton singled him out repeatedly for special praise: in 1940, Benton selected five of his paintings for a group show of student work at the Associated American Artists Gallery in New York; that same year, Benton also promoted Graham’s work in an exhibit of Midwestern artists at the Art Institute of Chicago.182

After Benton was dismissed from the faculty in 1941 for uttering a string of homophobic remarks, Graham terminated his studies at the school.183 Benton’s response to the bombings of Pearl Harbor is well-known: liberated from the duties of teaching he immediately embarked on a series of 10 propaganda paintings – collectively titled “Year of Peril” -- urging the Midwest to awaken to the grim situation facing the country.184 In late 1942, Graham, stirred by the message of these paintings, volunteered for the Army Air Corps, and served as a combat artist attached to the Far East Air Service Command in Australia and New Guinea. At the end of the war, he was transferred to the Combat Art Unit in Manila, and sent with Barse Miller to Tokyo in September 1945.
After traveling with the Sixth Army Advance for two months, Graham returned to Manila to reopen the studios, writing to Major Hermann Williams at the Historical Properties Section in Washington that he intended to “settle down to some real painting, using the material I collected during my travels on Kyushu in September and October.” He was followed by Leslie Anderson, Chief of the Far Eastern Section of the Combat Art Unit, who had been in Tokyo under MacArthur’s direct orders to begin the collection of Japanese war propaganda. Anderson, in the weekly reports he filed from Manila thereafter, indicated that studio space was inadequate for the four artists squeezed into the house at 120 Buencamino Street. Art materials were also in short supply. Graham began work on five paintings in oil and tempera, but the work remained unfinished at the time of his transfer back to the States in March 1946. He finished out his temporary duty in a makeshift studio in the headquarters of the Combat Art Section, North Atlantic Division, housed in an office on Broadway in lower Manhattan, and forwarded his paintings – with the varnish still wet – to the Historical Properties Section in August.

By the time of his discharge, Graham had spent over four full years as a combat artist, yet, only a handful of sketches – mostly landscapes, bearing the unmistakable mark of his teacher Benton’s lyrical style -- survive from his wartime service with the Army Air Corps. Of the six works accepted into the collection of the Historical Properties Section, three of the paintings – *Sea Planes at Nagasaki*, *Atomic Landscape #3 (Japanese Burial Detail)*, and *Respect for New Emperors* – definitively place Graham in Nagasaki. Graham’s work is particularly eye-opening in that of all the Army artists, he is the only one to have executed large-scale oil paintings of graphic human casualties of the bomb.

Graham’s work jumps quickly from inside the airplane hanger of *Sea Planes* – in which American troops gaze with curiosity at the grayish-green modified Zeros used for scouting and
reconnaissance missions in the Pacific – to a picture of the city in ruins (Figure 68). The first painting seems like a polite exercise with MacArthur as the intended audience: the hanger is intact, with no sign of damage from previous air raids on Nagasaki or the atomic bomb, and the planes, glistening metallic and neatly detailed with the rising sun and stirring, calligraphic slogans, appear to have been sheltered from the blast. Because Graham borrows from the conventions of photography -- cropping the image as if the planes are too numerous to fit within the perimeter of his canvas -- and the servicemen are dwarfed by the colossal machines, the Japanese fighting force appears formidable, providing material support for the claim that the atomic bombs were necessary to prevent the potential bloodbath of an Allied invasion of the home islands.

However, when Graham makes the geographic leap from the air base at the mouth of the harbor to the populated areas of Nagasaki’s interior, he jettisons photographic realism in favor of the Regionalist style of his student days for the painting Respect for New Emperors (Figure 69). While remaining faithful to the actual topography of Nagasaki – in real life, the rolling green hills dramatically rise and fall much in the manner that Graham depicts them – additional movement is created by Graham’s churning brushstrokes, which contribute to the sense of a landscape in the process of disintegration. He also makes the most of the phantasmagorical quality of his found imagery. Fluid forms are contrasted effectively with solid objects to create the bizarre juxtapositions that express the fickleness of the bomb’s destructive path: a rock garden in the middle ground remains relatively intact, while in the background, the three-story Christian university caves in on itself like a house of cards. In some cases, he seems to encourage metaphorical meaning in the appearances of reality. For example, the repeated crosses in the landscape -- in the fence which serves as the gateway; in the precariously leaning
telephone polls; and the crosses on the top of the university – are disturbing in that they seem less like random occurrences than supernatural signs. The real crosses signal the presence of a significant Christian community in Nagasaki – in fact the largest Catholic parish in Japan -- as well as mark the unintentional ground zero of the explosion, Urakame Cathedral; whereas their doubles, rendered in wood planks and twisted telephone lines, appear to mock the Christian values of Japan’s conquerors.

Like so many artists who came face-to-face with the violence of the war, Graham, while still drawing from aspect of his Midwestern style, veered in a new direction. Because verisimilitude seemed inadequate to paint nightmares, Graham let aspects of Surrealism creep into his work. Objects in the painting take on a living, tortured quality. Charred trees writhe in suffering, with branches and roots reaching like fingers into an overcast sky. Countless smokestacks are at once ominous reminders of the Japanese war-making machine and at the same time, positioned directly across from the epicenter of the explosion, grim witnesses to the force of a superior technological weapon. While the Japanese in the painting turn their backs from the road in deference or shame, stone lanterns, oversized and immobile, stand in condemnation of the casual jauntiness of the American G.I.s. A grayish-green pallor covers the rolling hills, while parts of clothing and faces are literally bleached out by a blinding flash of light hovering in the sky. The landscape itself seems locked in a titanic battle, as if the reverberations of the bomb still rattled the city’s heart.

If Graham strays from both documentary realism and the style of his mentor, what is perhaps most surprising in Respect for the New Emperors is that, in spite of the propagandistic title, Graham seems to abandon the role of combat artist entirely. If one is to assume that the artist is at the same location as he positions the viewer, then Graham situates himself at the gateway of
the Urakame Valley, looking down on the military jeep carrying the American survey team. The implication is clear: the artist has somehow managed to elude military policy, his direct supervisors, and potential censors and sketch in an area that has been designated off-limits. As the jeep rounds the corner, it is the civilians who become the true focus of the painting: a group of kimono-garbed women and their young children carefully picking their way through the rubble; two Japanese soldiers dressed in brown fatigues – one wearing a gas mask – attending to salvage and cleanup of still-smoldering ruins; and a woman who shields herself from observation with the aid of the Japanese flag, although the small part of her face exposed to the viewer reveals a white sanitary mask, possibly suggesting a burial or the site of a makeshift crematorium. The scene speaks of the massive displacement of Japan’s civilians from the bombing campaigns, the war widows, orphaned children, and dejected ex-servicemen, as well as the futility of carrying out the most basic of human rituals when sixty-six major cities in Japan had been wiped off the map, resulting in unending vistas of destruction. By removing himself from the cleared roadway and placing himself on the battered hillside, Graham seems to have crossed not only a physical but a psychological divide – no longer the Army’s apparatus, he paints an image of suffering, remembrance, and loss from the perspective of Nagasaki’s struggling survivors.

In Atomic Landscape (Japanese Burial Detail), the viewer has traveled deeper into the landscape introduced in Respect for New Emperors, and arrived at heart of destruction in the middle of the Urakame Valley (Figure 70). A comparison with a rare color photograph taken by a Japanese photographer of the bomb’s hypocenter less than one week following the explosion indicates how just how fearless Graham was in seeking out this image (Fig. 71). There is no Allied presence here; instead, Graham paints one of the brutal truths of the aftermath of the
bombing: that demobilized Japanese soldiers returning home from the front arrived at Hiroshima and Nagasaki exhausted, starving, and demoralized, only to be assigned to the clean-up of the thousands of dead bodies littering the landscape.\textsuperscript{191} The scene is unrelentingly bleak, an image of apocalyptic finality. All life has been extinguished – even the sun seems choked in ash. Graham paints a landscape cast in permanent shadow. Within this seemingly limitless space, hundreds of soldiers toil like ants to recover human remains. All that is left of the built environment is the smashed steel skeleton of a factory on the left, and a handful of tilting smokestacks; the suburban wooden houses have been completely obliterated, leaving no trace of their existence save for the random bones of their inhabitants which have escaped atomization. Graham’s fluid line works here to tremendous effect, suggesting wave after wave of unending misery.

While Graham never provided commentary on these paintings, in late 1946, the artist wrote to Edwin Taggert, the new director of the Historical Properties Section, that he intended to apply for a Guggenheim Fellowship for the year 1947, and requested reproductions of his two atomic paintings to submit with his application. The series he intended to complete with the funding was directly related to his experience in Nagasaki:

What I intend to paint would be too lengthy to explain here but I will say that the subject matter is non-profitable. It is principally concerned with my thoughts that we cannot afford another war and still come out with anything less than the suicide of all or most of humanity. Perhaps the knowing stupidity all Man has shown concerning his plain existence is worthy of such an inglorious end – but I cannot calmly wait for another war without doing something about it in my own way. I think as an individual I might bring a message of truth – humbly – to make the realization of the yawning brink clear.\textsuperscript{192}

In spite of a strong portfolio and recommendations from Taggert and Thomas Hart Benton (who continued to serve as a mentor to Graham for nearly a decade after the war), Graham was
denied the fellowship. In his letter informing Taggart of the decision, he joked bleakly about a long stretch of bad weather:

perhaps [this] world-wide bad weather has been caused by a balance upset by the terrific, unnatural explosions and changes of the war – or perhaps by a mighty justice which is touching the victors as well as the vanquished, democrats as well as communists. We’re not good people anymore, so God may think.193

Afterward, although he continued to ruminate on the direction of world affairs with the increasing stalemate between the United States and Russia and the suspicion that the Soviets were developing a nuclear weapon,194 this new social consciousness stirred up by his contact with the bomb failed to take root in his painting. Graham abandoned the series he had proposed for the fellowship, and turned, instead, back to paintings of the Missouri landscape, with one major difference: a strong, supernatural light continued to haunt his paintings, possibly an echo of his tour of duty in Nagasaki.195

**Ted Gilien and Joseph Vogel Sent to Cover Bombings**

Indicative of the fluctuating conditions on the ground in the aftermath of the surrender, the last of the recruits for the Far Eastern Section of the Combat Art Unit, Ted Gilien and Joseph Vogel, failed to even appear on Sidney Simon’s roster for the Unit drawn up the 2nd week in September. Both Gilien and Vogel had been professional artists before the war, but, because of late enlistments, had missed the opportunity to compete for the limited number of spots in the Army’s Combat Art Units awarded in 1942. Vogel enlisted in the Signal Corps in 1944, and was deployed to the European theater as part of the Combat Photography Division. Gilien, who had already decided to enlist in the Army when his draft notice arrived in the mail, was assigned to the Visual Aids Department and sent to New Guinea to paint camouflage; however, when “the trees gave all the camouflage that the Army needed”, he was reduced in rank and transferred to an ammunition battalion for two years. After suffering from “brain fever” and trench foot, he
was shipped to Milne Bay to convalesce and worked his way back to painting and illustration, eventually assuming the role of art director of the base.

After the war in Europe was over, both men were reassigned to the Philippines. On a swing through Manila, they found themselves being pressed into service by the remaining members of the Combat Art Section. Years later, in separate interviews conducted by Betty Hoag of the Archives of American Art, the two would recount how they came to be part of the first Art Unit of the Occupation. Gilien, who had been desperately trying to get into the program for four years and had overcome everything from strafing by Japanese Zeros to jungle rot to get there, eagerly offered up his services even though he was close to acquiring the necessary number of points for his discharge. Gilien was officially transferred to the Section, but when he “finally caught up with them … the officer in charge said, “Where have you been? We’re about to go home!”

Vogel would recall that moment a bit differently. He and Gilien had been:

literally ‘hooked’ by some, by Barse Miller and [Sidney] Simon, combat painters who wanted to get out. They were officers, and they hooked Ted Gilien and me…They used a curious device of promising us a trip back by plane rather than boat; that in itself sold us out! Next thing we knew, we ended up in Tokyo, still in the service."

Had the two officers bothered to dig any deeper into the biographies of their new recruits – as had been the policy of the War Art Advisory Committee when selecting the initial batch of Army combat artists sent abroad in 1942 -- they may have come to the conclusion that Vogel and Gilien were not the best ideological fit for the Unit. Vogel had been stirred to become an illustrator out of “sheer social justice,” coming under the heavy influence of Jose Gabriel Orozco through friends at the Art Students League in New York. Like so many artists of the time, he joined the Federal Arts Project; his first assignment was assistant to Ben Shahn on a mural for the Rikers Island Penitentiary. After organizing a number of strikes protesting a lack of work for artists on the Project in 1936, he and a small group of wide-eyed artists with no military training
left for Spain and thrust themselves into the Civil War. Vogel attached himself to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, illustrating skirmishes along makeshift battle lines; also during those years he saw Picasso’s *Guernica* and it had a profound effect on him because “it was the first real submission of …Cubist formalism into a meaning for the day.” When one of Vogel’s colleagues, Paul Block, was killed, Vogel returned to the States and to the Project, but was fired less than a year later for signing his name to a petition supporting a Communist candidate for political office. After moving to California to paint, he embraced various strains of the European avant-garde. Dalton Trumbo, in a review of a 1942 exhibition of Vogel’s work in Santa Monica, described it as “Surrealism, but healthfully, lustfully removed from the neurotic vaporings unfortunately associated with most of the Surrealist group.”

Gilien took courses at the Arts Students League and the National Gallery of Art for a total of a year and a half before striking out on his own to paint. In the early 1930s, he occupied a small studio in an apartment building filled with other struggling young artists, mostly sculptors; Isamu Noguchi and William Zorach worked right down the hall, and Gilien developed other friendships with the Japanese artist Kuniyoshi and Jack Levine that would have a lasting effect on his art. In 1936, he was also employed by the Federal Arts Project, which is where he met Joseph Vogel for the first time. In the beginning, Gilien was paid for churning out abstract canvases under the short-lived Easel Project; later, he designed, in his own words “hideous murals” for Missouri post offices before violating his contract by walking off the job and moving to California with two other artists from the Project that had felt stuck in the Midwest. Gilien attempted to secure a teaching job but could only find work in a shipyard at the Los Angeles docks, which is where he remained until he was drafted. At night, he continued to paint “literary” canvases influenced by Surrealism.
Gilien’s Mission at Nagasaki

Gilien and Vogel were sent to Tokyo at the end of September to, in Gilien’s words, “cover the bombings.” In his interview with Betty Hoag in 1965, the artist recalled how he, and not Vogel, came to be assigned to Nagasaki: “When we got to Tokyo, we flipped a coin to see who was going to be a big hero in Nagasaki and Hiroshima; and I won.” Although Vogel seems as if he would have been the better choice for the assignment, Gilien had a lot more riding on the outcome of this decision: shortly after he arrived in Tokyo, he had learned that his brother Sascha -- whom he had not seen in two years -- had been sent to Nagasaki with the 2nd Division Marines as an MP. While Nagasaki was a fair distance from Tokyo, Gilien quickly grasped the benefits of working for the Combat Art Section:

when I got transferred to this combat artists project I found out that it was a very important thing to MacArthur. We had all this special jazz – army patches and flying priority. So I took advantage of it and went down to see my brother ... And I did some work there in Nagasaki. The Marines had come in right after the atomic bombing, and I came in very soon after.”

Unlike the other branches of the military that set up camp on the edges of Nagasaki, the roughly 2,000 Marines sent to area were situated within the city itself. Many were assigned to salvage operations, rehabilitating some of the bombed-out buildings for temporary housing and command posts, while others, like Gilien’s brother, patrolled the city and ensured compliance with the terms of the surrender. A souvenir picture album, issued by the 2nd Marine Division under the command of Major General P. Hunt in December 1945, provides some sense of what Marine life was like in Nagasaki at the time of Gilien’s arrival (Fig. 72). After some rather candid photographs of destruction – admittedly proceeded by a collage of beachfront shots labeled “Where We Would Have Hit – D-Day 1 Nov. 1945” (Figs. 73, 74), the book moves on to record the daily aspects of work and life for the troops stationed in the city. There are several
pictures of the Mitsubishi plants that the Marines had converted into barracks, which are known to have been situated less than a mile from the blast (and possibly within the circle of radiological contamination). Other images show troops carrying out various aspects of security detail: routing out defenses, carrying out weapons inventory, and lighting the night with a bonfire of crushed Japanese Zeros (Fig. 75). The Japanese finally make an appearance in a section on repatriation: there are pictures of MPs checking the paperwork of dazed Japanese families, while captions like “these soldiers need no points for discharge” and “whatcha’ got there, mae?” mock the dejected returning troops (Fig. 76). But there are also more lighthearted moments: Marines twirling parasols; children teaching American soldiers Japanese; Marines on a mission of “souvenir reconnaissance”, even a celebration after the “atomic bowl” held on the city’s new gridiron (Figs. 77, 78).

Gilien, who would only arrive in Nagasaki on November 17th – a full two months after the Marines had reached Nagasaki, and less than one month before the Division would depart in December -- no doubt experienced the full range of subject matter presented in this Nagasaki portfolio. While Gilien confirmed that he did, indeed, locate his brother once he reached Nagasaki, the details of his actual assignment are unclear; what is known is that his time spent investigating his surroundings was cut short after he contracted malaria soon after his arrival, resulting in a three-week stay in a Marine hospital battling its effects. However, as the brother of an MP intent on taking full advantage of the privileges afforded him by MacArthur as a member of the Combat Art Unit, it would stand to reason that before the onset of his illness Gilien may have accompanied his brother on patrols of the city by jeep, and, more likely, ventured into the off-limits zone that had been branded by the Marines “the valley of death.”203
In all, the artist may have spent, at most, one week in the field gathering information, sketching, and taking photographs that would later become the basis of future paintings, but by his own recollection, it had been a productive trip:

Joe had stayed in Tokyo and did a lot of paintings and drawings of the local scene… when I got back from Nagasaki, Joe looked well-fed and healthy. I had lost twenty pounds and looked like a skeleton. But I was the hero. I had all the drawings and the photographs, the whole business. But we actually didn’t start to paint until we got back to the States.204

From a weekly report dated December 22, 1945, it can be determined that Gilien spent roughly a month in Nagasaki, returning to Tokyo on December 15. Hans Mangelsdorf, who had since taken over the monthly report charting CAS activities at General Headquarters in Tokyo, reported to Captain Leslie Andersen in Manila that Gilien had returned from Nagasaki possessing “a fine collection of paintings and photographs.”205 In this same report, Mangelsdorf noted that both Gilien and Vogel had requested temporary duty in the States for one month to work up their sketches into paintings. Mangelsdorf commented that studio space was “simply unsatisfactory”,206 although the Combat Art Section was located at the most desirable address in Tokyo: the Daichi Building, General Headquarters for the Occupation. Part of this had to do with the keen interest that MacArthur had taken in the Combat Art Section itself; moreover, the building had become the depository for the collection of Japanese war art and propaganda, which had recently come under the domain of the Combat Art Section. While Mangelsdorf was busy cataloguing these works with the aid of Japanese interpreters, Gilien and Vogel worked one floor above, in a studio on the same floor where MacArthur kept his office. Gilien recalled sharing an elevator with the General on several occasions, although he was always at a loss of what to say to him, sometimes uttering a “Sir” or, more often than not, just sinking back into the elevator in silence. He failed to disclose if MacArthur ever asked about his paintings.207
Censorship at Home

Gilien and Vogel returned to the States at the beginning of January, and reported directly to the Combat Art Section, North Atlantic Division, located at 97 Broadway. The two artists were then “locked in a hotel for thirty days” where the churned out paintings at “a rate of one per day” until they satisfied their quota. The two then proceeded to the Historical Properties Section in Washington, but, as Gilien remembered, “they really weren’t interested…the war was over, and it was just of matter of turning in certain paintings.” The work of both artists arrived in one lot on April 24, 1946; and just two days later, the War Art Advisory Committee had already reached its decision. Out of the 20 paintings that Gilien has said to have completed during his temporary duty in the States, only nine are on record of having been submitted to the Historical Properties Section at all; and out of these nine, eight were rejected by the War Art Advisory Committee for inclusion in the permanent collection.

Unlike Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., who, to his surprise, found himself in Nagasaki when orders directed the Sixth Army Advance southward to its harbor, Gilien’s specific assignment, as indicated by the coin toss between Gilien and Vogel, was to gather material in Nagasaki of potential historical interest. It is curious, then, that, after this directive from above, only a sole painting would serve as an official record of that journey; and that the selection itself, Liberty Party, Nagasaki is unremarkable as an historical document. The work is only known by a deteriorating black-and-white photograph; the actual painting went missing after a loan to the Pentagon in 1981. The subject is barely discernible: although the canvas seems wrapped in a dense fog, two, kimono-clad women can be glimpsed walking along the edge of a riverbank, while across the water, a group of G.I.s waits to board a ferry at night. Gilien’s style in this
painting could loosely be described as Surrealism, as both the women and the soldiers seem to float in a dream world, yet there are enough solid references – the dock, some strung, twinkling lights – to anchor it to reality. Seen in the context of other Surrealistic touches that had crept into soldiers work, the painting could be said to adhere to the overall documentary impulse that guided the Combat Art Program -- but was Gilien aiming at something more subversive? One could argue that the painting could operate as a veiled critique of “servicing the conquerors” – and certainly, the idea of a raucous night on the town seems incompatible with a city bombed into oblivion – but it just as easily comes off as a charming picturesque, like a vignette stolen from the pages of the Marines’ souvenir album.

The titles of the “rejected”, by contrast, suggest a potentially controversial body of work teeming with historical significance: Off Limits in Nagasaki; Delousing of Koreans in Japan; The Solicitors; “The Processional” at Nagasaki; Dead Birds at Omura (the town next to Nagasaki) to name the paintings with specific Japanese content. As to what these works (whose current whereabouts are unknown) may have looked like, Gilien described them in the 1965 interview as “very symbolic, inner type painting. Most of it they sent back to me because it had nothing to do with the war… [instead] it had a great deal to do with Ted Gilien’s confusion.”

While interest in the Combat Art Program may have been waning as the last of the recruits returned home with no thought of their replacements, when Gilien’s rejections are compared to the work records submitted to the Historical Properties Section by Joseph Vogel and Hans Mangelsdorf, it would seem that the rejection pile of the three artists is filled with the same kind of potentially explosive subject matter that had been carefully edited out of dispatches and photographs sent through the SCAP office in Tokyo. Vogel, whose paintings were practically
rejected wholesale, had submitted material that aggressively defied the image of the Occupation as a “miracle from above”: the titles of his paintings – *Japanese Civilians in Search of Food and Shelter; Japanese Soldier Returns to his Home in Tokyo Area; Orphans of Tokyo; Tank Column Approaching Tokyo Outskirts; English Lesson at the Oasis Nightclub at Ginza* – were outright condemnations of the imperial presence of the conquerors and the deplorable conditions he witnessed walking the streets of Tokyo for four months.²¹⁶ While most of the GIs stuck to what was called “Little America”, the few square miles of downtown Tokyo that were still standing and quickly remodeled to resemble an American Main Street, Vogel had dared to venture into the “mile upon mile of wasteland … where their subjects were attempting to reconstruct their lives.”²¹⁷ His token painting in the permanent collection -- *Two GIs Photographing Ceremonial Bowing in Front of Emperor’s Palace* – clearly, when taken out of context, fails to adequately express the hierarchies of power and privilege in postwar Japan.

Similarly, Mangelsdorf, who would not submit his work until late August, also sketched the material that he wrote to Taggart was “in close-range to our studio in Tokyo”: “the devastation, the slow clean-up” of the bombed-out sectors of the city, as well as the “presence of the GIs”; but he also went so far as to hire Japanese models from the poor and destitute of the streets.²¹⁸ He took it upon himself to design his own agenda as an “Occupation” artist, and became interested in a range of anthropological subjects such as the as the black market economy and burgeoning political expression among the Japanese people. In one letter to Taggart, he conveyed with remarkable candor that he had just returned from sketching a Communist rally made possible by the new spirit of “freedom and tolerance” fostered by the injection of American democracy²¹⁹ -- all the more ironic in light of the fact that the censorial excess of the Press Code would keep such activities from being reported internally.²²⁰ In spite of
Mangelsdorf’s attempts to “paint a complete picture of the Occupation,” he, like Gilien and Vogel, is represented in the collection by a handful of colorful works of American GIs on holiday.

It would seem, then, that later on in 1946, the Army’s Combat Art Program was beginning to feel the far-reaching effects of the Occupation censorship code. For one thing, the original panel of art professionals who served on the War Art Advisory Committee for the Historical Properties Section (the most prominent being Duncan Philips), was dissolved and replaced with military personnel with no art background or training, leaving Taggart in place as a figurehead. Since a National War Museum had become a real possibility, Truman had already signed off on the project in December of 1945 and funding for the idea was being seriously discussed the following Spring, the desire to expunge material that would in no way contradict the carefully managed narrative of the Occupation was understandable, at least from the Army’s perspective. While it is true that Robert MacDonald Graham’s far more graphic portrayal of Nagasaki clean-up was accepted by the jury, the subject was not necessarily controversial before the release of John Hersey’s Hiroshima in the summer of 1946. Polls showed that the majority of the general public felt that, much like the Germans who were forced to bury the bodies of the dead at the concentration camps, the “Japanese were merely reaping what they had sown.” Graham’s work also may have escaped censorship due to his incredibly close ties to Thomas Hart Benton, who had willingly served as a government propagandist during the war. Benton’s fervent patriotism may have deterred closer scrutiny of the ambivalent message buried within his favored pupil’s work.

It is also possible that the progressive sympathies expressed by Gilien, Vogel, and Mangelsdorf for their subjects may have exposed them to nascent Communist hysteria. In the
case of Mangelsdorf, after the artist was transferred to the top-secret Yuma missile base in Arizona in 1947 – which would soon become a proving ground for atomic weapons testing – Edwin Taggart sent a top-secret memorandum to a general at the Pentagon, warning him that:

three former members of the Combat War Art Unit in the South Pacific, have, at various times voiced a strong belief that another member of the Unit, one Lt. Hans Mangelsdorf, is inclined to subversive ideas and to somewhat extreme views of a communistic flavor.\textsuperscript{227}

Although Taggart didn’t wish to “subscribe to the slightest degree to any ‘witch-hunting’ mania” it was understood that the Lieutenant had now been assigned to “highly classified operations” at Yuma and that Taggart considered it his duty to inform his superiors.\textsuperscript{228} While one can be sure, then, that Mangelsdorf was being watched by the government, Vogel had already lost one job due to his Communist leanings in an earlier red-baiting incident by the General Postmaster of the United States,\textsuperscript{229} and both he and Gilien, who became close friends in Tokyo and would remain so for the rest of their lives, would soon become the targets of F.B.I. investigations in the 1950s. According to Gilien’s son, Jeremy, Vogel (who had moved on to television and screenplays) and Gilien, along with Gilien’s wife, Eleanor, a local Californian sculptor, were blacklisted and had difficulty finding work throughout the 1950s.\textsuperscript{230}

\textbf{Lost Photographs of Nagasaki}

Fortunately, the recent discovery of a small group of photographs taken by Ted Gilien during his deployment as a combat artist has begun to shed light on some of what the artist was exposed to during his week touring Nagaski. Like every other combat artist in the Section, Gilien was outfitted with a Pentax camera to take 2 x 3 inch photographs that would later be used to reconstruct details for the twenty canvases that each artist was expected to complete before his discharge. No matter how abstract or avant-garde the artist’s tendencies, most combat artists are
known to have taken advantage of the technology afforded them, particularly since artists’ materials, sketchbooks and charcoal, had dwindled down to nothing by the end of the war.

However, the use of photographs is either anecdotal, drawn from the artists’ descriptions of their working methods, or conjecture, based upon the similarities of certain aspects of the paintings with conventions of photography. As was the case for so many of the sketches done in theater which served a similar purpose, the Historical Properties Section seems to not have been interest in collecting the rolls of film generated by each artist’s mission. In fact, the papers of the Section are silent as to what was the official policy on these photographs, although this recent discovery would seem to indicate that they became the property of the artist at the end of the war. What is perhaps more surprising is that the images escaped vetting from the Civil Censorship Detachment in Tokyo in light of the sensitive material contained in some of the images. Either the photographs remained undeveloped until the artists were back in the States; or the special privileges extended by MacArthur to the combat art unit in Japan exempted them from the powerful eye of the censors. In any case, most of the photographs taken by the artists of the combat art units remain unknown and unexamined.

Shortly after his transfer to the Combat Art Section, Gilien had begun taking photographs in Manila. It is instructive to note that the camera was supposed to be used in its “official” capacity as a documentary tool, and although the rules appear to be unspoken, this meant training its lens on the activities of the troops -- no matter how mundane -- in the idle hours waiting for orders to proceed from Manila to Japan. As the set of photographs is admittedly incomplete, it is hard to determine whether or not Gilien carried out this routine task because there are no pictures of American GI’s whatsoever. Of the images that survive, Gilien’s earliest photographs concentrate on the plight of young children in the aftermath of the war, and the silhouette of the artist in
uniform can even be seen in a photograph of a little girl holding flowers (possibly a beggar on the streets), taken in August 1945 (Fig. 79).

Once he reached Japan, he continued to turn his camera on the afflicted population. In a photograph possibly taken in Tokyo dated September 1945, Gilien perfectly captured the aimlessness of the urban population, as individuals walk the streets in all different directions, some appearing almost dazed or disoriented, as if emerging from their homes for the first time after the end of the aerial bombardments (Fig. 80). Some areas of the photograph do seem to indicate that this section of the city was the target of bombing, such as the steel skeleton that rises shakily to the left in the background, or the field of rubble which lies to the right. Nonetheless, the overall feeling of the picture is that of cautious relief. Most of the people on the street still stroll or stand with guarded postures, but a demobilized soldier nods in Gilien’s direction, and in a spontaneous moment of gaiety, two women, still dressed in their monpe pantaloons, even pause to flirt with camera. However, the picture also hints at ongoing challenges: one of the women is wearing a face mask, suggesting that the city is still suffering from airborne pollutants kicked up by the bombings, as well as several communicable diseases (like TB and cholera) that were running rampant due to the filth and poverty brought on by seemingly endless years of war.

The remaining images date from the period of Gilien’s stay in Nagasaki. The photographs clearly indicate that Gilien traveled to the areas that had been cordoned off after the radiological survey. Some of these photographs are merely fragments of buildings. In one, hard-to-decipher photograph, initially the image appears to be a lamppost, with an ornate, wrought-iron hook still intact, when in actuality, it depicts a structural support with fragments of a building still attached (Fig. 81). A sliver of brick to the left is all that survives of the structure, while the skin of the
building has been peeled back like paper, exposing a glimpse of a scorched wooden core. Photographed at a tilted vantage-point, the object looks more like an enigmatic signpost with markers pointing in every direction. At the same time, its flattened shapes form a surrealist collage, one of so many “found objects” that, through its absolute strangeness and unfamiliarity, prompted combat artists to abandon documentary realism for something more layered and textural that could somehow approximate the irrational forces unleashed by the war.

Another photograph from ground zero provides more shocking evidence of the violence of the atomic blast: concrete, the material with the greatest chance of survival in a head-to-head battle with the bomb, in this instance has literally been stripped from its steel reinforcements, leaving a misshapened pile that struggles to stand up (Fig. 82). The building appears soft and malleable, with huge gaping holes left open to the expansive sky. Its appearance is evocative of a quote by Walter Benjamin, writing in the wake of the Great War: “A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile, human body.” Like the function of ruins in the Romantic landscapes of the 19th century, a structure is a stand-in for the human presence – the thousands upon thousands of nameless and faceless dead who, like the victims of the fire-bombings before them, had no warning that they had been targeted for mass slaughter. In this case, the building is a disturbing reminder of atomic radiation and melting flesh. In confrontation with the surreal and excessive effects of the bomb, Gilien foregoes the straight shot and its overtones of neutrality in favor of melancholic portraits of absence and loss.

There are only two images in the collection that address the survivors directly. In one, a mother and child stare out unblinkingly against a backdrop of shantytowns and rubble (Fig. 83).
The picture is iconic, posed in the tradition of thousands of “Madonna and Child” paintings which came before it, and yet, completely wrenching as an ordinary portrait of a mother and her son struggling against an uncertain future. The other photograph is perhaps the most stunning and provocative in the collection: the celebration of Catholic mass at the bombed-out site of Urakame Cathedral (Fig. 84). The cathedral was positioned high on the hillside overlooking the valley, and the remaining of Nagasaki’s faithful have gathered here in the open air to seek comfort in rituals. In Gilien’s photograph, the desire to celebrate mass against a backdrop of unfathomable devastation seems at once ludicrous and naïve in its trusting, heartfelt faith (particularly ironic in that it is borrowed from Western tradition), and on the other hand, the most sincere statement of belief.

The radical aspects of the photographs lead to more questions than answers. Who was the intended audience for Gilien’s images? They go beyond a mere indictment of the military, although the act of taking the photographs with his government-issued camera on an official assignment was subversive enough. It would seem, however unlikely, that Gilien may have felt, for a brief moment, the burden of responsibility to take the kind of pictures that might shake up an American audience to the point of contemplating whether or not the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians was the only path to peace. He therefore chose his Japanese protagonists with care. His widow with child, and church-going population, were sympathetic and at the same time oddly recognizable. Had the images been released to the public and widely circulated, perhaps, through a powerful identification with the victims, the gruesome realities of atomic warfare could have become permanently seared into the public’s memory. Instead, Gilien seems to have taken his photographs, developed them at an uncertain date, and buried them in his basement.
Undoubtedly, had these photographs been exposed to the censors, they would have failed to make it out of Japan.

After the war, Gilien had difficulty moving on from what he had witnessed. He explained that:

    when I got out of the Army, I was still upset… I must have done three hundred paintings of devastation…But people would say to me, you know, “The war’s over; knock it off; you’ve had it. I just had to paint it out of me. It was very compulsive. The only thing I could do was destruction and ruin.”

**Protest**

The result of “trying to paint the war out” of himself was that, in 1951, Gilien decided to gather these paintings together and publish them in an anti-war treatise called *The Price*. At the time of the book’s conception, Gilien was lamenting the outbreak of a new war in Korea, and “even though there were editorials that were very violent against this type of thing…I felt that I had to do it. I would suffer all the slings and arrows that would be thrown at me.” He borrowed eighteen hundred dollars from Dr. D. M. Morandini, educational coordinator of the Humanists Society in California and an early proponent of disarmament, and Dr. Donald A. Piatt, one of the most important philosophy professors at UCLA, securing the loan by offering his paintings as collateral. As they penned in the book’s “Foreward”, both men supported Gilien’s effort because they had recognized in his paintings “a clear call to mankind to marshal its millions to end war and the possibility of war.”

The cover of *The Price* is indicative of the content to come. The title is written in shaky cursive script fashioned out of barbed wire and set against the beach; the innovative design is a visceral evocation of both the horror of the concentration camps and the blood-stained beaches of Normandy and the South Pacific (Fig. 85). The opening page is flanked on either side by a tall,
thin drawing of a menacing figure fashioned out of a tear gas canister, metal tubing, and gas mask (Fig. 86). This hybrid creature, worthy of a Surrealist sculpture, symbolized the increased reliance on mechanized, push-button warfare and the subsequent dehumanization of the “enemy”, who more frequently than not in the increasingly violent military operations of the last war, had been tens of thousands of innocent civilians. Many of the paintings contained in The Price are as Gilien described his postwar output: shadowy realms, filled with a single, supplicant figure (or a statue that fills the same role), wandering aimlessly through a jumble of architectural fragments – collapsed steeples, cracked pediments, upturned columns and broken stairwells -- which suggest, collectively, the shattering of civilization and its accomplishments (Fig. 87). In a rare existing oil of that same image – the only one that could be located by the Gilien family from this period -- the apocalyptic feeling is even more pronounced. The black-and-white reproduction fails to capture the sky on fire, and the ghastly, carnival-like colors as bombs continue to explode. The light brings into sharp focus the figures at the lower left which in the reproduction are lost to the shadows – people in white robes, with hands outstretched in prayer, copied directly after the priest whom Gilien had photographed celebrating mass at Urakame Cathedral overlooking the valley of death.

There are other images in The Price that are direct commentaries on the specific hallmarks of destruction leveled by an atomic explosion. One image, paired with text describing the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima, depicts a veiled figure rising from the water, with empty eye sockets and peeling skin, beseeching the viewer in front of a backdrop of toppled buildings (Fig. 88). The collage-like nature of the background, which Gilien repeats in several of his images, is reminiscent of the photographs of textural contrasts taken by Gilien in Nagasaki. In another, coupled with a passage labeling the pursuit of atomic warfare “universal madness”, the soft,
collapsing structure to the left is a rough mirror-image of Gilien’s photograph of the hollowed-out concrete building on the hill (Fig. 89).

The reproductions in The Price – forty-eight in all – were accompanied by a running commentary outlining war’s devastating effects on all aspects of humanity. A significant portion of the text – nearly half – was dedicated to the human cost of nuclear war. Page 21 of The Price features a devastating collection of quotes drawn from Colonel Stafford L. Warren and Dr. Philip Morrison’s testimony before the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission in 1946. Warren and Morrison had descriptively recounted scenes of absolute horror from Hiroshima: skin that was “burned and hung in strips”; “bodies swollen up like drowned men;” a woman lying on the ground “with her head split open horizontally” and the “inside … red, like a watermelon”; “pitiful victims covered with atrocious wounds [who] came to lie down the burning sand of the beach…and were all blind.” After cynically listing a price of “each corpse” next to a tally of war profits by U.S. corporations, Gilien turns his focus on the H-bomb and the frightening implications of a two-way nuclear attack. Paired with a picture of a monstrous flower rising from a field of bones, Gilien’s stark commentary warns that “Let us not confidently expect a rebirth of life after such a war. The risk of extinction – a very real risk – is one of the prices that must be paid if mankind is dragged into an atomic war.”

As the forward to The Price so eloquently expressed, “No armament race can accomplish this, a secure peace…A ‘next war’ would see no victors.”

One of Gilien’s sponsors, Dr. Moriandini, took copies of The Price to Washington and distributed them to the people at the U.N.; according to Gilien, “he gave out thousands of them,” but the book generated little response. After this disappointment, Gilien sold most of the paintings reproduced in The Price to private collectors. He turned to religious painting,
specifically a series comprised of hundreds of images based on the book of Maccabees, which remained unfinished upon his death in 1967.

The surviving images of the combat artists who traveled to Hiroshima and Nagasaki counteract the dismissive portrait of the war artist as a simple propagandist. While the single image of the mushroom cloud effectively obscured the horror which occurred underneath it, the combat artists who followed in the wake of the bomb felt morally compelled to paint images which not only contradicted official policy, but questioned the unshakable narrative of the “rightness” of the bomb’s use. Sifting through the material ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they raised uncomfortable questions as to the effects of the bomb on human flesh, the radiation fallout, and uncertain fate of the survivors. In daring to picture the taboo of what could not be seen, these artists exposed the fissure between personal and public memory, leading one to ponder the “disappearances” of bodies and questionable actions in official histories. It is here in the Pacific, in the war’s aftermath, that the American artist embraced assertion of his own subjectivity, to engage in the larger question of the ethical responsibility of war’s witnesses.
Details of the War Art Advisory Committee can be found in the articles “Artists’ Battalion,” *Art News* 42 (May 1-14, 1943): 6; “United States Sends Artists to War Front,” *Art Digest* (May 1, 1943): 13.

The relationship between Biddle and Roosevelt, and his involvement in creating a role for the artist in the W.P.A., is explained from the first-person account in George Biddle’s book, *George Biddle and the American Artist’s Story* (New York: Little and Brown, 1934).

The first of these units included artists Joe Jones, Henry Varnum Poor, Edward Lansing, and Lt. William Cumings, who were assigned to Alaska; Aaron Bohrod, Sgt. Charles Shannon, David Fredenthal, and Howard Cook, sent to the South Pacific; and George Biddle and Fletcher Martin, who arrived in Tunisia in May of 1943.

The text of this letter is reproduced in George Biddle, *The Artist at War* (New York: Viking Press, 1944), 32.

“Congress Fumbles the Ball,” *The Art Digest* (August 1, 1943): 3

The combat art programs of the various branches of the armed forces are covered in depth in the article “Call to Action,” *Magazine of Art* 35 (March 1944): 96-101.


The importance of war art as another “document” of experience, along with the photograph and the filmstrip, is discussed in the article “Authentic War Art,” *The Art Digest* (December 1, 1944): 11. That the “interpretative” aspect of art was forgotten about can clearly be seen in the number of articles on the war illustrated with paintings from the combat art program. See, for example, “Victory’s Portrait in the Marianas,” *National Geographic* 88 (November 1945): 599-616.


12 For more information on options for ending the war, particularly Plan Olympic, see John Ray Skates, *The Invasion of Japan: Alternatives to the Bomb* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994); for detailed studies of Joint Chiefs of Staff Planning at this time, see Charles F. Brower, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy: American Strategy in the War with Japan, 1943-45* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

13 The willingness of the Japanese to take on massive numbers of casualties was particularly troubling to the U.S. administration. The Japanese, particularly soldiers being sent off to war as well as their families, had already been conditioned to accept their mission as a suicidal one in the name of the greater national cause – and continued to play this role in light of accumulating evidence that Japan would ultimately fail in this endeavor. See John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company), 21-25.

14 Message of the President to the Congress, June 1, 1945, *Department of State Bulletin*, XII, 310 (June 3, 1945), 1000.

15 The Naval Art program was the smallest of all the Armed Forces, employing only eight artists in total, but the first to be instituted as a cohesive program in September 1941 – three months before the United States even entered the war. Chief of Naval Information Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn personally recruited Parsons from the Corcoran to head the Combat Art Section. The output of these artists during the war is documented extensively in Col. Avery H. Chenoweth’s *Art of War: Eyewitness U.S. Combat Art from the Revolutionary War through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2002), 119-125.

16 Robert Parsons, letter to Standish Backus, June 1, 1945, Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.


19 Quoted in Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth*, 89.


23 For Truman’s announcement, see the *New York Times*, August 7, 1945, A-1; For the text of Emperor Hirohito’s radio address, see Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, 14.


25 Standish Backus, letter to Robert Parsons, August 29, 1945, Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

26 Mitchell Jamieson, letter to Standish Backus, August 16, 1945, Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

27 The dismantling of the Naval portion of the Combat Art Program is briefly mentioned in the review “Historical Naval Paintings in Thrilling Show,” *The Art Digest* (September 15, 1945): 12.

29 Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, 46.

30 In an editorial that was typical of the mood of the time, the Atlanta Constitution commented that, “if it not for the treachery of Pearl Harbor; the horrible cruelties of the Death March…the stories told by the starved, filth-encrusted dazed soldiers coming out of Japanese prison camps, we might feel sorrow for the Japanese who felt the atomic bomb”. “Editorial,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 1, 1945, 10.


36 The Museum of Modern Art sponsored several poster projects related to the war, beginning already in 1940 when it was anticipated that the United States would inevitably be drawn into the conflict.


42 Standish Backus, letter to Robert Parsons, August 29, 1945, Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.


44 Carey McWilliams discusses at length the discrimination the Japanese faced in California due to their dominance in the agricultural industry. See her *Japanese-Americans: Symbol of Racial Intolerance* (New York: Little, Brown, 1944).


Official media outlets were willing to discredit stories that there were dangerously high levels of radiation at Hiroshima that would pose a serious threat to American servicemen. See, for example, “U.S. Atom Bomb Site Belies Tokyo Tales,” *New York Times*, September 12, 1945, A-1, 2; “No Radioactivity in Hiroshima Ruin,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1945, A-1.

Standish Backus, letter to Robert Parsons, September 30, 1945, Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.


*Leatherneck* 28.9 (September 1945): cover.


U.S. Navy, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet, and Pacific Ocean Areas, *Guide to Japan*, 37. Assembled as a guide for servicemen, this publication was part travel guide, part propaganda. Interestingly, this publication by the U.S. Navy makes no mention of the fact that a large percentage of Japan’s major cities have been destroyed through firebombing. Most of the recommended tourist attractions (including the gardens of Hiroshima) were no longer in existence by the time of the printing.


Standish Backus, inscription on the back of the watercolor, *At the Red Cross Hospital, Hiroshima*, Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Hersey, *Hiroshima*, 16.

Standish Backus, inscription on the back of *In the Line of Duty*, Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
60 Hersey, *Hiroshima*, 155.

67 The documents are quoted in Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth*, 612-613.


70 Douglas MacArthur, letter to John J. McCloy, July 8, 1945, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

71 “War Department Memorandum 345-45: Establishment of the Historical Properties Division,” June 11, 1945, Edwin Taggart Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

72 See “First Press View,” August 26, 1945, Edwin Taggart Papers, Archives of the Army Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

73 The members of the committee are disclosed in the “First Press Showing of Army Combat Paintings,” press release, n.d., Edwin Taggart Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C. This committee is not to be confused with the original War Department Art Advisory Committee assembled by George Biddle to identify artists for the Army’s combat art units. See “Organization of the War Art Advisory Committee,” Memorandum to George Biddle, February 20, 1943, George Biddle Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.


76 “War Department Memorandum 345-45: War Paintings,” September 9, 1945, Edwin Taggart Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

77 Sidney Simon, Memorandum for Historical Properties Section, WD, HQ Military District of Washington, Washington, D.C., September 29, 1945, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

78 See “Artist’s Work Record, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., Historical Properties Section, August 2, 1946,” Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

79 For more information on troops sent to Nagasaki as part of the repatriation order from MacArthur, as well as the occupation of the city itself, see Charles Smith, *Securing the Surrender: Marines in Occupied Japan* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Marines Historical Center, 1997); with reference to soldiers in contact with the contaminated areas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, see chapter one, “The First Atomic Veterans,” in Harvey Wasserman and Norman Solomon, *Killing Our Own: The Disaster of America’s Experience with Atomic Radiation* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982).

Although this is the official Army position (see note 5), a number of former soldiers in recent years have attempted to sue the government over illnesses related to “salvage and clean-up” of the contaminated areas of Nagasaki; and the National Association for Atomic Veterans has back legislation to compensate servicemen who are allegedly suffering from the after-effects of radiation exposure. See, for example, John D. Langston, *Invisible Enemies of Atomic Veterans* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford Publishing, 2006); Jim Larager, *In the Shadow of the Cloud: Photographs and Histories of America’s Atomic Veterans* (Boulder, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1998); and Harvey Wasserman and Norman Solomon, *Killing Our Own: The Disaster of America’s Experience with Atomic Radiation* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982). In 2005, H.R. 2962, “The Atomic Veterans Relief Act,” was introduced in the House of Representatives, but referred to a House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs and never acted upon. See *House Journal*, 108th Cong., 2nd sess., June 17, 2005.

This biographical information was provided by Graham to the Historical Properties Section in 1947. Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., letter to Miss Rosenthal, October 10, 1947, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

For more information on Graham’s relationship with Benton, as well as that of Benton with his other students, see Marianne Bernardi and Henry Adams, *Under the Influence: The Students of Thomas Hart Benton* (St. Joseph, MO: Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, 1993).


Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., letter to Major Hermann W. Williams, Jr., November 7, 1945, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.


See Robert MacDonald Graham, letter to Edwin Taggart, May 17, 1946, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C. Graham discusses his unfinished paintings and the makeshift studio space in the office at 270 Broadway. However, at the time of his transfer back to the States, Graham was reported to be loading “22 gesso panels” on a naval vessel for transport out of Manila. See Major W. L. Day to Robert MacDonald Graham, “Order AGPO 71-13, United States Army Forces, Pacific, 12 March 1946,” Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C., verifying the original count. It is unclear what happened to the additional pieces, as Graham makes no mention of them in his correspondence.

Graham apologized to Edwin Taggart for the unfinished condition of the paintings, which he had hurried to complete in order to gain his discharge from the Army Air Corps. See his letter to Taggart, July 11, 1946, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military, Washington, D.C.
Although none of Graham’s work from the Army Air Corps days is represented in either the Army Art Collection or the Pentagon Art Collection – the two repositories of the combat art of the Army Air Corps -- several sketches from this period are still extant and have been sold at auction.

This topic is covered thoroughly by Dower in *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*.


Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., letter to Edwin Taggart, February 28, 1947, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., letter to Edwin Taggart, April 6, 1947, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. to Edwin Taggart, May 8, 1947, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr. Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.


Biographical information can be found in Vogel, “Oral History Interview with Joseph Vogel,” 10-15.

Biographical information can be found in Gilien, “Tape-Recorded Interview with Ted Gilien in his Studio in Los Angeles, California, March 3, 1965,” 1-8.


The commemorative album is in the possession of Mrs. Gilbert Stuart, whose husband served with the 2nd Division Marines. Reproductions of the images were provided to me courtesy of Keith Whittle, Director of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Portland, Oregon.

The quote is taken from a caption in the commemorative album accompanying a picture of the destroyed Urakame Valley on page 10.


Hans Mangelsdorf to Leslie E. Anderson, “Activities, Combat Artist’s Section, OCE, GHQ, Advance Echelon,” Memorandum, December 22, 1945, Hans Mangelsdorf Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Mangelsdorf to Leslie E. Anderson, “Activities, Combat Artist’s Section, OCE, GHQ, Advance Echelon,” Memorandum, December 22, 1945, Hans Mangelsdorf Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Gilien gives details of his temporary duty in his interview with Hoag, page 11; unfortunately this is a topic not covered in Hoag’s separate interview with Vogel.


“List of Pictures by Theodore Gilien, Accepted” April 24, 1945, Theodore Gilien Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Gilien mentions this number in the interview with Hoag, see page 10; while the official document of work received lists nine works; see “Lot No. 25, Vogel, Gilien, Received by the Historical Properties Section 22 April 1946,” Theodore Gilien Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

The actual photograph is too fragile for reproduction; however the original can be viewed in the Theodore Gilien Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Miltiary History, Washington, D.C.

See “Lot No. 25, Vogel, Gilien, Received by the Historical Properties Section 22 April 1946,” Theodore Gilien papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C., which has hand-written notes identifying which paintings are “in” or “out” of the collection; and “List of pictures by Theodore Gilien, released by the War Department Committee,” July 13, 1946, Theodore Gilien papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Gilien’s sales records of his paintings no longer exist, according to interview conducted by the author with the artist’s son who inherited the bulk of his father’s estate. Also prior to our telephone interview, Jeremy Gilien was unaware of these paintings from Nagasaki. Denise Rompilla, telephone interview with Jeremy Gilien, September 5, 2007.


See “Lot No. 25, Vogel, Gilien, Received by the Historical Properties Section 22 April 1946,” copies in both the Gilien and Joseph Vogel Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C., which has hand-written notes identifying which paintings are “in” or “out” of the collection.

The quote is John Dower’s; see his description of “little America” in his Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II, 208-211, quote found on 208.

Hans Mangelsdorf to Leslie E. Anderson, “Activities, Combat Artist’s Section, OCE, GHQ, Advance Echelon,” Memorandum, December 22, 1945, Hans Mangelsdorf Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Hans Mangelsdorf to Leslie E. Anderson, “Activities, Combat Artist’s Section, OCE, GHQ, Advance Echelon,” Memorandum, February 5, 1946, Hans Mangelsdorf Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

Political activity, particularly rallies and mass demonstrations, was on a list of “forbidden” topics of the Operation Press Code ushered in on September 19, 1945. Any sign of political unrest would counteract the idea that transition to democracy was working smoothly. See John Dower, Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II, 410-416, and in particular, the list of “categories of deletions and suppressions” of the Civil Censorship Detachment (CCD) on page 411.

125  See “Lot No. 30, Mangelsdorf, received by the Historical Properties Section on August 14, 1946,” Hans Mangelsdorf Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C., with written notations of which paintings were “in” or “out” of the collection.

126  Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., acknowledges this change in response to a letter he had received from Taggart; see Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., letter to Edwin “Bob” Taggart, October 27, 1946, Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

127  For more information on the National War Museum, see, for example, “Proposal to Establish a National War Record Museum,” August 28, 1945, Sidney Simon Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.; specific aspects of combat art and the museum are discussed in Sidney Simon, letter to Bill Hermann, December 5, 1945, Sidney Simon Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.; Bill Hermann, letter to Sidney Simon, December 11, 1945, Sidney Simon Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

128  John Dower, among others, describes this sentiment in the context of the Occupation censorship codes in Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II, 415.


130  Edwin Taggart, letter to Lt. Col. Donald D. Blackburn, the Pentagon, GSC, July 24, 1947. Edwin Taggart Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C. Although Taggart mentions “three artists” who were of the opinion that Mangelsdorf possessed “communistic” views, he only mentions Leslie Anderson (who was on the receiving end of Mangelsdorf’s memoranda from Tokyo), and Lt. Loren Fisher (who painted mostly in China), by name. The views of Gilien and Vogel, the two artists who undoubtedly had the most contact with Mangelsdorf in Tokyo, are unknown.

131  Edwin Taggart, letter to Lt. Col. Donald D. Blackburn, the Pentagon, GSC, July 24, 1947, Edwin Taggart Papers, Archives of the Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

132  Vogel describes this event in detail in his interview with Betty Hoag; see Vogel, “Oral History Interview with Joseph Vogel,” 10-11.


135  Ibid., 13.


137  The Price contains a separate bibliography of source material, found on page 55 of the text. Warren and Morrison’s testimony was taken from the Department of State Publicaton 2661, “International Control of Atomic Energy; Scientific Information Transmitted to the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission, June 14, 1946 – October 14, 1946,” 38-43.

138  The list is found on page 50 of The Price. Total war profits are listed as 47,200,000,000 dollars, an increase of 27,200,000,000 dollars over the peacetime economy. With the total number of U.S. fatalities at 310,979, Gilien calculated the “profit per corpse” as 87,465 dollars. This cynical view of war as big business seems anachronistic
for this period, but certainly places Gilien among a small but growing group of Pacifists alarmed by the amount of money feeding the nuclear arms race.


Chapter 3: Bombs over Bikini: Ralston Crawford’s Mission at “Operation Crossroads”

After the explosion of bombs four and five, there is almost a standardization of catastrophe.
--Norman Cousins, *Saturday Evening Review*, 1946

On July 1, 1946, at 0600 hours, nearly 22,000 individuals began earnest preparations for what the press had called “A-Day,” the date set for the world's fourth atomic bomb explosion. The "A" stood for Test Able, an air drop and the first of two tests slated for that month at Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific. A 10-mile crescent of sand bordering a lagoon on one side, Bikini was but a tiny speck in the Ralik Chain of the Marshall Islands, sufficiently isolated from its neighbors to escape much notice and the ravages of war (Fig. 90). Yet it was precisely Bikini’s remoteness that caught the attention of Joint Task Force One, the combined United States military unit entrusted with mobilizing the first atomic mission in peacetime. While other locations for this operation nicknamed “Crossroads” had been actively considered, Bikini was uniquely situated in a virtual no-man’s land, cut off from its neighbors by strong ocean currents and ringed by successive coral reefs. To Joint Task Force One, these natural barriers could possibly offer a first line of defense against the speculative after-effects of the bomb -- all the while knowing that there were simply no guarantees that the trajectory from a nuclear explosion (especially in water) would fail to reach America’s shores.

With its dreamy remoteness in the South Pacific, Bikini was a world away from the poison of fear and suspicion that still lingered after the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the war. Americans had recently learned that the Japanese cities were closer in composition and character to populous centers of the Midwest than the military targets that Truman and others had purported them to be. With its turquoise waters, swaying palm trees, and warm breezes, Bikini provided a degree of psychological distance from the crushed
buildings and broken bodies of the nuclear landscape. Once its 164 inhabitants had been ejected from paradise, relocated to a less desirable chain of islands, and ushered into modernity with chocolate, Coca-Cola, and cigarettes, Bikini Atoll offered the proverbial tabula rasa, the tropical equivalent of the featureless stretch of desert where the first atomic test, Trinity, was conducted in the summer of 1945.4

However, there was an important distinction between that first demonstration shot at Alamogordo, New Mexico and the affair about to take place at Bikini. While the first blast of that historic day had reverberated ominously across the landscape, its single casualty was a tall metal tower to which the world’s first atomic bomb had been attached. In contrast to that marker in the desert, at the remote Pacific idyll of Bikini, Joint Task Force One packed 95 ships, at the time the world's fifth largest naval fleet, into the shallow end of its natural harbor. This group of old war-horses had managed to survive some of the most perilous amphibian operations in the Pacific theater. Here at Bikini, they would be asked to fight a mock battle of epic proportions.

On Able Day, an electronically operated metronome had been placed upon the deck of one of the target ships. An hour before the bomb was to be dropped, it started to tick away the moments to the explosion - for some, it came to sound "like a voice of doom tolling the world's last minutes."5 *Time* magazine would later remark on the irony that "around the world, ordinary men and women who would be casualties in an atomic war bent their heads and cupped their ears to their radio sets to catch this preview" (Fig. 91).6 At Monday 9:00 a.m. Bikini local time, Sunday 5:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, the doors of the sleek B-29 bomber nicknamed "Dave's Dream" opened, released its cargo, and as the weapon started to fall silently to earth, a voice from the cockpit could be heard signaling "Bomb away. Bomb away." As millions held their breath in anticipation, the familiar voice of Raymond Gram Swing, stationed at Bikini for ABC
Radio, interrupted what for many must have seemed like an interminable silence. With a mixture of awe and giddy intoxication, he announced to the world, "Listen! This is Crossroads!"7

"Bikini. A little eggshell of coral, like hundreds of others out here; hitherto unknown…” in a fraction of a second had become "a pinpoint in the sea of human affairs…”8 42,000 men, 242 ships, 156 airplanes, 4 television transmitters, 750 cameras, and bombs four and five had gathered at this lonely post in the Pacific at a pivotal moment in modern history. Hollywood movie crews, radio broadcasts, and press junkets were facilitated by the Joint Task Force to showcase the technological wonder of its arsenal -- by one estimate, half of the world's supply of photographic film was on hand to record the two tests. Congressional representatives had signed up to "get their kindergarten course in atomic energy." Eleven foreign countries that had membership in the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission had been invited to send their own witnesses. According to Operation Crossroads’ official historian, W.A. Shurliff, "No effort was spared in making this the best-reported as well as being the most-reported technical experiment of all time."9 However, of all the civilians brought to Bikini, there was only one artist among them -- the American abstractionist, Ralston Crawford -- sent as a press representative for Fortune magazine.

To understand how Crawford arrived at Crossroads, it is first necessary to examine how this particular mission became the most media-saturated event in the history of atomic testing exactly at a moment in time when “fear over the weapon and guilt over its use could have very well pushed it to the periphery of America's consciousness.”10 While national security had dictated that the narrative of the bomb's production and demonstration at Alamogordo, New Mexico, be cloaked in secrecy until after the war, and information over its use at Hiroshima and Nagasaki
tightly controlled, by contrast, every stage in the formulation of this peacetime mission appeared "thoroughly press-agented" from the start.\textsuperscript{11} The postwar atomic tests had already been in the planning stages shortly after the Japanese surrender, and although a detailed technical plan was not approved by President Truman until January 10, 1946, merely a day later a press conference was called to announce the military's intentions for the "Atom Age" (Figs. 92, 93). The revelations included a series of three atomic tests, code-named "Crossroads," to be conducted in the Pacific in order to "promote the understanding, development, and use of America's scientific discoveries."\textsuperscript{12}

The tantalizing promise of full disclosure - at least to the fullest degree that security would allow - had prompted the leading news agencies to advocate that the bomb should be detonated with a considerable number of its civilian members, including international correspondents, in attendance. The \textit{New York Times} argued that "making the tests an open one would show that we consider this new weapon a matter of world responsibility, not just our own."\textsuperscript{13} Official authorization to send press and radio representatives to Bikini came from the White House on March 14\textsuperscript{th}, and shortly thereafter over 6,000 applicants flooded Public Information Officer Captain Fitzhugh Lee's headquarters with requests. An ad hoc committee wrestled with what method and what criteria should be used in making the selections for the limited number of spots: Should individuals, particularly those experienced in reporting on scientific and military matters, be invited by name? Or should the selection process be broadened to include all kinds of news agencies, regardless of their ability to grasp scientific jargon, or even the subject matter covered by their usual "beats"? In the end, the latter view won out, with "the redeeming advantage … that accounts of the Tests appeared in nearly every type of newspaper and magazine, including, some of our most "feminine" magazines."\textsuperscript{14} In reality, when President
Truman, under criticism from world leaders at the timing of the tests and inundated with thousands of penny postcards denouncing the "Buck Rogers foolishness" of the mission, delayed Crossroads from May 15 to the middle of summer, several choice correspondents were reassigned to other stories - allowing others like the editor of a crossword puzzle and the emissary for a periodical as yet unpublished to sneak into the press pool.

While Fortune's decision to send an artist as its single representative on the Appalachian may seem somewhat unusual in light of such estimable company as two-time Pulitzer prize winner William L. Laurence, New York Times science editor Hanson W. Baldwin, veterans of the wire services, Bob Considine and James L. Killagen, William Randolph Hearst, Jr., and Norman Cousins of Saturday Evening Review, there is little evidence to suggest that Crawford was chosen either haphazardly or last-minute. Nor does it seem likely that the abstractionist entertained the opportunity as a publicity stunt, or (as was later insinuated) entered into the arrangement as a willing “pawn of the Luce propaganda machine.” Artists had actually served as high-profile correspondents throughout much of World War II, vividly documenting the war's conflicts in drawings, water-colors- and paintings executed "on the spot" and oftentimes under hazardous conditions. In 1942, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy had ordered that official artists be deployed to cover the various theaters, and thereafter, each branch of the military assembled its own "Art Unit" to commemorate its glorious contribution -- whether by land, air, or sea - to the campaigns. When a failure to appropriate funds threatened the project shortly after its inauguration, the contracts of the civilian artists were quickly snapped up by the press - the most prominent being Henry R. Luce's family of publications, the wholesome, family-oriented Life and its slick, slightly edgier sister magazine, Fortune.
It is useful to consider how this art functioned in the periodicals, and what placed it held in the larger art world during the war. A brief survey of art literature from that period elucidates that images from the front, originally generated as illustrative material for the big periodicals, functioned both as information and original artwork – and generally outshone painting that was being produced and exhibited in New York. Due to a number of articles in Life on the theme of art in the armed services and subsequent multi-paged spreads (the subject of the “Artist at War” even garnered the cover spot on Life's April 30th, 1945 issue), somewhat ironically, the magazine became the vehicle by which the images of the artist-correspondents moved beyond their original function as reportage to achieve widespread recognition and acclaim as works of art in their own right (Fig. 94). Also greatly contributing to this shift in perception was the fact that the public's exposure to these images was not limited to reproductions, but exhibitions of the works themselves were staged at such populist venues as the Iowa Centennial State Fair to venerable institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was by examining the objects firsthand - hurried pencil sketches and pen-and-ink scrawls, watercolors and oils put down on wrapping paper, plywood, even pasteboard from packing boxes -- that the public could fully grasp the immediacy of the artist’s vision, ponder the obstacles he had to overcome to record each scene - and perhaps most crucial to an understanding of the reception of Crawford's paintings from Bikini -- come away from the exhibition convinced that the artist had been bound by a sense of duty to truthfully record all that he had seen.

This formulaic vision dominated the outlook on images from the front, save for a small exhibition pointedly titled “We Challenge War Art”. The show, which was held at the Puma Gallery in New York, did not even pretend to court sympathy with the current mood of the art world – it was mounted in direct protest to the recent exhibition of the art of the armed
servicemen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1943. Fernando Puma, the gallery’s director, issued a stinging indictment of the praise showered on the sketch artist, whose “rows of planes…presented in neat pretty patterns” seemed an evasion of any substantial facet of the war. The group of advanced artists he proposed as an alternative was, in his estimation, more sensitive to the complexities and philosophical issues involved in the struggle, and their pictures offered a critical interpretation of its events. His gallery statement outlined two main directives for the artist enlisted in the war effort, both of which he found to be “sorely lacking”: “First, that the paintings should bear records in pictorial history…that a camera could not capture. Second, the works would exhibit an artist’s psychological or philosophical reaction…on war.” However, Puma’s challenge was not meant as “an anti-war show but an exhibition illustrating the menace and horror which our heroic soldiers are facing in the fight, illustrating the true stature of their martyrdom for universal freedom.”

Somewhat predictably, critics were not kind to Puma, but the works on display had made a lasting impression. Six months after the exhibition had closed, the paintings from the modest show were thrust into the spotlight -- only to be made the object of national ridicule. In the article “Studio War Art,” the unnamed author seemed determined to paint the artists, a collection of moderns with Socialist ties that included Max Weber, William Gropper, and George Grosz, either as detached aesthetes or absolute charlatans. Unlike the slate of artists-correspondents sponsored by the magazine, or the soldiers whose art which had also graced its pages, the artists introduced in the article had conceived their works entirely from their imaginations (and, as was often repeated, in the comfort of their own studios). *Life* was ruthless in its satire of the “stay-at-home war artists,” best exemplified by a string of captions placed under the artists’ works. Under George Grosz’s painting *I Was Always Present*, a fiery vision of
the apocalypse complete with the specter of death on horseback, *Life* suggested that the artist was inspired by “a pile of leaves burning on the lawn of his Long Island home (Fig. 95).” The artists had the particular misfortune of being profiled in the same issue that breathlessly announced the D-Day invasion, accompanied by stirring photographs of Marines storming the beaches of Normandy. It is therefore not difficult to imagine why the “pathos” and the “power of action” Fernando Puma had attributed to the artists’ depictions of war had a somewhat hollow ring.23

Yet aside from their perceived lack of authenticity, the marked departure in style of these works from the officially sanctioned war art of the period cannot be so easily ignored (Fig. 96). The overwhelming idiom for these works was a surrealistic vocabulary, which these artists had deemed the most suitable language for depicting the irrational forces unleashed by the barbarism of war, and the blind hatred that systematically dismantled and annihilated existing patterns of reason. *Life* splashed the most hallucinatory and dreamlike of the images on its pages in derision; but ironically, just one year prior, in an exhibition organized by *Life* on the “Art of the Armed Services,” one of the paintings, a surrealistic dreamscape pitting a mannequin against a tank in a battle straight out of the mind of Freud, had been awarded third prize by an esteemed panel of museum curators and critics out of thousands of more conventional submissions (Fig. 97). 24 One might suspect that *Life* launched this belated attack against the works in the Puma show precisely because they plunged the viewer into a nightmarish world that may, as Puma insisted, have brought the fronts much closer to home than anything that was accomplished by the artist-correspondents and their first-hand experience. The disturbing nature of the works themselves pointed to the gap between a sanitized view of war and the traumatic events that must have been experienced, but failed to appear, in bulk of images that comprise art from the front.
If Ralston Crawford, as a modernist - and an abstractionist at that - could have been poised to challenge either the fantastical aberrations showcased at Puma or the more common one-dimensional portrayal of war as "a glorious pageant of armed servicemen" he seemed an unlikely candidate to do so. In his most famous painting to date, *Oversea Highway*, an extremely flat, almost diagrammatic, view of a highway that stretched to the blue of the horizon, the artist had manage to express, with simplicity of color and vision, a boundless faith in technology that was perfectly in step with the buoyancy of the country in 1939 (Fig. 98). While artists incorporated into the official art units tended to be of a journalistic bent, valued for their shorthand of actual events with a tendency toward embellishment, Crawford's aesthetic had been characterized by the ruthless selection and paring down of observable reality where drama translated into tensions between form and form, color to color. As a result, when Crawford was drafted in 1942, his skills as a painter were deemed more suitable to graphic presentations of the weather - a critical factor in the formulation of strategic and tactical plans throughout the war.

As D. N. Yates, Chief of the Weather Information Branch, explained in a pamphlet accompanying "In Peace and War," an exhibit showcasing Crawford’s work for the Army Air Force at the Downtown Gallery in 1944, "Weather is a particularly difficult subject to describe in words or conventional drawings…the resulting illustrations…convey an idea in clear-cut logical symbols through which the irrelevant is eliminated and emphasis is placed on that which is important." He further added that, "The modern painter's knowledge of color, tone, distortion, and emphasis is used to this end." Capitalizing on the interest in artists involved in the war effort, Crawford had managed to secure a place in the rotating exhibition schedule of the Downtown Gallery, working connections and gaining assurances from gallery director Edith Halpert that his paintings would continue to
be promoted in New York during his absence.\textsuperscript{29} He also aggressively pursued new avenues that would introduce his work to a wider audience, attracting the attention of Deborah Calkins, Art Editor at \textit{Fortune} magazine. \textit{Fortune} had employed an impressive array of photographers, European abstractionists, and American moderns over the years to design the eye-catching images of their acclaimed covers and illustrate their stories, exemplifying new efforts to marry text and illustration from a decidedly sophisticated viewpoint.\textsuperscript{30} The didactic pictorial shorthand developed by Crawford for the AAF was similar to the intelligent visualizations that regularly accompanied \textit{Fortune’s} war coverage. The artist was commissioned to produce two covers for the magazine, and to provide illustrations for the article "Thunder over the North Atlantic," which featured some of his meteorological charts for the D-Day invasion (Figs. 99, 100, 101, 102).\textsuperscript{31}

At the end of the war, Crawford remained for a time in D.C., working on a contractual basis for the Army Air Forces to support his family and at the same time, sending out resumes for graphic design jobs and teaching positions all over the country. He also actively courted opportunities to apply his skills of visual presentation to scientific subject matter for textbooks, film, and animation. For one prospective assignment, he wrote that:

\begin{quote}
It has been my experience…that the concepts embraced in many scientific fields call for visual presentation, not simply prettification or popularization in any derogatory sense, but presentation for the sake of a really graphic expression.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

It was during this time when Crawford was making his transition from military to civilian life that, through his continued association with the Army Air Forces, he first heard about Operation Crossroads. While he was engaged on a special project at the Weather Bureau in the beginning of 1946,\textsuperscript{33} several military personnel around him in D.C. were busily involved in preparations for the tests. Although Crawford was no longer an active member of the armed services, he knew
that continuing interest in his expertise, along with the professional recognition on having recently been awarded a Commendation Ribbon for his wartime meteorological charts, might win him a commission to operate in some capacity at Bikini. He also seemed to recognize that the “success” of Crossroads would very much depend on the intensity of the public relations campaign supporting the mission, and that, being in a position where he had received accolades from the military and attention from the press, he could operate as a liaison between the two.

At the beginning of May, Crawford drafted a letter to his former Army supervisor, Colonel D. N. Yates, thanking Yates for his recommendation of Crawford for the ribbon of merit. He opened the letter by mentioning how the public continued to be interested in his military activities nearly a year after his discharge. He noted that his military experience had often been instrumental in the promotion of his civilian career as an artist, such as in the case of his participation in the current exhibition at the Downtown Gallery in New York featuring “6 Artists out of Uniform” (Fig. 103). He credited the Bureau for having provided him with a “very constructive and stimulating experience,” and drew his attention to a recent Newsweek profile, in which he had stated that the current direction of his artwork would not have been possible without his contact with the AAF.34 Having steadily built up his case, at the end of his letter Crawford posed the question: “A propos of current activities, do you think we might work out something in the field of visual presentation regarding the Weather Service and Bikini? It seems to me that many desirable public relation angles are possible, along with instructive illustration for Army personnel.”35

One can assume that Yates provided some encouragement, but no guarantees, as a week later the artist sent a more detailed proposal along the same lines to Deborah Calkins, Art Editor of Fortune magazine. In his letter to Calkins, Crawford anticipated numerous aspects of the tests
that could warrant illustration, but only a small portion of the proposed list hinged on his eyewitness account of the tests themselves. He intended to explore far more technical areas of an atomic blast, and working in consultation with atomic scientists in Washington, D.C., as well as the staff of the Weather Bureau, he hoped to address “the composition of the cloud formation, the character of the water spout, and the force of the pressure wave in the air.” What Crawford noticeably failed to promise were sketch-like notations of the cloud that spoke of the untidiness of experience and the harrowing immediacy of being in the presence of the bomb; instead, much like the distillation process ending in a scientific formula, data would be gathered, analyzed, and condensed into pictorial formats that would clearly present the factual basis of experience.

As an officer, Crawford had prided himself on the “direct function” he had in the army “as opposed to those artists painting war pictures,” and it is this statement that gives weight to the idea that the artist viewed any potential assignment from *Fortune* to cover the tests as a continuation of the work he had produced as a member of the Army Air Force’s Visual Presentation Unit, not that of the traditional artist-correspondent. As a painter who had always worked in a style of reductive language, he seemed prescient of future accusations that his contact with the bomb would result in just another detached aesthetic exercise, or even worse, a cult image of the “ultimate” machine. He took pains to point out that “there is also the matter of considering that certain phenomena …will not be directly observed at Bikini,” and it was the elucidation of these “unseen” aspects of a nuclear explosion that required his particular background in visual presentation.

Specifically, Crawford’s association with atomic scientists in Washington had already alerted him to the dangerous byproducts of fission – he noted that “the effects of radiation are the least known factor of the experiment and are anticipated with great interest.” It is unclear if
Crawford knew at the time he crafted his proposal that the ideal weather conditions to minimize the fallout from the tests occurred at Bikini only once every four days; Richard Freeman would later suggest that a new concern with temporality entered Crawford’s art as a result of working with the meteorological charts, “as weather is always changing and the probabilities and possibilities of these changes had to also be stated on the charts in terms readily understood by the tactical planners as well as the pilots and navigators.” Nor is it evident that Crawford fully understood what the ultimate consequence of radiation exposure would be if a sudden shift of winds should carry radioactive particles to populated areas. Yet what he obviously grasped was that as this unpredictable element invisibly snaked its way from the site of the explosion to the atmosphere, it needed to be given sight through potent visual language, its movement tracked as aggressively as one of the weather currents he had mapped on his charts.

Crawford also suggested that the energy released by the bomb be compared not only to conventional weaponry, but natural forces such as tidal waves, hurricanes, earthquakes, meteorite showers, or volcanic eruptions, in order to translate the unfathomable into terms that were tangible and concrete. Lastly, Crawford intended to map out the crucial differentiation between the explosion of an atomic bomb on land and in water – possibly because even before Bikini, there was a growing awareness that such a weapon as difficult and costly to produce as an atomic bomb (of which there had only been six manufactured by the time of the tests) would never be wasted on a naval target in a future war. There can be no doubt from the wording of his proposal that Crawford intended the resulting images of Bikini to take the form of “shapes, patterns, and movements,” precisely the same elements he used to compose his weather charts for the armed services.
How Crawford was able to obtain a berth on the Appalachian less than one month before the correspondents were to leave on a train bound for the West Coast has yet to be pieced together with any convincing satisfaction. Correspondence from that period actually reveals that up until the last week of May, Crawford was still courting simultaneous offers to teach a photography course that summer at Black Mountain College, or study film with László Moholy-Nagy at his Institute of Design in Chicago.45 A single telegram dated May 28, 1946 offers hasty apologies and what would appear to be the first and only mention of the Bikini mission to the former faculty member of the Bauhaus.46 But the artist’s wife Peggy insists that in spite of appearances, Crawford went to great lengths to be chosen. She credits the artist’s charisma and the contagious enthusiasm he carried to all his projects for greasing the connections that made his voyage possible.47

Crawford’s son Neelon corroborates this story, but insists that the suitability of Crawford’s skills for this mission have to this point overshadowed his far more personal motivations for wanting to attend the tests. He recalls a conversation where Crawford explained to his son that as soon as he heard the announcement in the press, he knew that "no matter how horrific the event was, or how terrible the weapon may prove to be," that he needed to find a way to get to Bikini to witness it.48 The overwhelming sense of urgency that emerges from sons Neelon and John’s intimate portraits may seem surprising in light of Crawford's seemingly straightforward abstractions, as the works often stressed the civilizing properties they exerted on the viewer, and Crawford himself had rhapsodized on their "sense of fitness" and the “rightness of certain relationships" contained therein.49 Yet he also cautioned that his work was not purely rational, as outward appearances might suggest, stating that:
My work is usually charged with emotion, and not of a basically geometric character. I realize this comment is quite at variance with many responses to my pictures, but I am never concerned with a pictorial logic to the exclusion of feeling.

"A crushing blast, violent winds and violent seas, terrific heat and, something new to war - lethal radioactivity - will batter the target ships and the military equipment of all kinds," so reported the New York Times in their article "Expectations at Bikini," June 19, 1946 (Figs. 104, 105). For what was billed as a controlled scientific experiment, speculation as to the results of the tests seemingly held no bounds. Some experts warned that massive underwater landslides might be tripped off; enormous tidal waves might sweep across the Pacific and devastate its shores; the very crust of the earth might be parted, or a chain reaction might be triggered in which the whole ocean would explode. Frenchmen were told to “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may be atomized.” Curiously, very few of the predictions centered on the extent of the bomb's damage to ships in the target array -- perhaps this is because to the untrained eye, the damage between conventional bombing and contact with an atomic weapon seemed virtually identical (Figs. 106, 107). Photographs of the firebombing of Tokyo render an equal, if not more powerful image of utter devastation in the flattened linear expanse of a city physically pummeled into the landscape. Truman himself had described the punch the bomb had levied on Hiroshima in terms of tons of TNT, and in spite of the hyperbole surrounding Bikini, there was little reason not to believe that the tests would yield similar results to their intended targets.

The signature image of the atomic weapon was the cloud, and if visual documentation of its destructive path failed to distinguish it from other warheads, by contrast, the picture of that sinister apparition immediately became the defining symbol of the "nucleonics age". While the static black and white photos of its distinctive mushroom shape appeared on the front pages of newspapers across the country, they only told part of the story - for many correspondents, it was
the indelible image painted by William “Atomic Bill” Laurence, the most revered press
correspondent at Bikini, and fresh off the triumph of his second Pulitzer for his coverage of
Trinity and Nagasaki, that they expected to see. In his run-away best-seller, *Dawn over Zero*, he
vividly recounted the explosion he witnessed in the desert at the Trinity test site in mid-July:

> Up it went,” he wrote of the initial fireball, "a great green super-sun climbing in a
> fraction of a second to a height of more than eight thousand feet…changing colors as it
> shot upward, from deep purple to orange, expanding, growing bigger, rising as it
> expanded, an elemental force freed from its bonds after being chained for billions of
> years… 55

“How does it feel to be on your way to a catastrophe?” mused Norman Cousins, in a column
he filed for the *Saturday Evening Review* en route to Bikini.56 Aboard the *USS Appalachian*,
nicknamed “the Big Apple,” the correspondents were growing used to the “grotesque unreality”
of participating in a mission in which they themselves were eager guinea pigs. To his readers at
home, Cousins recounted the details of the mob conferences that the correspondents crowded
into a tiny stateroom to attend. At one, a geologist spoke unblinkingly about the remote
possibility of planetary extinction from the atom bomb tests. If the world did manage to pull
through unscathed, stories of concussions from the blast and blindness from the light of the
explosion were drummed into their heads to take appropriate safety precautions.

Because of these lessons which forced them to confront their own mortality with unsettling
frequency, the passengers turned to macabre humor for relief, starting up their own newspaper,
the *Daily Blast* (published from “Guinea Pig Bay”), composed their own theme song (dedicated
to Joint Task Force Press Officer Captain Fitzhugh Lee), and on one of the last evenings before
reaching Bikini, held an elaborate banquet, which featured “Plutonium Pie” for dessert (Fig.
108). However, during the six week journey the correspondents spent the majority of their hours
in the tropical heat with no news and nothing to write about. The lack of mobility of the crowd,
their confinement for such a long stretch of time, and the complete impartiality with which they were doled out the news, resulted in stories in which most of them “wrote their heads off about something most of which was already known, and the rest Top Secret.”

On July 1, 1946, when the moment of the explosion finally came, Crawford was positioned on the deck of the Appalachian at a distance of 18 miles from the perimeter of the target fleet. The members of the press were spread out on deckchairs, dressed like beachcombers, many clothed in the wild prints of the Hawaiian shirts they had picked up on their stopover in Honolulu, with typewriters and notepads on their laps and military-issued goggles on their foreheads. Crawford was one of a handful to refuse the protective gear and look at the explosion directly as he crouched behind the starboard rail -- but as his son remarked on the circumspect nature of his father, he watched the test with one eye closed "just in case.”

In the end, the goggles were totally unnecessary - at the radius of the observation fleet, the sound and the light of the explosion had dropped off exponentially. As the salmon colored cloud snaked its way into the stratosphere, some of the servicemen threw off their goggles and grabbed their cameras instead - as one veteran noted "when the first Bomb exploded, you heard more camera clicks before the sound of the explosion arrived to our ears.” Bill Downs, the first reporter to speak on the global hookup after the static died down, remarked with noticeable disappointment "there was no tidal wave, the plane did not receive any shock, I can't see any damage below.” Observers on the Appalachian noted that Bikini's palms were still visible, gently swaying in the breeze. As one serviceman wrote home to his wife, "There has been a lot of scuttlebutt over the test, but I'll tell you what I can see… tomorrow when we go in” (Fig. 109).
If the immediate reaction to Test Able had been disappointment when Bikini failed to be reduced to "Nothing Atoll",\(^62\) by the time the remaining press representatives returned home after Baker, they found that the public was more confused than ever by the interpretation of the results. Indeed, there is almost an alarming disparity in the press coverage, first in terms of type spilled between the two tests --80% of the journalists left after Able, the less visually spectacular and deadly in terms of radiation; and second, in that content could vary so widely not only from periodical to periodical, but in stories that ran side by side in the same newspaper.\(^63\) As Robert Littell, editor of *Reader's Digest* remarked in "Voice of the Apple," an account of his experience on the press ship *Appalachian* at Bikini, some correspondents "whose twelve cylinder adjectives had been idle" in the weeks leading up to the test, could not after A-day resist letting "them out with a roar."\(^64\) Reporters who had fantasized filing copy with banners such as "Seventy-three ships Sunk! Or Bomb Test Kills 32,000" now grasped for any bit of news to entice their readers, or embellished the little they had actually seen. One correspondent recalled an absolutely surreal moment when a small band gathered secretly in one of the cabins below and gazed longingly at photographs that had been taken overhead by drone planes - unmanned aircraft which had captured the images that lured them to Bikini but had managed to elude their naked eyes (Figs. 110, 111).\(^65\)

To further complicate matters, the Navy was intent on downplaying the damage to the target fleet. Most photos filed by the press focused on the cloud, but damage shots that did appear in newspapers around the country in the first few days, after being radioed by the AP, were hazy and inconclusive (Figs. 112, 113). Fires burned, wreckage littered the lagoon - yet the interpretation of these results depended on whether you were looking at them from a military or a civilian standpoint. Upon his return from a tour of the lagoon to inspect damage to the target
array, Norman Cousins of the Saturday Literary Review, dismissed the once-mighty fleet as a "floating graveyard of steel." But as Bob Considine of the wire services would later write in his memoirs "for reasons comprehensible only Annapolis graduates, Blandy was cheered by what short-sighted newsmen considered a pretty beat-up array of targets." In a headline that ran on page one of the New York Times two days after Able Test, Blandy said that he had seen worse damage done to ships by kamikaze attacks. Only decades later would it be revealed that Blandy had been coached by a Hollywood publicist, who had thoroughly convinced the Admiral that “the actual technical results are not nearly as important as the public’s interpretation of these results…there will still be damage, and that can always be made to look bad.” Blandy therefore braved gamma rays to board contaminated ships, and in one of the most unforgettable press shots from Bikini, smiled as he posed under an inscription someone had scrawled just before disembarking -- "Old Sailors Never Die."

While Blandy’s view was certainly sanguine, the almost simultaneous release of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey’s report on Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the tests at Bikini shifted the focus of attention from the use of the bomb against unmanned military targets to populous, potentially American, cities. A little over a week after Test Able, a full page article on the findings of the report ran in the Science Section of the Sunday edition of the New York Times. Offering a wealth of statistical analysis, the report by Times Science Editor Hanson L. Baldwin revealed the extent of atomic destruction in quantifiable measures. Baldwin was all too aware that such information had been lacking in the briefings he had filed for the newspaper subsequent to his own inconclusive experience of the bomb at Bikini. He wrote that “it is clear from the reaction of “let-down” and relieved disappointment that followed the world’s fourth atomic bomb explosion…that the general public has not assessed properly the new knowledge now
available." While a circular chart to the upper right of the article reflected preliminary findings on the damage of the air burst against the target array from the recent test, for Baldwin’s readers, the two charts below it were far more instructive. Labeled “Against People” and “Against Housing,” the charts measured the blunt force of the bomb based upon the combined data from the two pulverized cities (Fig. 114). Baldwin’s message was unequivocal: atomic weapons had produced “the greatest mortality rate and the greatest casualty rate per square mile in human history”.  

The numbers once and for all exploded the myth that Truman had sold to the American people, that “the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base…because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.” They also proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that “one bomb from one plane” produced far more damage than the terrible firestorm on Tokyo to which the bombings were often compared.  

Although Americans might be able to protect themselves in a future nuclear war by building shelters out of concrete (the one material to withstand the bomb’s blast at both Hiroshima and Bikini), Baldwin argued that construction of shelters would be useless if the vital functions of the city continued to be clustered in a core area. The centralized planning of most American cities had left its population vulnerable to deadly attacks. Even though the data from the second, and proposed third test of Operation Crossroads had yet to be registered, Baldwin, like many others had already concluded that “the atom bomb is primarily a weapon against cities, and the Bikini tests can give no answer to that.” Baldwin’s projection of this damage on an American city of comparable construction and population density brought to mind speculative accounts of atomic attacks on American targets written in the period following the months after Hiroshima.
The release of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey’s report also stirred up old fears about radiation, the nature and properties of which were poorly understood. In the weeks following the bombings, tales of radiation exposure had been widely dismissed as “Japanese propaganda” – and some of the most dismissive critics had vocalized their opinions in the publication for which Baldwin was now writing. However, a few months later in December 1945, the country had been mesmerized by the conflicting eyewitness testimony of Phillip Morrison in front of the McMahon Committee. A Cornell physicist who had worked on the Manhattan Project, and was one of the first to visit Hiroshima after the explosion, Morrison unveiled an excruciating portrait of shattered humanity that had heretofore existed only in rumor. While he anticipated the findings of the U.S. Survey report with his description of the “debris-filled the streets…the hundreds, if not thousands, of fires burned unchecked among the injured and the dead,” he also discussed the far more sinister effects of radiation poisoning in gruesome detail. The swift incineration of those at the epicenter seemed preferable to fate of the “survivors,” who were too numerous to crowd into the city’s collapsed hospitals, and suffered from ailments that confounded their skeleton staff. In one particularly arresting passage, he described individuals whose “blood…does not coagulate, but oozes in many spots through the unbroken skin, and internally seeps into the cavities of the body.” Morrison’s testimony was quoted at length in the radio broadcasts of Raymond Gram Swing and excerpts published in Newsweek, and ran verbatim in the New Republic with the title “Beyond Imagination.” Months later, in March 1946, Morrison contributed an article to a slim paperback assembled by the Federation of American Scientists titled One World or None. Priced for a dollar and selling over 100,000 copies, One Word or None was instantly labeled the “definitive guide to the atomic age.” The collection was fairly pessimistic in tone, and the writings put forth a
consistent message: that no realistic protection could be offered against a nuclear attack, but that the existence of the bomb itself could serve as a universal deterrent to war. While the majority of articles debated over the speed of development of a nuclear warhead by the Soviet Union and the atomic arms race that was most certain to get underway, Morrison looked farther into the future. His contribution to *One World or None* painted a hypothetical attack on New York City, applying the knowledge he had learned from Hiroshima to a chilling domestic scenario.

Morrison prefaced his contribution by stating that “a clearer and truer understanding can be gained from thinking of the bomb as falling on a city, among buildings and people, which Americans know well.” In his story, Manhattan has become a wasteland of toppled skyscrapers and charred terrain. The author painted an equally bleak picture of the prognosis for the city’s inhabitants: “Everywhere in this whole district were men with burning clothing, women with terrible red and blackened burns, and dead children caught while hurrying home to lunch.”

By the time Crawford was readying his report for the December issue of *Fortune*, the environmental catastrophe caused by the massive radiation released in the second underwater explosion, Test Baker, had begun to leak out in the press. As the observation of the tests had been carried out at what was determined to be a “safe distance,” and it had been assumed that the dangerous fission products released by the explosion would be propelled high into the atmosphere, the public had been relatively unaware of the potential danger of radiation exposure to both servicemen and civilians involved. While this had been the case in the first test, where the bomb exploded high above the target fleet and the cloud rushed upward in what was termed a “self-cleansing” shot, in the second test, the detonation of the bomb in water by remote control disseminated its byproducts first outward into the ocean and then into the air, in a fine mist that
enveloped the harbor. Without any knowledge of the phenomena of fallout, which would be experienced at Bikini for the first time, few had given any thought to how an environment poisoned by radiation could result in the death of an entire spectrum of life forms, from algae to human beings.85

In an article published in the “Science News Letter” titled “Bikini, Breath of Death,” the editors pointed out that had the ships been occupied, “they would certainly be manned only by corpses,” as the “persistent lethal fog of radioactive water droplets and fission byproducts that the bomb spewed into the air over the whole target area.”86 The initial bravado of the military quickly dissipated after most of the fleet had to be abandoned at Bikini, as no amount of vigorous scrubbing from fore to aft could remove the dangerous level of radiation that stubbornly clung to the hulls of the ships.

Crawford urged Fortune to address the issue of radiation up front, and it was through his Army connections at the Weather Bureau that he was able to file a story that encompassed more than just his visual recollections. He worked tirelessly, gathering statistical information, interviewing scientists and medical professionals on the potential risks of radioactive exposure, even calculating the survival rates of an atomic attack on New York. Much of his research, along with meteorological charts, and reproductions of two paintings he had made based on his eye-witness accounts of the tests, were included with documentary photographs of the blast (Figs. 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120).87

As the introductory text explained Crawford’s assignment to the reader:

There is much more that meets the camera’s eye in atomic bombing. The intangibles allowed some blasé correspondents to pooh-pooh the bomb’s power. But the great clouds that have become so familiar a symbol of atomic explosions cloak the lethal stream of neutrons and gamma rays…atomic bombs can spread lingering death over a vast area.
The accompanying portfolio is an attempt to bring home this macabre warfare. Ralston Crawford, in civil life an abstract painter, was Chief of the Visual Presentation Unit, Weather Division, Headquarters A.A.F., during the war. He developed a notably successful application of principles of abstraction to meteorological maps and charts. Both in Washington and the C.B.I., theater his total experience of war convinced him that the meaning of war lies not in individual battles or even in the sum of human tragedy, but far deeper – in the all-encompassing force of destruction itself. For Crawford, Bikini was the supreme challenge.88

Right from the beginning, the *Fortune* article addressed the almost-seductive pull of images of the atomic cloud, the public’s overwhelming desire to see the image that had, by its very repetition, become the “logo of annihilation” in the post-war environment.89 This desire is partially thwarted by cropping the opening photo in half, thereby refocusing attention on the text (Fig. 115). What Crawford seemed to grasp, in his judicious selection of photographs from Task Force One; in their careful cropping and placement on the page; the overlay of graphics on certain images; and the decision to intersperse photographs with paintings and charts; was that the individual would still instinctively be drawn to images of the cloud at the expense of vital information. Crawford’s task was to interrupt this experience, to interrogate the visual phenomena, and to transform the cloud from awesome spectacle to a real, quantifiable danger that would jar the viewer from their almost-voyeuristic glimpse at catastrophe.

If Crawford’s overall mission was to communicate the “all-encompassing force of destruction,” then the two paintings included in the article, *Test Able* and *USS Nevada*, do just that. *Test Able* captures to a chilling degree the shockwave that spread out in an almost perfect circular formation after the explosion -- beautiful to behold, but carrying with it the brunt of a force that ripped through the metal of ships, tore up flight decks, and caved in hangers, as seen in the twisted gray wreckage of its perimeter (Fig. 116). Crawford used the photograph that opens the “Bikini” article as a jumping off point for his composition. Rings of concentric circles mimic successive waves of destructiveness as they radiate outward from the initial burst. Crawford
used an aggressive yellow for his center that is actually irritating to look at after a few seconds, perhaps the most effective means of communicating the blinding light of the blast. A light turquoise represents the waters of the shallow natural harbor, while the darker blue suggests the surrounding Pacific. The cracked and broken forms of the ships overlap, in some places sink (like the steel-grey piece with ship’s portholes), and in others, are thrown high into the air, above the explosion itself. Although their placement is somewhat confusing, overall the abstraction is effective, in that it conveys how the silhouettes of the once-mighty fleet were reduced to unrecognizable chunks of steel.

The shockwave had been a totally unexpected phenomenon at Bikini, as due to the rudimentary visual mechanisms in place to record the world’s first atomic bomb explosion, scientists had failed to perceive this phenomenon at the Trinity test site in New Mexico. The point-of-view of the painting has been relocated from the human eye gazing at the explosion at a point on the horizon, to the seemingly omniscient, hovering view overhead; the original shot, taken from a camera aboard a drone plane, looks down upon the cloud from above, as its blunt force spreads not upward as expected but outward. This disorienting viewpoint nonetheless destroys the common misperception of the bomb as a kind of “inverted” conventional weapon, only damaging the area underneath its detonation, and then sweeping that debris upward into the atmosphere. It also shifts the content of the work from insights gathered from Crawford’s personal observation to something more disturbing, information that would be physically impossible to obtain without the aid of remote-controlled technology. The artist’s role here is not to convey what he has seen, but to gather all available facts and interpret them in compelling fashion.
In *USS Nevada*, what would at first seem to be a completely inappropriate color choice for Crawford’s painting was actually dictated by the red, orange, and white paint that had been applied to make the bomb’s target more visible from the air (Fig. 117). The *Nevada* had been chosen as the bulls-eye for Test Able because it was considered the most rugged ship available; having survived a kamikaze attack at Pearl Harbor, it was later re-floated and modernized in preparation for its battle with the bomb.91 Although the bomber dropped the target almost 2000 feet to the left, the battleship sustained moderate damage in the first test. Its two topmasts failed, its deck was battered, and some of its stanchions and bulkheads were distorted; but a white seaplane, which had been placed on the stern of the ship, was blasted beyond recognition.

Crawford reduced the Nevada to a few signature elements -- its vertical stack, the portholes on the side of the ship, and a large arrow painted on its skin to direct the bomber to its target – but it is difficult to grasp the form of the vessel. Instead, there is an overwhelming feeling of chaos, as the elements of the ship have been displaced from their usual order, and the rest of the composition is merely a heap of bent lines and shredded forms.

After the explosion, the contrast between the scorched deck and the glaring backdrop was all the more visibly striking, and Crawford renders this contrast in a uniform, monochromatic red with charred sections and twisted black outlines. The white of the composition may refer to wreckage of the seaplane, whose skin was shredded by the explosion and scattered across the deck. While the *Fortune* article fails to inform its readers about the paint job of the ship, the “hotness” of the color could also refer to the designation of “hot” that spelled lingering radioactivity of the fleet. As Operations Crossroads historian W.A. Schurcliff alarmingly pointed out:

> the Geiger counters on the target vessels demonstrated that an enormous burst of gamma radiation was produced during the detonation…the total output was so great, that if by
some feat of magic it could have been distributed uniformly among several million persons it would have eventually killed or seriously injured all of them.92

Many reporters had described radiation as clinging to the ships like a layer of paint, and the Nevada had become so contaminated, that it was labeled off limits to visitors.93 No doubt Crawford used the intensity of the color red to alert the viewer to the concentrated dose of radiation, thereby visualizing a deadly but unseen threat to human existence.

For both these images, Crawford had stressed that while reality had been his starting point, the “awful” shapes and colors had been “born of man’s destructiveness.” For him, they expressed “the sense of that ‘compulsion to disintegration’ which for him was the central, metaphysical fact of the war.”94 However, without the introduction and the generous captions accompanying each image, it is unclear if the work could stand on its own as “representative” of any of the phenomena it purports to describe. Perhaps a far more effective means of communication was the weather map that concluded the article on Bikini. In “If Bikini Atoll Had Been New York Harbor,” Crawford transferred the trajectory of radioactive fallout from an atoll somewhere in the Pacific to the East Coast of the United States (Fig. 118). The radioactive spread of particles from Bikini to Wake Island was hardly quantifiable in the average American’s mind. But overlaid on a section of North America, one could grasp the terrifying reach of radioactive fallout in the event of an attack on a major American city. Washington, Philadelphia, New York, Hartford – all would feel immediately feel the “tissue-destroying touch of radiation,” and the rest of the coast to the north would experience fallout in a matter of days. As the article noted, safety was an illusory concept, as the drift of the cloud was completely unpredictable:

The Bikini blasts were set off under artificial conditions on a carefully prepared target in an uninhabitable corner of the world. But the atomic bomb is, par excellence, a weapon against densely populated regions. If it were dropped on New York, it would probably be dropped when atmospheric conditions would guarantee a maximum of radioactive poisoning.95
While the original objective of the tests had been to determine the effects of atomic explosives against naval vessels in order to appraise the strategic implications of atomic bombs on naval tactics and design, the radioactive catastrophe of Bikini had completely overshadowed the results. While Crawford dutifully recorded the damage to the ships, he was far more concerned with deadly effects of persistent radioactivity. An enemy in possession of one or two bombs could wipe out an entire fleet not through the terrific force of the blasts themselves but from fatal doses of neutrons and gamma rays carried by its poisonous cloud. But the doctrine of total war indicated that if the enemy did manage to acquire the ultimate weapon, then it would use its bomb against a populous target for maximum effect. In essence, Crawford had transferred the technique he had developed in his military stint to a broader mission -- instead of tracking inclement weather, he now charted potential patterns of human destruction. With its use of accurate data, and straightforward graphics, this article can be claimed as one of the first to responsibly report the deadly threat posed to a major American city in the event of an atomic assault, replacing ignorance with "a healthy fear of the known."

Concurrent with the release of the article, a series of eight paintings and gouache studies that Crawford had executed on the subject of "Operation Crossroads" was exhibited at the Downtown Gallery in New York. The invitation sent out by the gallery briefly mentions that Crawford had received his assignment from Fortune, as an artist and illustrator operating independently of his military capacity. However, Crawford’s continued association with the Army Air Forces had been underscored by his recent contributions to “6 Artists out of Uniform” at the Downtown Gallery in May. In spite of the promise of the title, the works that Crawford submitted for that
show failed to make the postwar transition from an illustrator of visual presentations to an abstract artist, as almost every piece on view had been commissioned by the AAF. As this was the last exhibition of Crawford’s work in New York prior to “Operation Crossroads,” there is some sense that, at least in the mind of the artist, the public’s expectations for the Bikini paintings should have been aligned with the principles of duty and service fulfilled in his meteorological charts.

The exhibition of Operation Crossroads was one that was anxiously anticipated, and Crawford in his capacity as a liaison had gained access to a site that was the subject of intense, but in the New York art world private, speculation. As Crawford had always been well-regarded for his ability to convey factual information in a seemingly unbiased matter, the viewer might have expected to come face to face with a truer portrait of this terrible weapon. At the same time, it was recognized that Crawford’s mission “led to the creation of what is, as yet, only a small series of drawings and paintings that communicate the overwhelming implications of the opening of the Atomic Age.”

In the pamphlet accompanying the paintings of Operation Crossroads at Bikini, the artist carefully laid out the thought process behind the work:

Destruction is one of the dominant characteristics of our time. These pictures constitute a comment on destruction. They most certainly do not explain the atomic bomb, nor do they give quantitative information about the ships. They refer to these facts. They refer in paint symbols to the blinding light of the blast, to its color, and mostly to its devastating character as I saw it in Bikini Lagoon.

Along with Test Able and the USS Nevada, the two images reproduced in Fortune, Crawford exhibited one other oil painting, Tour of Inspection, Bikini (Fig. 121). This painting comes closest to the experience of the reporters who were sent out to survey the damage and found several of the proud vessels of the fleet “battered and bent in like tin cans” Crawford’s work
resembles pieces of a colorful jigsaw puzzle, made up of bits of harbor, white concrete bunkers, a ship’s mast, and the orange-painted skin of the *Nevada*, spilled over a field split in two: on the left the blue of the ocean, and on the right, the yellow of the explosion. There is a noticeable difference between this painting and the two other works, in that in the latter, Crawford seems to have “tidied up” his experience. The combination of the color palette is delightful, and there is a certain jazziness to the forms that remind one of the best painting of Stuart Davis. Instead of forms disintegrating into chaos, the pieces are either fixed in one spot, pinned down by their two-dimensionality and uniform tones, or playfully jostle each other, creating a pleasing picture of visual interest that seems far removed from the disturbing events it purports to depict.

The exhibit at the Downtown Gallery also included several of the drawings that Crawford made in relation to the tests. In *Bikini*, Crawford focuses on an aircraft carrier, probably the *USS Saratoga*, whose deck had been snapped in half and the pieces of which had famously sunk into the water, forcing the Saratoga to the watery grave it had manage to elude at Pearl Harbor (Fig. 122). Dotted lines against a white ground indicate pieces of a landing strip, but the drawing has become almost *too* abstract to be representational. Unlike the tangible hulks of metal of *Test Able*, the forms lack substance, particularly when rendered in close to all white. Two torn, yellow forms hover mysteriously over the broken flight-deck. As the yellow has no know correlation to the ship, its meaning is impossible to decipher; furthermore, because the color is monochrome, it seems to further dematerialize the object underneath it. In truth, *Bikini* looks more like an image of one of Crawford’s crumbled up sketches than the battered wreckage of the lagoon.

Taken out of the interpretive context of the *Fortune* article, the paintings were deemed by many critics to be lacking in sensitivity. The crisp, clean outlines that neatly demarcated
Crawford's forms, the choice of primary colors, and the smooth paint application seemed deeply at odds with the profound psychological disturbance that had been rendered on the collective imagination by the bomb. Some identified his coolness as "a refusal to commit himself emotionally." The critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* accused Crawford of "betraying a startling indifference to the drama of the events depicted." Ad Reinhardt asked, "Do crooked shapes and twisted lines represent paintings adjustment to the atomic age - no." Even more damaging to Crawford’s reputation was the fact that only three paintings were actually of the explosion itself - the remainder were of preparations for the test flight over the Pacific, which led some to accuse the artist of being part of "that wonderful junket to the south seas." One of Crawford's more sympathetic reviewers pointed out the dilemma at hand: "To those who object to abstract symbols, one might ask, "How would you paint an atomic blast?" Interestingly enough, there was an answer to this question. In spite of the glut of promotional statements made by *Fortune*, Crawford’s gallery dealer Edith Halpert, and the artist himself, Crawford was not the only artist at Bikini. In fact, unlike Crawford, who literally had to beg for his assignment, at least three artists were extended personal invitations by Joint Task Force One to attend the tests and work in an official capacity as the artists of Operation Crossroads. Like Crawford, each artist – Arthur Beaumont, Charles Bittinger, and Grant Powers – was either currently or had been enlisted in one of the branches of the armed services, but had not been attached to any of the official Combat Art units. Rather, each had been chosen for his particular area of visual expertise related to technical, scientific, or military matters. While virtually unknown today, at least two of the three artists were pioneers in their particular areas of specialization, and like Crawford, they had worked steadily throughout the war to provide intelligent design and visual feedback for military operations. Just as Crawford’s meteorological
charts for the Army Air Force had doubled as illustrations for articles in Fortune, the military assignments of Beaumont, Bittinger, and Powers had appeared in such publications as *National Geographic* and *Life* during the war.

Although the sheer number of people present at Bikini is staggering, given Crawford’s military connections, and the uniqueness of his assignment among the attendees of the press pool, it seems difficult to believe that Crawford would not have been aware of the presence of other artists at the tests. In the case of Grant Powers, who from the evidence available seems to have been placed aboard the *USS Appalachian* -- the same ship where Crawford observed the test – it seems impossible that the two artists failed to meet or discuss their work. Therefore, it is in the collection of images of the phenomena surrounding the Bikini tests generated by these three artists that one might consider alternatives to Crawford’s abstract approach.

As a formal Navy Reserve officer with a long and distinguished career painting ships, Arthur Beaumont had received a special commission by Admiral William D. Leahy of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to witness both tests on the deck of the *USS Fall River*, the flagship of operations at Bikini. For artists, naval assignments were known to be particularly demanding, as every detail not recorded with absolute fidelity would become the target of severe criticism. But early in his career, Beaumont had been “widely recognized by the officers and men of the Fleet, who would discern at a glance if a turret or even a screw were out of place in a painting of any of their beloved vessels.” Beaumont had received several important commissions, such as an eight-painting spread in *National Geographic* in 1940, “The Ships That Guard Our Ocean Ramparts,” which was designed to garner public support for the war effort. This initial collaboration had been so successful that Beaumont was recruited by the War Department to contribute
illustrations to *National Geographic* as well as *Life* to document Army and Navy maneuvers during World War II.\textsuperscript{109}

Although Beaumont, who was granted permission to set up his easel on the bridge of the *Fall River*, was certainly in the position to paint the explosions with the greatest degree of accuracy as he literally painted from a position of privilege, his son confirmed that the actual arrangement and placement of the ships in the artist’s paintings from Bikini was distorted.\textsuperscript{110} As paintings executed by artists associated with the military were commonly shipped back to the United States prior to their own departures – partially due to censorship controls – Beaumont wanted to confuse the enemy about tactical formations in case his paintings fell into the wrong (Soviet) hands. It is unclear whether this idea was Beaumont’s own, or if he had been directed to engage in this deliberate obfuscation by one of the high level officers surrounding him on deck. Such precautions seemed unnecessary when, in fact, the *New York Times* published detailed descriptions of the target array and subsequent levels of damage based upon the type of vessel and its proximity to the center of the shockwave as soon as their correspondents toured the wreckage of the lagoon.\textsuperscript{111}

When one considers what kind of painting would have satisfied the audience who attended Ralston Crawford’s exhibit of his work from Operation Crossroads, Arthur Beaumont’s painting, *Able Bomb Test, Bikini Atoll, Bridge of the USS Fall River*, contains all the elements that were lacking in Crawford’s work: proximity, personal observation, and, perhaps most important, breathtaking spectacle (Fig. 123). Beaumont painstakingly rendered the officers in their tidy brown uniforms and standard-issue goggles, whiles the Navy sailors in their characteristic blue shirts and black trousers assume crouching positions, tucking their head into their hands to avoid the rumored “glare of one thousand suns” of the atomic blast. Beaumont purposely did not
protect his eyes while watching the two bombs explode in order to more accurately interpret the colors of the mushroom cloud, something which cameras could not record since their light meters were rendered inaccurate by the flash. The subtle, tonal nuances of the cloud are rendered in the delicate washes of his watercolor medium. The flowing shapes, spontaneous brushstrokes, changes in color, and the slight abstractions in the rush to put sensations on paper, are understated, yet expressive touches that convey the immediacy of the event. Beaumont later explained his working method in trying to rapidly record the unfolding experience:

The large mushroom cloud climbed upward changing color from yellow to salmon pink. From mauve to molten iron, the cloud reached 20,000 feet, then another mushroom formation appeared near the bottom. I sketched madly, writing in the colors…After thirty minutes, the cloud was still about 30,000 feet high and still drifting.¹¹²

Beaumont painted a number of dramatic images of vessels in the target array being tossed about by the sheer force of the blast. In the Sinking of the Saratoga, the beloved survivor of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor is literally upended in a disorienting fury (Fig. 124). Planes that had been secured to the aircraft deck were dumped into the water, and the tail end of a fighter jet can be seen bobbing in the waves to the right. Yet in watercolor executed just two weeks later, Baker Bomb Test, Bikini Atoll, the surface of the water appears glassy and smooth, and the observation vessel in the foreground remains motionless in spite of the fact that the great, underwater geyser of Test Baker had violently churned up the waters, erupted in a great, multicolored fireball – and by some accounts -- tossed an approximately 35,000 ton vessel straight up into the air. It is easy to overlook these factual inconsistencies because the theatrics of the painting exert such a strong visual pull, but they begin to chip away at the artist’s veneer of objectivism, opening a space to examine Beaumont’s motivations. If one compares Beaumont’s Bikini paintings to earlier work commissioned by the Navy before and during the
war, one begins to notice certain familiar patterns that raise question as to the “spontaneity” of his approach. For example, in *Battle Cruiser HMS Repulse Parts Company with the Giant Company HMS Hood*, a completely benign image of two American ships parting ways in the Pacific that was painted in 1939 -- the drama of the churning waters and swirling atmosphere seem just as menacing as Bikini (Fig. 125). Perhaps in toying with these conventions, Beaumont meant to suggest that while the impact of the bomb was undeniable, the American fleet had always been prey to dangers, and survived.

While a certain, formulaic approach, then, appears to creep into Beaumont’s “on the spot” rendering, the artist took great pains to showcase his observational faculties at work. After the second test, Beaumont even went so far as to tie himself to a steel buoy in the harbor in order to paint the sinking wreckage of the *USS Saratoga*. One might be tempted to dismiss this story as a ridiculous claim of bravado, except for the fact that Beaumont’s stunt has been memorialized in a photograph, the artist posed haphazardly with palette in hand (Fig. 126). As Beaumont would later recall, after he had steeped himself in the radioactive waters of the harbor, he discovered during an encounter with a Radiological Safety crew that he had developed “a case of ‘hot pants.’” Beaumont had come so close to the contaminated ship that his clothes emanated a level of radiation to make the needles on their Geiger counters jump to the end of the scale. Beaumont was ordered to discard his clothing and “have a thorough scrubbing down.” As an agent of the Navy, the artist believed that a near-fatal dose of radiation could simply be washed away with a little soap and water (although, unlike other participants of the test, there is no evidence that he suffered any lingering effects from his exposure). More tellingly, Beaumont’s knowledge of radiation had no bearing on his subsequent sketches and paintings.
Beaumont’s son indicated that, as his father had already achieved fame as one of the greatest naval ship artists in history, he was less interested in exploring the human dimension of Bikini than in analyzing the damage inflicted on the vessels and “the abstract patterns formed by this destruction.” While as a whole, Beaumont’s paintings are more visually spectacular than that of Crawford’s, there is still a certain “heroic” aspect of the work that belies the origins of his assignment. The high-level officers aboard the USS Fall River are unruffled by the terrible sight of the atomic cloud; the massive aircraft carrier the USS Saratoga is engaged in its last, epic battle of survival; the damage of the other vessels is minor and reassuring. In Beaumont’s watercolor Native Graveyard After Tidal Wave Caused by the Bomb -- the only known image from Bikini to address the damage leveled on the atoll itself – the physical evidence of this destruction – broken palm fronds, a battered craft, shifted sand dunes – appears to be little more than that caused by any natural phenomenon, such as a powerful thunderstorm. While in total, Beaumont would create more than 180 sketches and 14 paintings of Operations Crossroads, seen collectively, the body of work does not necessarily bring one closer to an understanding of the bomb, but rather, the images reinforce the official view proffered by Admiral Blandy, that there is relevance in an atomic world for his beloved ships.

Close to 70 years old in 1946, Charles Bittinger, the second of the official artists of Operation Crossroads, had served as the Chief of the Section of Camouflage Design for the U.S. Navy in World War II. Bittinger, something of a painter-scientist, had combined the artist instruction he had received at the L’Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris with an interest in optics from several years at MIT to arrive at a novel camouflage technique of deceptive, shifting tones of gray that was credited with protecting numerous ships throughout the war. Notwithstanding his age and a previous heart-attack, Bittinger had climbed to the dizzying heights of war ships to study
coloration, dived in submarines, and jumped into and out of small flotation craft to work out his theories for camouflage. During his extensive studies in color, he had also discovered certain unknown applications of its invisible spectral differences, holding some twenty patents in the field. Aside from his longstanding commitment to the Navy, stretching back to 1917 when he enlisted as a Navy Machinist’s Mate, Bittinger had been asked to come to Bikini document the unique color properties of an atomic explosion.115

Of the three artists in this group, Bittinger’s paintings are by far the most visually spectacular, gaining a good deal of their power from the surreal shapes assumed by the mushroom cloud itself. It is clear from photographs of the test that Bittinger relied on images taken by remote-controlled cameras and not his own observation. This seems particularly odd given that Bittinger’s area of expertise was connected to sensory phenomena; perhaps the artist concentrated on jotting down the rapidly changing colors of the cloud in preliminary sketches, but at some point made the decision to overlay his colors onto the forms captured by the multitude of remote-controlled cameras placed on the decks of the ships. The paintings, however, many of which show the cloud in various states of formation and collapse, appear, because of the introduction of time as an element of the composition, like frozen frames of a filmstrip, giving the inaccurate impression of Bittinger rapidly executing the paintings in bold strokes.

In Bittinger’s painting *Baker Test #1*, the surging force of the underwater explosion is given expressive shape (Fig. 127). As the heat and energy that drove the cloud upward dissipated, the cap spread out and stretched to two miles across. Although not visible at the bottom, the ships and islands of the atoll are all covered by the Baker cloud hanging overhead. The image shows it at its peak, with the colossal column of water that composed the water spout and the cauliflower-
shaped cloud of the water vapor. The millions of tons of water displaced by the blast hung in the atmosphere, where they mixed with the fission particles of the explosion and became highly radioactive. In *Baker Test #2*, Bittinger shows the dramatic view of the collapsing cloud raining radioactive spray over the target fleet, thoroughly contaminating both ships and lagoon (Fig. 128). Although Bittinger would have known about the deadly radiation when painting both of these images, neither conveys the deadliness of what is being depicted. Instead, with their spectacular shapes and pastel colors – although the pinks and purples are true to the oxidation of nitrogen caused by the high heat and radiation of the explosion – they are fantastical and impressionistic, gripping because of their sheer pictorial value.

The most productive but little known artist at Bikini was Grant Powers, who, in spite of a formidable collection of other artists attached to the Naval, Army, and Army Air Corps, had been plucked out of the Marine Corps to serve as the “official artist” of Operation Crossroads. He seems a curious choice for such an assignment, since, after being drafted in 1942, he spent the bulk of his time working on promotional films for the Marines, although he did see actual combat at Iwo Jima later in the war. Powers had also worked as a commercial artist before the war, and his previous occupation is evident in the bold colors that he chose for his palette and his gravitation to simplified forms. His illustrations and watercolors sometimes verge on the amaterurish, or cartoonish, and its is tantalizing to speculate that Powers was asked to Bikini to create images that could almost be interpreted as studies for animation cells, possibly for a future film about the tests, although there is no paperwork to confirm this suspicion.116 Powers subjects at Bikini run the gamut from ship damage to sympathetic portrayals of displaced islanders. One gets the sense that he worked with a greater degree of autonomy than any other artist present at the test.
Powers is particularly important in a discussion of Crawford’s work because at least one, possibly two images place him on the deck of the *USS Appalachian* at the time of Test Able. In *0900 Through Protective Goggles* on the U.S.S. Appalachian, Powers cleverly depicts the view of the explosion through the standard-issue gear, using the silhouette of the glasses as the perimeter of his composition (Fig. 129). The filter in the goggles has considerably shielded the viewer from the ferocity of the blast, although for reasons unknown, it also seems to have blocked Power’s view of the ships in the target array, as only a single ship appears on the horizon. The water is darkened, almost to a black, the ship is shown in silhouette, and the cloud, which rises up to a highly stylized cap, emanates with a golden-yellow like a radiating sun. In a reverse image, Powers painted the journalists on the deck on the Appalachia, in his humorous *How We Looked to the Atomic Bomb* (Fig. 130).

However, in *Mike Hour*, which is actually a view of the explosion that precedes *0900* as the cloud has yet to form Powers observes the explosion unguarded, and paints the intense fireball as it radiates outward from the burst (Fig. 131). While *0900* is a sanitized view of the bomb, painted almost like a caricature of what had been expected at the test, the second, unexpected image, is a gorgeously rendered, but haunting image of fiery, instantaneous death. While the cloud is almost comforting in its familiarity, the searing, pulsating heat that hovers for a split second over the atoll pictures, in all of its horror, what the inhabitants of Hiroshima and Nagasaki must have experienced underneath the atomic cloud.

Powers’s watercolors, in their subtly, fluidity, and tonal fluctuations, have a strangely hypnotic effect. In his *Test Baker*, 1946, Powers creates an unabashedly gorgeous image of the waterspout, rendered in long, upward strokes of blue that have blotted into the paper to form their convincing organic shape (Fig. 132). The white peeking through delicate washes at the
base suggests the churning up of the water, giving the spout a sense of torsion and a living, expanding quality that is only checked by the dark navy of the ocean water at its extremities. Once again, Powers takes a recognizable image – photographs of the waterspout had appeared in every newspaper across the country – but unfixes its form, refusing to allow the phenomenon of the second test to cement into a single, repeatable image that would dilute the potency of the message. Instead, Powers plays with the seductive nature of the image itself, luring the viewer into its beauty, only to have the image shift and change into a monstrous form that towers at an unfathomable height over ships, and tosses them like toy boats with the eruption of its brute force.

As it seems that the work of Beaumont, Bittinger, and Powers would remain unknown outside of the military for at least another year when Beaumont would exhibit some of his Bikini paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in a group exhibition of naval paintings, at the time of Shahn’s exhibit, he could only be judged against himself. Seen in a continuum with the body of work that Crawford was well-known for in New York -- the purified abstraction that grew out of a fixation on “dumb” objects in mechanical Precisionism -- the virulent attacks on Crawford do not seem all that surprising. In Serge Guilbaut’s, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art, the author equates Crawford’s Bikini pictures with other modern experiments that, in his estimation, fail to communicate beyond certain class boundaries. He sees the wealthy art connoisseur as one and the same as the “privileged” audience of Fortune, whose need to distinguish themselves from the burgeoning capital of the middle class prompted them to seek out objects where “luxury” equals an esoteric form of “knowledge” – in this case, an ability to coax meaning from seemingly mute forms. Guilbaut almost goes so far as to accuse the magazine of deliberate obfuscation, planting images that have only been codified to a certain
class and thereby transmit a privileged kind of information that remains inaccessible to others.

He prefaces this argument with a quote by Aline Louchheim in an article that explains the (al)lure of abstraction in “Who Buys What in the Picture Boom?” *Art News* July 1, 1944:

> Created in an instant, the most beautiful stylized modern objects are not intended to be understood by the majority, at least not right away. Their social function in the first place is to serve as distinctive signs, as objects set apart by those who set them apart. Other people don’t even see them. 118

While *Fortune* certainly had a demonstrative history of showcasing abstract works on its covers, and occasionally extended a vanguard approach to the design of its pages under certain periods of creative leadership, even a casual perusal of the magazine would yield a startling fact – before 1945, *Fortune* rarely, if ever, used pictorial spreads or even realistic imagery executed in any medium to prove a point, choosing instead to communicate to its audience with the abstract language of charts, graphs, and maps. While Guilbaut views the article on Bikini as “coldly detached and therefore troubling,” other articles that ran in *Fortune* throughout the war -- which range in topic from issues of devastating famine to the latest design in ballistics -- could be admired for the way they present information to the reader clearly and succinctly, without any of the dripping sentimentality or patriotically-skewed perspectives of other articles in rival magazines. In one article of special relevance, “The Physics of the Bomb,” the accompanying illustration is particularly geared towards a public bombarded with atomic babble but lacking a degree in nuclear physics to decipher it all.119 The illustrative material manages to penetrate the mysteries of the energy released in the splitting of atoms, with an almost step-by-step instruction guide that is easy to follow. The articles of *Fortune* are not meant to be personable but didactic, they instruct and enlighten – a sobering tonic for a country fed on a steady diet of hyperbole and hysteria.
Furthermore, to buy into Guilbaut’s interpretation one must also completely ignore the “artwork” Crawford had done for the Army Air Forces, which captured the imagination of the public not only for its beauty and fitness, but for its brilliance in concept and design. Crawford’s charts communicated the realities of war through symbols, a summation of hazards (albeit weather, not guns and bullets) that sharply deviated from what Crawford himself derided as the “Sunday afternoon picnics” of the art of the armed servicemen.\(^{120}\) There is little reason to believe that Crawford’s work was not undertaken with one eye towards utility. Abstraction was the vehicle to project vital information, and the Bikini pictures must be recognized as an extension of this effort, even if the attempt was a clumsy one.

If, as Guilbaut argues, abstraction was set apart by a moneyed and cultural elite as being the only vehicle for interpreting “the new meaning of human experience, the incredible feeling of total disintegration”\(^{121}\) -- but that this meaning could only be “read” by a defined (upper) class -- others would argue that abstraction was so convincing, that in fact, its lessons had been widely recognized and heavily borrowed by the popular mainstream before abstract art was virtually institutionalized in the United States in the 1950s. One need only look back three years to Fortune’s single article on “The Painter Interprets the War,” which ran in the March issue of 1943.\(^{122}\) The images which accompanied the article were selected by Deborah Calkins, Art Editor of Fortune and the same individual with whom Crawford worked in close consultation on his assignment for Bikini. The text, which is unsigned (but presumably drafted by the Art Department or at the very least approved by Calkins), points out how many of the current war pictures had been informed by the example of Modern art. Cubism had introduced the “queer-angled shot” and “distorted perspective” that had characterized the most gripping of the current crop of images. Photographers, too, had “looked for expressiveness of mood in ruined
buildings,” and scanned for “symmetry and form in broken machinery.” However, the article ultimately denounces the war pictures as little more than “a glorious pageantry of armed servicemen,” and delivers a damning blow with a comparison of European imports in experimental styles that, in spite of their abandonment of the rules of reality, approximated the feeling of “unending desolation” like few other images of their time. As the author of the text concluded, “the war had dismantled that which was known, and rebuilt the world in strange patterns of destruction.”

If Crawford’s works were “misread” in terms of their purposefulness and utility, they seemed to many to be equally lacking the gripping pathos of a *Guernica* or the nightmarish quality of a Surrealist work. More than a criticism of abstraction itself as a legitimate artistic strategy, the charges levied at Crawford had more to do with his seeming acknowledgment of the aesthetic pleasures of the bomb in his manipulation of paint, explosion of colors, and “playful” arrangement of forms. In many ways, this criticism mirrored the guilty fascination of the public with a sight of growing familiarity, the surging fireball that culminating in the mushroom cloud. What an artist could offer and the grainy photos of the periodicals could not was a glimpse of the bomb in all its rumored, technicolor splendor. Although the cloud is noticeably absent in Crawford’s series, he himself did little to dissuade others from the opinion that he had evaluated the event from a purely aesthetic standpoint when he was quoted as saying that the explosion was the “visual dessert” to the second World War. However seemingly misguided, Crawford’s comment is perfectly consonant with numerous eyewitness accounts beginning with Lawrence’s *Dawn Over Zero* and extending to the reports filed on Bikini, which intertwined beauty with the terror of the unfathomable.
Yet it must be restated that it was Crawford’s inability to shut out the implications of sensual phenomena that had sparked his desire to travel to Bikini in the first place, as “the objective world had finally disrupted [his] calm quiet appraisal of it.” Crawford had once wrote that had he been in the position of the sketch artist asked to tackle the issue of “war pictures,” he would choose to not merely to illustrate that which he had seen, but to make “intelligent pictures connected with these events.” In his application for a Guggenheim fellowship the year following his participation at Crossroads, he was even more critical in his perception and conscious of his ability as an artist to filter out the incidental detail of a snapshot in order to arrive at fundamental compositions that would convey his feelings on the universal condition in the sparsest of terms. He wrote in his application that he wished to continue making pictures with the same consciousness as those that came out of his experience at Bikini, ones that would comment on the “negative aspects of war”, and that these would take the form of line-cuts and two-color lithographs that would distill the original paintings to their bare outlines. The images from Bikini do not sidestep the terror unleashed by the actual use of the weapon, but meditate on this reality in an intensely personal, deliberate -- and characteristic for Crawford -- restrained way. The subtle shift in his pictorial vocabulary was one that was privately undergone and not publicly exhibited, and thereby failed to register on the all-important critical record of New York.

Even before Crawford embarked on an active tour of duty in the China-Burma-India theater at the end of the war, he had begun a series of preliminary pen- and-ink sketches in which he “had worked into the most intricate and varied designs bits of broken fuselage, scraps of twisted barbed wire, and fragments of all kinds of debris.” One of these sketches graced the cover of *Briarcliff Quarterly*, a small literary journal published out of Maryland, in January of 1945 (Fig.
Although the works grew out of “careful anatomical studies of wrecked planes, boats, bridges, and people,” the images are nothing like the solidly constructed forms of Crawford’s prewar days, nor do they resemble the skilled designs of the weather charts. Instead, a seemingly unsure hand moves in fits and starts across the paper, as every turn of direction signals the artist’s hesitation and doubt in grasping the image before him. Oddly linear for Crawford works, it is as if the certainties of the world no longer retain their power and weight; the shaky lines are like ghostly traces of once-vibrant forms (Fig. 134). Objects have been cracked, shattered, and deadened to the touch while awakening in their path fragile and naked sentiments. What emerged was a body of work that intimated something more than a documentary impulse, what Vivienne Koch, upon reviewing them in another small literary journal, *New Directions*, in January 1946, labeled as nothing less than “a recognition of destruction as the physical and psychic fact of our time.”

It would not be until 1947, with Crawford’s exhibition at the Howard University Art Gallery in Washington, D.C., that this schism in the artist’s work would become so very apparent. In a letter to the gallery’s director, Dr. James K. Herring, Crawford takes pains to alert Herring that the grouping of his work should occur around two “entirely separate” themes. In his proposed list for the exhibition, he instructed that the work he had done of *Aircraft Plants*, variations of *Plane Forms*, as well as the earlier *Grain Elevators* and *Fisherman’s Wharf*, be classified as pertaining to investigations of construction. *Gas Mask, Broken Bridge, Crackup*, along with other fragmented images and two pictures associated with Bikini, were to be set apart in the exhibition from the preceding group and labeled as dealing with questions of “destruction.”

Although the differences between the two were evident to the artist, one senses his impatience with others who failed to grasp the subtleties of their distinction, as in the instance where he
reprimands his friend Caresse Crosby, who was helping to facilitate the show at Howard, for mistaking one for the other. “The title: Aircrash, ’45, is erroneous and quite misleading,” he wrote, “since the drawing obviously has nothing to do with destruction. It is a plane construction. This is the correct title: Aircraft Plant.”\(^{135}\) Crawford, evidently pleased with Vivienne Koch’s singular ability to intuit the conviction behind his latest work, asked that the text from her review in New Directions be reprinted in full, and that an asterisk be used to mark works in the exhibition informed by her statements.\(^{136}\)

The juxtaposition of paintings and meteorological charts at the “In Peace and In War” show at the Downtown Gallery had been mounted so that Crawford could argue that his military work was contingent upon a vigorous application of his style, a slight shift yet nonetheless a continuation, a way to work abstractly until he could rejoin the ranks of working artists in New York. In the Howard exhibition he now seemed content to turn his back on that world, or at least appeared ambivalent to it. Crawford himself recognized that he was not the same artist after having seen the war, that having experienced the world crumbling around him resulted in a divided self -- one that wished to put the world back together again, and another just as convinced of the futility of that desire. By separating his drawings into two camps, and then deliberately marking the works that dealt with destruction, he demanded that the public, who had been immune to the lessons of Bikini, finally sit up and take notice.

In the artist’s estate, a small brown envelope contains classified photographs (property of the Army Air Forces) that Crawford must have used as the basis for his compositions. The photographs have been carefully measured, then cropped; key passages have been suspended and trapped within penciled perimeters. The images have then been transferred in spindly script to the large sheets, some of whose blue color is reminiscent of architectural blueprints – ironic, as
the images are the exact opposite, the beginnings of the artist’s archive of destruction. It is in the
distance between the photograph and the drawing that one can witness like nowhere else how the
“objective world had disrupted [Crawford’s] calm cool appraisal of it,”137 how the ordered and
rational elements of mechanical documentation broke down when copied by the human hand. In
one adaptation of a photo from an airplane crash, the tangled mass of metal of the plane’s body
has been peeled back, strip by jagged strip, to reveal the limp legs of a soldier ensnared in the
deathtrap (Figs. 135, 136). There are other photos in the collection, presumably shot by the artist
himself, with actual “still-lifes” of war (twisted scraps of metal, shards of glass, a gas mask)
arranged on oversized pieces of paper in his studio (Figs. 137, 138). These macabre souvenirs
have also been touched and turned over, examined and scrutinized, then laid out on a blank field
like an unfinished puzzle. The fragments must be pieced together to discover the connection
between the pieces, the larger picture, and ultimately, meaning, even while the gaps between
forms, blank spaces, and the literalness of the drawn surface (all of which at times seem like
Crawford’s true focus) silently mock this assumption.

These found documents support Koch’s understanding of the artist’s working method, which
she described as a synthesis of information culled from “photographs, written reports (both
technical and eyewitness), verbal accounts, and actual primary observation.” Anticipating the
approach he would take at Bikini, the resulting drawings “reveal the effect of discipline and
control upon the disjointed physical data upon which he has fixed his imagination.” Koch
cautioned the critic that Crawford’s sifting, deliberation, and appropriation of found imagery in
lieu of trust in the first (person) impression should not blind the viewer to the fact that
Crawford’s drawings lacked the primacy of experience. They were, in fact, an attempt to expose
the viewer to the totality of destruction, rendered all the more impersonal and anonymous by the
mediation of technology, yet by that technology’s very invasiveness, enabled the presentation of truth with an unflinching eye. Koch wrote, “During his four years in the Army his trained sensorium has been subjected to a constant bombardment of fact, the implications of which could not be evaded.” While Crawford may have manipulated his sources through an omission or in some cases an overlapping of detail, their informational content is none the less real however, and, as is in more traditional art, is achieved by means of distortion and emphasis. If the metaphor is not too literary, we can think of these scrupulously clinical compositions as at once a symbol and a warning of the death implicit in the atom-grinding WELTANSCAUUNG of our times.”

Crawford, aware of the hype and speculation surrounding the tests of Operation Crossroads going into his mission, and witness to the manipulation and distortion of the narrative thereafter, had perhaps rightly sensed that there was no visual correlative to match “a terror of dimensions impossible to assimilate.” Any attempt was bound to fail, as no realistic vocabulary could communicate the devastating implications of the tests - although his paintings, in their clinical execution, seem like a chilling premonition of the world of push-button warfare that was to come. The artist, like the rest of the nation, had been caught up in the anxiety of the era, but this anxiety was even more personal and heart-wrenching having actively participated in the war. After volunteering for service so that his talents would contribute to “greatest good for the greatest number”, all the military successes rendered by his prognostication of the weather could not refute a visual legacy of horrors that left him badly shaken. Crawford’s response to this irrefutable testimony was that he chose to bear witness to this new and terrible weapon before it had the chance to strike again in all its cataclysmic fury.
In between the tests at Operation Crossroads and Crawford's report on Bikini in December, on August 31, 1946 John Hersey published a single journalistic account of his experience in Hiroshima in the *New Yorker* that seemed to finally jar ordinary Americans from their complacency about the human consequences of atomic warfare. Hersey’s dispassionate account of six ordinary individuals whose lives were irrevocably altered in the flash of the bomb’s explosion was different from any report or photograph to date, because it was the first to present details of the attack from the victims’ perspective. Discarding the abstract and impersonal language of previous writing on Hiroshima, Hersey delved into the harrowing experiences of six survivors – five Japanese and a German-Jesuit priest – to give shape, content, and meaning to the unimaginable encounter with the bomb.

Hersey was a wartime correspondent and a popular author whose novel *A Bell for Adano*, a fictional account of the American liberation of small Italian village, had won the Pulitzer Prize in 1945. At the end of that year, Hersey left on a fact-finding tour of Occupied Japan and quickly settled in Hiroshima, interviewing survivors, pouring over the data of the United States Strategic Bombing reports, and jotting down his own observations; out of a series of four separate articles, *Hiroshima* began to take shape. But unlike the overly sentimental *Adano* -- which at times read more like a picturesque romp through the countryside than the aftermath of a war zone -- Hersey’s *Hiroshima* did not take on the form of sensationalized fiction. Rather, the author stepped out of his own way to let the story unfold. He recounted the victim’s stories with an economy of prose. Restraint actually worked in Hersey’s favor, as the poignancy of each individual narrative was communicated through a bare recitation of the facts. Some passages did leap off the page with their explicit delineation of the horror. But Hersey was merely a conduit
for the Japanese experience. It was the ability to hear their voices, to view the catastrophe through their eyes, that proved so riveting to an American audience.

Hersey was well aware of the emotional hook of casting individuals in a struggle to survive. Americans thrilled to the dispatches sent back from the front by Ernie Pyle detailing stories of ordinary courage, and laughed at the absurd humor of Bill Mauldin’s cartoon soldiers, Willie and Joe. It was a daring gamble, though, to think that an American audience would vicariously identify with an absolutely detestable enemy. He therefore chose his Japanese protagonists with care. The widow with three children, a female clerk, two doctors, and a reverend of a Methodist Church, were sympathetic and at the same time oddly recognizable; taken together, they seemed more like a cross-section of middle-class America than the (supposed) homogenous face of the fanatical “Jap”. It was through this powerful identification with the victims of the narrative that a set of images detailing the gruesome realities of atomic warfare became permanently seared into the public’s mind.

_Hiroshima_ was an immediate sensation. The issue immediately sold out at newsstands across the country. Albert Einstein wrote to the _New Yorker_ requesting 1,000 copies. Within days, newspapers across clamored for the rights to reprint Hersey’s story, which the author granted on two conditions – that the essay not be abridged, and the proceeds would go to the American Red Cross. Popular actors Paul Robeson, Alfred Lunt, Lynne Fontanne, and Katherine Cornell performed a dramatic reading of _Hiroshima_ in four consecutive half-hour broadcasts for ABC radio.

Here were the scenes of horror charts and symbols could never communicate - faces wholly burned with hollowed-out eye sockets, a woman cradling a dead baby, anguished cries begging for the release of death as the insidious poison of radiation blanket the city. The public’s
response was swift and overwhelming. One young reader wrote, "I had never thought of the people in the bombed cities as individuals." A veteran of the Manhattan Project broke down and wept to recall the "whoopee spirit" with which he had greeted the bombing of Hiroshima. *Commonweal*, the Catholic publication, perhaps summed up it up best when it editor wrote:

> despite the miles of print, and endless reels of photographs… it is the *New Yorker* which most shatteringly brings home to the reader the utter horror of the atomic bomb… one curse of the modern world is that individuals are becoming mere faceless ciphers… we may escape the atom bomb because men with souls realize that it dooms men with souls.  

Readers fixated on “Hiroshima” because it allowed them to see things that had been shielded from view behind the ubiquitous mushroom cloud. The same individuals who, over the past year, had wildly imagined their own nuclear demise in trumped up scenarios of atomic attacks on American soil, had never really bothered to question the dearth of images that showed exactly what happened to a human population when a bomb was dropped on its city. As Michael Yandevetti wrote in an essay 25 years after the release of essay, the enduring power of *Hiroshima* owes much to the fact that Hersey’s narrative allowed Americans “to visualize the actual experience of the Japanese in Hiroshima – the initial surprise… the terrible firestorm, the devastation of medical services, and the frightened, bleeding, confused survivors.” Moreover, because Hiroshima depicted an atomic attack “more vividly that all previous publications combined, for perhaps since the first time since Pearl Harbor thousands of Americans confronted Japanese who were ordinary human beings.”  

*Partisan Review* columnist Mary McCarthy, an early critic of the use of the weapon and no fan of the *New Yorker*, astutely noted that “up until August 31 of this year, no one dared think of Hiroshima – it appeared to us as a kind of hole in human history.” In removing *Hiroshima* from the one thing that could give the attack context -- the pattern of terrorizing incendiary raids
leading up to Hiroshima and Nagasaki – and focusing instead on the aftermath, Hersey had reduced the atomic bomb to “the familiar order of catastrophes – fires, floods, and earthquakes – which we have always had with us and which offer to the journalist . . . an unparalled wealth of human interest stories, examples of the marvelous, and true-life narratives of incredible escapes.” Focusing on the will of the survivors conveniently obscured the thousands upon thousands of nameless and faceless dead who, like the victims of the fire-bombings before them, had no warning that they had been targeted for mass slaughter. To interview the survivors was, in the opinion of McCarthy, “an insipid falsification of the truth of atomic warfare.” She argued that “to have done the atomic bomb justice, Mr. Hersey would have had to interview the dead.”

Dwight Macdonald, who had equated the use of the bomb to Nazi atrocities in his essay “A Descent into Barbarism,” published in Time less than a week after the Japanese surrender, also attacked Hersey for his clever evasion of the issue of accountability in his review for the journal politics. He detested Hersey’s “suave, toned-down, underplayed kind of naturalism” -- what Hersey himself had thought as a kind of non-style – calling it “antiseptic,” “morally deficient,” and “completely irresponsible.” He criticized Hersey for allowing the Allies to view the consequences of their actions from a comfortable distance, without ever shaking them up enough so that they might ponder whether the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians was the only path to peace. “Naturalism,” McDonald argued, “is no longer adequate, either esthetically or morally, to cope with modern horrors.”

McDonald’s statement could equally be applied to painting, and in particular, to the enormous challenge Crawford had faced at Bikini. Representational language was no longer accurate, but abstraction had also failed, and continued to fail Crawford in his attempt to paint a new vision of the world unleashed by the bomb. After Bikini, the artist would never be the same again.
Travelling to Europe in 1951, he spent a number of days in Cologne and toured the architectural ruins of the bombed-out city. Once more, he was moved to comment graphically and in photographs on the subject of war (Figs. 139, 140). This time the images were more poignant and powerful, as the sympathy that inspired them was drawn from enemy soil. Like other voices of the postwar generation, Crawford realized that loyalties to country had to be abandoned in order to expressly communicate war's affront to humanity. While Crawford struggled to return to his bold forms and clear patterns, he continued to collect fragments upon his return to the United States. Whether in the peeling paper of advertisement in *Torn Signs* or the fractured glass of a windshield in *Crackup Fragment*, the works never managed to recapture the unity and wholeness of an earlier time. These fragments were fragile records of history, turned into human touchstones by Crawford's intense scrutiny -- signs not only of the past, but of the irrevocable forces that had pulled it asunder.

---

1 At one point, the Joint Task Force had considered conducting the tests in the Galapagos Islands, located 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean. The Islands, made famous by Charles Darwin as the inspiration for his theory of evolution after he witnessed the diversity and wealth of its species, were not protected by law until the 1950s. The site was eventually rejected because of its proximity to the United States (and the unknown possibility of nuclear contamination). For the most thorough investigation of the tests to date, see Jonathan Weisgall, *Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at the Bikini Atoll* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 17-20.

2 It was relatively unclear to the scientists how the atomic bomb would react if detonated in water. Some of the more apocalyptic forecasts predicted that a chain reaction would spread throughout the ocean, or that the Pacific would fall into the molten crust of earth (see, for example, “Bikini,” *New Yorker*, March 9, 1946, 44-46.) The environmental catastrophe of the second underwater test, Baker, demonstrated that the bomb worked in a far more sinister fashion – scientists failed to anticipate how fission products bonded with water.

3 For example, see John J. O’Neil, “The Blasts That Shook the World,” *Reader’s Digest*, October 1945, 109-113, for a contemporary account documenting the way in which information released in the first days after the bomb was dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki came to be reassessed.

4 Peter B. Hales comes to a similar conclusion to my own about the role Bikini played as a suspended and/or contained field for the bombing; however, he also gives his analysis a more biblical slant in his connection between William L. Laurence’s language from Genesis and the Edenic paradise of Bikini. See Hales, “The Atomic Sublime,” *American Studies* 32 (Spring 1991): 5-31.


null
a Surrealist landscape straight out of Salvador Dali’s Persistence of Memory. A reproduction of his painting even appeared in the periodical several times – however, when asked why he chose to work in this “peculiar” style, Standley responded that “I just wanted to amuse my buddies.”


26 See, for example, Richard Freeman’s unabashed enthusiasm for Crawford’s “intelligent use of the machine” in his catalogue for the exhibition “The Works of Ralston Crawford” at the Flint Institute of the Arts, Flint Michigan, April 1942. Freeman’s text is particularly of value as it was written on the eve of Crawford entering the armed services. He took pains to connect Crawford’s work, and the particular Modernist strain it represented, as “useful”, even before the lessons of Modernism would be directly applied to the war effort.

27 Weather was a crucial element to the strategic planning of military operations, and its role was discussed in an article Crawford illustrated for Fortune. See “Thunder Over the Atlantic,” Fortune (November 1944): 153-60.

28 Colonel D. N. Yates, text for the pamphlet accompanying the exhibit “In Peace and In War,” New York: Downtown Gallery, January 4-29, 1944.

29 Ralston Crawford, letter to Edith Halpert, September 9, 1942, Ralston Crawford Estate.

30 For a complete study of Fortune’s cutting-edge design, see Daniel Orkent, Fortune: The Art of Covering Business (Portland, Oregon: Gibbs Smith, 1999).


32 Ralston Crawford, letter to Kenneth McGowan, March 26, 1946, Ralston Crawford Estate. MacGowan was editor of the Hollywood Quarterly, and apparently had discussed the possibility of Crawford working on an animated film of “scientific and semi-scientific subject matter” that was somehow connected to nuclear physics. The idea never seems to have been carried much further than this letter.

33 Crawford was able to stay on at the Weather Bureau in Washington, D.C. when other opportunities for postwar employment failed to materialize. However, it is clear through correspondence at this time that the artist was struggling to reinsert himself into the New York art scene.

34 According to his letter to Yates, Crawford had been interviewed by a Newsweek correspondent for a human interest piece on his transition from military to civilian life – however, a review of the periodical in the years 1945-46 fails to reveal any articles on Crawford, nor is any article of the sort mentioned in any subsequent bibliographies of the artist.


36 Ralston Crawford, letter to Deborah Calkins, May 16, 1946, Ralston Crawford Estate.

37 Ralston Crawford, letter to Niles (last name unknown), August 22, 1943, Ralston Crawford Estate. Crawford notes that after a “somewhat demoralizing period” in a Camouflage Battalion in Fort Meade in 1942, he had been transferred to the Visual Presentation Unit of the Army Air Forces, where he was involved with “pioneering work that calls for my background.”

38 Ralston Crawford, letter to Deborah Calkins, May 16, 1946, Ralston Crawford Estate.

39 Ibid.

40 Colonel Benjamin G. Holzman, a veteran of Trinity and the man who had set the date of the Normandy invasion, noted that the atoll’s “swirling, unpredictable winds” could conceivably cause the fission products to fall out at
different levels or scatter the atomic cloud outward, thereby threatening the populated islands nearby. See Jonathan Weisgall, *Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at the Bikini Atoll*, 174.


42 After he was discharged from the Army, Crawford was at work on illustrations for a scientific textbook of natural phenomena, to be executed along the lines of his suggestions to Deborah Calkins for the Bikini assignment. A contract was drawn up and Crawford appears to have worked sporadically on the conceptual aspects, but the publisher at some point backed out of the agreement. The project was finally abandoned in 1947.

43 While the Joint Task Force tried to convince the public otherwise, there was a growing consensus in the months leading up to Bikini that the atomic bomb would never be expended on a naval target. It remained to be seen what function, if any, the navy would serve in a future war if in fact the hostile powers acquire knowledge of how to build an atomic bomb. For an essential look at the way in which the existence of the bomb shaped foreign policy, see Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

44 Crawford, letter to Deborah Calkins, May 16, 1946, Ralston Crawford Estate.

45 It is clear from telegrams in the Ralston Crawford Estate that the artist was pursued heavily by Black Mountain College as a painting instructor for the summer session of 1946, but that Crawford’s response to this offer was lukewarm at best. It is indeed intriguing to think about what effect, if any, the highly experimental and relatively unstructured environment of Black Mountain might have had on the artist’s work. However, Crawford already seemed determined to move in new directions when he approached LN about the possibility of studying filmmaking under the master. Although M-N response is not in the Estate, the director of the Institute must have felt a sympathy of design between his own work and Crawford’s weather charts for the Visual Presentation Unit, as Crawford was offered a position for the summer teaching typography. Crawford held both schools at bay with telegrams for nearly a month, apparently hoping that his plans for Bikini would eventually fall into place.

46 Ralston Crawford, telegram to László Moholy-Nagy, May 28, 1946, Ralston Crawford Estate. Crawford, who up to this point had been coy with Moholy-Nagy about his alternate plans for the summer, abruptly announced in his telegram his imminent departure for Bikini. Ironically, on the same date of this telegram, Moholy-Nagy would be found dead in Chicago from kidney failure.


50 Ralston Crawford, handwritten notes in preparation for a speech, possibly for the opening of a printmaking exhibition in 1972, Ralston Crawford Estate.


54 William L. Laurence repeats this phrase several times in his writings, presumably in order to stress his solidarity with the nuclear scientists who preferred this phrase to the more commonly used “atomic age.” To learn more of Laurence’s unique role among journalists as a witness to nuclear development in the United States, see Beverly Ann Deepe Keever, *News Zero: The New York Times and the Bomb* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2004), chapter 2; also see the initial announcement of his collaboration with the government to become the official

55 William L. Laurence, Dawn over Zero: The Story of the Atomic Bomb (New York: Knopf, 1946), 11. After the initial fireball, Laurence claims that the cloud briefly “took the form of the Statue of Liberty magnified many times.” Although he was awarded the highest honors in journalism, Laurence is probably more celebrated today for the creative license he took in reporting the chain of events that opened the atomic era. Yet perhaps more than any of the scientific or technical reports filed in the press, it was his hyperbolic descriptions of the bomb which loomed large in the minds of Americans.


61 Charles Decker, letter to his wife, July 1, 1946. In my telephone interview with Decker, on July 1, 2000, the serviceman spoke of a preview day that took place before the actual explosion, in which the Joint Task Force went through a dry-run of operations complete with a broadcast over the P.A. system describing the physical manifestation of the bomb as if it had been detonated. It is unclear where this “script” came from, but Decker theorizes that as it was fairly accurate to the events he would witness the following day, it must have been written by an eyewitness to either Trinity or the bombings in Japan. One wonders if the test had been a dud, if the intense pressure on the military to make this operation a success would have resulted in the substitution of this script for actual testimony – further obfuscating the actual results of Test Able.


63 The most striking examples of this disparity can be seen in a comparison of the stories filed by the Associated Press, Science Editor of the New York Times Hanson L. Baldwin, and Pulitzer Prize winner William L. Laurence, particularly the initial articles which ran on the front page of the New York Times on July 1, 1946. Laurence compared the explosion to “an awesome supernova,” while the AP reporter branded the bomb “a dud.”


68 Blandy, quoted in “Bikini Toll Rises to Five Ships Sunk, 31 Fired by Blast,” New York Times, July 2, 1946. Blandy said at a news conference that “despite the damage, there is no reason to conclude that the day of the carrier and the destroyer was done.”

69 This information is revealed in Weisgall, Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at the Bikini Atoll, 124. While the tests had larger ramifications for the world, Blandy’s chief concern was that the battle brewing between the Army and Navy branches of the United States Armed Forces for additional funding by Congress. As an Army Air Force plane had carried the two bombs to Japan, and that subsequently these bombs had been used to wipe out
two Japanese cities, Blandy was well aware that the proliferation of nuclear weapons would forever change the nature of warfare, and possibly render the Navy obsolete.


71 The data contained in the report filed by the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey just confirmed what many had already suspected -- that comparisons between the atomic bomb and a World War II “blockbuster” were simply erroneous, as the energy released in an uranium explosion had the power to vaporize everything within a mile of ground zero. By December 1945, the military editor of Reader’s Digest, Francis Vivian Drake, had written that “The Hiroshima bomb is already dated. It is now in the power of the atom smashers to blot out New York with a single bomb.”


73 Early on Life magazine pointed out that the “increasing ferocity of strategic bombing led to Hiroshima, and Hiroshima was, and was intended to be, almost pure Schrecklichkeit [terror].” However, while the escalation could “logically” be traced, there was no denying that all powers emerged from the war “with radically different practices and standards of permissible behavior towards others.” See “The Atomic Age,” Life, August 20, 1945, 42.


75 See, for example, “The 36 Hour War,” Life, November 15, 1945, 22-35. Fear was seen as the only deterrent to the nuclear holocaust which seemed to loom on the immediate horizon. As Commonweal had written in August, “Fear may do what sheer morality could never do.”

76 For example, William L. Laurence filed two high-profile stories with the New York Times on September 12 and 13, 1945, denying rumors that radiation sickness had inflicted the inhabitants of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “Any reports to the contrary,” wrote Laurence, “were simply Japanese propaganda.” See his “U.S. Atom Bomb Belies Tokyo Tales,” and “No Radioactivity in Hiroshima Ruins,” New York Times, September 12 and 13, 1945, respectively, both 1.


81 Morrison, “If the Bomb “If the Bomb Gets Underway,” in One World or None: A Report to the Public on the Full Meaning of the Atomic Bomb, 3.

82 One such article to speculate on the aftermath of Test Baker was W. A. Higinbotham, “There is No Defense Against Atomic Bomb,” New Yorker, December 3, 1946, 48.

83 A true understanding of the nature and extent of the radiation poisoning at Bikini would not be afforded to the general public until the following year. See, for example, “The A-Bomb’s Invisible Offspring,” Collier’s, August 9, 1947, 18-19, 61.
The phrase “self-cleansing shot” refers to the scientists’ belief that all dangerous fission products would be swept up into the atmosphere. While in the first test the bomb had exploded mid-air over its target, and the particles were disseminated in the fashion described, what the scientists did not predict was that in the second underwater test, the fission particles would “rain down” on the fleet after first being conducted in water and jettisoned into the atmosphere.

It would take David Bradley’s New York Times bestseller No Place to Hide (Boston: Little & Co., 1948), to illustrate how painfully unaware the majority of servicemen were of the lingering danger of radiation exposure following the two tests. Bradley, who was a member of the Radiological Safety Force at Bikini, reported that at one point after Test Baker, radiation had seeped into the evaporating water tanks and water lines of several manned ships. Bradley, No Place to Hide, 103.


The phrase “logo of destruction” to refer to the atomic cloud was coined by graphic design historian Richard Heller.

David Bradley describes this phenomenon in detail in No Place to Hide (Boston: Little & Co., 1948), 93.

Jonathan Weisgall gives a full account of vessels that participated in Operation Crossroads and their previous service in the two World Wars – see his Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at the Bikini Atoll (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984). Many of the most beloved battleships were sacrificed, over vigorous protest of thousands of servicemen and a handful of government officials. Blandy had assured the dissenters that the ships would be able to withstand the force of the blast, would be re-floated, and sent home after the tests – however, in most cases, the vessels had to be abandoned because of the high levels of radiation.


Bradley, No Place to Hide, 102. Bradley points out that the “hairy-chested” attitudes of the Navy needlessly exposed many of the servicemen to dangerous levels of radiation – Navy brass were convinced that the fission products that clung to the surface of the vessels could be scrubbed away with “a clean sweep down fore and aft,” even while the Geiger counters of the Radiological Safety Force suggested otherwise.


Richard Freeman, Crawford’s sensitive biographer, comes closest to my interpretation in suggesting a conceptual link between the artist’s meteorological charts and the Bikini paintings. See his “Artist at Bikini,” Magazine of Art (April 1947): 156-158.


There are very few overt images of the bomb in the immediate years following Hiroshima. Many, including myself, have speculated that no amount of realistic imagery could convey the staggering implications of nuclear energy and weaponry. Mention of the bomb in connection with artistic production tends to focus solely on Abstract


113 Ibid.


115 Charles Bittinger III, telephone interview with Denise Rompilla, March 21, 2003; the same information can be found in a typed biography of the artist in the Charles Bittinger papers, Archive of the Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

116 See Grant Powers biography in the Grant Powers Papers, Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

117 Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 96. Guilbaut throws his weight behind Abstract Expressionism, especially the vigorous gesturalism represented by Jackson Pollock, whose paintings seem to speak of the “vibrant, iridescent, brilliant source of light and to a heat so intense that it destroys all objects...”, 97. However, Guilbaut fails to take into account Crawford’s previous employment in the Visual Presentation Unit of the Army Air Forces and illustrations for Fortune as an extension of that work. Moreover, Crawford’s work does relate a profound feeling of disturbance that separates these pictures from that prior to the war years – however, the
illustrations are no more than a slight tremor compared to the complete annihilation he attributes to a Pollock canvas.


123 “The Painter Interprets the War,” 42.

124 The majority of the artist featured in the article were European painters working in a Surrealistic idiom who had fled Hitler’s aggression and were now part of a thriving coterie of ex-patriots in New York. Some, like the Chilean artist Matta, would have a tremendous influence on the development of the young Abstract Expressionists.

125 This comment was related to me by the artist’s son, John. John Crawford, interview with Denise Rompilla, Queens, New York, April 10, 2000.


127 Marie Lavelle recalls Crawford’s startling confession in a letter to the artist dated December 9, 1946, Ralston Crawford Estate.

128 Ralston Crawford, “Art Notes: Statement by Ralston Crawford,” Maryland Quarterly (Spring 1944): 8. The Quarterly also used one of Crawford’s line drawings of an air crash, which included a glimpse of the limp body of the dead pilot inside, to illustrate a short story written by a soldier who was cold, hungry, and disoriented at the front.

129 Ralston Crawford, application for a Guggenheim fellowship, 1946, Ralston Crawford Estate. Crawford habitually applied for the fellowship every year, but this is the first time that the artist indicated that his work had taken a noticeable turn from his abstracted and “detached” subject matter.

130 Vivienne Koch, quoted in New Directions #9 (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1946), 411.

131 Briarcliff Quarterly, January 1945, cover. Briarcliff Quarterly had grown out of the smaller literary journal Maryland Quarterly, which was the first publication to feature Crawford’s tentative drawings based on war photographs.

132 Richard Freeman, Ralston Crawford (Mobile, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1953), 36.

133 Vivienne Koch, quoted in New Directions #9 (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1946), 411.

134 Ralston Crawford, letter to James K. Herring, April 13, 1947, Ralston Crawford Estate.

135 Undated note scrawled to Caresse Crosby on a piece of scrap paper, Ralston Crawford Estate.

137 Undated note scrawled to Caresse Crosby on a piece of scrap paper, Ralston Crawford Estate.

138 Vivienne Koch, quoted in New Directions #9 (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1946), 411-412.


140 Ralston Crawford, “Artist Statement,” undated, Ralston Crawford Estate. The statement appears to have been written in conjunction with an exhibit of Crawford’s paintings in April 1945 at the Crosby Gallery of Modern Art in Washington, D.C. Crosby, in a press release for the exhibition, commented that “This is one case in which war has developed rather than restricted the scope of the artist.” “Air Force Exhibits Here,” press release by Caresse Crosby, Ralston Crawford Estate.


Chapter 4: Stop the H-Bomb: Ben Shahn and the Art of Nuclear Deterrence

There is much about man and about his environment still to be learned and crystallized in art. One could hope that there might arise out of such an effort a resurgence of Humanism. And in this era of almost total mechanization and H-Bombs, I, myself, feel that this objective is of first importance. – Ben Shahn, 1951

In the disastrous reviews of Ralston Crawford’s exhibit at the Downtown Gallery in December of 1946, art critics were unanimous in noting that the fragmented, Cubist style of Crawford’s paintings of the Bikini blast could never even begin to approach the enormity of a world shattered by the presence of nuclear weapons and the underlying anxiety of living with a tenuous peace. While Crawford had been in a unique position to observe the bomb, his proximity to the blast had failed to render any memorable image that could serve as a signpost for other artists wishing to grapple with the fundamental crisis of their age.

In 1946, Crawford’s style of painting, as well as the nationalist and Social Realist art that had been seen in New York galleries during the war years, had been superseded by the abstraction of a younger generation. Milton Brown, remarking on the dramatic change in the April issue of the Magazine of Art, exclaimed that “All along the street are evidences that the vogue today is abstraction. Three years ago this tendency is evident, now it is swarming all over the stage.”¹ For Brown, this development marked a worrisome trend away from a socially committed art:

Certainly the artist has become, just as all people have, more aware of the world – the atom bomb must have done that, if the war did not – but faced with the complexities of postwar life, its uncertainties and its problems, he has retired even further into the clear and untroubled limitations in his craft. There he can deal with tangibles, with the basic ingredients of his profession. It is as if, unable to resolve his conflicts and problems as a human being and a citizen, he keeps at least his individual artistic capacities limber by practice.²
While Abstract Expressionism would come to embody the “Age of Anxiety,” countering Brown’s claim that the new art was merely a self-absorbed exercise in formality, it was not an engaged art in the sense of using one’s art as a form of political action. That it was co-opted as such – the virile masculinity of Abstract Expression being a perfect counterpart to a muscular foreign policy – is not to be confused with the painter’s open engagement to politics and present-day affairs. While the apparent chaos of Abstract Expressionism may have evoked the specter of nuclear war to a jittery public, the individual artist was encouraged to retreat from the world, to exert his democratic freedom by choosing to detach from other concerns in order to pursue individual expression. Although their paintings seemed to speak of the disintegration of the world, the artists themselves said very little about their perceptions of that world.

A new crop of abstract artists were emerging in the postwar era, aided, in part, by a weariness of the imagery of war and a desire to return to a painting that could not be co-opted by any party or program. In the meantime, a handful of Social Realists, many of whom had lent their talents to the war effort (only in many cases to see themselves ostracized in the postwar era) continued to press onward with a socially committed art that was charged with the task of addressing the existence of the bomb and the survival of humanity as a whole. Although Ben Shahn was not among the artists who personally experienced the bomb or its after-effects, he can be credited as the first American painter to give its victims a voice. Not content to shelve social content for the novelty of abstraction, he fought the tide of non-objective painting and provided living symbols for the first decade of the atomic era right through the escalation of the Cold War, addressing both the perpetrators and victims of an aggressive military policy and the approaching nuclear cataclysm. Unlike any other artist of his generation, Shahn personally inserted himself into the
politics of the era, lending his voice and talents to the movement towards nuclear disarmament in spite of censorship and government scrutiny.

In the immediate period following Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the atomic tests at Bikini Atoll, it could be argued that the sense of chaos and disintegration which worked its way into the canvases of non-objective painters like Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning was a subliminal reverberation of the bomb. However, a counter-argument can be made just as compellingly. The play of presence and void, the evocation of bleak landscapes and the unfurling of primitive energies across a blank field was as much a creative response to the war in its entirety as to the bomb itself. So few of the paintings produced by artists of the period are tangibly and definably about the bomb, that works which contain overt atomic imagery can literally be counted on one hand.

Although lacking the privileged perspective of Ralston Crawford, Philip Evergood was another artist who directly responded to the Bikini Atoll tests. After joining the PWAP and the Artist’s Union in the 1930s, Evergood drifted far from the conservative upbringing and the academic subject matter that was the bulk of his artistic training to paint gritty populist images of direct political confrontation. Exempted from military service due to poor health, he had nonetheless continued to comment on the broader themes of the war in powerful paintings like *The New Lazarus* and *Coming Home*, both of which focused on the lonely sacrifice of the common soldier. In early 1946, he painted *Apocalypse Grandstand Play*, a precursor to *Renunciation*. High-level military officers view the aerial bombardment of civilian targets from the safety (and psychological distance) afforded to them by their position and binoculars, as their implied doppelgangers, satanic beasts, drink wine goblets of human blood.
In *Renunciation*, Evergood addressed the cavalier attitude and carnival atmosphere of the “war games” in the Pacific – the unknown consequences of which could have resulted in the end of the world (Fig. 141). The painting clearly refers to the second underwater test at Bikini, which was conducted after most of the cameras and news correspondents had gone home. The devastating bomb blast sent destroyers and cruisers soaring into the air as easily as one might toss toy boats. The event acquires a further layer of unreality through Evergood’s cartoonish treatment of the subject. The quality of his draftsmanship vacillates wildly, loud garish colors explode across the canvas, and the surface itself is rough and irregular – it is as if the solidity of the painting is threatened by the event it depicts.

Monkeys surround the composition, clearly damning their “superiors” on the evolutionary chain for poisoning the very environment that sustains life. The cloud twisting upward resembles the spinal cord and knotty brain stem leading to the cerebellum, another comment on the supposed intelligence behind splitting the atom. But the painting is far more than an indictment of the tests themselves -- the twisting mushroom cloud of the atomic explosion stretches directly upward from the ovens of the concentration camps, forging, at least for Evergood, a continuous link of barbarism between Buchenwald and Hiroshima. Scientific exploration and faith in machines has led to better and more “efficient” ways of killing huge swaths of the human population, hardly a redemptive model of historical progress. In spite of its sobering message, Evergood’s painting was roundly dismissed as a woefully inadequate response to the aftershocks of the war and the unknown terrors of an atomic future.⁵

Judging by the tepid responses to both Crawford and Evergood’s painting, the surreal and excessive nature of the violence unleashed by the atomic bomb raised questions as to what style of painting would adequately represent the facts at hand. Peter Blume, the artist whose painting
The Eternal City had so perfectly captured the creeping threat of fascism in the jack-in-the-box head of Mussolini looming over Rome’s classical ruins, attempted to apply his strain of surrealism mixed with political critique to threats of the postwar era. In 1948, Blume unveiled the painting The Rock, which he had struggled to bring to completion for the better part of three years (Figure 142). The work was commissioned by the Edgar Kaufmann family for the living room of their Frank Lloyd Wright’s masterpiece Fallingwater in Bear Run, Pennsylvania. Blume was asked to render a fairly straightforward likeness of the celebrated house, but as the painting evolved the artist decided that he “wanted to put everything he could” into it. By “everything”, the artist meant nothing less than a meditation on building throughout history, and the unsettling and irrational aspects of the human temperament that periodically shook its foundations. The Rock was entered into the prestigious Carnegie International Exhibition of Painting, and although it did not place in terms of the official awards handed out by the jury, it was voted the most popular painting by those who attended the exhibition during the course of its run. Interestingly, Edgar Kaufmann Jr. decided not to retrieve the painting for Fallingwater, and instead, donated The Rock to the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Although not as specific as Evergood’s reference to Bikini, Blume’s painting addresses the free-floating anxiety of living under the threat of the nuclear cloud. Anchoring the painting at its center is a strange rock of peaks and valleys, seated on a “pedestal” of earth. With its vaguely round contours, the rock seems like a world split open, revealing within it the history of geological time. Scattered around its base are the skeletal remains of an animal, as well as a decomposing tree trunk which have sprouted moss and lichen. Degeneration has become the fodder for new life, however the violent displacement of the trunk, the exposed roots, and the upturned bones of the carcass, mark a path of whirlwind destruction that seems to negate the
promise of life. The lichen and moss are more like scavengers of dead carcasses, opportunists feeding off the remains of a tragedy. A young woman kneels at the base of the pedestal, her arms thrown up in an indeterminate gesture: is it supplication to the mysterious object, or a display of sheer terror at its awesome power?

Moving outward, a flurry of building activity unites workers in the process of reconstruction. They are notably of mixed races, and their harmonious collaboration holds out the possibility of a new world order built on the ruins of dystopia. However, their struggle to regain order is overshadowed by the ominous remains of a cataclysm – a brick structure ripped open by a blast, its guts exposed to the daylight. A second-story parlor floats, partially intact, with printed wallpaper and painted portraits, an evocation of its snug domestic interior and by extension, a simpler time. White smoke wafts upward from a fiery furnace in which the charred ruins of the architecture are being stoked, assuming the vague form of a mushroom cloud. The smoke hovers over the wreckage and then drifts off to the left, finally dissipating into fluffy cumulus clouds against a bright blue sky.

Seen in its intended context of Fallingwater, the painting could be read in two ways. At its most literal, The Rock is a reference, of course, to the stone core of Fallingwater, out of which Wright extended his cantilevered concrete trays in suspension over rushing water. In fact, to the left of the rock is a schematic representation of the building in the process of construction. The Rock could be interpreted as a celebration of Wright as a creator who worked with rather than against nature, respecting its authority so much that he famously planned his architecture around the natural features of his site. Yet Blume’s painting could be read in a far more cynical light – a mockery of Frank Lloyd Wright’s idealized version of the home as a safe harbor against the
forces battering humankind in modern society. One can even go further and view Blume’s painting as an interrogation of Wright’s benevolent view of nature itself.

_The Rock_, upon further rumination, is vaguely reminiscent of an atom split open, revealing within it all the explosive fury nature contains. The stricken expression of the young woman makes sense in this interpretation, as she attempts to bargain or plead for the fate of the society behind her. The workers remain oblivious to possible danger, swept up in the utopian dream of a new world order rising from the ashes of crushed civilizations, the same dream that had been postulated by so many architects of the early 20th century. Although Blume’s painting is commonly interpreted along the themes of regeneration and renewal, _The Rock_ seems far more pessimistic in its cyclical rhythm – there is no refuge, either man-made or in nature, to escape the terrifying condition of modern existence.

While a handful of artists who had been socially engaged before the war made sporadic, and one could argue, not so successful attempts to deal with existence of the bomb, only one prominent Social Realist artist, Ben Shahn, committed the next twenty-five years of his life to articulating the threat of nuclear weapons for a mass audience.

Best known for his journalistic, socially committed art of the 1930s, Shahn’s work had undergone a transformation working for the Office of War Information during the war years. Looking back on that time Shahn remarked that:

> During the war I worked in the Office of War Information [O. W. I.]. We were supplied with a constant stream of material, photographic and other kinds of documentation of the decimation of the enemy territory. There were the secret confidential horrible facts of the cartloads of the dead...At that time I painted only one theme, “Europa,” you might call it. Particularly I painted Italy as I lamented it, or feared that it might have become.

> It would seem that after sifting through hundreds of photographs commemorating the grisly realities of total war, Shahn began to realize the limitations of his previous approach of working
with photographic documentation to get at the truth of a story. In what could be called his “war portfolio,” Shahn created a number of paintings pulled from fragments of photographs, the artist’s older works, and personal memory, to create images that are layered with meaning.

Several of the paintings contained bombed-out landscapes such The Red Stairway (1944), Italian Landscape II (1944) (Figs. 143, 144). The lack of specificity turns each painting into a lament of the incomprehensible suffering of the war. Even in Liberation, which ostensibly documents the freedom of young children emerging from their hide-outs to play in the rubble, the dizzying whirl of the rope swing portends an ominous and unstable future (Fig. 145.).

Shahn’s first reference to Hiroshima appears in his 1946 painting Renascence (Fig. 146). Framed by an expanse of a red wall, a woman uneasily looks over her shoulder to objects which appear in the distance. The wall itself is reminiscent of the red frescoed walls of Pompeii, and continuing the importance which Italian ruins played in Shahn’s allegorical war paintings, it is clear that the reference is intentional. Near the edge of the wall stands a fluted classical column, topped not with any recognizable order but with a bulbous, ornately carved head that resembles a phallus, the ancient symbol of fertility. The two symbols of classical architecture are contrasted with the twisted steel frame of a modern building way off on the horizon – recognizable to any reader of Life magazine as the blasted remains of a steel factory in Hiroshima (Fig. 7). Through architectural fragments, Shahn brings together two traumatic events in history which shook the foundations of the civilized world: the flash of an eruption which snuffed out the lives of thousands of people at Pompeii; and its modern equivalent in human terror, the earth-shattering force of nuclear destruction unleashed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

While the title of this work ostensibly signals regeneration and rebirth, Shahn’s painting is rife with tensions. It sways between terror and beauty, annihilation and creativity, and a future
that is haunted by the memory of the dead. Shahn’s ambivalence is seen in several instances in the painting. On the far left, an expansive, upward reaching shock of spring grain entwines its yellowish-green form with that of the woman. She is transformed from her ordinariness into a modern-day Demeter, the goddess of ancient times who held out the promise of resurrection through the regenerative cycles of life. Shahn clearly intended this image of fecundity to form one half of a pair with the column on the right. The column, which in its refinement of the ancient fertility symbol could represent the “civilizing” force of culture on baser passions, has been noticeably blackened and cut off on top by the edge of the canvas. If anything, Shahn’s column, pictured in such close proximity to the ruins of Hiroshima, carries a negative meaning. The architectural forms introduced by the Romans – the arch of triumph, the columns of war -- were a means of communicating aggressive territorial expansion, and the classical cladding of Shahn’s column may simply mask a naked lust for power. Shahn’s blackened column may also refer to the perversion of culture at the hands of the Nazis, as culture itself was transformed into a terrorizing force that sowed discord and hate, allowing the basest and most barbaric impulses of human nature to rise to the surface.

Similarly, the mangled ruins of a Hiroshima munitions factory represent another set of contradictions. The steel remains are the remnants of an old order -- and yet, rising from its surroundings in defiance, the factory seems almost eerily animated with the aim of reconstituting itself. Shahn had first seen the factory in a U.P.I. photograph which came across his desk at the Office of War Information, and the photograph was then placed in a folder of source material for his work. When the photograph appeared in Life magazine on September 17, 1945, the image had been significantly cropped, and interestingly, instead of using the original untouched photograph that he had in his possession, he instead copied the “sanitized” version that had been
released to the press (Fig. 147). The cropping makes a distinct difference as it changes the tone of the photograph: by editing out the hollowed-out shell of a multi-story building next to the factory, the narrative is transformed from a meditation on the dead to a story of miraculous survival. But what is it exactly that survives? Is it the resiliency of the creative impulse, represented by an architectural skeleton come to life? Or the warmongering of the munitions factory, reinventing itself into another, more terrifying form? Like the ruins of Pompeii, the building, in the miracle of its preservation, becomes a modern touchstone by which its civilization can be scrutinized.

All these discordant fragments cast doubt as to the meaning of the painting’s title. As seems evident by the worried expression on the woman’s face, *Renascence* does not necessarily suggest comfort in a return to the familiar. Rather, the painting exposes the seeming impossibility of resurrecting creativity without its opposite, the negative, destructive cycles of life. The uneasiness at the heart of this painting marks a distinct departure from the hope-filled canvases of the Shahn’s war portfolio, and would color his paintings hereafter.

The fiery red of the wall in *Renascence*, signaling all at once the violence of death, life itself as a process of combustion (the “lived life”), and the smoldering embers which spark rebirth, reappeared with full force in Shahn’s 1948 painting *Allegory* (Fig. 148). The painting evolved out of an assignment for *Harper’s* magazine, in which Shahn was asked to provide illustrations for a story about a quick-moving tenement fire on Chicago’s south side which claimed the lives of four African-American children. *Allegory* abandons the specificity of the drawings and is instead dominated by the kind of mythmaking that would characterize Shahn’s post-war style. The reddish-purple, mottled background of the edges of the painting gives way to the crimson beast occupying its center, its head engulfed by a halo of flames. In “The Biography of a
Painting,” Shahn describes this creature as a “huge chimera-like beast” which he related to “Harpies, Furies, and other symbolic, semi-classic shapes and figures” that were traditional harbingers of destruction. The beast arches itself triumphantly over the bodies of several small children, who lie tangled on the ground in a lifeless mass.

Although it can be debated whether or not Shahn’s first Allegory refers specifically to a nuclear holocaust, it is a pivotal work in Shahn’s development of what he called his “personal realism”, a shift in his painting from the factual and specific to his postwar “symbolic” approach. At the end of his assignment for Harper’s, Shahn had felt a “curious sense of responsibility” to address the larger issues surrounding the Hickman fire. In “The Biography of Painting,” Shahn wrote that “the implication of this event transcended the immediate story; there was a universality about man’s dread of fire . . . his sufferings from fire . . [and] in the pity which such a disaster invoked” for which he struggled to find expression. The factual method of his earlier series of works addressing issues of social justice – such as the images of the Sacco-Vanzetti case or the persecuted labor leader Tom Mooney, no longer appealed to him. Shahn then turned to abstract symbols, but in the end he rejected that approach too, for, as he wrote, “in the abstracting of an idea one may lose the very intimate humanity, and this deep and common tragedy was above all things human.”

Reading about the fire had aroused in Shahn “a chain of personal memories” that now became intertwined with the story, prompting a new form of representation which transcended the factual and specific. As a child, Shahn had witnessed a fire destroy the small Russian village of his grandfather; too young to understand the significance, he watched as flames leapt from house to house, illuminating the night and coloring the faces of the villagers. When he was much older, he watched in despair as his father narrowly rescued his brothers and sisters from their second-
story window as a fire consumed the family’s tenement in Brooklyn. Shahn contrasted these two experiences in “Biography of a Painting”: one was “a cheerful affair, full of bright colors and moving shapes”; the second, something which went far beyond the physical aspects of fire to overwhelming “terror . . . heart-shaking fear.”

Shahn wrote that “among the discarded symbols pertaining to the Hickman story, there were a number of heads…one of these, a lion-like head… I made into several drawings, each drawing approaching more nearly some inner figure of a primitive terror I was seeking to capture.” Shahn transferred a wreath of flames from a drawing of the Hickman tenement to crown the head of his mythical beast. Although the creatures from which the Chimera was assembled were often debated – the monstrous beast was most commonly described as having a lion’s head, with the body of a goat and a dragon or snake’s tail -- in Greek mythology all versions of the Chimera breathed fire. But he pulled from other, more personal sources. Shahn noted that the body of the Chimera was something like the statue of the Roman she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus a story which had terrified him as a child. Shahn had been convinced that the she-wolf would more likely devour the children rather than raise her alien young – an interpretation that mingled his fear of wolves from the Russian fairy tales of his youth. For Shahn, this creature in Allegory came to evoke not just fire, but the “primitive” fear of the terrors that had battered humanity throughout the ages.

In Allegory, Shahn expands outward from the realm of personal memory and shared experience to an entire world that has become saturated with death and destruction. Ziva Amishai-Maisels, in her article “Ben Shahn and the Problem of Jewish Identity,” has pointed out that the children that lie at the feet of the beast, rather than representing the Hickman children or Shahn’s own siblings, as the artist himself claimed, were taken from a photograph of dead
children in Warsaw that Shahn had seen during his tenure at the O.W.I. According to Amishai-Maisels, the Hickman fire struck such a chord with Shahn because it was “an echo of his own childhood which was itself a foretaste of the Holocaust.”\textsuperscript{21} The fires then – the Hickman fire; the two earlier fires of Shahn’s childhood; and the fires of the Nazi death chambers -- become linked in an unending chain of man-made destruction, culminating in a fiery image of world annihilation.

Shahn wrote that in \textit{Allegory}, he had attempted to grapple with “the emotional tone that surrounds disaster; you might call it the inner disaster,” and this no doubt extended to the bleakness, the sense of futility, that colored the postwar environment.\textsuperscript{22} In 1947, social philosopher Will Herberg in 1947 referred to anxiety of the postwar condition as having glimpsed “the horrors of the hell within . . . the evil and chaos that lies at the heart of man.”\textsuperscript{23} Painting in the wake of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, in \textit{Allegory} Shahn confronts the emotional shock, the inner conflict of guilt and despair, at the barbarous and unspeakable acts of the war, as well as the future instability of world populated with nuclear weapons. Like Shahn’s chimerical beast, the presence of death hovered uncomfortably over the living.

Shahn’s fascination with ruins of Hiroshima would continue in a series of works across media that would reinterpret the image for different audiences. The blasted factory makes a reappearance in the painting \textit{The Anatomical Man} of 1949 (Fig. 149). Like many of Shahn’s works, it had been recycled from parts of other paintings and prints, in this case combining a section of \textit{Renascence} with the overall image of a 1948 serigraph of an emptied carnival fairground (Fig. 150). In the \textit{Anatomical Man}, the fantastical imagery painted on the sides of the tents is reminiscent of the lurid advertising of sideshow attractions, which tempts the fairgoer with all kinds of strange artifacts and freakish delights. By occupying one panel of Shahn’s
“Tent of Wonders”, as such sideshows were often called, the Hiroshima wreckage is reduced to a tawdry exhibit. The pairing of the twisted steel building with the flayed man may remind the viewers of the verbal descriptions in John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* of bodies stripped of their skin by the bomb’s blast. Rather than referencing a noble tradition of anatomical study tracing back to the Renaissance, when the investigation of the body was originally prompted by the desire to gain new perspectives on the human condition, in *The Anatomical Man*, Shahn cynically equates the desire to see the remains of Hiroshima, including its victims, with the same kind of morbid curiosity that propels one to visit the 2 foot woman or the shrunken head.

In 1950, Shahn would use the image of Hiroshima yet again, for the Container Corporation’s “Great Ideas of Western Man” advertising campaign. Walter Paepcke, the head of the Container Corporation of America, was known for his innovative use of fine art in advertising, often at the expense of promoting CCA products themselves. The genesis of the “Great Ideas of Western Man” campaign came out of a Great Books discussion group that Paepcke and his wife Elizabeth attended in Chicago. Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, the two men who had originally organized the group, were also editing *The Great Books of the Western World* series, and Paepcke approached Adler with the idea of running an institutional campaign that would commission contemporary artists to interpret the great ideas contained in those texts. Each artist would be assured of absolute freedom of their artistic conventions. Paepcke and his wife were joined by the Bauhaus designer Herbert Bayer in selecting artists for the campaign. Ben Shahn was among the first group of artists selected (over 130 would be chosen in total), and his first ad (he would produce three in all) ran in December of 1950 in both *Time* and *Fortune* magazines.

For his first assignment, Shahn was asked by Adler to interpret a quotation from John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690):
The end of the government is the good of mankind...and which is best for mankind, that the people should be always exposed to the boundless will of tyranny, or that the rulers should be sometimes liable to be opposed when they grow exorbitant in their power, and employ it for the destruction and not the preservation of the properties of the people?

In the “Great Ideas…” ad, the Locke quote is transformed from iconic text into a personal touchstone (Fig. 151). Once again, Shahn has subtly reworked earlier images to arrive at the illustration. The fairground tents of the earlier serigraph Deserted Fairgrounds and Anatomical Man have been deconstructed into screens which are meant to suggest the partitions of voting booths. The screens preserve a connection to both works in that they still retain the Harlequin patterns of the carnival, and the ruined factory appears once again on a panel, this time in the booth’s interior, in the exact place where one would normally contemplate a slate of candidates. Shahn may be condemning the carnival-like aspect of politics, but he is also prompting the individual to look past the slick packaging of politicians and their platforms to the substantive issues of the day.

Shahn was all too familiar with the political machine, having worked on the presidential campaign of Progressive party candidate Henry A. Wallace in the 1948 election. Wallace, who, as Secretary of Commerce, had been fired by Truman in 1946 for vehemently denouncing the latter’s hawkish policy towards the Soviets, particularly his stance on nuclear weapons, continued this line of attack leading up to the election. Truman, who had one of the lowest approval ratings going into the general election, had countered with accusations that Wallace’s operation had been infiltrated by Communists. While Wallace was nowhere near the threat to Truman as Republican candidate Thomas Dewey, Truman pulled a stunning, come-from behind victory, having slowly built up support by criss-crossing the country on a “whistle-stop” tour. Giving impromptu speeches from the rear platform of an observation car on a passenger train,
Truman played up his folksy roots to pander to the increasing crowds, masking the more troubling aspects of the first term of his administration.\textsuperscript{27} Undoubtedly, Locke’s reference to those “who grow exorbitant in their power” resonated with Shahn’s distaste for Truman and his actions since the 1948 election: an even more aggressive policy of Soviet containment; an atmosphere of fear and mistrust spurred by the accusations of Senator Joseph McCarthy and Truman’s own loyalty oaths; the rumors of the development of a “superbomb”, and the U.S. entry into the Korean conflict in the summer of 1950.\textsuperscript{28} The ruins of Hiroshima were both an indictment of failed leadership by Truman, and an urgent call for change through the power of the ballot box.

To the artist, then, the perfect interpretation of Lock’s quote was to equate the end of “tyranny” of irresponsible governance with the democratic exercise of voting. In a letter to Edward Warwick of the advertising agency N.W. Ayer and Son, Shahn wrote of this image that:

…I think of the voting booth as the most succinct pictorial statement about democracy. Where the voting booth is present, one cannot for long pursue ends other than those of public good…The suggestion of war and destruction behind one booth is intended to indicate how serious a responsibility the vote is. The uninformed vote, the emotionally partisan vote, the intimidated vote may lead to disaster.\textsuperscript{29}

Prior to the CCA campaign, Shahn had already begun to publicly speak about the heightening Cold War and the race for nuclear weapons. In 1949, shortly after the Soviets had exploded their own atomic device, Shahn remarked:

We are living in a time when civilization has become highly expert in the art of destroying human beings and increasingly weak in its power to give meaning to their lives. I don’t know anyone on either side of the political fence who has the slightest degree of optimism about the direction in which civilization is moving.\textsuperscript{30}

Invariably, these comments were bound up with contemporary discussions addressing the viability of representational painting versus the growing threads of abstraction in the New York
School. In numerous articles published in the late 40s and 50s, there was an attempt to validate abstract art as a more truthful representation of what science had already revealed – that solid matter was an illusion, and all that was left was the limitless space of the atom. Peter Blanc, in “The Artist and the Atom,” remarked that “it seems altogether natural that contemporary painting should depict a shadowy and insubstantial world in which amorphous objects hang suspended in a state of watching expectation and uncertainty.” He compared the skeins of lines suspended in Action Painting of Pollock, Tomlin, DeKooning, and Tworkov, to particles of atoms strung together in space. At the same time, the movement across the canvas, the darting of the line across a void, mimicked particles hurling through space at dizzying speeds, sometimes colliding, sometimes disintegrating altogether. Of more contemplative painters like Rothko, Gorky, Stamos, and Baziotes, he saw an affinity between their “amorphous” images and a groping towards the mysterious, invisible forces at work in the universe. Blanc argued that:

It is not spiritual confusion, lack of humanity, or morbid preoccupation that leads artists to face the facts of life and to paint works of art that take them into account. On the contrary, it would be a cowardly evasion to ignore them and turn blindly to the past for more reassuring subject matter. It is the paradox of art today that what is still known as realism is actually an escape from reality.31

In “American Painting at Mid-Century, An Orthodox View,” Shahn cynically responded to the persistent attempts to interweave humanity’s artistic and scientific achievements, as well as the insistence in some camps that contemporary painting needed to form a close, reciprocal relationship with modern science. While in the Renaissance, this interdependence may have positively brought about a method for the optically correct rendering of visual phenomena, for Shahn, the importance of this development was not in the exactitude of the rendering, but that such a method facilitated a greater awareness of the immediacy and fullness of sensory experience. However, if one chose to embrace the scientific discoveries of the mid-20th century
– the invisible forces that create equilibrium and the non-visible nature of atomic structures --
then logically, one was plunged into an immaterial universe, completely divorced from the world
of material things and of images. Shahn argued that:

It is claimed that non-nobjective art is the perfect expression of such an [atomic or
scientifico-mechanical] age, and perhaps it is true. For the non-objective painting claims
validity only for its mechanics; for the materials with which it is made and the manner of
their organization. It rejects man, his life, his visions, his philosophies, his future. It is
even affirmative in the sense that it asks us to be of good cheer; the machine can absorb
our emotions and contain our soul.32

Although Shahn’s criticism of non-objective painting was unequivocal, he did relent that the
current resurgence of interest in painting “is in essence [a] rebellion against the absolutism of
science and mechanics; that it evidences a widespread nostalgia for the human touch and for the
personal statement.”33 But what he advocated was imagery that embraced representation, not
shied away from it. In the article “Just what is Realism in Art?” he wrote that:

there is much about man and about his environment still to be learned and crystallized in
art. One could hope that there might arise out of such an effort a resurgence of
Humanism. And in this era of almost total mechanization and H-Bombs I, myself, feel
that this objective is of first importance.34

Four years after Shahn created his allegorical image of apocalypse by fire, he returned to the
subject in his painting Second Allegory of 1952 (Fig. 152). In Second Allegory, the outline of the
flames surrounding the head of Shahn’s chimerical beast have been super-imposed on a red and
orange mottled background; the flames, traced in white like smoke, form a menacing cloud with
vague hints of claws or paws at its mysterious center. Descending downward from the cloud is
an arm that points accusatorially to a black-clad man who cowers horizontally along the
painting’s bottom edge. Crystalline forms hover to the right, and through their transparent forms
one can catch glimpses of blue. Parts of the painting have been recycled from Shahn’s small
tempera sketch, *Man* of 1952, in which the same cowering figure is shown warding off the attack of a faceted (possibly molecular) mass (Fig. 153).

In the interim between the first and second *Allegory*, Shahn had adapted the flames of the wolf-lion to an image of a fiery wreath for an illustration accompanying Daniel S. Gillmor’s article “Guilt by Gossip,” published in the May 31, 1948 issue of *The New Republic* (Fig. 154). The article, which referred to the paranoia of the Communist scare, featured a red wreath of flames branded “subversive”. While the illustration can be a straightforward take on the unsubstantiated claims by Senator Joseph McCarthy that the federal government had been infiltration by Soviet sympathizers and spies, it also served as a not so subtle rejoinder to New York Sun art critic Henry McBride, who, in a review of Shahn’s painting *Allegory* at the Whitney Museum’s 1948 Annual, referred to the work as “a subtle tribute to our quondam friend but present enemy, the Soviet Republic.” Although Shahn later wrote that he was “baffled” by McBride’s interpretation, the critic was writing on the heels of an event that had caused a chill in the art world the year before. In April 1947, Republican Congressman Fred Buseby of Illinois had referred to Shahn as one of several New Deal artists “in various shades of Communism” whose subversive efforts were unwittingly being supported by the taxpayer’s dollar. Buseby’s critique referred to the use of government funds to purchase modern art, and sponsor exhibitions of American artists abroad, as part of a larger diplomatic cultural mission by the U.S. State Department overseas. Buseby’s criticism, and the public’s outcry over his overheated rhetoric, resulted in the abrupt cancellation of a two-part exhibit organized by the U.S. State Department, *Advancing American Art*, in which Shahn and other Social Realists of the 1930s were prominently featured.
Far more serious to the artist’s reputation and income, however, were more pointed accusations that had been leveled against Shahn by the red-baiting periodical *Counterattack* in 1952. *Counterattack* was an infamous hate sheet founded in 1947 by three former FBI agents and backed by a number of sympathetic businessmen. Its sole goal was to uncover and publicly name not only card-carrying Communists, but anyone who had shown even the slightest sympathy with “Communist front” organizations. Shahn had never been a member of the Communist party, but his agitating social images of the 1930s, his work for the unions and the Progressive Party, and his association with the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee all made the artist an easy target for vitriol.

In the July 25, 1952 issue, *Counterattack* named Shahn as “a leading, continuing supporter of Communist party causes,” and encouraged its readers to mount a letter-writing campaign urging Shahn’s employers to end their association with him. *Counterattack*’s campaign against Shahn resulted in the artist’s loss of several lucrative contracts, the most important being Shahn’s partnership with the legendary art director William Golden at CBS for whom Shahn had contributed illustrations for the network’s prints campaigns and title screens for some of the first television programs. Notably, anti-McCarthy crusader and pugnacious journalist Edward R. Murrow, who rented space on the CBS network for his “See It Now” program, continued to solicit work from Shahn. On the surface, then, the meaning of *Second Allegory* seems relatively straightforward – the withering criticism of the McCarthy era, the self-righteousness of the accusers, uncontrollable hysteria in the face of an unknown threat, and the familiar themes of damnation and persecution at the hands of the unjust.

While *Second Allegory* can easily be read as an indictment of McCarthyism in light of the artist’s personal troubles, by the early 1950s, Shahn had turned his attention to the escalating
threat of nuclear annihilation. Following the successful test of an atomic weapon by the Soviet Union in 1949, Atomic Energy Commissioner Lewis Straus lobbied Truman for the creation of a crash program aimed at the development of a new, even more powerful weapon – the hydrogen bomb.

Although the General Advisory Committee to the AEC actually rejected Strauss’ plan by a vote of 8-1, Truman ignored the GAC’s recommendation and decided to move forward. At the beginning of 1950, Truman had announced to the American public that he had no choice but to pursue all research and development of atomic weapons, including the hydrogen bomb, as talks with Soviets would probably amount to nothing. Edward Tellar, a Manhattan project scientist who had begun calculations for the “super” during the war, paired with fellow scientist Stanislaw Ulam to come up with a working design. The “George” shot of Operation Greenhouse in 1951 tested the basic principles of the hydrogen bomb on a small scale, confirming that the design was feasible.

On November 1, 1952, the Tellar-Ulam design was tested in the “Ivy Mike” shot at the Enewetak Atoll. Although it was not a true “bomb” as the materials had yet to incorporated into a deployable weapon (the fissionable materials were pumped into a large drum that was anchored to the island), the destructive effect was spectacular. The yield of the bomb was 10.4 megatons – over 450 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Reports of the explosion also noted that the island upon which the drum was anchored was completely vaporized – leaving a three mile crater where the coral island once stood.45

The attack on Shahn’s patriotism did not prevent the artist from signing petitions in support of world government, attending peace conferences, and debating the role of the artist in a post-Hiroshima world. In doing so, he added his voice to that of several other artists and writers who
spoke out against the escalating Cold War and the development of new, more powerful atomic weapons. In light of these activities, then, the flames in *Second Allegory* assume another meaning. While fire in the first *Allegory* was representative of a kind of free-floating terror, Shahn turned the fiery wreath into a very pointed symbol of the cataclysmic fury of nuclear weapons, culminating its use in his *Lucky Dragon* series of 1960-61.

That *Second Allegory* addresses the growing nuclear crisis is bolstered by the fact that the crystalline shapes which dance around the figure are representative of the experimentation of science at the atomic level as well as the molecular basis for life. As Frances K. Pohl has noted, in a watercolor version of *Second Allegory*, the crystalline shapes are clearly numbered and labeled with their scientific nomenclature: (1) isometric system; (2) tetragonal system; (3) hexagonal system; (4) orthorhombic system; (5) monoclinic system; and (6) triclinic system (Fig. 155). It is clear by the labeling and the precise rendering of the shapes that Shahn must have copied the information either from a textbook – possibly on hand from his original desire to study biology in college -- or from *Scientific American*, one of many periodicals for which Shahn provided illustrations. The shapes specifically refer to six of the seven crystal systems that combine with centering lattices to form what are known in condensed matter physics as the Bravais lattices, the fourteen possible combinations of which, when repeated, fill three-dimensional space. The lattices, then, form the building blocks of all physical matter – precisely what is threatened by the searing energy of the atomic blast.

What is tantalizing about the difference between the watercolor study and the tempera version of *Second Allegory* is how the titles are painted out, allowing the shapes to operate on two levels. By 1953, fueled by faith in nuclear energy, models of atomic and molecular structures had started to inhabit everything from wall clocks to curtains – there was literally an “aesthetics of
the microscope” applied to interior design. To a general audience, then, the shapes in Second Allegory would be synonymous with “atomic energy” -- yet freed from the harmless pattern of their wallpaper, the shapes in Shahn’s painting seemed poised to attack. To a scientist working in the field of molecular chemistry, the shapes would be instantly recognizable as the cells that form the physical basis of all matter. Could it be, then, that Shahn was sending a coded message to those scientists that worked on a molecular level, who held in their hands the power to create or destroy life? Certainly it is not hard to imagine that the figure being condemned is the atomic scientist who has unleashed this terror on the world — into the atmosphere, as it were, represented by the free-floating molecular crystals that seem to have gotten away from their creator. Floating off into the blue, they now exist, uncontained and unchecked, a potent symbol of nuclear proliferation.

The hand that reaches down from the heavens, oversized, engulfed in flames, and sprouting wings, inserts an otherworldly element into the composition and raises the issue of the tension between the scientific and the spiritual in modern life. Avram Kampf has interpreted the fire as a symbol of “the presence of the Lord while the hand refers to His creative power and His intervention in the affairs of man”, and the retribution of the Old Testament god was invoked by those who condemned the atomic scientists for usurping the powers of the Almighty. Although Shahn dabbled in religious symbolism, he rejected a return to doctrinal religion. In fact, in 1952, Shahn, in his small book Paragraphs on Art, wrote that he had “no quarrel with scientific skepticism as an attitude,” for it provided “a healthy antidote to fanaticism of all kinds.” The artist did not necessarily fault those who placed their faith in science when the world seemed morally bankrupt and absent of God. He commented on this need to fill the vacuum with some fetish of certitude: “If man has lost his Jehovah, his Buddha, his Holy
Family, he must have new, perhaps more scientifically tenable beliefs to which he may attach his affections.” For Shahn, however, the choice between science and religion was a false one, as each allowed the individual to justify one’s actions with a ready-made set of beliefs. Shahn’s individual trembles in fear precisely because he has no ground to stand on.

To refer to another religious tradition, the fiery arm is also reminiscent of the line from the Bhagavad-Gita quoted by theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer upon learning of that atomic weapons had been unleashed on Japan: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” With his characteristic dark suit, close-cropped hair, and prominent eyes, Oppenheimer bears a strong resemblance to the tortured soul of both *Man* and *Second Allegory*. Scientific director of Los Alamos, colloquially referred to as the “father of the bomb”, Oppenheimer was undoubtedly the face of the U.S. atomic energy program. Yet he was haunted by his role in bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, notably arousing the ire of President Truman during a post-war meeting with a nervous comment about having blood on his hands.

As chief advisor to the United States Atomic Energy Commission in the years after the war, he had actively tried to reign in the use of nuclear weapons and deter an international arms race, and had strongly objected to a crash hydrogen bomb program in 1949, due to both ethical and practical considerations. But in 1951, Oppenheimer did an about face -- when a practical plan to develop such a weapon was introduced by Edward Teller and Stanislaw Ulam, Oppenheimer reluctantly offered his support, resigned to the idea that the Soviet Union might also arrive at a similar working design. In spite of his capitulation, Oppenheimer continued to agitate for disarmament, approaching the President in 1953 with the idea of creating a five member disarmament panel.
That the subject of Second Allegory is meant to evoke Oppenheimer also makes sense in light of the events of 1953. Oppenheimer’s opponents began building a case against him, questioning his loyalty to the government in his half-hearted support for the H-bomb and efforts to slow down or halt the production of nuclear weapons. The Chair of the Atomic Energy Commission, Lewis Strauss, organized a smear campaign, placing broadsides in all three of Henry Luce’s publications. Helping to pen an anonymous article in the May 1953 issue of Fortune, “The Hidden Struggle for the H-Bomb: The Story of Dr. Oppenheimer’s Persistent Campaign to Reverse U.S. Military Policy,” Strauss, under the cover of anonymity, stated that there was “a serious question of propriety of scientists trying to settle such grave national issues on their own, insomuch as they bear no responsibility for the successful execution of war plans.”

Following on the heels of these rounds of attacks, Joseph McCarthy publicly denounced Oppenheimer for slowing down the development of the H-Bomb – the opening salvo in a series of events that would lead up to Oppenheimer’s humiliating show trial before the House Un-American Activities Committee in April 1954. While Shahn could not foresee this event, he was certainly aware of the blistering criticism directed at Oppenheimer. The hand reaching down from the heavens, then, could also be a rebuke for the scientist who dared to question the “morality of atomic retaliation.”

Shahn would go on to draw Oppenheimer’s portrait for several commercial assignments, most notably for an article in the September 1954 issue of the Nation (Fig. 156). Both men were the targets of anti-Communist hysteria, and it is likely that Shahn felt a kinship with Oppenheimer after the latter was stripped of his security clearance at the conclusion of his highly publicized and politicized trial. James Thrall Soby claimed that the two men knew each other from Oppenheimer’s days at the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, although from
correspondence between the editor of the *Nation* and Ben Shahn, it would appear that the latter had requested photographs from Oppenheimer himself, although it is unclear if the two maintained an ongoing relationship.\textsuperscript{60} Clearly, though, the fact that Shahn rejected commissions for illustrations for Edward Teller and Stanislaw Ulam indicates that, at the very least, Shahn had personalized Oppenheimer’s persecution – by rejecting the commissions, he refused to add his name to the list of accusers.\textsuperscript{61}

In Shahn’s illustration for the *Nation*, the likeness of Oppenheimer is rendered in a torturous drawing, all sharp angles and nervous line. It has been suggested that in his thinly attenuated form, Oppenheimer resembles a Romanesque saint, wholly appropriate in that the Romanesque was a stylistic response to a doomsday scenario. The attribution is correct in style but fails to identify the actual source – Christ surrounded by the 24 elders in the tympanum of the great Romanesque Cathedral of Saint Pierre de Moissac, France, an image taken from the book of the Apocalypse by St. John (Fig. 157). Oppenheimer awkwardly assumes the gesture of Christ, with one hand partly raised and the other clasping a book. The infinite distance between the certitude of the apocalyptic Christ and the fallible Oppenheimer could not be greater. Oppenheimer is the very portrait of anxiety and anguished suffering, tortured by his own moral failings and the possibility of life without redemption.

In 1954, Shahn completed the painting *The Blind Botanist*, which, along with the Oppenheimer hearings, also coincided with the test of a second, more powerful hydrogen bomb (Fig. 158).\textsuperscript{62} Once again, an Oppenheimer-like figure appears on the canvas, tall and gaunt, his figure swallowed up in a dark-suit, with characteristic flat-top and a hint of pale blue in man’s sightless eyes. He sits precariously on a spindly, two-dimensional red chair – the color, of course, hardly seems incidental as Shahn has used it repeatedly up until this point to symbolize
atomic fire. The botanist clutches a prickly shrub, which first appeared as a green shoot in
Shahn’s 1947 painting *Spring* (Fig. 159). In that work, a young girl carefully grasps a similar
looking plant, and the work could be interpreted according to the broad themes of the postwar
era – the tender promise of reconciliation, a naïve hope for the future, and the younger generation
as stewards of the earth. In *The Blind Botanist*, the plant has reached maturation but is now more
reminiscent of the dormant rose bush with its maze of woody stems and sharp thorns. Blind to
external realities and blissfully involved with his specimen, the botanist seems unaware of the
possible dangers surrounding him.

*The Blind Botanist* is generally identified by scholars of Shahn’s work as a reference to
Oppenheimer or to the body of atomic scientists as a whole. While these identifications make
sense, it is also possible that the figure is a reference to a specific identity, the Englishman John
Gough, a celebrated blind botanist from the Lake District who was particularly revered by the
Romantic poets. In spite of his handicap, Gough could readily identify almost any plant or
flower by the touch of his fingers; Samuel Taylor Coleridge testified that Gough had become so
attuned to the natural world that “the rapidity of his touch seems fully equal to that of sight, and
the accuracy greater.” Gough was similarly praised by William Wordsworth, who cast him as
the Blind Man in book seven of his epic poem “The Excursion”, a lamentation on man’s drift
from the natural world after the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Wordsworth equated
Gough with those blind seers of antiquity who possessed something far superior than physical
sight – an inner vision, sparked by the imagination, which allowed one to perceive the mysteries
of life. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge contrasted Gough’s Romantic sensibilities with the
materialistic and mechanistic bias of their own age.
The Romantics had complained that, starting with the philosophy of Descartes, moving forward through the scientific revolution of Newton and his successors, the natural world had been stripped of its mystery, boiled down to a set of objective “truths.” There is a curious tension in Shahn’s painting between the natural and constructed elements, such as the figure’s silhouette of a suit or the simplistic rendering of the red chair. In its two-dimensionality, the spindly chair takes on the same schematic quality as the crystal shapes in Shahn’s painting *Second Allegory*. As red had evolved into Shahn’s color for nuclear disaster, the red chair may be a reference to the pen and paper calculations of nuclear science, which spectacularly failed to predict the destructiveness of the bomb’s blast. While it requires a bit of a conceptual leap to connect one image with the other, just as the drawing fails to represent the chair in physical space, scientific models can never adequately describe or support nature in all of its breathtaking complexity. In the wrong hands, this remote view of science can lead to a deadening of the senses as well as the death of nature in both the metaphorical and literal sense – understood by Shahn’s generation all too well as the news was announced that the new hydrogen bomb had vaporized an entire island in the Pacific.65

Shahn seems drawn to Gough for his reverence of nature and the importance he placed on experiential over theoretical models of science. But equally as important is the fact that Gough was the tutor of the chemist John Dalton, who first proposed his theory of atomic matter in 1804.66 By referencing Gough, Shahn establishes the tragic lineage between the blind botanist and the atomic scientists of the present era. The shrub itself is suggestive of a professional family tree, with Gough as the lifeblood, Dalton its roots, and 150 years of atomic development as its branches. The great irony is that Gough, with his “inner vision”, could not foretell how his
benevolent view of nature and the vast knowledge at his fingertips would be perverted into something monstrous.

In 1955, Shahn wrote of this work that “my own concern was to express a curious quality of irrational hope that man seems to carry around with him, and then along with that, to suggest the miraculous vocations which he pursues.” However, Shahn also remarked in a different context, that *Blind Botanist* was about “scientism, where pure research can turn against the researcher... who is unwittingly punctured and torn by the material he studies.” The latter meaning is evident in Shahn’s sketch for the 1954 version of the *Blind Botanist*, in which a much larger plant, covered in thorns, menacingly engulfs the sitter (Fig. 160). Shahn’s botanist in the painted version of the image is both John Gough, the blind seer who possesses an inner light of truth; and Oppenheimer, whose imagination, along with that of his fellow scientists, propelled humanity into darkness and despair. Curiosity blinded the atomic scientists as to the outcomes of their choices, and in the case of Oppenheimer, curiosity about the hydrogen bomb eventually trumped ethical considerations. The painting is also a withering response to those who would question whether or not scientists should be responsible for directing society in the application of knowledge it has placed in its hands.

In 1957, Shahn was approached by *Harper’s* magazine to illustrate Ralph E. Lapp’s story “The Saga of the Lucky Dragon”, which ran in three parts between December 1957 and February 1958. The article recalled a highly-publicized incident involving a Japanese fishing boat named Daigo Fukuryu Maru (Lucky Dragon) that had strayed into the range of the U.S. atomic testing grounds near the Bikini Atoll in the pre-dawn hours of March 1, 1954. Unbeknownst to the fisherman, the U.S. Department of Defense was about to conduct the second hydrogen bomb test in history. Shot “Castle Bravo” was nearly 1000 times as powerful as the bomb dropped on
Hiroshima. Due to a gross miscalculation by the Los Alamos scientists, it was also sixteen times more powerful than what had been predicted.

The fishermen were on deck just after dawn, attending to the nets for the day’s catch, when “the sky was suddenly lit up, and the sea appeared brighter than day.” Shortly thereafter, a fine ash began to fall down like rain, and it continued to fall well into the afternoon. The crew, amazed at the novelty of what they were witnessing, collected several bags of what was really pulverized, radioactive coral as souvenirs, and stored the contaminated ash under their pillows for safe-keeping. All 23 fishermen on board received high levels of radiation exposure and needed to be hospitalized upon return to port, and one, radiator operator Aikichi Kuboyama, eventually died. Over a hundred individuals aboard three separate U.S. Naval ships, Air Force and Army servicemen stationed on the inhabited atolls of Rongelap, Rongerik, and Utirik, as well as the inhabitants of these islands, also became victims of nuclear fallout.

After the media circus surrounding the tests at the Bikini Atoll in 1946, the U.S Department of Defense had become fairly secretive about its testing program in the Pacific. The discovery of espionage at the Los Alamos laboratory, and the subsequent Soviet development of nuclear weapons based on stolen designs -- culminating in the explosion of “Joe One”, the code-name given by the Americans to the first Soviet atomic bomb test, on August 29, 1949 in the desert of Kazakhstan -- necessitated that information surrounding the U.S. atomic energy program be kept tightly under wraps. This included, at times, failing to properly notify neighbors in proximity to the U.S. proving grounds in the Marshall Islands as to both the nature and the timing of nuclear tests. Of the ten atomic bomb tests conducted in the Pacific between 1947 and the spring of 1954, only two prior warnings were given to the Japanese Diet. In the case of the “Bravo” shot, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission simply sent a telegraph the previous October stating that a
series of tests would be conducted the following spring. The Maritime Shipping Board, the agency in Japan responsible for issuing weather and other safety warnings to seafaring vessels, was informed that ships could not venture within 100 miles of the Enewetak Atoll, although shifting weather patterns and miscalculations as to the strength of the bomb – both of which occurred at the “Bravo” shot – could radically affect safe distances from the center of detonation. Even after news of a radiological disaster had come to light, Joint Task Force 7 finished the remaining tests in the “Castle” series (a total of 4 hydrogen bomb explosions in all) with no further notifications.

The poisoning of the Lucky Dragon crew was almost a non-story. News of the atomic bomb test did not break in Japan until two days after the Lucky Dragon had returned to port at Yaizu – nearly 15 days after the bomb had gone off and the crew had unknowingly been contaminated by radioactive fallout. It was only by chance that a runner for the Japanese paper Yomiuri Shimbun heard about the story from a fellow boarder in Yaizu, a 19-year old student who had spoken to some of the crew members and heard their strange tale. Although the crew members themselves had suspected that what they had witnessed was a “pika-don”, the Japanese phrase for atomic explosion, the phenomenon of fallout was completely unknown. The young student, in direct contradiction with the local doctor, recognized their symptoms as the “atomic bomb sickness” described in some news clippings on Hiroshima which he had in his possession.

By the time the burns of the crew members were correctly identified by experts who had been summoned from Tokyo, and confirmation of this news was released to the press, their tuna catch had already made its way into the marketplace. Dr. Yashushi Nishiwaki, a biophysics professor at St. Paul’s University near Osaka, read of the fate of the crew in the morning newspaper, grabbed a Geiger counter, and headed over to the Osaka market to see if any fish had been
tainted by atomic ash. Alarmingly, he identified traces of radiation in a number of fish, and in the wrappings of a hundred more that had already been eaten or sold. His findings set off a panic, first closing the Osaka market, then the Misaki, Yokohama, and finally the grand Tokyo Wholesale Central Market, which had not shut its doors since a 1935 cholera outbreak. The widening circle of hysteria prompted some desperate fishmongers in other locations to post signs stating “we do not sell radioactive fish.”

Wishing to offset the panic by establishing “acceptable” levels of radiation for fish consumption, Dr. Nishiwaki composed an open letter to the Atomic Energy Commission, asking it to disclose the payload of the weapon. However, when he attempted to send his request via the U.S. wire service in Tokyo, the bureau chief refused to transit the message, calling him “an alarmist who was obviously seeking publicity.” Doctors at the University Hospital in Tokyo, where the two most seriously affected of the crew had been moved after the discovery of radiation exposure had come to light, also pleaded for information so that the injuries sustained by the men could be diagnosed and treated effectively. While some of the doctors on staff had also worked with Hiroshima victims, the fact that the Lucky Dragon was calculated to have been 85 miles from the point of detonation puzzled them. When Dr. Kenjiro Kimiura, an atomic scientist at the University of Tokyo, identified Strontium-90 in the ashes that had been collected on board the Lucky Dragon, medical experts shuddered – the element, which was not present in either of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima or Nagasaki, deposits itself in bone and can linger in the body for up to 28 years. Dr. Kimiura added his voice to those who begged for full disclosure about the elements of the new weapon being tested in the Pacific, but U.S. officials repeatedly refused, citing national security. All of these developments were bitterly condemned in editorial pages of the major Japanese newspapers.
Although the poisoning of the Lucky Dragon crew touched off an international incident between the United States and Japan, few Americans were aware of the extent of the damage at the time. On March 2, 1954, Joint Task Force Seven issued a press release stating that the U.S. had tested an atomic device without mentioning the type of bomb or the ensuing fallout. While it had been speculated that the spring test series would result in the explosion of one or more hydrogen bombs, the “ordinariness” of the announcement (as the New York Times put it), seemed to dismiss the possibility – indeed, after the spectacular destruction of part of the atoll at the 1952 hydrogen bomb test, the absence of reports of a cataclysmic event suggested that a Hiroshima-type bomb had been detonated instead. Ten days later, the Atomic Energy Commission released a potentially alarming report that a handful of U.S. servicemen had been accidentally irradiated at the test as a result of a sudden shift in the weather pattern, but as the radiation was listed as “mild” and the test was referred to as “routine”, several newspapers were still led to believe that the Bravo shot was an older-type fusion bomb. However, when the story broke out of Japan that 23 of its fishermen had been “hit by a nuclear downpour” of radioactive ash almost 80 miles from the center of the March 1 atomic explosion, the true nature of the H-bomb was exposed. Crewmen were extensively interviewed about “flashes of fire on the horizon”, searing white dust that fell from the sky, and the mysterious symptoms that overtook the sailors, one by one. At least one publication also reported that the sailors’ catch exhibited “such a degree of radioactivity . . . to be fatal to any person who remained for eight hours within 30 yards of the contaminated fish.”

After about week of airing shockingly blunt pieces of investigative journalism, major news organs suddenly reversed gears and sought to downplay the accident. United Press International distributed photos which showed the crew aboard the Lucky Dragon appearing to be in good
spirits, although the images were snapped before any of the crew members had been properly diagnosed with radiation sickness. The New York Times, who had initially placed the Lucky Dragon well outside of restricted waters, now claimed that the Lucky Dragon had trespassed the boundary of the “closed area” of 200 miles around Eniwetok, even going so far as to circulate an erroneous chart pinpointing the tuna trawler in the off-limits zone. The Washington Post lamented that even though the United States was probably culpable of some type of “negligence” in the affair, the sailors had failed to heed (non-existent) warnings of an imminent atomic explosion in the area. Although Japanese officials sent a flurry of messages through diplomatic channels attempting to disarm these myths, when their objections were reported in the press, they were frequently accompanied by references to prevailing anti-American sentiment in Japan. Such muddying cast doubt as to the seriousness of the Japanese claims.

Further information about the incident was doled out sparingly to the American public through comments made by U.S. officials who set American atomic policy, as well as well-known officials connected to the post-war Occupation of Japan. John Pastore, a Senator from Rhode Island and also a member of the Joint Congressional Committee of Atomic Energy, was the first American representative to actually see members of the crew on a diplomatic swing through Tokyo. He remarked that in spite of the crew’s lesions, hair loss, and (temporary) condition of infertility, he felt certain that their recovery was just a matter of weeks. Dr. John J. Morton, the American doctor at the head of the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in Hiroshima, also examined the victims and reported that their condition had “been greatly exaggerated” by a vengeful Japanese press. U.S. Ambassador to Japan John M. Allison, who was besieged by Japanese ministers to admit blame and postpone further tests until after the fishing season was over, assured the Diet that “the U.S. is prepared to take such steps as may be
necessary to insure fair and just compensation if the facts so warrant” -- but was quick to release a series of reports from the AEC denying the possibility of lingering radiation in the food supply. Representative Sterling Cole, Chairman of the Joint Committee of the Atomic Energy Commission, even went so far as to imply that the Lucky Dragon might have remained “undetected” because it had been on a spying mission for the Soviets, effectively playing upon American’s paranoia at the height of McCarthyism to deflect further criticism from the nuclear testing program.

Although the United States did eventually offer Japan 2,000,000 dollars in compensation the following year (most of which was pocketed by the fishing industry, not the victims), there was never any admission of culpability for the incident. In fact, until Dr. Lapp’s story was published in Harper’s, few Americans knew of the months of hospitalization endured by two of the crew members, the economic devastation resulting from the fish panic, the public’s rage at what was perceived as American indifference, and the specter of Hiroshima raised by death caused by a third atomic bomb. When, on September 24, 1954, crew member Aikichi Kuboyama succumbed to complications brought on by radiation exposure, his death was overshadowed by news that atomic rain was falling on Tokyo – allegedly the result of the first Soviet hydrogen bomb test in Siberia. For most Americans, the Soviet’s possession of the H-bomb, and with it the implicit possibility of their own annihilation, was far more worrisome than one “accidental” casualty to safeguard the country’s future.

Lapp’s article, arriving on the pages of Harper’s over three and a half years after the original incident, was part of a resurgence of nuclear anxieties after a period of diminished concern and a somewhat weary resignation to the necessity of the bomb in the face of Soviet aggression. To illustrate just how comfortable Americans had gotten with the bomb, the new U.S. proving
ground at Yucca Flats, in the middle of the desert of Nevada, had become something of a boon for the tourist industry of Las Vegas, as visitors flocked to the city to view the spectacular light show of the atomic explosions.\textsuperscript{85} While a drifting atomic cloud caused occasional “worries” for the city, the menace was thought to be merely psychological. Photographs in \textit{Life} magazine showed soldiers at Yucca Flats, sporting nothing more than ordinary fatigues and a “protective” set of goggles, witnessing the bomb tests from trenches dug on the proving grounds themselves.\textsuperscript{86} These stories and images were reassuring signs that radiation emissions were limited and temporary. However, at the end of 1954, when scientists concluded that the “Castle” test series in the Pacific, and the subsequent Siberian tests of the Soviets, had spread radioactive fallout over 7,000 square miles,\textsuperscript{87} two questions arose: one, would the U.S. forego an atomic attack, only to be poisoned by fallout from a Soviet nuclear bomb; and two, what would happen if the H-bomb was tested on American soil?

According to nuclear historian Milton Katz, Dr. Ralph E. Lapp was the first scientist to warn the American people about the distinction between “atomic bomb tests, which only produced local fallout, [and] hydrogen bomb tests [which] produced forms of radiation that circled the globe and returned to the ground thousands of miles from the point of explosion.”\textsuperscript{88} As a nuclear physicist at the Los Alamos laboratory, and one of the only scientists to accompany the first wave of Occupation forces into Hiroshima and Nagasaki in October 1945, Lapp’s opinions were frequently sought out by the \textit{Washington Post} and \textit{The New York Times}. Ironically, before the issue of fallout became known, Lapp had been something of an apologist for the H-bomb, contributing several articles to both publications which attempted to explain the mechanics of the new bomb in layman’s terms.\textsuperscript{89} Although he had a sobering respect for the almost limitless capacity of thermonuclear weapons – their power, as he noted was only limited by existing
methods of delivery -- he had also dismissed other scientists’ doomsday predictions that the explosion of an H-bomb would dissolve the earth into millions of tiny particles, or light the earth’s atmosphere on fire. He was often referred to as one of the “sane voices” of a nuclear future – which is why, after he remarked to the press that in his opinion, the world had reached the maximum safe level of radiation exposure after the “Castle” series, his statement generated a great deal of anxiety.90

Adding to public unease was the fact that, due to a new censorship policy put into place by AEC Chairman Admiral Louis Strauss in 1954, Americans had no idea as to the strength of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, the current nuclear stockpile, or the balance of weapons between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.91 Where once it seemed possible to defend against the heat and force of a “mere” atomic blast, the hydrogen bomb invalidated all Civil Defense tactics and survival strategies. The creeping, all-pervasive poison of nuclear fallout made suggestions such as those offered by the 1950 manual Survival Under Atomic Attack, such as “Don’t rush outside right after a bombing – wait at a few minutes … to give lingering radiation a chance to die down” hopelessly obsolete.92 Without a candid assessment of the new threat facing the U.S., the country was left, as Joseph and Stewart Alsop bemoaned in their syndicated column, “Matter of Fact”, “in intentional ignorance of the single most important problem that faces us today.”93 When the A.E.C. was finally pressured into releasing an “estimate” of the reach of radioactive fallout in the event that a hydrogen bomb was dropped on Washington, the conclusions were terrifying (Fig. 161).94

However alarming these developments must have seemed, it was only when radioactive, or “black” rain was detected in Chicago that the threats posed by an escalating arms race became uncomfortably real for the average American. The presence of detectable radiation in U.S. cities
led to the first truly national effort to ban nuclear testing, starting with a promise made by Adlai Stevenson in his 1956 presidential campaign. A new group of doctors and scientists, armed with research which showed that carcinogenic elements of nuclear fallout were also turning up in the food supply, made persuasive arguments as to the health hazards posed by continued atomic testing, particularly to children. Scientists like Leo Szilard and Linus Pauling, whose opposition to the nuclear program in the early 1950s had been silenced by McCarthyism, now openly denounced the “immorality” of atomic weapons, and circulated petitions asking for an immediate halt in international testing. Starting on May 26, 1957 and lasting through the first week of June, liberal California congressman Nathaniel Holt, who had been moved by these voices of protest, held congressional hearings on the issue of radiation, confronting uncomfortable AEC scientists and administrators with the damning conclusions of their own data.

By pairing his drawings with the expose by Dr. Lapp, a well-known critic of the Eisenhower administration’s nuclear policies and a man whom the Washington Post referred to as “a one-man atomic truth squad and nuclear lie detector,” Ben Shahn returned to his earlier roots of more overt political action through art. Shahn opened the first installment of Lapp’s story “The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon” with a column of smoke and fire, the same image he had used in his painting Second Allegory to symbolize atomic destruction (Fig. 162). Between that last painting and its appearance in Harper’s, however, the cloud had undergone a significant change. In Second Allegory, Shahn had equated the brunt of atomic power to the Old Testament fury of the vengeful, fire-and-brimstone God, who rained retribution upon the wicked. For the Harper’s story, Shahn’s cloud had reverted to something much closer to the symbolic image of fire in the first Allegory painting: hidden within the vague shape of the mushroom cloud is a devious beast,
bearing claws and fangs. While the illustration is much more subtle than the fiery she-wolf, it is no less an image of living terror: the cloaked *Beast of the Atoll* is an apt metaphor for the stealth properties of nuclear radiation. In its kinship with the earlier painting, *Beast of the Atoll* indicates an important shift in Shahn’s work: from ferocious condemnation of those who perpetuate nuclear weapons (all the politicians, scientists, and military men who populated Shahn’s pictures from the early to the mid 1950s) -- to renewed attention to the helpless victims who are affected by them.

Shahn’s *Beast of the Atoll* bears some resemblance to a work by the painter Hyman Bloom, whose painting *Harpies*, of 1947, was described as “an allegory . . . of the psychic situation of man in the modern world: lacerated, devoured, and killed by a multitude of swooping evils.”

After the Hickman fire story of 1947, Shahn had, like Bloom, been consumed by images of all kinds of barbaric and sinister creatures, which were turned into an ongoing series of drawings. These include his own Harpie, and several versions of a Phoenix – not to be interpreted, as is common, as a symbol of triumphant resurrection after fiery consumption, but as a never-ending cycle of insanity, where a “fresh start” is engendered by the seemingly inevitable course of destruction brought about by man’s greed and thirst for power. In an undated drawing titled “Demon”, Shahn combined all these creatures together into a figure that resembles his *Beast of the Atoll* (Fig. 163). Like Bloom’s use of mythical creatures plunged into the swirling, chaotic vortex to grapple with the inconceivable horrors of the war, Shahn’s whirlwind cloud of destruction references primordial images of terror – demonic spirits, chimerical beasts, and the unstoppable forces of nature’s wrath – to signify the nightmarish escalation of the arms race and hovering specter of nuclear annihilation. Shahn’s cloud may also may reference the nuclear “genie in the bottle”, an oft-made analogy in the postwar era between the power contained within.
the atom and the all-powerful, wish-granting genie of the Aladdin tale in the westernized version of *One Thousand and One Nights*. The genie was popularized in the animated cartoon “Our Friend the Atom”, which appeared beginning on January 23, 1957 in the “Tomorrowland” segment of the Disneyland television show (Fig. 164.). In 1955, Disney had been approached by the Eisenhower administration to take part in its “Atoms for Peace” program, in reality, an all-out propaganda assault to promote atomic energy as a gateway, borrowing from the words of William L. Laurence, to “a world built to order with no limit to the realization of [its] vast potentialities, physically, intellectually, and spiritually.” Working with the U.S. Navy and General Dynamics, builders of the first atomic-powered submarine the *U.S.S. Nautilus*, Disney created a combination live-action and animated feature that celebrated candy-colored visions of atomic cities. Taming the terrible genie to gentle servant, they hoped to domesticate nuclear energy and dispel nagging fears about the dangers of lingering radiation.

Given its currency in popular culture, the nuclear genie was a potent image for Shahn to manipulate. The hypothetical peacetime benefits of atomic energy – the miracle cures through bombardment with radioactive isotopes – complete with pictures of the lame rising from their wheelchairs, powered by the force of an atomic blast; factories which ran themselves; verdant fields and the end of hunger and poverty – had been comforting in the wake of the death toll of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Fig. 165). But by the late 1950s, not only had these benefits failed to materialize, but the narrow application of atomic energy for military purposes had disastrously backfired. Radioactive fallout was an unseen threat; and nuclear attack, either by intentional strike or catastrophic accident, was more likely than ever.

In his illustrations, Shahn not only turned the affable, Technicolor genie back into the conniving spirit of the original Arabian tale, but he reached back even further, to the ancient
Semite conception of jinn (the archaic word means “concealment”) as demons of fire and smoke that could shift into any form, including monstrous beasts.\textsuperscript{106} Shahn would have been familiar with the jinn from his own preparation for \textit{The Alphabet of Creation}, a small book of creation myths that he published in 1954.\textsuperscript{107} The jinn were known for their malice and treachery towards humans -- however, the specific reference is unnecessary, as Shahn’s beast taps into any number of well-known cultural myths in which an individual enters into a Faustian bargain with a diabolical spirit in order to break free of human limitations. Equally etched into the collective consciousness is the fact that such “unnatural” pacts often end badly for the individual, like the genie that takes advantage of poorly worded wishes to expose the greed behind one’s desires. The malicious spirit at the heart of Shahn’s \textit{Beast of the Atoll} exacts an even greater price, in that it retaliates for man’s overreaching ambitions by punishing the innocent and defenseless -- the crew of the \textit{Lucky Dragon}, and the displaced Marshallese.

Although the remainder of the twenty-four illustrations of the Lapp article are fairly straightforward, in the last installment of the \textit{Voyage of the Lucky Dragon}, Shahn once again returns to a mythological image of terror. In his second version of \textit{Beast of the Atoll}, Shahn plays upon the name of the boat of the doomed crew, and replaces his demon with an elaborate, Oriental dragon that floats in the sky above an atoll in the Pacific (Fig. 166). The dragon in Eastern cultures is a symbol of the primal forces of nature and the universe, the mythical ruler of weather and water. It is also evoked, as the name of the tuna trawler implies, as a symbol of luck or good fortune as these uncontrollable forces often determine one’s fate. Like all of Shahn’s creatures, the Oriental dragon is a chimera, a fusion of elements from a snake-like body to the talons of an eagle; and like Shahn’s previous \textit{Beast}, it also possessed shape-shifting qualities, able to alter its size from that of a carp to the enormity of the universe itself. But seen here, as it
hovers in the atomic cloud, it is also reminiscent of a passage in the Book of Revelation, where the dragon, deceiver of the whole world, appears in the sky before being hurled down upon the earth, only to cause great calamity for humankind. The second Beast of the Atoll, then, is a visionary image, full of apocalyptic warnings.

The pairing of the dragon with the atoll speaks of a pending ecological and human disaster on a cosmic scale, the truth of which has already been revealed in several “aberrant” incidents in the history of atomic development. The empty atoll recalls the emergency evacuations and repeated displacements of the native inhabitants of the Marshall Islands, who were threatened time and again by the drifting, unpredictable atomic cloud. Moving backwards, it eerily recalls the fragile beauty of a coral island before it was vaporized by the first explosion of a hydrogen bomb in the Pacific. An almost identical scene – palm trees bent over under the terrible blast of a nuclear explosion, was filmed at Operation Crossroads, and then distributed to the public in proud recognition of America’s technological supremacy – not knowing that two weeks later, the second bomb blast would create an environmental disaster. That the image is a book-end of sorts to the last illustration of the article – the altar at the memorial service of Aikichi Kuboyama – reminds the reader of the innocent victims of this “experimentation”, as well as the suicidal course for the fate of the planet if the arms race continued unabated.

Shahn’s return to public activism may have ironically been prompted by his distinguished appointment as the Charles E. Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard for the 1956-1957 academic year. While the year would prove to be a fruitful one in crystallizing Shahn’s thoughts in a series of lectures that would eventually be published as The Shape of Content, Shahn also had some reservations about the “comforts” of academia. He wrote that:

I am plagued by an exasperating notion: what if Goya, for instance, had been granted a Guggenheim, and then, completing that, had stepped into a respectable and cozy teaching
job in some small – but advanced! – New England college, and had thus been spared the
agonies of the Spanish Insurrection? The unavoidable conclusion is that we would never
have had “Los Carprichos” or “Los Desastres de la Guerra.” The world would not have
been called upon to mourn for the tortured woman of the drawing inscribed ‘Because she
was a liberal!’ Nor would it have been stirred by Goya’s pained cry, ‘Everywhere It Is
the Same!’ Neither would it have been shocked by his cruel depictions of human
bestiality, nor warned – so graphically, so unforgettably – that fanaticism is man’s most
abominable trait.108

Shahn’s preoccupation was expressed in the multiple versions of *Goyescas* that he made
during his residence at Harvard (Fig. 167). *Goyescas* is Shahn’s 20th century version of Goya’s
*Disasters’s of War;*109 the title itself, “Goyescas”, may come from a musical piece of the same
name, whose central movement was inspired by the Goya painting *El Pelele*, a work in which a
puppet is tossed mercilessly in the air by a group of females.110 The looming image of
Napoleon, engaged in a game of cat’s cradle over a pile of dead bodies, is perhaps one of
Shahn’s most powerful images, although it remains relatively unknown in his body of work.
The contemporary reference is obvious – Napoleon is linked to President Dwight D.
Eisenhower, the great general of the modern era and the Supreme Commander of the Allied
forces in World War II. Underneath the 19th century military garb, the caricature captures the
physical features of the president: close-set eyes, long, narrow nose, ears that stuck out, and
tight-lipped smile. The faces of the dead are borrowed from a World War II era news-clipping
of dead Germans in the artist’s source file on war111. But in 1956, images of dead bodies could
have evoked the slaughtered freedom-fighters of the Hungarian Revolution, which was
violently suppressed by the U.S.S.R., aided in part by Eisenhower’s decision not to intervene.112
Like in a number of other works from this era, Shahn’s general is unresponsive to the horrors
surrounding him, indicated by the man’s empty stare.

In *Goyescas*, perhaps what is far more disturbing is the fact that the stature of the central
figure, or his victory (one could argue that his body and hands form the “V” sign for victory),
seems to have been gained at the expense of the dead – which, from a pacifist point of view, one could argue is what propelled Eisenhower to the presidency. Although Eisenhower had fulfilled his campaign promise to end the Korean War, he forged a far more dangerous policy in moving nuclear weapons front and center in America’s defense system. His frequent taunting of the Russian Premier Khrushchev with the existence of these weapons could be equated to a dangerous war game. The presence of the dead, then, indicates that the Eisenhower presidency is not progress, nor does it advance the aims of democracy. Like Napoleon’s own disastrous campaign against Russia, Eisenhower’s tactical stance towards the Soviet Union is exposed as a foolhardy gamble with incredibly high stakes.

In 1960, Shahn contributed a serigraph poster for SANE, the National Committee for a SANE nuclear policy. SANE was founded in the Spring of 1947 by Norman Cousins, editor of the Saturday Review and longtime nuclear pacifist, along with Clarence Pickett of the American Society of Friends and poet Lenore Marshall. While the original intention of the founders was to throw their considerable weight behind the doctors and scientists already speaking out against nuclear testing, after the group placed full-page ads in a number of newspapers across the country calling for action by their fellow citizens, letters and donations poured into SANE’s nuclear office, prompting the launch of a national campaign. The group quickly attracted powerful antinuclear voices from Hollywood to Washington, D.C., including Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, Harry Belafonte, and Martin Luther King, Jr, many of whom linked a ban on nuclear testing to social justice for all. It also attracted grassroots support, as local chapters of SANE sprung up across the country, along with student chapters on college campuses. Although other anti-nuclear groups had existed in the past, SANE was the first organization to marshal the public’s widespread discontent with the country’s nuclear policies
by targeting their message to a mass audience.\footnote{114} Ben Shahn was active in both his local New Jersey chapter and the New York City chapter of SANE.\footnote{115}

“Stop the H-Bomb” is a notable departure from Shahn’s earlier posters both for various populist causes in the 1930s and his work for the O.W. I. during the war (Fig. 168). In keeping with the direction of Shahn’s work in the 1950s, the artist used flat, two-dimensional shapes and blocky text to create a work that is highly legible, yet still draws upon the mythical content of his recent atomic paintings and illustrations. The mask form that is the confrontational part of the image is the same menace at the center of Shahn’s previous illustration for Harper’s; here it has been enlarged, but retains the same, malevolent spirit of the original. The black of the mask encroaches upon the white space the serves as the ground for the text below, and at the same time, bleeds through the red lettering that makes up the word “STOP” at the top of the poster. The unevenness of the text creates an uncomfortable instability, as letters float instead of sitting on ground lines; and at the bottom of the poster, they literally slide downwards to the right to escape the expanding black mask. The letters themselves – part stenciled, part hand-drawn, at times almost appearing to be cut-out with a scissors and then collaged – reinforce the idea that the poster is both a personal and institutional response to the nuclear threat facing humanity.

Although the mask dominates the composition, the more alarming message of the poster can be found at its edges. The demon-mask rubs up against a stripe of blue of the left, as does the letter “H” in H-bomb, undoubtedly signaling both the location of the hydrogen bomb testing ground in the Pacific and the place where the phenomenon of nuclear fallout was first identified. Viewed abstractly, the sliver of blue juxtaposed with the large black mass takes on
the vague contours of sea, coastline, and interior country, signifying that the threat has migrated from an unknown atoll in the Pacific to the uncomfortable closeness of the Nevada desert.

As Laura Katzman has pointed out in her own assessment of the poster, although the message of Shahn’s text is completely straightforward, the ambiguity of the visual language seems to suggest some hesitation on Shahn’s part as to whether or not he personally believed that the popular groundswell against nuclear testing would be enough to halt America’s atomic ambitions. SANE and other like-minded organizations had gained a partial victory when, on October 31, 1958, President Eisenhower agreed to abide by the Soviet Union’s temporary moratorium on atmospheric testing. Yet the ban did nothing to halt the aggressive rhetoric between the two powers, and there were other, alarming developments that kept the threat of nuclear war front and center in the public’s consciousness. The surprise launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik on October 4, 1957 intimated to the American people that the Soviets might possess the technology to launch far-reaching nuclear weapons; when news leaked out that the Soviets had also successfully tested the first intercontinental ballistic missile, it was understood that enemy was in possession of a technology capable of delivering nuclear payloads across vast distances. Once the U.S. acquired their own ICBMs, the construction of missile silos nestled in the cornfields of the Midwest made the presence of nuclear weapons keenly felt to the average American. The nuclear test ban finally collapsed in 1961, and the U.S. eagerly renewed testing at its Nevada site year-round.

Also in 1960, Shahn, with fellow artists Edward Sorel and Jules Feifer, formed Graphic Artists for SANE. The group, comprised of painters, illustrators, photographers, and printmakers from the New York city local chapter of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, wished to augment SANE’s highly effective print ad campaigns with posters targeting an urban
audience. The New York City chapter had already witnessed the effectiveness of this approach, when, in the spring of 1959, SANE had rented a storefront at Times Square for four weeks. Under a blue and white sign that asked “Suicide or Sanity?” the window displayed, according to an account by a reporter from the *Nation*:

>a Geiger counter, marked magazine articles explaining the effect of Strontium-90 in the milk we drink, statements by Albert Schweitzer and Linus Pauling on the dangers of nuclear fallout, a long photograph showing the flattened landscape of Hiroshima after the A-bomb and, perhaps a small concession to the ambience of the district, a flash-board hooked to an “Electronic Brain”, inside that challenged all comers to game of tic-tac-toe.¹¹⁸

A loudspeaker pumped out readings of anti-nuclear literature onto the sidewalk between the hours of 11:30 am to 11:30 pm. The station was staffed by volunteers from over 70 neighborhood groups in New York City; however, on quite a few occasions, pedestrians had spontaneously pitched in with the efforts, cajoling the stream of humanity to enter the exhibit. It was estimated that more than 20,000 people visited the storefront, and more than 6,000 people signed a petition calling for a permanent moratorium on atmospheric testing.

A collaborate effort by Graphic Artists for SANE resulted in a poster which showed a pregnant mother in silhouette with the caption “1 Million Unborn Children Will Be Born Dead or Have Some Gross Defect Because of Nuclear Bomb Testing” (Fig. 169). The poster was a companion piece to the first SANE ad to run nationally in major American newspapers, which featured Dr. Benjamin Spock, the renowned child development expert, warning against the possibility of radiation being transmitted through breast milk. Although some criticized the campaign as alarmist, Spock’s warning had, in a way, already become a reality — Strontium-90, the same deadly element found in the ash collected from the Lucky Dragon, had been identified in the milk supply as early as 1956.¹¹⁹ The posters generated by Graphic Artists for SANE
helped to widely distribute the message of nuclear disarmament through memorable, hard-hitting imagery.

In September of 1961, Shahn showed a collection of 11 paintings and several drawings based upon his collective feelings about the Lucky Dragon incident. The *Saga of the Lucky Dragon* opened at the Downtown Gallery on October 20, 1961. According to Bernarda Bryson Shahn, Shahn considered the *Saga* his finest achievement as an artist. The paintings were:

> a consummation of everything he wanted to say in paint. Intellectually, emotionally, and in the material-visual sense, they were gratifying to him. More than any of his other works, grouped or singly, they established him in his work, expressed his relationship to it, told the role that he wanted to play in it.\(^\text{120}\)

Shahn embarked on the paintings for *The Saga of the Lucky Dragon* after a lengthy visit to East and Southeast Asia from January through April of 1960. Ben and his wife Bernarda Bryson Shahn had been invited by their close friends Dorothy and Sydney Spivack to join them on an exciting, round-the-world trip that would start off in Tahiti, move through East and Southeast Asia, over to Russia and then Western Europe, and finally back to New York by the middle of July. The itinerary was mostly laid out by the Spivacks, and while there is no evidence that Shahn undertook the trip with the series of paintings in mind, the artist did encounter several interesting sights that would later be incorporated into the *Lucky Dragon* cycle.\(^\text{121}\)

Shahn carried his camera with him on the trip, and took several small 2 x 3 photographs that are consistent with traveler snapshots.\(^\text{122}\) Surprisingly, this former FSA photographer, renowned for his moving images of poverty-stricken Americans during the Great Depression, took few photographs of the people whom he encountered (with the exception of a group of orphans at the Faling Orphanage in Bangkok). Although he had set out to do as he had always done – to use his camera to document the human condition -- he commented to an interviewer in 1964 that during this trip, he found that he had “lost his ability to photograph people.”\(^\text{123}\) Instead, most of Shahn’s
photographs from the first part of the trip focused on the magnificent carvings of the temple complex at Angor Watt; a number of native rituals, including a cremation ceremony; and random street scenes which are often interesting for their formal compositional values, but offer little in the way of sociological insight.

When the group moved on to Japan, the Spivacks and Shahn spent a significant amount of time touring the country, and Shahn in particular delighted in the “total aesthetic” of the place, the integration of art into every facet of Japanese life. Because of his fascination with the Hiroshima ruins, and his growing activism in the area of nuclear disarmament, one might have expected that Shahn would have made some effort to visit the city, but there is at least no written evidence to suggest that he tried to incorporate it into the itinerary. Aside from the small number of photographs he took of the shrines in Kyoto, his snapshots of Japan are mostly of bustling urban panoramas, notable for their juxtaposition of the peaked silhouettes of traditional Asian architecture with the slick billboards of Western commercial advertising (Figs. 170, 171). Debunking the romanticized view of Japan as a country of kimonos, cherry blossoms, and tea houses, Shahn’s photographs concentrated on its modernity, and in an indirect way, such as in image of the glamour shots in a display window of a photographer’s studio -- with women and men styled in bouffants and pompadours -- the impact of the Occupation on Japanese culture (Figs. 172, 173).

At the end of their month-long excursion to Japan, Ben and Bernarda decided to cancel the remaining legs of their trip. Writing to Edith Halpert the first week of April, Shahn informed his gallery dealer that he had become saturated by the experience. He asked, “How much can you digest in one meal?” The artist indicated that he was “eager to get home and return to work.” As he had no other pressing projects before him, it would seem that Shahn was referring to the
Lucky Dragon series, which he would begin in earnest in the summer of 1960, churning out a total of 10 paintings during the course of a year. According to Bernarda Bryson Shahn, the artist had returned from Japan with the idea of turning every facet of the H-bomb test into a human experience.¹²⁶

The Saga of the Lucky Dragon was the third in a series of painterly cycles that Shahn had tackled throughout his career. At its unveiling at the Downtown Gallery in April 1932, The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti had established Shahn as the most passionately committed social artist of his generation. Shahn had spent months at the main branch of the New York Public Library meticulously researching details of the life, trial, and execution of the two Italian immigrants, which were channeled into the Passion’s 23 gouaches. The honesty and directness pioneered in these works would become the hallmarks of the Social Realist style. But by 1960, Shahn had outgrown that approach. His challenge now was to somehow marry his convictions and the content of the Lucky Dragon narrative with the symbolic type of painting he had developed after the war.

In a letter to Shahn from his friend and biographer Russell Lynes, who had been assigned the task of writing the forward to the Downtown Gallery catalogue for the exhibit, Lynes asked Shahn to confirm that the “Saga of the Lucky Dragon” series had, in fact, evolved from an usual source – a series of drawings that he had produced in 1948 for Harper’s magazine, which accompanied an article on a catastrophic mine disaster in Centralia, Ohio.¹²⁷ Lynes wrote, “I know that Allegory came out of the Hickman story…Am I right that the paintings came out of the drawings you did for the Centralia piece?”¹²⁸ This second possible source is intriguing, in that it ties the Lucky Dragon incident with an earlier event that demonstrated gross negligence by the government and big business. On March 25, 1947, a gigantic explosion at Centralia Mine
No. 5 had claimed the lives of 110 miners, making the event one of the worst mining disasters in history. The disaster prompted Congressional Hearings on Miner Safety in both the House and Senate. United Mine Workers of America union president John L. Lewis powerfully testified with these words:

> If we must grind up human flesh and bone in the industrial machine we call modern America, then before God I assert that those who consume coal and you and I who benefit from that service because we live in comfort, we owe protection to those men first, and we owe security to their families if they die.\(^{129}\)

The first painting of *The Saga of the Lucky Dragon* begins with the crew-member Aickichi Kuboyama, the radio operator for the tuna trawler, who would become the first casualty of the hydrogen bomb (Fig. 174). Perched at the edge of his hospital bed, with the familiar beast of the atoll flanking him like a shadow, the pathetic figure introduces the cycle of paintings with these words:

> I AM A FISHERMAN
> AICKI CHI KUBOYAMA
> BY NAME. ON THE
> FIRST OF MARCH
> 1954 OUR FISHING
> BOAT THE LUCKY
> DRAGON WANDERED
> UNDER AN ATOMIC CLOUD
> 80 MILES FROM
> BIKINI. I AND MY FRIENDS
> WERE BURNED.
> WE DID NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO US.
> ON SEPTEMBER 23 OF THAT YEAR
> I DIED OF ATOMIC BURN.

*Kuboyama* is linked to images of other atomic victims in his “display” pose and prominent placard. Kuboyama himself had appeared in a photograph in the March 29, 1954 issue of *Life* magazine, a close-cropped shot in which his head is being probed by a strange metallic device; the photograph is particularly surrealistic in that the probe is held by a pair of disembodied hands.
In photographs taken by the Atomic Bomb Survey Commission of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there is a similar distancing effect, as the victims are placed on examination tables and forced to hold placards announcing their condition. In both instances, the photographs of the injured are clinical and detached, with doctors probing and pointing at their specimens without emotion. Shahn inserts Kuboyama in this uncomfortable visual tradition, but rather than continuing this pattern of dehumanization, Shahn allows Kuboyama to regain control over his own body by changing the words on the placard from a clinical assessment to a mournful, first-person account. Kuboyama is a provocation, badgering the viewer to look at, and get intimately familiar with, the lives sacrificed for the sake of their own security.

At the same time, the figure of Kuboyama is a good example of Shahn’s desire to instill in this character a sense of the everyman/everywoman; he is not a specific likeness to Kuboyama himself, but is drawn from a number of familiar bodies that populate Shahn’s work. In the body’s transparency, there is some similarity to Shahn’s Anatomical Man, the dissected figure that was paired with the ruins of Hiroshima in his painting of 1949; there is also a resemblance to two backdrops Shahn made during a brief stay at Black Mountain College in 1951, Nicolas C and Downfall, both of which feature an angular, transparent figure which he continued to rework well into the 1960s (Fig. 176). Rather than a portrait, Shahn purposely creates a stark and unadorned figure that has been stripped of most of the idiosyncrasies of personality, and more tellingly, that of race. Encountering this lack of specificity, the spectator might project the face of a loved one, imagining a father, brother, or husband as the victim of nuclear fallout.

Shahn’s cycle of paintings follows the trajectory of the story first laid out in Harper’s, but his creative response was no longer limited by the dimensions of the page. One of the most
challenging aspects of the cycle was to conceive of an image that would communicate the invisible terrors of nuclear fallout in a manner as gripping as the awesome force of a nuclear explosion. In the most harrowing painting of the series, *We Did Not Know What Happened to Us*, Shahn re-imagines the crew’s encounter with the hydrogen bomb blast as a plunge into a hellish inferno (Fig. 177). In Shahn’s retelling of the story, at the moment of the explosion, the sky goes dark and the Lucky Dragon is viciously attacked by the Beast of the Atoll. The painting expresses the full brunt of the terror that was unleashed upon the fisherman: the beast is everywhere, clawing at his victims, laughing malevolently as they try to escape the suffocating black cloud. The bodies of the fishermen are literally turned upside down, dragged downward, and contorted into anguished poses; their limbs try to protect their bodies from harm, and at the same time, futilely attempt to repel the demon’s attack. The fisherman to the right, face singed from the heat of the atomic blast, has become the pawn of the merciless beast.

As the title suggests, *We Did Not Know What Happened To Us* is conceived from the point of hindsight. The painting is a looking back and reinvesting what was curious and playful – the strange phenomenon of the falling ash – with murderous significance. The memory of the event is thus colored by knowledge of the horror to come. However, it would be hard to ignore that the contorted bodies of the fishermen are evocative of the hundreds of thousands of victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, trapped in the hell-fires of atomic incineration. This is partially hinted at by the source for the face at the right – a porcelain Japanese Noh mask – which, in many forms of Noh theater, is donned by a ghostly character who re-enacts the scene of his own death. Shahn had photographed one of these masks in a shop window on his trip to Kyoto (Fig. 178).

The painting contains traces of the original violence of the pika-don, the disproportionate use of aerial power against an innocent population who also “did not know” the nature of the terrifying
force which attacked it. The fisherman, then, are also the mutilated corpses of the dead, the shadows of the unseen, who have come forth to tell their story, pointing to a larger body of human atrocities that have yet to be confronted.

After the somberness of the first two paintings, *That Friday: Yaizu* is an unexpected, colorful assault on the senses (Fig. 179). In the third painting of the cycle, the lively fishing port is represented as a brightly hued cubist landscape, which is laid out on a long horizontal. However, bearing down on the right, threatening to disrupt the cheery bustle of life, is the terrifying whirlwind of the atomic beast. Just as in the previous work, the painting seems to hold a double significance: the cloud represents the radiological threat carried by the Japanese fishing boat, as it slowly made its way back to shore over the course of two weeks; at the same time, in the white transparency of its form, it is a ghostly reminder of the indiscriminate violence of the aerial bombardment campaigns against Japan, culminating in the explosion of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

While the abstraction of *Yaizu* is peculiar to Shahn’s work, a somewhat similar treatment appears in the 1950 painting *Paterson*, as well as in the two serigraphs he made with the same title. In those works, a horizontal brick building with brightly colored windows, representing the dye patterns displayed in the windows of Paterson (an important dye-making industry was located there), evoked the animated character of an industrial town (Fig. 180). In *Yaizu*, the jumbled, architectural fragments are less representative of a sleepy fishing village – the way that Yaizu was characterized in the Western press -- than the urban centers that Shahn documented in his photographs of Japan. *Yaizu* even bears similarities to the vertiginous environment of a Western metropolis in the strong thrust of vertical elements scattered throughout the composition. As the U.S. Occupation Press Office had fed Americans a steady stream of
misinformation that Japan continued to be constructed from bamboo and paper, it is tempting to think that, in his choice of visual language, Shahn was attempting to correct this error, casting the victims of his saga as thoroughly modern instead of alien and inscrutable. By adopting the visual language of Patterson with a slight change in orientation, he may also have been trying to point out that nuclear fallout could easily be reversed to any American city.

From that Day On is the second of three images of Kuboyama in the Saga (Fig. 181). The painting addresses the return of Kuboyama to his family after his exposure to the bomb and long voyage home. There is barely any hint of the illness and excruciating death to come. Kuboyama, dressed in traditional, loose-fitting clothing and sandals, has gathered his infant son up in his arms and holds him close to his chest. The baby wrestles in fits and starts, and it is his lively energy that finally calls attention to the sad, far-away look in his father’s eyes. Shahn emphasizes the preciousness of this exchange in Kuboyama’s oversized hands, which seem to desperately clutch the child as Kuboyama cradles him in his arms. Shahn had drawn a similar image for the story of the Centralia Mining Disaster, in which mothers, clutching their babies, await news of their doomed husbands (Fig. 42). As in the earlier illustration, the purity of the child, his innocence and lack of awareness of the machinations of the world, is a tug at the adult conscience. Surrounding and partially washing over the two figures, an intense blue, the exact color of the sky before the last light of day is extinguished, further contributes to the mood of overwhelming sadness. The title itself suggests a march to the inevitable, and the burst of red in the sky, over the shoulder of Kuboyama, is the disaster that will stalk him in his remaining days.

In Physicist, Shahn pictures the Japanese atomic scientist who discovered Strontium-90 in the ashes which fell on the crew (Fig. 43). Physicist was based on an earlier illustration which appeared in Harper’s, although this version is far more abstract. An almost unrecognizable
figure, covered in head-to-toe protective gear, examines a piece of paper, upon which Shahn’s by-now familiar atomic beast makes an appearance. *The Physicist* is notably different from Shahn’s other collection of scientists, in that while most of his features have been covered up, a single eye, shown both frontally and in profile, addresses both the evidence and the spectator. Up until now, Shahn’s scientists have consistently lacked the element of sight: they are either literally blind to the facts set out before them, like the subject of the *Blind Botanist*; or, in the case of Oppenheimer or the other souls tortured by outcomes of their own calculations, they have lacked an inner vision that could have guided them to make ethical decisions. By contrast, the *Physicist*, both correctly identifies the contagion, and in holding the results up for the viewer to scrutinize, communicates the danger of his findings to the world. The transparency of his actions stands in marked contrast to both the physicists of the Manhattan Project and the scientists of the Atomic Energy Commission, who vigorously downplayed the carcinogenic threat of nuclear fallout.

Behind the Physicist, there is a chart which presumably measures the extent of radioactive particles in the specimen he holds in his hand. Overlaid on the grid, in a delicate, calligraphic line, there is a dance of molecules, which mimics the turbulent energy of the Dragon. With its brightly colored squares, the checkerboard grid is hard not to compare to the image of *Paterson*.

The similarity points out another, alternative layer to Shahn’s painting of dye-making town which may be of some significance here. While the image of *Paterson* came directly out of Shahn’s actual observation of the physical environment, Shahn’s work on this theme was also inspired by the epic poem of William Carlos Williams of the same name. For Shahn, the following lines held particular significance:

\[134\]

\[
\text{Without intervention nothing is well spaced}
\]
...the old will go on
repeating itself with recurring deadliness

In 1959, Shahn had been asked to design some of the stage-sets for Jerome Robbins’ choreographed work *Ballets: USA*, and the artist had recycled the image of *Paterson* for the backdrop of one of its movements, “New York Export.” On a poster commissioned for the ballet’s European tour, Shahn had paired the words “Ballet: USA” with that same backdrop, transforming the sliver of architecture into a symbol of American culture (Fig. 184). It is possible, then, that the colored pattern is used in the same way in this work; however, given that the root of Shahn’s stage-sets and poster was in the dark, destructive language of the Williams’ poem, it would seem that any association would be negative. On second glance, there is a jazzy syncopation to the plotted points on the chart, and a liveliness to painted squares, that, in contrast to the archaic symbol of the dragon, seems wholly inappropriate in light of the horrifying revelations of the Physicist’s tests. In analyzing his specimen, the Physicist not only glimpses the formula for a nuclear holocaust, but more importantly, identifies its elements as part of a larger pattern of destruction that is distinctly “American”, and its radioactive poison as an ugly “export” that has repeatedly been forced upon Japan.

In *It is no use to do anymore*, the lonely figure of Kuboyama appears way off in the distance, collapsed on his hospital bed, perhaps already in a coma (Fig. 185). Admitted to the Tokyo hospital in March, Kuboyam’s health had continued to decline over the course of six months. In the lower, right-hand corner, two men, who with their spectacles and suspenders look to be American, exchange remarks on the fate of the doomed patient. Their presence is cynically remarked upon – while the Dr. John J. Morton, director of the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, insisted that American doctors had been “turned away” from treating the crew
members of the Lucky Dragon. Shahn exposes this lie by placing Morton at the scene of the Kuboyama’s death; no doubt the artist was referencing actual photographs which showed him physically examining Kuboyama’s crewmembers (Fig. 186). Shahn’s message is clear: it is because of the refusal of the U.S. government to divulge the components of the bomb, and the willingness of the ABCC doctors to feign ignorance of Kuboyama’s symptoms, that there was “nothing to be done” to save the man’s life. The huge physical distance between the Americans and the dying Kuboyama signals callousness towards the human victims of the atomic experiment.

Kuboyama’s moving funeral service and final burial are addressed in the last two images of the Saga. *A Score of White Pigeons* witnesses the procession of the townspeople of Yaizu to the place of Kuboyama’s burial on a hillside overlooking the town (Fig. 187). According to the account of the ceremony written by Dr. Ralph Lapp, Kuboyama’s widow, dressed in a black kimono with the family crest, carried the ashes of her husband in the funeral procession, with her two young daughters by her side. Shahn omits any reference to the widow in his painting, and instead focuses on the children’s loss of their father. In the procession, Kuboyama’s eldest daughter carried a wooden mortuary tablet on which the words “The soul of the deceased Kuboyama” were composed in black ink. In Shahn’s version, although the marks are barely visible (Shahn has, in fact, painted over them), the characters on the board actually represent the words “Fukuryu Maru Number 5”, which Shahn had practiced writing in a notebook in preparation for this work. The younger daughter carries a picture of Kuboyama, which Shahn renders as a true portrait likeness, reminding the viewer that each death is significant, particularly to those who are closest to it. Shahn has covered her face with a Noh mask, once again tying this individual tragedy to the thousands of atomic casualties who haunt the memories of the living.
The release of white pigeons at the end of the ceremony echoed the same ritual enacted each year at Hiroshima and Nagasaki on anniversaries of the nuclear attacks, and in the painting, the doves of peace mingle with the smoke of the atomic cloud. Kuboyama’s ashes were then interred in a vault on the hillside. In *Why*, a single white chrysanthemum is placed upon the family’s marble tomb (Fig. 188). The finality of the stone marker questions the senselessness of Kuboyama’s death, as well as all the innocent victims of atomic aggression.

Reviews of *The Saga of the Lucky Dragon* were decidedly mixed. Brian O’Dougherty of the *New York Times* exclaimed that “the master is masterly.” Acknowledging that the shadow of the H-bomb tragedy from 1954 is one that falls more and more urgently over all us us these days, to see Mr. Shahn’s exhibition becomes almost a duty. For in the one of the superb services that art can perform, and rarely does, he takes the inhuman energies that threaten to destroy us and simply puts them in human perspectives.

But some reviewers wondered out loud about the soundness of Shahn’s approach, weighing it against the “symbolic-journalistic art” of his Sacco and Vanzetti paintings of two decades prior:

The pictures do not come off, and this reviewer wishes that there were more room to investigate why…Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent – doubly so – but their innocence was in their overcoats and their neckties, their mustaches and haircuts, in the leather bench and wood paneling of the courthouse anteroom, as well as themselves. These poor people are innocent in a way for which we have yet found no plastic symbology.

Anticipating his critics, Shahn, in an article that he published in *Art in America* in November 1961, Shahn explained how this cycle of paintings differed from those of the past:

When I did the Sacco and Vanzetti series and also the Mooney series, I was very careful to document my work with newspaper photographs and clippings, but with the Japanese paintings I no longer felt the need of such documentation. The radio operator on the fishing boat, who subsequently died of radiation poisoning, was a man like you and me. I now found it unnecessary to paint him, but to paint us. The radio operator playing with his child was any father playing with his child. The Japanese Nobel Prize-winning physicist who first suspected the truth was a scientist. He might have been any scientist. I no longer felt the need to document him specifically. The terror of the beast…is now the terror that haunts us all.
At least one observant critic managed to grasp another subtle, ideological difference between the *Saga* and Shahn’s earlier cycles. While in the *Trial of Sacco and Vanzetti*, Shahn had placed blame squarely on the Lowell committee for the abuse of justice that resulted in a fixed trial and the immigrants’ execution, Shahn’s *Saga of the Lucky Dragon* was not only accusatory of the usual, corrupt power structures, but also hinted at the audience’s complicity in the poisoning of the crew. To justify nuclear testing for the sake of one’s own security was to condemn another man to death – a fate as unjust as that of Sacco and Vanzetti. As Richard Getlein wrote in the *New Republic*: “To put the Japanese atom victims into art today is to put ourselves into it [as well]…by illustrating them, [Shahn] illustrates us also, and perhaps we deserve it.”

After his paintings were shown at the Downtown Gallery, Shahn continued to tirelessly promote the message of peace through the works in the *Saga*. In 1962, some of the paintings were sent abroad in an exhibition organized by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art to great acclaim. In page after page of positive reviews from tour stops in Amsterdam, Brussels, Vienna, and Rome, Shahn was lauded as “the most authentic painter of the United States”, a “new phenomenon, rare in the plastic arts”, who “ignored all the styles of the day” in order to create painting “that haunts the memory.” “Why does this art speak so strongly to the public?” asked one reviewer. “Because Ben Shahn always takes a definite stand: he is speaking for the social…for peace, for humanity.” All of the paintings and the *Harper’s* illustrations were published in a children’s book, *Kuboyama and the Saga of the Lucky Dragon* in 1965. And although Shahn didn’t live to see it, The *Lucky Dragon* paintings and drawings eventually traveled to Japan and were exhibited in Tokyo in 1970. Bernarda Bryson Shahn personally escorted Kuboyama’s widow, Suzuki Kuboyama, through the exhibit.
Once, back in 1956, Shahn’s art dealer, Edith Halpert, had criticized the artist for “dissipating” his “energies as an artist on most of the commercial jobs…such as illustrations, book jackets, pamphlets, and talks.” With an air of exasperation, she continued: “Your reply is that it stimulates you. Surely with your imagination and creativity, it is hard to believe that you need superimposed ideas.” Shahn responded, rather curtly, that it was “necessary” that part of his attention “has got to go into participation requiring political affairs – sometimes requiring art work, sometimes requiring design, and so on.”

To Shahn, such work was a moral necessity.

Shahn’s words at the Peace Convocation in Buffalo, New York in 1951, seem just as relevant today:

If either art or society is to survive the coming half-century, it will be necessary for us to reassess our values. The time is past due for us to decide whether we are a moral people, or merely a comfortable people, whether we place our own convenience above the life-struggle of backward nations, whether we place the sanctity of enterprise above the debasement of public. If it falls to the lot of artists and poets to ask these questions, then the more honorable their role.

5 The negative reaction to this painting is discussed in John I. H. Baur, Phillip Evergood, (New York: 1975), 47.
6 Blume, quoted in Peter Blume: Paintings and Drawings (Manchester, New Hampshire: The Currier Gallery of Art, 1989), 16.
7 The Carnegie International Exhibition of Painting had been suspended for over a decade due to the war and its aftermath, although an all-American Annual had continued to be held. The 1950 exhibition featured 360 artworks from 11 different countries; 108 were entries by U.S. artists. The first place prize for painting went to The Thresher, an abstract canvas by French artist Jacques Villon. See Howard Devere, “Frenchman Wins 2,000 Dollar Art Prize at the Carnegie International Show,” New York Times, October 20, 1950, 31.
8 It is curious that Kaufmann, who in 1950 was employed by the Museum of Modern Art as a Research Associate and Design Consultant in the Department of Architecture, purchased the painting for the Art Institute of Chicago. Blume’s painting, The Eternal City, had been purchased by MoMA in 1937 and was enormously popular.
Kaufmann’s donation to the Art Institute of Chicago, known for its strong collection of American realists, may suggest the diminishing importance of Blume and stylistically similar painters in New York.

9. See, for example, the discussion of this painting in Greta Berman and Jeffrey Wechsler, *Realism and Realities: The Other Side of American Painting, 1940-1960* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Gallery, 1982), 56-57. If the painting is analyzed from left to right, the legacy of the atomic bombing and the Holocaust negates the precarious construction on the left.


11. For the photograph in context, see “What Ended the War”, *Life*, September 17, 1945, 38.

12. A copy of this photograph can be found in Ben Shahn’s source material files in the Ben Shahn Papers at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Microfilm Roll D383: 115.

13. John Bartlow Martin, “The Hickman Story,” *Harper’s* 197 (August 1948): 39-52. Shahn had a fruitful relationship with *Harper’s* that would last more than a decade, and one could argue that his best illustrations were created for these assignments. For Shahn’s thoughts on his productive relationship with the magazine, see “Ben Shahn,” in “After Hours” *Harper’s* (December 1957): 79-81.

14. Ben Shahn, *The Biography of a Painting* (New York: Paragraphic Books, 1966), 16. A number of these creatures would be revisited in different paintings, prints, and illustrations throughout the 1950s. See, for example, Shahn’s painting *City of Dreadful Night*, 1951, and *Homer’s Struggle*, 1952, which, the artist writes in *The Biography of Painting* he considered to be major works that “each having, besides its classical allusion, a great deal of additional motivation for me,” 16.

15. Ben Shahn, *The Biography of a Painting*, 49. Shahn discusses the evolution of his painting from the factual and specific Social Realist style of the 1930s to the more broadly allegorical war paintings such as *Cherubs and Children, Liberation*, and *Red Stairway*, in which the artist, crushed under the enormity of world events, could only paint images of the “general fate of Europa.” Shahn suggests that it is the incomprehensible markers of the war and its aftermath, and the failure of realism to grasp the horrors of what had been witnessed (and the terrors yet to be unleashed), which prompted him to develop a “personal” realism. Shahn’s new direction in painting would filter reality through a set of symbols culled from personal and collective memory. See *The Biography of a Painting*, 37-51.

16. Ibid., 22. The fire in the Brooklyn tenement was ruinous to the Shahn family’s fortunes, and it thus understandable why the Hickman fire touched such a nerve in the artist. Shahn’s father, who had climbed up the building’s drainpipe to rescue his brothers and sisters from a second-story window, carried scars on his hands and face from the fire’s scorching heat for the rest of his life. See Shahn, *Biography of Painting*, 14.

17. Ibid., 7. Given Shahn’s prominence as an artist, he was at the middle of the debate raging in artistic circles as to the viability of realism as a painterly idiom in the post-war era. This reference to the debate in *Biography of a Painting* is just one of numerous public statements that Shahn made on the subject. While Shahn had shifted a socio-political “journalistic” art to a style of painting that was more allegorical and symbolic, it is clear that the artist felt that the abandonment of content altogether was in some way a shirking of one’s social responsibility. See, for example, his statement at the Harvard University Conference “American Painting for the Past Twenty-Five Years: An Unorthodox View,” quoted in Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-54* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 114.

18. Ibid., 12.

19. Ibid., 16. That fact that this symbol held great personal significance to Shahn can be seen in the use of the fiery lion’s head in his work “Credo” of 1960 and 1964, in which Shahn drew himself in self-portrait presenting an open
book to the viewer with the image of the lion emblazoned on its frontispiece. This work is discussed in Kenneth W. Prescott, *The Complete Graphic Works of Ben Shahn* (New York: Quadrangle, 1973), 60-61.

20 Ibid., 21-23. The wolf is the traditional villain of Russian folk tales, sneaking into the village to attack under the dead of night. See Jack V. Haney, *Russian Animal Tales* (The Complete Russian Folktales, Volume 2) (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999). Shahn had earlier confronted the image of the wolf in a painting he had been commissioned to create for the Capehart Corporation’s recording of Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*. In the painting of 1943, two children, one of whom dons a wolf-mask, meet an isolated landscape full of foreboding. Capehart rejected the painting for their advertisement due to a minor inaccuracy in one of the figure’s sneakers. This incident is recalled in James Thrall Soby, *Ben Shahn: Paintings* (New York: George Braziller, 1963), 20.


24 This passage is one of the most memorable in Hersey’s book, allowing the reader to have some sense of the magnitude of the bomb’s destructive power against its human targets. See John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 77.

25 For more on Walter Paepke, as well as the artists who were employed in the “48 States” and “Great The Shape of Content Ideas of Western Man” advertising campaigns, see Neil Harris and Martina R. Norelli, *Art, Design, and the Modern Corporation: The Collection of the Container Corporation of America, A Gift to the National Museum of American Art* (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986).

26 Half-way through the campaign, Shahn had become disillusioned by Wallace, convinced that his voice was being drowned out by Communist sympathizers. He nonetheless continued to work for him until his defeat in the 1948 presidential election. See Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate*, 1947-54, 62-66.


28 For an overview of the second term of the Truman presidency, see David G. McCullough, *Truman*, chapters 9-10.


39 For a complete history of the exhibit, see Montgomery Museum of Art, *Advancing American Art: Politics and Aesthetics in the State Department Exhibition, 1946-1948*.

40 The public outcry over the use of taxpayer dollars was fueled by articles in mainstream magazines, such as “Your Money Bought These Paintings,” *Look*, February 18, 1947, 80-81.


42 The Emergency Civil Liberties Committee was founded in 1951 by Thomas Emerson of the Progressive Party, Cary McWilliams of *The Nation*, and Stringfellow Barr, to counter the attack on liberals who were not Communists, but who fought domestic repression and refused to comment on their reservations about Communism. Shahn became acquainted with Emerson and Williams through his work on Wallace’s presidential campaign.

43 See *Counterattack*, July 25, 1952, 1.


47 Shan had a long-standing relationship with *Scientific American*, providing several illustrations for the magazine, and even appearing in a portfolio published by the magazine on *Art and Science* in 1954. Shahn’s drawing *Fundamental Questions* (a portrait of Einstein), and *Human Resources* appeared in reproduction.

48 For the influence of the atomic bomb and nuclear energy on aspects of design in the postwar era, see the Brooklyn Museum catalogue *Vital Forms, American Art in the Atomic Age* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2001).


50 For the religious outcry over the possession of “supernatural” powers by the atomic community, see Paul Boyer, *By The Dawn’s Early Light: American Art and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), chapter 11.

Oppenheimer had taken up Sanskrit studies in 1932, taking private tutorials with Arthur W. Ryder, a professor of Sanskrit at the University of California, Berkeley, and was soon reading the ancient Hindu text in the original language. He called the text “the most beautiful philosophic text of any tongue”, and would refer to it frequently both in his personal life and in public statements. The quote mentioned in conjunction with the Trinity test was first published in a *Time* magazine article on Oppenheimer in 1948. For the importance of this text for Oppenheimer’s philosophy and ethics, see Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 99-102, 152, 290, 309.


Laura Katzman mentions Shan’s rejection of these assignments for *Time* magazine in her article “Art in the Atomic Age: Ben Shahn’s ‘Stop H-Bomb Tests’,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11: 1 (Spring 1998): 150.

The second thermonuclear explosion, and the first true hydrogen bomb test on March 1, 1954, far exceeded the destructive power of the first test two years earlier, and will be discussed more at length in connection with the radiological contamination of the Lucky Dragon crew.


John Gough is the inspiration for Wordsworth’s character The Blind Man in Book VII of his epic poem, *The Excursion*.

The world’s first thermonuclear explosion on November 1, 1952, was a prototype of the hydrogen bomb in that its explosive contents were pumped into a 20 foot cylindrical tower that was built on one of the islands in the Enewetak Atoll. The detonation vaporized the island of Elugelab, leaving behind a 1.2 mile crater in the coral reef. News of the test was withheld from the public for sixteen days after the explosion, and nine days after the 1952 presidential election. See, for example, “Dean Bares Test: Breaks Weeks’ Silence on Unofficial Reports of Super-Explosion,” *New York Times*, November 1, 1952, 1-2. News of the vaporized island is buried on page 2 of the article.

For an overview on Dalton’s discovery and its far-reaching effects for atomic science in the 20th century, see...


68 Ben Shahn, quoted in Soby, *Ben Shahn: His Graphic Art*, 18.


82 Sterling Cole, quoted in Ralph Lapp, *Voyage of the Lucky Dragon*, 40.

83 Initially, the issue of compensation was raised in connection to the hospital expenses of the irradiated fishermen, although once the contaminated fish were identified as having entered the food supply, Japan widened its claims and sought an official apology. See “Japanese May Ask Damages for Atomic Ash Victims,” *The Hartford Courant*, March 17, 1954, 1; “Japanese to Ask U.S. Apology on H-Damage,” *The Washington Post and Herald Tribune*, April 2, 1954, A4. The official compensation package was only agreed upon in January 1955; it fell short of the six million dollars requested by the Japanese Foreign Minister. See “H-Bomb Compensation: U.S. Payment of 2,000,000 Agreed to by Japan,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1955, 3. No formal apology has ever been issued.

84 “Japanese Spot Soviet Bomb Site,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1954, 4. Japanese meteorologists had detected radioactive rain falling over Tokyo, and estimated that the fallout had drifted on wind currents from Siberia. The meteorologists determined the explosion to be a hydrogen bomb due to the similarity between the radioactive
particles present in the rain and that of the 1954 series of Spring tests at Bikini. Although the title of the article suggests no connection to the irradiated fisherman, Kuboyama is mentioned in the second half of the piece, and is reported to be “near death.” His demise was announced the following day. See “Japanese Dusted by H-Bomb is Dead,” New York Times, September 24, 1954, 10.


90 “Cult of Doom,” New York Times, March 4, 1950, 16. David Lilienthal, former head of the Atomic Energy Commission, cited Dr. Ralph E. Lapp in a speech in New York as one scientist who did not agree with the prediction that an explosion of a hydrogen bomb would lead to a doomsday scenario for mankind. Lapp began to reassess the threat.

91 Surprisingly, in an era of increasing domestic oppression on free speech, scientist editors of periodicals around the country, such as Hanson W. Baldwin of the New York Times, decried the “roaring voices of the Joe McCarthys” preventing open and honest discussion about “atomic matters” and national security. See Hanson W. Baldwin, “Atomic Secrecy – 1: Hush-Hush Policy Called Foe of Security and Menace to Nation’s Need to Be Alert,” New York Times, March 1, 1953, 6.


94 Hanson W. Baldwin, “H-Bomb Fall-out Poses New Defense Problems,” New York Times, February 20, 1955, E10. The new AEC revelations of the scope of radioactive fallout in the event of a hydrogen bomb attack were revealed in the article. The potential of migrating fallout significantly challenged existing plans to survive a “conventional” Hiroshima or Nagasaki-type atomic blast.

95 Adlai Stevenson was the first politician to publicly call for a moratorium on nuclear testing. In the lead-up to the 1956 election, the Eisenhower camp tried to paint dissenters of the nuclear program as “Communists” who threatened the security of the country. Former President Truman added to the vitriol, stating in essence that a few lives lost from atomic fallout was “a small sacrifice” compared to the “infinitely greater evil of the use of nuclear bombs” against the United States. See Milton A. Katz, Ban the Bomb: A History of SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, 1957-85, 15-16, 19-20.


For the press coverage on these hearings and its affect on public opinion, see Milton A. Katz, *Ban the Bomb: A History of SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, 1957-85*, 18-20.


The dream of atomic energy as a compliant servant was put forth by William L. Laurence at the end of *Dawn Over Zero* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946). On page 219, he writes that “atomic energy [will be] harnessed in the service of mankind, as contrasted with its use in atomic bombs.” The idea gained currency throughout the 1940s and into the early 1950s, and then seemed to decline after the explosion of the H-bomb and more information about radioactive fallout began to be released in the press. Disney seems to have been the first to crystallize the idea in visual form.

The illustration pictured is taken from the print version. For the text, see Heinz Haber, *The Walt Disney Story of Our Friend the Atom* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1956).

William L. Laurence, “Is Atomic Energy the Key to Our Dreams?,” *Saturday Evening Post*, April 13, 1946, 41. The material covered is this an extension of thoughts first presented in Chapter 19 of *Dawn Over Zero*.


Ben Shahn, *Alphabet of Creation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954). The text is an introduction to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. *The Alphabet of Creation* is an adaptation of an ancient Gnostic legend from the *Sefer Ha-Zohar*, or *Book of Splendor*, supposedly written in Aramaic by Moses de Leon, a Spanish scholar of the 13th century, but supposedly revealed centuries earlier by the Jewish mystic named Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai. The story tells of the creation of the world through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Although the Zohar does not mention jinn, they do appear in several stories of Gnostic Kaballah and also in Jewish fairy tales; Shahn may have come across this concept during his research for the illustration.

Ben Shahn, quoted in Greenfield, *Ben Shahn: An Artist’s Life* (New York: Random House), 285. See chapter 37 for more information on Shahn’s activities at Harvard during the 1956-57 academic year.

The photograph can be found in the Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Microfilm Roll D383: 122.


It is unclear whether Shahn used the title as a colloquial reference to the “Disasters of War” etchings, or if he also intended to cite the operatic work. “Goyescas” is a nationalistic Spanish opera that was written by Enrique Granados in 1914, and first performed at the Metropolitan Opera in 1916. Based on an earlier set of six piano concertos also named “Goyescas”, the opera was the only composition to be directly linked to a specific painting by
Goya, that of *El Pelele*. I am thankful to independent Goya scholar Oscar Villegas for making me aware of Granados’ work.

112 For more information on Eisenhower’s role in the unfolding crises, see Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (Cold War International History Project Series) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). That the Hungarian Revolution gained extensive coverage in the press, and the struggle of its people captivated the imagination of everyday Americans, can be seen by the decision of *Time* magazine to name the Hungarian Freedom Fighter it “Man of the Year” for 1956. The choice was announced on the January 7, 1957 issue of *Time*.


114 The complete history of SANE is covered in Mitlon A. Katz, *Ban the Bomb: SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1986). The archival records for SANE can be found at the Peace Collection of Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

115 Copies of letters referencing Shahn’s membership in both chapters can be found in the Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Microfilm Roll D147: 1016-1019.


117 Some of the well-known visual artists who were members of GAFS included: Richard Avedon, Jules Feiffer, Andreas Feininger, Art Kane, Leo Lionni, Duane Michaels, Hans Namuth, Arnold Newman, Ruth Orkin, Irving Penn, Maurice Sendak, Edward Sorel, and Garry Winogrand. See Membership Lists; GAFS membership form letter; and GAFS brochure; SANE Archives, Peace Collection of Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA. Shahn had worked for Lionni when the latter was the Art Director for *Fortune* magazine in the 1940s.


119 The Dr. Spock campaign was highly successful in mobilizing average Americans, particularly mothers, to the anti-nuclear cause. 25,000 posters of the Dr. Spock were distributed across the country, including copies handed out at a Pediatrician’s Convention in New York. See Milton A. Katz, *Ban the Bomb*, 75.


121 The itinerary for this trip can be found in the Taller Archive, Ben Shahn Papers, Harvard University Art Museums.

122 In 1970, Ben Shahn’s photographs from Asia were donated to the Harvard University Art Museums by Bernarda Bryson Shahn. The photographs had been part of the couple’s private collection.


125 Ben Shahn, letter to Edith Halpert, April 1, 1960, Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Microfilm Roll D144: 1011-1012.

126 Bryson Shahn, *Ben Shahn*, 55.

127 John Bartlow Martin, “The Blast in Centralia No. 5: A Mine Disaster That No One Stopped” *Harper’s* 196 (March 1948): 193-220. Shahn created over sixty-four different illustrations in conjunction with the assignment,
although only 24 accompany the article; see James Thrall Soby, *Ben Shahn: Paintings* (New York: Braziller, 1963), 29.

128 Russell Lynes, letter to Ben Shahn, August 31, 1961, Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Microfilm Roll D146: 298. Lynes had been the editor at *Harper’s* during the time that Shahn made his illustrations for John Bartlow Martin’s article, “The Blast in Centralia No. 5.” His interaction with Shahn on this assignment is mentioned in Soby, *Ben Shahn: Paintings*, 29.

129 The testimony is recorded in Martin, “The Blast in Centralia No. 5: A Mine Disaster That No One Stopped,” 218.


131 A good sampling of these photographs can be found in Averill A. Liebow, *Encounters with Disaster: A Medical Diary of Hiroshima* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1970). The book is the author’s personal and professional account working as a physician for the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission after the war.

132 The photograph was probably taken in Kyoto, as numerically, it falls after Shahn’s photographs of that city’s ancient shrines.

133 Most “information” about Japan that reached the average American was conveyed through popular entertainment, particularly a number of films that featured storylines of American G.I.s stationed in Tokyo as part of the Occupation. Even though these films were Hollywood productions, they often employed the assistance of one or more members of the Occupied Press as script consultants. See Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the Yellow Peril: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).


135 For more on Jerome Robbins ballet “NY Export, op. Jazz”, see the *New York Times*, August 31, 1958, SM42. Shahn’s backdrops can be seen in the photographs of the dancers at rehearsal.


137 The list is located in the Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Microfilm Roll D148: 1024.

138 The tradition of doves being released at the annual memorial service of Hiroshima and Nagasaki dates back to 1947, when such ceremonies started to be formalized. See “Hiroshima Celebrates Day of Atomic Bomb and Campaigns to End All Wars,” *Life*, September 1, 1947, 28-30.


141 “Shahn in Amsterdam,” *Art in American* 3 (November 1961): 62-67. The article features Shahn’s presentation and interpretation of a wide selection of his paintings, some of which were to be shown in Amsterdam as part of an upcoming tour of his work organized by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art.


143 The reviews are located in the Ben Shahn Papers, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. A full itinerary and catalogue of work’s can be found in the Museum’s exhibition files.


A copy of the letter can be found in the Ben Shahn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Microfilm Roll D144: 902-903.

Conclusion

In the fall of 1962, the United States probably came the closest it has ever been to nuclear war. On October 14, an American U-2 reconnaissance plane photographed an image of a missile base being constructed in the heavily agricultural Pinar del Rio section of western Cuba. Further surveillance confirmed the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles at other disguised bases scattered around the island. President John F. Kennedy first learned of these photographs on the morning of October 16, and immediately called an emergency meeting of the group of 19 advisors known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM). Acting on the advice of the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor, the president ordered the military to begin preparations for a full-scale aerial attack on Cuba’s missile bases, a naval blockade of its ports, and a ground invasion by U.S. troops. On October 22, Kennedy delivered a televised radio address to a shocked nation announcing the alarming proximity of nuclear weapons in Cuba. The president made clear in no uncertain terms that a missile launch from Cuba directed at the United States would be considered an act of war by the Soviet Union, with the United States ready to respond in kind.

In the coming days, a flurry of telegrams went back and forth between Washington and Moscow, with the U.S. attempting to force an admission of guilt from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, and Khrushchev, in turn, communicating staunch denial over having installed tactical nuclear missiles in Cuba. As the stalemate continued, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered Strategic Air Command to DEFCON 2, and to set into motion Operation Falling Leaves, in which radar was hastily set up to monitor the missile sites for evidence of a possible launch. Several tense moments – including the shooting down of a U-2 plane over Cuba – could have
precipitated a war between the two superpowers. However, on October 26, Khrushchev sent a handwritten letter to the State Department in an attempt to defuse the crisis:

I propose: we, for our part, will declare that our ships bound for Cuba are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its troops and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba. Then the necessity of the presence of our military specialists in Cuba will disappear.¹

While the letter was greeted with cautious optimism, the following day, Khrushchev seemed to do an about face, demanding a new set of conditions for the resolution of the conflict. Khrushchev argued that the placement of “destructive missiles” on the border of Turkey – on the border of the Soviet Union itself -- was “analogous” to the staging of missiles 90 miles off the coast of Florida, and demanded that the U.S. announce its intention to remove weapons from the border.² Kennedy, however, decided to ignore the demands laid out in the second message – which would have put the United States at odds with its security pledge to NATO – and instead, drafted a reply to Khrushchev’s first proposal. In a letter made available to the press the night of October 27, Kennedy wrote to Khrushchev that “the key elements … seem generally acceptable as I understand them…”³ On October 28, the crisis was over: Khrushchev, in a broadcast over Radio Moscow, agreed to halt work on military bases in Cuba and return all missiles to the Soviet Union; the U.S., in turn, publicly agreed to respect the sovereignty of Cuba and secretly arranged to remove nuclear weapons from the border of Turkey.

The nuclear brinksmanship of the Cuban Missile crisis drove home the urgent need for international action regarding the control of nuclear weapons. On August 5, 1963, the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union signed the “Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space And Under Water,” often colloquially referred to as the Partial Test-ban Treaty or Limited Test-ban Treaty. The opening text of the Treaty proclaimed that the:
principal aim [is] the speediest possible achievement of an agreement on general and complete disarmament under strict international control in accordance with the objectives of the United Nations which would put an end to the armaments race and eliminate the incentive to the production and testing of all kinds of weapons, including nuclear weapons.\(^4\)

To that end, the original parties agreed to ban outright the testing of atomic weapons either underwater or on land, while making concessions for the continuation of underground tests. The Treaty was opened to other states, with 163 countries adding their signatures. It went into effect on October 10, 1963.

As the memory of the Cuban Missile Crisis began to fade and nuclear weapons were literally driven underground, there was an exponential drop-off in cultural responses to bomb. Paul Boyer, who writes about this period in the epilogue of his book, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, notes that “after 1963, the nuclear theme largely disappeared from TV and movies, emerging only fleetingly in fiction and popular music,” although he then goes on to list a host of “exceptions”:

the 1965 rock hit ‘Eve of Destruction’; Randy Newman’s song “Political Refrain, with its insinuating refrain “let’s drop the big one and see what happens; the young man in Ann Beattie’s novel Falling into Place, who won’t let his girlfriend use the bug killer Raid because it gives him nightmares of nuclear tests and radioactive active fallout…\(^5\)

What is true is that, even before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, the country’s attention had been wrenched, at least momentarily, from an international yet amorphous threat to domestic unrest at home. Newspapers and television screens were filled with dramatic images that marked the progress of the civil rights movement: high-pressure fire hoses and guard dogs being turned on peaceful demonstrators; bloody confrontations at lunch counter sit-ins; young school students being dragged off to jail. These images exposed the
country to violence that was real and immediate, and all the more disturbing in that it posed a threat to American hegemony from within.

However, a number of artists would continue to paint nuclear themes to draw attention to the threat constantly lurking in the background of American lives. Moreover, once the United States entered Vietnam in 1965, artists used the image of the bomb to suggest that America’s status in the world was dependent on its long history of violence, that, to quote M.I.T. historian Robert Fogelson, “America had resorted to violence in order to reach goals otherwise unattainable.”

Starting with the extermination of the Indians and leading up to wholesale slaughter of civilians in Vietnam, American history had been rooted in ruthless competition and violent, military conquest. While nuclear themes may have disappeared from literature, movies, and television, the atomic bomb lived on as metaphor in the visual arts.

In Andy Warhol’s “Death and Disaster” series of the 1960s, Warhol collected ready-made images of anonymous individuals meeting violent ends from the front pages of tabloid newspapers and silkscreened the photographs onto various surfaces. Beginning with simple, black-and-white reproductions of a single image blown up on canvas, the images began to double, triple, and then multiply, with Warhol overlaying the reproductions with garish neon shades of orange, pink, yellow, and red. As the series continued, Warhol further manipulated his images, blurring, fading, and overlapping them in such a way that the violence contained in the photograph seemed to seep into the process itself. But the overall effect is somehow empty -- just as in the media’s constant onslaught of one macabre story after another desensitizes viewers to the realities of violence, in Warhol’s silkscreens, the horrific somehow gets lost in the artist’s manipulations. Car accidents and race riots, suicide jumpers and plane crashes, all jostle for attention in their tawdry and sensational glory. With the “Death and Disaster” series, Warhol
extended his earlier critique of consumerism to the media, who dance a fine line between news and entertainment in reporting these catastrophes; and to the public, who eagerly feed upon these images all the while expressing moral revulsion at the media’s increasing intrusion into “inviolable” territory.

The only image not to be serialized in different variations in Warhol’s “Death and Disaster” series was *Red Explosion (Atomic Bombs)* (Fig. 189). There is some dispute over the actual date of its creation; as Georg Frei and Neil Printz point out in Warhol’s catalogue raisonné, secondary sources record the date of this work as 1965, and use the title *Atomic Bombs*. However, stylistically, based on layout of the pictures and technique, Frei and Printz place this work in 1963, which, they claim, is also reinforced by the description of this (or perhaps a similar work) titled *Red Explosion* in the 1963 exhibition records of the Leo Castelli gallery in New York. In *Red Explosion*, Warhol silkscreened a newspaper photograph of an atomic cloud burst in a repetitious, checkerboard pattern across a nearly nine foot vertical canvas, covered from top to bottom with a bright, pulsating red. The multiple mushroom clouds are at once alarming, signifying nuclear proliferation gone amuck, and yet slightly comical, in the sense that what had been terrifying and unfathomable had, through the very repetition of the mushroom cloud, been rendered so utterly predictable.

If the date that Frei and Printz propose is correct, then Warhol’s *Red Explosion* was created in the same year as *Silver Chair, Orange Disaster (Electric Chair)*, and *Blue Electric Chair*, 1963. In the latter, the repeated, blurred images of an unoccupied electric chair in a death chamber form one half of a diptych, with the second half composed of a uniform blue panel (Fig 190). Taken together, the two subjects seem like the microcosm and macrocosm of violence, with the cool remoteness of death of by electric shock in some way breaking down the moral barriers that
make the death of thousands by push-button warfare possible. The two machines are also linked as instruments of “justice”, although, the comparison also calls to mind instances of hysteria and suspicion resulting in botched justice, such as the rushed executions of supposed Communist spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg; or on a global level, the fear and mistrust between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. that almost led to a nuclear exchange in 1962. Warhol preys upon the public’s easy seduction by sensationalism only to confront them with an uncomfortable reality: that absolute “safety” and “security” are myths enforced by acts and instruments of violence in which they are fully complicit.

Because of its instantly recognizable image, *Red Explosion (Atomic Bombs)* may seem closer to Warhol’s Brillo boxes and Campbell soup cans than the anonymous disasters of “Death and Disasters.” Because the United States had been the only country to drop an atomic bomb on its enemy, by default, the mushroom cloud had metamorphosed into a distinctly “American” icon, and Disney’s bizarre involvement in promoting atomic energy had literally intertwined atomic power with one of the country’s most recognizable brands. But *Atomic Bombs* also follows in the wake of important books as Nevil Shute’s 1957 bestseller, *On the Beach*, and Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler’s *Fail-Safe* -- which were both dramatized on the big screen -- as well as lesser, “B” science-fiction movies of the 1950s, which had turned musings of the nuclear apocalypse into Saturday afternoon diversions. Television episodes of the *Twilight Zone* and the *Outer Limits* that dealt with atomic themes had brought terrors of nuclear extinction right into the home. *Red Explosion (Atomic Bombs)* is linked to the other works in the “Death and Disaster” series in that it ghoulishly offers up images of death as entertainment, with one remarkable difference: unlike the images of anonymous death stolen from yesterday’s news, the audience is asked to view an image of what may ironically turn out to be a carbon copy of their own demise.
In fact, as Jonathan Jones has pointed out, Warhol’s repetitious pattern of the atomic clouds is similar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Stopped Worrying and Love the Bomb.* In the final moments of the film, an atomic bomb that has been erroneously launched at the Soviet Union reaches its target and explodes. The explosion, in turn, triggers a Doomsday device that had been secretly developed by the Soviets to ensure that, in case of a surprise nuclear attack, the superpowers would both face mutual destruction. The last scene is “a montage of mushroom clouds [assembled from] many of the test explosions photographed and filmed in the 1950s and early 1960s,” with the explosions timed to the strains of Vera Lynn’s buoyantly optimistic World War II song “We’ll Meet Again.” Jones observes that “like Warhol,” Kubrick’s repetition of the mushroom cloud to signify the end of the world “implies that we already have seen the end, that that we walk around with film of the world's destruction running in our heads.”

In August 1964, after two U.S. ships were allegedly fired upon by North Vietnamese boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, Congress gave President Lyndon B. Johnson the power to “take all measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” By the end of the year, Johnson committed 140,000 Marines to Vietnam, and sorties began flying bombing missions over North Vietnam. The beginning of a new conflict – with military armed with a powerful new array of tactical nuclear weapons – prompted some artists to create more pointed critiques of the mechanization of warfare and the big business of a “militarized” America. In James Rosenquist’s mammoth and best known work *F-111* (1964-65), the artist created a multi-panel arc that, like Dr. Strangelove, is both humorously perverse in its glorification of the military, and tragically accurate in predicting the results of a foreign policy rooted in warmongering (Fig. 191). Rosenquist, a former billboard painter, adopted the format
of his former profession as well as its materials and techniques to create an industrial pageant that stretches from the dawn of electricity to the explosion of the atomic bomb, with the fuselage of the F-111 as its backdrop. The piece is comprised of fifty-one separate, ten-foot high panels, made of canvas and aluminum which, when installed, reaches a length of eighty-five feet and three inches, and in its original installation at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, wrapped around four walls. Read from left to right in terms of its predominant imagery, the tail end of an F-111 B bomber is connected to a panel with a light bulb; which is hinged to a panel with a section of the bomber; which runs behind the head of a smiling little girl under a metallic hairdryer; which connects to another section of the bomber; which is next to a gigantic atomic explosion topped by an umbrella; then to a scuba diver with a similar “cloud” of oxygen bubbles floating upward in pitch black water; and finally, the needle-head of the bomber resting on a bed of spaghetti.

In 1961, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara green-lighted project TFX, an ambitious attempt to create a long-distance, high-speed, missile-carrying fighter plane that would address the needs of both the Navy and the Air Force against a menacing Soviet threat. Controversy plagued the project from the start. First, the Navy and Air Force, who had been developing their own prototypes in the late 1950s in response to new advances in Soviet air defenses and jet bombers armed with nuclear warheads, were unconvinced that one plane could serve the needs of both services. Then, in 1962, the Department of Defense awarded the contract for the F-111 to General Dynamics Corporation, even though both the Navy and the Air Force both felt that Boeing had presented a more efficient (as well as significantly cheaper) prototype. At the time of the award, General Dynamics Corporation was reeling from a 143 million dollar loss, but General Dynamics President Roger Lewis, who had served as Assistant Secretary of the Air
Force from 1953-1955, used his military connections, as well as his friendship with Lyndon Johnson, to take the most coveted military contract away from Boeing. In 1965, the TXH, renamed the F-111, was tested to great fanfare. Once the air war in Vietnam began, it was understood that the F-111 would, unlike other fighters already in use, be standard equipped with a nuclear payload. In fact one version of the F-111 was designed solely for the purpose of conducting nuclear missions.12

When asked, “What is the F-111?” Rosenquist stated:

It is the newest, latest fighter-bomber at this time, 1965…People are planning their lives through work on this bomber, in Texas or Long Island. A man has a contract from the company making the bomber, and he plans his third automobile and his fifth child because he is a technician and has worked for the next couple of years. Then the original idea is expanded, another thing is invented; and the plane already seems obsolete. The prime force of this thing has been to keep people working, and economic tool; but behind it, there is a war machine.13

Rosenquist’s F-111 clearly illustrates this unholy alliance between big business, consumerist culture, and war. In Rosenquist’s painting, images of consumer products that have taken the drudgery out of housework -- light bulbs, cake mixes, and no doubt canned spaghetti – are all representative of American ingenuity on a smaller scale. The aluminum panels, as well as the chrome hairdryer, speak to the filtering down of “atomic” and “space-age” design from bombers and satellites to popular consumer products. Rosenquist’s Technicolor palette is borrowed from 1950s cinema, such as Douglas Sirk’s overblown melodramas; while the sheer size and horizontality of the piece itself are evocative of a movie screen. He also uses classic film language – extreme-closeups, fades, montage – to suggest that the images that dance in foreground are illusions, or more precisely, diversions, meant to seduce as well as sedate. As the bomber literally forms the backdrop of these images, Rosenquist points out the absurdity that the economic prosperity of the country – not to mention its rise to superpower status – was
born out of war production in the 1940s and is now being kept afloat by the gigantic defense contracts issued by the government to keep pace with the Soviets. Consumerism is a distraction that keeps the anxieties of the atomic age at bay.

In late January of 1965, when Rosenquist was still working on the painting, President Johnson delivered a special defense message to Washington that was reported by the media. As Time noted in its coverage, President Johnson “ticked off the impressive statistics of U.S. weaponry: more than 850 land-based ICBMs, more than 300 nuclear-armed Polaris missiles borne by submarines, more than 900 long-range SAC bombers.” In connection with the F-111, Johnson communicated “in purposely vague terms ‘remarkable new payloads for strategic missiles.’” Rosenquist may have Johnson’s address in mind when he painted the remaining panels, which combine the image of the fallout of an atomic cloud being deflected by an umbrella with that of a scuba diver, possibly a comical reference to the impossibility of escaping the nuclear threat even by hiding underwater. Like the ridiculous “duck” and “cover” routines of the fake bomb raids, and similarly far-fetched recommendations by Civil Defense, these two panels expose the flimsiness of these defenses against the world’s nuclear arsenal.

Although the F-111 had not yet made its debut in Vietnam -- in fact the plane would not be ready until 1968 -- Rosenquist combined the light bulb, the fighter plane, and the specter of nuclear war to suggest past, current, and future atrocities stemming from American invention. In an interview with the New York Times, Rosenquist was quoted as saying “I am strongly involved with the United States and the position of a person trying to be an artist. It [F-111] is an antidote to the new devices that affect the ethics of human being.” Rosenquist’s attempt to claim himself as an American who is nonetheless opposed to its use of violence to propel its fortunes underscores the inescapable fact American patriotism has, according to Ira Leonard in
his essay, “Violence and the American Way” “been expressed in military and militaristic terms.”
As Richard B. Maxwell Brown, the leading historian of American violence, provocatively wrote: "Violence has accompanied virtually every stage and aspect of our national experience," and is "part of our unacknowledged (underground) value structure." This is deeply at odds with “the national self-image” that had been cultivated since Woodrow Wilson, what Leonard refers to as “a myth, of America as a moral, "peace-loving" nation which the American population seems unquestioningly to have embraced.”

Johnson’s touting of America’s cache of atomic weapons was also in direct contrast to the “peacenik” image he had cultivated just a few months prior in the run-up to the 1964 presidential election. Johnson’s Republican opponent Barry Goldwater had made a careless remark about the possibility of using nuclear weapons to end the conflict in Vietnam. Johnson capitalized on this slip with the infamous “Daisy” ad, a campaign commercial that ran only once the evening of September 7, 1964. In the roughly 60-second television advertisement, a little girl in a field of flowers is seen counting the petals of a black-eyed Susan. When she reaches nine, her voice is replaced by that of an adult male initiating the count-down sequence of a missile launch. The young girl’s attention is diverted to something in the sky; when the count reaches zero, the camera pans to a close-up of one of her pupils, the screen blackens, and then a gigantic fireball unfolds into mushroom cloud, and a landscape is engulfed in flames. The voiceover then switches to President Johnson: “These are the stakes! To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die,” after which a second voice urges viewer to “Vote Johnson” on November 4. While the ad was immediately pulled off the air due to protests, it continued to be analyzed and discussed on talk
shows and in the news media, and to this day, remains the most controversial political ad of all
time (Fig. 192).

Starting in 1966 and continuing through 1970, the artist Nancy Spero created forty gouache
and ink drawings on paper collectively known as The War Series: Bombs and Helicopters. Like
Rosenquist, Spero felt a deep sense of outrage at the American escalation in Vietnam, and began,
with her husband, the painter Leon Golub, to mobilize and paint in protest. In 1966, she, along
Golub, joined 150 artists to create “The Collage of Indignation” over the Christmas holiday at
the Loeb Center at New York University, which featured huge blank canvases that artists were
asked to “whatever images or objects will stand for your anger against the war.” Golub
described the necessity for the collage:

Today art is largely autonomous and concerned with perfectibility. Anger cannot easily
burst through such channels. Disaffection explodes as caricature, ugliness, or insult and
defamation…essentially the work is angry – against the war, against the bombings,
against President Johnson, etc. The Collage is gross, vulgar, clumsy, ugly.

While Spero considered the helicopter “the symbol of the war” which appeared in her
drawings as “a primeval (prime-evil) bird or bug wreaking destruction,” the most repetitive
image in Spero’s war cycle is the mushroom cloud, which the artist returned to again and again
to as the most powerful symbol of mechanized, mass killing in existence. As Robert Storr has
written about Spero’s use of this symbol in absence of the actual use of nuclear weapons in
Vietnam, “in Spero’s post-Hiroshima cosmology of violence, the ultimate phallic power is the
ultimate weapon…and all lesser ordnance aspires to its force.” For Spero, the lust for
competition and violence that drives all conflicts is intricately caught up with gender – mostly
male, although she does, at times, draw upon mythological images of harpies as well as the
Hindu god of destruction, Shiva. In drawings such as The Male Bomb (1966), a naked male
torso literally metamorphoses into the head of a mushroom cloud (Fig. 193), while an oversize,
erect penis sprays sperm/deadly fallout outward and downward. In *Sperm Bomb*, cartoonish sperm ending in male heads swarm around the vapors of the cloud, screaming obscenities like war cries, while “swimmers” at its base represent the reproductive cycle of violence (Fig. 194). As the imagery grows more disturbing, scatological, and obscene, in Spero’s *Bomb Shitting* (1966), the base of the mushroom cloud resembles male testicles and the same time the pair of buttocks, as severed heads spewing blood are literally expelled in a sickening display (Fig. 195).

As the casualties of aerial bombing runs in Vietnam reached into the hundreds of thousands, Spero attempted to give voice to the victims of anonymous slaughter. In *Androgynous Bomb and Victims* (1966), a mustard-yellow, mushroom cloud sprouting both penis and breasts spews steams of blood as it recedes into the distance, leaving in its wake a blood-soaked landscape littered with charred victims, with at least one in the lower right corner – clearly a soldier clutching a gun -- still writhing in agony (Fig. 196). In *Love to Hanoi* (1967), a mushroom cloud terminating at both ends with the flowing haired, heads of Harpies spawns a series of cluster bombs that are delivered from the clouds’ column like infants through a birth canal (Fig. 197). As they fall to earth, a catalogue of its victims can be seen writhing inside the casings, in imagery that is similar to the perversities of Hieronymus Bosch’s 14th century painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. It is as if each bomb has already been marked with the name/s of its victims, and in adding a red cross to the bomb’s casings, Spero memorializes the dead as martyrs sacrificed to bloodthirsty ambitions.

This image of martyrdom is then carried through to the controversial *Christ and the Bomb* (1967), where the crucified Christ is catapulted into heaven by the upward thrust of the atomic blast (Fig. 198). As the cartoon-Christ rises triumphantly from his bomb-cross, prostrate women at its feet choke on the blood of his stigmata. Calling to mind explanations that justified
Hiroshima as bringing a pagan country to its knees, Spero calls out the hypocrisy of a Christian nation that uses mass killings to rid the world of godless Communists. *Christ and the Bomb* also exposes the “moralistic rhetoric” that American presidents have used to drag a reluctant nation into war. As historian Ira Leonard has written in his essay “Violence is the American Way,” America’s leaders “assured [us] that the nation's singular mission in the world required the nation to go to war, but that when it went to war, America only did what was morally right.” Leonard points to the clever repackaging of World War II as “the Good War” as just one example of America absolving itself from responsibility for any atrocities committed in the pursuit of peace.22

Robert Storr wrote of Spero’s *War Series*:

*Spero, of course, did not see the strafing and napalming of Vietnamese villages first hand. Rather, she interpreted what everyone else saw in newspapers, in magazines, and on the Nightly news, and reduced that flood of images to their sickening essentials, to indelible images of violence. Her work acknowledges the impossibility of “bringing the war home” in its details, but made clear that the naked moral and political terms of America’s Southeast Asian adventure were inescapable.*23

After the Vietnam War, the bomb receded for a time – only to come back full force with Ronald Reagan’s election to the presidency in 1980. Reagan’s escalation of nuclear production, his goal to militarize space with “Star Wars,” and his public sparring with an equally intractable group of Russian premiers, particularly Leonid Breshnev and Yuri Andropov, which in the latter case, led to a suspension of arms-control talks between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., all caused a second generation of artists to live under the threat of nuclear war. Unlike the first arms race of the 1950s, by 1984, it could be said that almost every major artist was somehow engaged with the anti-nuclear movement, marching in mass protests, signing petitions, or creating artwork and posters that acknowledged and denounced the insanity of the arms race and its implications for
humankind. The intense worldwide pressure to end the stalemate between the two powers led to a cooling of tensions, eventually dissipating with tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the dissipation of the Soviet Union itself.

The Legacy of the Bomb Reconsidered

In 1994, when, in the year leading up to the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, controversy erupted over an upcoming exhibit of the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum (NASMA) in Washington, D.C.24 According to the original draft of the exhibition proposal dated July 1993, “The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Onset of the Cold War,”25 was to be a distinctly different affair from that of the numerous celebrations feting the half-century mark since the Allied victories in Europe and Japan in 1945. Instead of a narrative lauding the dominance of American air power and a demonstration of technological supremacy, Smithsonian Secretary Robert McCormick Adams, and Director of the National Air and Space Museum Martin Harwit, the two originators of the exhibit, had proposed that the physical presence of the B-29 that had dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima might be used as a jumping off point to re-examine the “political and military factors leading to the decision to drop the bomb.”26 Far from a celebratory retelling of the final months of the Pacific War, in which the glimpse of the mushroom cloud marked the war’s dramatic conclusion, Harwit and Adams’s exhibit would, for the first time, expose the public to the human cost of Allied victory over Japan.

The most controversial aspect of the exhibit centered on plans to devote an entire unit to “the human suffering experienced by the people of Hiroshima and Nagaski.” In “Unit 4: Hiroshima, 8:15 AM, August 6, 1945/Nagaski, 11:02, AM, August 9, 1945,” which in subsequent months would be shortened to “Ground Zero,” the blueprint for the exhibit design called for the
atmosphere in that section to change dramatically from that of the previous gallery, funneling visitors into a space that was “tight, gloomy, and depressive.” The curators’ wanted nothing less than to simulate the experience of being on the ground during the atomic attacks on the two cities. Harwit and Adams insisted that the “opening … must convey the stunning searing moment of the initial flash, heat and burns through pictures, through the words of survivors themselves, and through bomb-damaged artifacts that will be lent by Hiroshima and Nagasaki…” The “emotional center” of the exhibit would feature a long, rectangular gallery of photographs of atomic bomb victims, “enlarged to life-size”, whose faces would “stare out” at the visitors as made their way down a darkly-lit corridor.27

Although the first draft of the proposal had been reviewed by an external committee and approved with minor changes, the same proposal was met with hostility by Monroe Hatch, executive director of the Air Force Association. Although the Smithsonian agreed to appoint an internal team to review the AFA’s criticisms and make changes if necessary, Hatch decided to take his grievances to the public over the expressed wishes of Harwitt.28 The AFA issued a press release on March 3, 1994, drawing attention to what, in their estimation, had been a disturbing pattern of “politically correct curating” at the Smithsonian since Robert McCormick Adams’ began his tenure as Secretary in 1984. In the case of the Enola Gay exhibit, the AFA argued that, according to the script presented in the first draft of the proposal, the exhibit would slant “toward the Japanese victims of the bomb with little regard for the overall wartime context.”29 John McCaslin, writing for the Washington Times, brought the story to the media in his “Inside the Beltway Column,” on March 28, 1994, thereby opening the debate to the general public.30

In April, editor-in-chief John T. Correll -- who would become the de-facto spokesman for the opposition movement -- began to pen a series of articles denouncing the “revisionism” of the
Smithsonian and justifying the final act of the Pacific War. Over the next few months, as Correll’s arguments began to be championed by the media, galvanizing various factions to aggressively take action. Paul Tibbets, the pilot of the Enola Gay, called for the exhibit to be canceled, reiterating that he had “never lost a night’s sleep” over bombing Hiroshima. Veterans groups, headed up by the American Legion, joined forces with the Air Force Association to demand editorial oversight of the exhibit, meeting with the House Government Subcommittee on Human Resources and Foreign Relations. The patriotism of the curators, and even the Smithsonian itself, was called into question. In September, under the leadership of Senator Nancy Kassebaum, the US Senate overwhelmingly passes a nonbinding resolution against the proposed exhibit. In October, Congressman Gerald B. H. Solomon, speaking on the floor of the House of Representatives, remarked that “It is tragic that a museum funded by public dollars dare revise our history and distort the facts.” By January 1995, eighty members of Congress had signed a petition demanding that Harwit be replaced as Director of NASMA. Eventually, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich called for congressional hearings to be conducted by the House Appropriations Committee, with the unspoken understanding that funding for the Smithsonian was possibly in jeopardy if the National Air and Space Museum refused to acknowledge that the original script was “seriously flawed.”

The public face of this debate rested upon what for many had been, up to this point, Truman’s “morally unambiguous” decision to drop the bomb in order to avoid a full-scale invasion of the Japanese islands. The most persuasive argument for the necessity of the atomic attacks was couched in the number of lives saved by forcing the Japanese surrender. Conventional wisdom had always put this number at close to one million; but recent scholarship, such as Gar Alpervotz’s *Atomic Diplomacy*, had shown how this number had been manufactured
by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson in 1947 to counteract the emotional appeal of John Hersey’s *Hiroshima.* When Harwit himself attempted to lower the casualty total after being confronted with the actual number mentioned in Admiral Leahy’s diary – 46,000 casualties – the American Legion, and the public, became outraged. As one reader wrote in a letter to the editor of *Newsday*: “My blood boils when revisionist historians…challenge the views of history of those who actually lived it.”

However, as Tom Englehardt and Edward T. Linenthal point out in their book, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past,* the battle behind the scenes had everything to do with images. Adams replacement, Michael Heyman, and Martin Harwit were pressured into appointing an outside advisory committee comprised of high-ranking members of the military and the American Legion. Aside from conceding to line-by-line veto power over versions of the script -- resulting in five different revisions -- NASMA curators Michael Neufeld and Tom Crouch also agreed to screen the visual material for the exhibit before the outside advisory committee. At first, the committee agitated for a parity of the dead, requiring that there should be the same number of photographs of Japanese atrocities (such as an extended section on the massacre at Nan king) as that of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But, as developments progressed, not surprisingly, any brutal confrontations with victims of the atomic bombings were pushed aside. Curators at the Smithsonian struggled to come to an agreement with the committee, until only eight photographs remained in the section on Ground Zero. Finally, a stalemate occurred between the two sides when a photograph of a child’s battered lunchbox, half-buried in the rubble of a building that had been leveled by the atomic blast, was judged too provocative for viewing. Secretary Heyman finally capitulated on January 30, 1995, agreeing to mount a less controversial exhibit; while Martin Harwit, resigned in May, just two days before he was to
appear at congressional hearings and a little over one month before the “Enola Gay” opened at the National Air and Space Museum on June 28, 1995.

This interference did not go without notice by American historians. In October 1994, the Organization of American Historians (OAS) had passed a resolution defending the Smithsonian against outside interference and government pressure to change the direction and content of the exhibit, were tantamount to “historical cleansing.” That same month, members of a separate group, the Historians Committee for Open Debate on Hiroshima, including prominent historians of the early atomic era, including Kai Bird, Robert Jay Lifton, Greg Mitchell, and Gar Alperovitz, began to push back against the criticisms of the veterans groups and the politicians. In an editorial published in the New York Times, Kai Bird urged the Smithsonian “to display history with all its uncomfortable complications” instead of “feel-good national myths.” A delegation of historians, carrying a letter signed by 80 scholars in the field, met with Harwit to “impress upon him that the censored script was not only unbalanced, but contained outright fabrications.” Barton Bernstein, historian at Stanford University, memorably said to Harwit: “We have our documents. Where are yours to support these figures?”

After the original exhibit was scuttled, and a new, gentler exhibit organized to appease the Smithsonian’s critics, the Historians Committee for Open Debate on Hiroshima organized a national “teach-in” in March on the full range of scholarly debate on the bombings. Bowing to a different set of pressures, Secretary Heyman agreed to participate in a conference, hosted by the University of Michigan, on museums in a democratic society. As a final act of protest, American University in Washington, D.C. opened a competing show in the same month that the revised exhibit opened at the Air and Space Museum, displaying some of the material that had been censored by the outside advisory committee.
And yet, as the historians themselves pointed out, over 50 years after the fact, few Americans really knew – or were ready to face – what had happened on the ground in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In “A Hole in History: America Suppresses the Truth about Hiroshima,” published in the *Progressive* in August 1995, historian Greg Mitchell wrote that: “To commemorate is to combine memory and ceremony to remind and be mindful – to witness again. In that sense America is clearly far from being ready to commemorate Hiroshima in 1995.”

The artists who attempted to confront America’s first nuclear age, had no history of protest, no ready-made language to fall back on. While their peers gained critical and commercial success with an apolitical art of abstraction that seemed, nonetheless, to glorify the competitive, masculine, and militaristic culture that had created the atomic bomb, a handful of artists struggled to make sense of the humanistic implications of America’s possession and use of the weapon. Some, like the combat artists of World War II, had unparalleled access to the bomb’s effects and yet struggled to paint the enormity of what they saw. An artist like Ralston Crawford used his skills to measure and chart paths of destruction, but his mechanical approach was misunderstood and attacked. Ben Shahn attempted to give a human face to the bomb’s victims by continuing to paint figuratively in spite of predominant trends, and began to agitate for an engaged art that would not only reflect the anxieties of the age, but spur others to action. Rosenquist and Spero followed in the footsteps of these artists, using the bomb as a metaphor to broach a discussion about the disturbing history of American violence that seemed as if it would stretch into the future ad nauseum, its scope and reach only limited by imagination and technical invention. All sought to peer behind the mushroom cloud, to tear down its monolithic image, in order, in some way, to bear witness and give shape to what ultimately may be an experience beyond representation.

2 Quoted in Kennedy and Schlesinger, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 142.


5 Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Art and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, 356.


8 For a book-length treatise on the subject of Kubrick’s film and its relation to the political and cultural realities of the first half of the 1960s, see Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).


11 See Richard F. Shephard, “To What Lengths Can Art Go? To 85 Feet in This Case, and Buyer Has a Problem,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1965, 39, which contains a picture of the original installation. The first museum to show the work, The Jewish Museum, changed the configuration to two adjoining walls; see “Rosenquist’s F-111 at the Jewish Museum,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1965, 28. As of 2008, the work is installed as part of the collection of the Museum of Modern art; the panels wrap around two contiguous walls.


15 Shepard, “To What Lengths Can Art Go? To 85 Feet in This Case, and Buyer Has a Problem,” 39.


17 The advertisement can be viewed on You Tube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKs-bTL-pRg


24 For a good first person account of the controversy, see Director of the National Air and Space Museum Martin Harwit’s *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of the Enola Gay* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1996).


27 Martin Harwit forwarded a copy of “Crossroads” to Hatch asking that he “not circulate the material at this time.” Harwit, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of the Enola Gay* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1996), 239.


33 “Political Correctness: America through the Eyes of the Smithsonian,” *Congressional Record – House*, October 6, 1994, no. 144, part II.


36 For a summation of the position of the veterans groups, see Brian D. Smith, “Rewriting the Enola Gay’s History,” *American Legion*, November 1994, 36-38, 64-68.


For a full list members on the Historians’ Committee for Open Debate on Hiroshima, see “Announcement,” *OAH Newsletter* (November 1994): 3.


For media coverage of the symposium, see, for example, Stephen Cain, “Museums in ID Crisis after ‘Enola Gay,’” *Ann Arbor News*, April 16, 1995, C1; and Julie M. Klein, “Historians Meet Uncertainty over What History is All About,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 24, 1995.

A comparison between the material in the two exhibits can be found in Eugene L. Meyer’s article “2 Exhibits to Mark A-Bombings,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 1995.

Figure 2. Associated Press from the United States Army, “Builder of the Atomic Bomb Picks a Target,” Christian Science Monitor, August 7, 1945, 1.
Figure 3. Associated Press Wirephoto, “Atomic Bomb Sites and the First of the Targets in Japan to Feel the Force of the Powerful Missile,” New York Times, August 7, 1945, 1.
Figure 5. “How an Atom Explodes,” Christian Science Monitor, August 7, 1945, 5.
Figure 6. “Land of the Rising Sons,” editorial cartoon that appeared in the *Atlanta Constitution*, August 7, 1945.
Figure 9. U.S. Army Air Forces, photo, Colonel Paul Tibbets, pilot of the Enola Gay, waves to photographers and film crews before the bombing run at Hiroshima. Library of Congress
Figure 10. “On the Beach,” photo, Life, March 10, 1944, 46.
Figure 12. U.S. Army Air Forces, “Mainz from the air sometimes looks like the excavated ruins of an earlier civilization,” *Life*, June 11, 1945, 33.
Figure 16. George Silk, aerial photo of bombed-out Hiroshima, *Life*, August 20, 1945.
Figure 17. George Silk, aerial photo, “A refugee train winds its way through Hiroshima,” *Life*, August 20, 1945.
Figure 18. U.S. Navy, photo, “U.S. Has Paid a Heavy Price in the Pacific,” Life, August 20, 1945, 38B.
Figure 19. Gerald Silk, photo, “The Graves of Iwo Jima”, *Life*, August 20, 1945, 38C.
Figure 22. Jack Wilkes, photo, “Scientists Examine the Site of the Atomic Test,” *Life*, September 24, 1945.
Figure 23. AP Wirephoto, American P.O.W., freed from captivity, on the USS Benevolence, New York Times, September 4, 1945.
Figure 24. Carl Mydans, “American POWs Freed In Japan,” September 5, 1945, Christian Science Monitor, A1.
Figure 25. Photo of the grisly remains found in the Buchenwald concentration camp from “The German People,” *Life*, May 7, 1945.
Figure 26. Yosuke Yamahata, photo taken August 10, 1945, from the Nagasaki portfolio, reproduced in *Asahi*, August 19, 1945.
Figure 27. Yosuke Yamahata, photo taken August 10, 1945, from the Nagasaki portfolio, reproduced in *Asahi*, August 19, 1945.
Figure 28. Yosuke Yamahata, photo taken August 10, 1945, from the Nagasaki portfolio.
Figure 29. Yosuke Yamahata, photo taken August 10, 1945, from the Nagasaki portfolio, reproduced with an incorrect credit to the Associated Press Wirephoto in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 14, 1945.
Figure 30. Yosuke Yamahata, from the Nagasaki portfolio, reproduced uncredited in *Time*, September 19, 1945, with the caption, “At least ours was just a test,” 32.
Figure 31. George Silk, photo, “At Nagasaki, the great Mitsubishi steel and arms works, producing torpedos, ship plates, and munitions, are now a tortured mess of steel, Life, September 17, 1945, 37.
Figure 32. Bernard Hofmann, photo, “Steel girders of another factory were twisted into knots…” *Life*, September 17, 1945, 38.
Figure 33. Bernard Hofmann, photo, “Barber shop, by some fluke of the blast, still has its tiled washstand and one enameled barber chair” *Life*, September 17, 1945, 38.
Figure 35. J. R. Eyerman, photo, “Schoolchildren, carrying their books and parasols, walk along a sunny suburban road on their way to school in Hamamatsu...,” *Life*, October 8, 1945, 31.
Figures 36, 37. J. R. Eyermann, photos, “Boxes of ashes, with the names of the atomic bomb victims, are packaged in remains of a Hiroshima Buddhist temple (left); “In a Buddhist temple in Hiroshima, a family kneels to pray during memorial services for relatives killed in the atomic bomb” (right), *Life*, October 8, 1945.
Figure 38. J. R. Eyerman, photo, “The Goddess of Mercy looms over the wooded hills of Ofuna, 29 miles from Tokyo,” *Life*, October 8, 1945, 30.
Figure 39. J. R. Eyerman, photo, “Nose and mouth masks of gauze are worn by Hiroshima girls as protection against infection which spread rapidly through the ruined city after the bombings” *Life*, October 8, 1945, 33
Figures 40, 41. J. R. Eyermann, photos, “Atom bomb victims in Hiroshima, suffering from burns and fractures, are cared for in filthy, fly-filled bank building” (left); “Mother and child, burned by blast, rest on bank’s floor” (right), *Life* magazine, October 8, 1945.
Figure 42. Bernard Hofmann, photo, “The head of a statue of Christ, severed by the bomb blast at Nagasaki, lies before the ruins of a Roman Catholic cathedral,” *Life*, October 20, 1945.
Figure 43. Illustration that accompanied “The 36-Hour War,” *Life*, November 17, 1945.
Figure 44. George Biddle, *Dead Civilians*, 1943. Oil on board. Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.
Figure 45. Fletcher Martin, Bizerette, 1943. Oil on board. Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.
Figure 46. Standish Backus, *The First Wave on Japan*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 47. Standish Backus, *Approach to Fort #3, Futtsu Pennisula, Tokyo Bay*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 48. Carey Orr, “Throwing in An Extra Charge,” appeared in the Chicago Tribune, December 10, 1941.
Figure 49. “Remember Dec. 7th—? Keep America Free”, poster published by the Office of War Information, 1942. Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.
Figure 50. “This is the Enemy”, submitted to the Museum of Modern Art’s “This is the Enemy Contest” in 1942 and later reprinted in *Life*, May 6, 1942.
How Tough Are the Japanese?

They are not tougher than other soldiers, says a veteran.

Figure 51. Paul Ellingorth, “A British Commentary on the Japanese Soldier,”

Figure 52. “Let the Punishment Fit the Crime”, an editorial cartoon on the murder of the Doolittle Flyers, New York Times, April 1943.
Figure 53. “Louseous Japanicas”, a cartoon that appeared in the U.S. Marine monthly *Leatherneck* in March 1945.
Figure 54. Standish Backus, *This Was Hyuga*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 56. Mitchell Jamieson, *Battle at Iwo Jima*, 1945. Watercolor and crayon. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 57. Standish Backus, Following Signing of the Surrender Documents, 1945. Pen, ink, and felt-tipped pen on paper. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 58. Standish Backus, Hiroshima, 1945, 1945. Pen, ink, and oil paints. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 60. Standish Backus, *Settlers of New Hiroshima*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 61. Standish Backus, Still Life, Hiroshima, 1946. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 62. Standish Backus, *Garden at Hiroshima, Autumn*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 63. Standish Backus, *At the Red Cross Hospital, Hiroshima*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 64. Standish Backus, Recent Guests of Japan, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 65. Lt. Wayne Miller, victim of Hiroshima, photographic print, 1945. Photographic Collection of the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.
Figure 66. Lt. Wayne Miller, victim of Hiroshima, photographic print, September 1945. Photographic Collection of the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.
Figure 67. Standish Backus, *In the Line of Duty*, 1945. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 68. Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., Seaplanes at Nagasaki, 1946. Oil on board. Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.
Figure 69. Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., Respect for New Emperors, 1946. Oil and tempera on board. Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.
Figure 70. Robert MacDonald Graham, Jr., *Atomic Landscape (Japanese Burial Detail)*, 1946. Oil and tempera on board. Army Art Collection, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.
Figure 71. A rare color photograph of Hiroshima taken by an unknown Japanese photographer less than a week after the atomic attacks. Collection of the Hiroshima Peace Museum, Hiroshima, Japan
Figure 72. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, cover illustration, picturing the field of destruction in Nagasaki around the area of the Nagasaki Medical College. Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.
Figure 73. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 3, locating the site of what would have been the equivalent of the D-Day beaches in the event of an Allied invasion of the Japanese homeland. Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.
Figure 74. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 16, with various aspects of destruction of buildings in the Urakame Valley. Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.
Figure 75. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 13. A considerable collection of Zeros, the feared Japanese attack plane, is set ablaze in Nagasaki as part of the mission to demilitarize the country. Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.
Figure 76. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 12, covering interactions between the Marines and the local population. Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.
Figure 77. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 23. Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.
Figure 78. Occupation of Japan by Second Marine Division, souvenir album, published December 1945, page 21, with a reference to Nagasaki’s first “atomic bowl.” Collection of the Atomic Veterans History Project, Seattle, Washington.
Figure 79. Ted Gilien, photograph of a child in Manila (with shadow of Gilien), September 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles.
Figure 80. Ted Gilien, photograph from Tokyo, late September, 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles
Figure 81. Ted Gilien, photograph from Nagasaki, late November or early December 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles
Figure 82. Ted Gilien, photograph of Nagasaki, late November or early December 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles
Figure 83. Ted Gilien, photograph, Nagasaki, late November or early December 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles.
Fig. 84. Ted Gilien, photograph from Nagasaki, Catholic mass being celebrated at the site of the bombed-out Urakame Cathedral, late November or early December 1945. Collection of Jeremy Gilien, Los Angeles.
The Price
Figure 85. Ted Gilien, cover of *The Price*, 1951.
Figure 86. Ted, Gilien, *The Price*, 1951, frontispiece.
Figure 87. Ted Gilien, illustration from *The Price*, page 11.
Figure 88. Ted Gilien, illustration for The Price, 1951, page 20.
Figure 89. Ted Gilien, illustration from *The Price*, 1951, page 27.
Figure 90. Map of Bikini as it appeared in the July 2, 1946 issue of the New York Times.

Figure 91. Photograph from the front page of the Washington Post, July 2, 1946.
Figure 92. A mock-up of the air operation is admired by Vice Admiral W. H. P. Blandy, Commander of Joint Task Force 1 (standing, Left). Reproduced in W. A. Shurcliff, *Bombs at Bikini: The Official Report of Operation Crossroads*.

Figure 94. Cover of *Life* magazine, April 30, 1945, featuring “Life’s War Artists.” The artist shown sketching on the cover is Aaron Bohrod.
Figure 95. George Grosz, *I Was Always Present*, 1941. Oil on canvas. Reproduced in the article “Studio War Art,” in the June 12, 1944 edition of *Life* magazine.
Figure 96. Fernando Puma, *They Will Not Conquer*, 1943. Oil on canvas. Reproduced in the article “Studio War Art,” in the June 12, 1944 edition of *Life* magazine.
Figure 97. PFC. Harrison S. Standley, *A Soldier’s Dream*, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue “Art Exhibition by Men of the Armed Services,” sponsored by *Life* magazine, p. 10.
Figure 98. Ralston Crawford, *Overseas Highway*, 1939. Oil on canvas.
Figure 103. Invitation for “6 Artists Out of Uniform,” an exhibit held at the Downtown Gallery, May 7 – 25, 1946.
Figure 104. Illustration from the June 30, 1946 edition of the *New York Times*, accompanying the article “Expectations at Bikini.”

Figure 105. A more fanciful artist’s rendition in the the same article.
Figures 106 and 107. A photograph of fire-bombed Tokyo at the end of the war (top), is virtually indistinguishable from that of Hiroshima after an atomic bomb was dropped on the city (bottom).
Figure 108. A fake certificate from one of the servicemen at Bikini reveals humor in the face of atomic uncertainty. Gift to the author from USN serviceman William Parks.
"Baker Day"—Bikini Arell, as we could see it from about 13 miles away.

0835 "How Near"
1st Stage: a brief flash of light and a swift gushing cloud of extremely hot vapor
2nd Stage: about 1 minute later, high explosion
3rd Stage: a few minutes later.

another minute later:
3rd stage: mushroom cloud climbs to about 5000 ft, lasts 8-9 minutes
4th stage: RAIN, RAIN, RAIN, and CLOUDS OF STEAM developed and drifted to the left for ever and ever.

Figure 109. Handwritten letter of USN serviceman Charles Decker to his wife, with drawings of Test Baker sketched on the deck of one of vessels in the observation fleet. Fascimile given as a gift to the author by Charles Decker.
Figures 110 and 111. Two photos taken by the drone planes that flew above the explosion. On the top, the hemispherical condensation cloud, lit by the white-hot fireball at the center, outshines the tropical sun. On the bottom, the fireball starts its swift ascent into the atmosphere.
Figure 112. A blurry AP photograph, transmitted over the wire, of the “fighting Saratoga”, one of two aircraft carriers in the target array. The large “3” in the picture is an inscription on the flight deck, which has been bent in half by the force of the blast.

Figure 113. A more spectacular, if blurry, AP picture, transmitted over the wire, of the second, underwater Test Baker. The small black shapes at the base of the waterspout are naval ships in the target array. Unseen in this picture but witnessed by participants are ships that were literally turned on end and carried high in the air with the upward thrust of the underwater explosion.
Fig. 114. Graphics for Hanson L. Baldwin’s article “Atomic Bomb Proved the Most Terrible Weapon,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1946.
BIKINI
WITH DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHS, ABSTRACT PAINTINGS, AND METEOROLOGICAL CHARTS
RALSTON CRAWFORD HERE DEPICTS THE NEW SCALE OF DESTRUCTION
Photographed: Joint Army-Navy Task Force One

The two atomic bombs touched off by Joint Task Force One at Bikini on July 1 and 25—two miles above water, two miles below—did major damage on twenty-four other ships, and spread varying degrees of disaster throughout the target fleet. These were the immediate and visible effects of the blasts. More terrible by far were the invisible radioactivities that smothered up by the same output of energy, which caused on water and ships to radiate as dangerously as radium and made the island area uninhabitable for days. Two months after the second blast some ships were still too radioactive for repairs.

There is more than meets the camera’s eye in atomic bombing. The intangibles allowed some blast correspondents, far from the blasts, to push the bomb’s power. But the great clouds that have been so familiar a symbol of atomic explosions catch the lethal stream of neutrons and gamma rays. To track these streams, an elaborate radiological apparatus was set up on four islands within an 800-mile radius of Bikini and on three ships nearby. Atomic bombs can spread lingering death over a vast area. If the bombs are detonated in air in fair weather, its radioactivity may be quite rapidly dispersed by wind currents. But if detonated under water or in moist atmosphere, its poisonous radiations are concentrated in water droplets and held in the

Figure 115. Opening page of the article “Bikini: With Documentary Photographs, Abstract Paintings, and Meteorological Charts Ralston Crawford Here Depicts the New Scale of Destruction,” Fortune, December 1946, 156.
Test Baker: Great Waterspout

July 25, 1946, dawned clear and beautiful near Bikini lagoon. At exactly 8:30 A.M., a complicated series of radio impulses set off the second Bikini test, the first atomic bomb ever dropped under water.

• One-thirtieth of a second later (top) a rosy-white column of water accompanied by a dark column of smoke and scintillating particles rose like a great peacock feather from the surface of the sea.

• Three seconds later (center) the blast compressed and expanded the surrounding atmosphere into a full half-mile cloud of dense vapors, and shock waves threw up a mighty surf around the base of the explosion.

• Twenty-one seconds after detonation (bottom) the bomb's peacock cloud of radioactive smoke showed itself through the thin, dispersing cloud of vapor.

• Test Baker was by far the most portentous of the Bikini blasts. Its cloud of radioactivity spread wide at 5,000 feet, hanging the target area. Its blast shot millions of tons of dangerously radioactive sea-water over ships and test equipment, and made the ships themselves radioactive.

• Twenty-four hours after the test thirty-one square miles of the lagoon were eerily contaminated, and for over a week the center of the test area was too "hot" for close inspection. If the ships had been manned, the last of those not killed by the blast would have soon been dead of "radiation sickness."

Figure 121. Ralston Crawford, Tour of Inspection, Bikini, 1946. Oil on canvas.
Figure 122. Ralston Crawford, *Bikini*, 1946. Pen-and-ink and tempera on paper.
Figure 123. Arthur Beaumont, Able Bomb Test, Bikini Atoll, Bridge of the USS Fall River, 1946. Watercolor. Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 124. Arthur Beaumont, *Sinking of the Saratoga*, 1946. Watercolor. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Dean Beaumont

Figure 126. Photograph of Arthur Beaumont painting in Bikini harbor, July 1946. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Dean Beaumont
Figure 127. Charles Bittinger, *Baker Test #1*, 1946. Oil on canvas. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 128. Charles Bittinger, *Baker Test #2*, 1946. Oil on canvas. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 129. Grant Powers, 0900 Through Protective Goggles on the USS Appalachian, 1946. Watercolor. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 130. Grant Powers, How We Looked to the Atom Bomb, 1946. Watercolor and pencil on paper. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.
Figure 131. Grant Powers, *Mike Hour*, 1946. Watercolor. Naval Art Collection, Washington, D.C.

Figure 133. Ralston Crawford, cover of *Briarcliff Quarterly*, January 1945.
Figure 134. Ralston Crawford, *Crash*, 1945. Pen-and-ink drawing.
Figures 137 and 138. Photographs by Ralston Crawford documenting the working methods of the artist. Top: A piece of twisted metal (possibly from an aircraft) is placed on a table next to a “blueprint” drawing that resembles the illustration Mission #1, 1945; Bottom: A gas mask is set against what looks like the work in progress drawing of Gas Mask, 1945, ink.
Figure 139. Ralston Crawford, *Cologne #2*, c. 1952. Pen and ink drawing.

Figure 140. Ralston Crawford, *St. Louis Cemetery*, 1951. Line-cut.
Figure 141. Philip Evergood, *Renunciation*, 1946. Oil on canvas. Private collection.
Figure 142. Peter Blume, *The Rock*, 1944-1948. Oil on canvas.
Art Institute of Chicago
Figure 143. Ben Shahn, *Red Stairway*, 1944. Tempera on masonite. The Saint Louis Art Museum
Figure 147. Hiroshima factory, *Life* magazine, September 17, 1945.
Figure 148. Ben Shahn, Allegory. 1948. Tempera on panel. Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas.
Figure 149. Ben Shahn, *The Anatomical Man*, 1949. Tempera on board. New Jersey State Museum Collection, Trenton, New Jersey
Figure 150. Ben Shahn, *Deserted Fairground*, c. 1948. Serigraph. New Jersey State Museum Collection, Trenton, New Jersey.
Figure 151. Ben Shahn, Voting Booths (The end of the government is the good of mankind…and which is best for mankind, that the people should always be exposed to the boundless will of tyranny, or that the rulers should sometimes liable to be opposed when they grow exorbitant in their power, and employ it for the destruction and not the preservation of the properties of the people? John Locke, 1632-1704. From the series “Great Ideas of Western Man”, 1950.)
Figure 152. Ben Shahn, Second Allegory, 1953. Tempera on masonite. Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion, University of Illinois, Chicago.

Figure 153. Ben Shahn, Man, 1952. Tempera on canvas mounted on board. Private collection.
Figure 154. Ben Shahn, *Burning Building*, 1948, drawing. Private collection.
Figure 155. Ben Shahn, Allegory, c. 1954. Watercolor. The Detroit Institute of the Arts, Michigan.
Figure 157. Christ of the Apocalypse, Portal sculpture on the Abbey Church of St. Pierre de Moissac, France, 12th c.
Fig. 158. Ben Shahn, Blind Botanist, 1954. Tempera on board. Collection Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York.
Figure 159. Ben Shahn, Spring, 1947. Tempera on masonite. Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York.
Figure 162. Ben Shahn, Beast of the Atoll, 1957, illustration for first installment of “The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon” by Ralph E. Lapp, Harper’s magazine.
Figure 163. Ben Shahn, *Demon*, undated, brush drawing. Harvard University Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Figure 164. Illustrations from the Disney Publication *Our Friend the Atom*, p. 20-21.
Figure 165. Photo-montage from a May 3, 1947 *Collier’s* article on the atom’s medical promise.
Figure 166. Ben Shahn, Beast of the Atoll, 1957. Illustration for the third installment of “The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon” by Ralph E. Lapp, Harper’s Magazine.
Figure 167. Ben Shahn, *Goyescas*, 1956. Tempera on panel. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
Figure 169. Graphic Artists for SANE, “1 ¼ Million unborn children will be born dead or have some gross defect because of Nuclear Bomb Testing.” Print advertisement/poster design for SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, 1961. Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.
Figure 174. Ben Shahn, The Lucky Dragon, from The Saga of the Lucky Dragon, 1960. Tempera on board. Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan.
Figure 175. Aikichi Kuboyama being examined with a Geiger counter at the Tokyo University Hospital, photograph accompanying the article “First Casualties of the H-Bomb,” Life magazine, March 29, 1945, p.18.
Figure 176. Two backdrops, Nicholas C and Downfall, that Shahn created for Black Mountain College in 1951. Reproduction in the Ben Shahn Taller Archive, Harvard University Art Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts.


Figure 181. Ben Shahn, *From That Day On*, 1960. Oil and tempera on canvas on board. Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin.
Figure 182. Ben Shahn, illustration for an article by John Bartlow Martin, “The Blast in Centralia No.5: A Mine Disaster No One Stopped,” Harper’s Magazine, March 1948, p. 3.

Figure 184. Ben Shahn, “Ballets U. S. A.,” 1959, exhibition poster.
Figure 186. Dr. John Morton, director of the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, examines Sanjiro Masuda, one of the Japanese fishermen burned by radioactive ash. Photography accompanying the article, “Inquiry is Begun in Hydrogen Test,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1954, p. 3.
Figure 188. Ben Shahn, Why? from *The Saga of the Lucky Dragon*, 1961. Gouache. Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan
Figure 189. Andy Warhol, Red Explosion (Atomic Bombs), 1963 (section). Silkscreen ink and acrylic on linen, 103 ¾ x 80 ¼ in (263.5 x 203.8 cm). Daros Collection, Switzerland
Figure 190. Andy Warhol, Blue Electric Chair, 1963. Silkscreen.
Figure 192. Still from the “Daisy Ad” made for the presidential campaign of Lyndon B. Johnson and aired on September 7, 1964.
Figure 197. Nancy Spero, Love to Hanoi, gouache and ink on paper, 1967. Collection of Jenny Holzer.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Braw, Monica. “Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Voluntary Silence.” In *Living with the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age*, eds. Laura Hein and Mark Selden (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996): 155-172; and also Kyoko Selden and Mark Selden, eds.,


“Hiroshima Celebrates Day of Atomic Bomb and Campaigns to End All Wars.” Life, September 1, 1947, 28-30.


“Nagasaki a Month after the Blast.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 17, 1945, 23.


“Picture of the Week.” *Life*, October 20, 1945, 14.


“Studio War Art.” *Life* (June 12, 1944): 76-79.


Denise M. Rompilla
718-720-3656
rompilld1@yahoo.com

EDUCATION
Ph.D., Art History, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, October 2008
Dissertation: “From Hiroshima to the Hydrogen Bomb: American Artists Witness the Birth of
the Atomic Age”

M.A., Art History, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, May 1999
Master’s Thesis: “Thwarting Male Action (Painting): Elaine de Kooning’s Seated Men”

B.A. in Art History, Temple University, Philadelphia PA, May 1993

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Assistant Professor of Art History, Department of Fine Arts, St. John’s University, Queens, NY,

Adjunct Assistant Professor of Art History, Department of Art History, Manhattanville College,

Teaching Assistant, Department of Art History, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ,

MUSEUM EXPERIENCE
Curatorial Assistant, The Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New

Registrar, Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection of Latin American Art, New York City and


Museum Educator, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA,

EXHIBITIONS
“Frank Lloyd Wright on Staten Island,” curator, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, NY,
4/2008-present
“Art on the Edge: Contemporary Art from Cuba,” curator, St. John’s University, Jamaica, NY, February 2004

Faculty Show, curator, Chung-Cheng Art Gallery, St. John’s University, Jamaica, NY, October 2003


“Images from the Atomic Front,” curator, St. John’s University Gallery, Jamaica, NY, February 2003

PUBLICATIONS


CONFERENCE PAPERS


GALLERY TALKS AND PUBLIC LECTURES


Fellowships and Awards

Faculty Development Grant, Center for Teaching and Learning, April 2003

Premier Project Grant for “A History of Women in Photography,” Council for the Arts and Humanities of Staten Island, December 2001

Teaching Assistantship, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, 1996-97

PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

Director, Preservation League of Staten Island, 5/2006-present


Panelist on Review Board for Grant Awards, Council for the Arts and Humanities of Staten Island, 9/2003-present


LANGUAGES

French and German