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book review of

*The Final Spectacle: Military Painting under the Second Empire, 1855–1867* by Julia Thoma

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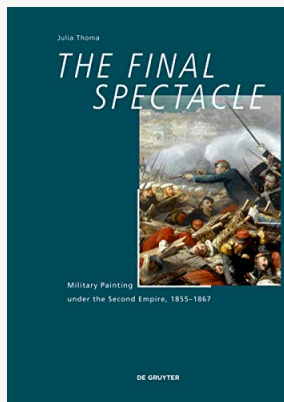
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Julia Thoma,  
*The Final Spectacle: Military Painting under the Second Empire, 1855–1867*.  
Belin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2019.  
358 pp.; 104 b&w and 33 color illus.; bibliography.  
\$68.99 (hardback)  
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Julia Thoma's *The Final Spectacle* is a deeply researched book that sheds new light on a corner of French nineteenth-century visual culture that has rarely been the focus of scholarly attention—namely, the production and critical reception of French military painting during the Second Empire. Thoma discusses works that were exhibited at Salon exhibitions from 1852 up through 1867, encompassing the Crimean War as well as France's military interventions in Italy. Thoma also addresses the display of French military painting at the World's Fair of 1855 and briefly examines the World's Fair of 1867 in the book's conclusion. The artists and works discussed in *The Final Spectacle* have rarely been appreciated on their own merits since the publication of Arsène Alexandre's *Histoire de la peinture militaire en France* (*History of Military Painting*) in 1899. Thoma's volume is a veritable trove of new information about long-forgotten works, their authors, and the circumstances surrounding state patronage of military painting during the Second Empire. The artists at the center of *The Final Spectacle*—for example, Isidore Pils, Adolphe Yvon, and Alexandre Protais—are not household names. Moreover, many of the works discussed at length in *The Final Spectacle*, including the three monumental battle paintings by Adolphe Yvon for the Crimean War Gallery at Versailles, are rolled up and have not seen the light of day for many decades. Fortunately, there are color reproductions available, which Thoma activates with deep passages of formal analysis. It is the next best thing to seeing these works in person. This may not be possible for a long time to come, owing to space constraints, but also to a general lack of interest in this particular kind of mid-nineteenth-century official painting made by artists whose reputations have not survived their own lifetimes. The effacement of these painters and their works from art historical study would seem to confirm Charles Baudelaire's prognostication in his *Salon of 1846* about the future renown of France's most important living battle painter, Horace Vernet. Vernet looms large in Thoma's study as an artist who younger generations of battle painters sought to emulate and surpass. According to Baudelaire, Vernet's "immense popularity will not last any longer than war itself, and will diminish as peoples discover other joys."<sup>[1]</sup> If Thoma is largely silent on questions concerning the afterlife of these now obscure works and why they have been relegated to art historical

oblivion, the book brims with deep archival research that evaluates military painting on its own terms, retracing its buried histories, the contexts that surrounded its commissioning, and the reactions of Salon critics who encountered it.

The first section of the book is devoted to the Exposition Universelle of 1855 and the situation of military painting at the time. The chapter opens with a lengthy foray into the political context of the Second Empire in order to help explain why Napoleon III relied so heavily on this particular kind of painting as a way to shape public opinion about his military deeds. This section also provides an overview of Horace Vernet's status as the period's most esteemed battle painter and recounts the highlights of his career. Vernet, along with Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Eugène Delacroix, was given the honor of a career retrospective at the fair. At the centerpiece of the chapter's analysis is Vernet's horizontally expansive *Capture of the Smala of Abd-el-Kader at Taguin, May 16, 1843*, painted for King Louis Philippe during the July Monarchy. Thoma notes that the title of the painting was changed to include the name of the commander who led the French army during the battle, Louis-Philippe's son, the duc d'Aumale. The sections on Vernet's career and the painting are thorough and informative but tend to read as more descriptive than discursive. Thoma dwells at length on the negative criticism of the painting and on Vernet's idea of history painting, perhaps spending a bit too much time deploying primary sources, many of which establish the same thing, namely, that Vernet's "journalistic" approach to painting war was at odds with the lofty ideals of history painting. Vernet emerges in the chapter as the innovator of a new kind of battle painting, who was nevertheless attacked for his penchant for depicting war as a series of incidents, without a higher ideal or a center of dramatic action.

The next, slim chapter, "The Second Empire's Influence on Military Paintings," focuses on the institutional and political imperatives that structured the production of official battle paintings during the Second Empire. It also describes how the Second Empire government tightened its control over the arts by having the administration select the Salon jury and taking full control of the Academy of Fine Arts pedagogy by 1863, among other restrictive measures. Thoma also examines the Second Empire's ambivalent relationship to the Algerian campaign, which began under the July Monarchy and was continued under Louis-Napoleon. Also noteworthy is that fact that the Emperor collected genre paintings related to the Algerian campaign. These paintings, however, failed to attract critical attention. Thoma returns to Horace Vernet and discusses his waning critical fortunes, epitomized by the failure of his first large-scale commission during the Second Empire, his 1852 *Siege of Rome*, and the public row between Vernet and the art critic Théodore Silvestre. Thoma then introduces the Crimean War as an important subject within the arts policy of the Second Empire. Here she examines the decision to dedicate an entire room in the historical museum at Versailles to the Crimean War, known as the Crimean War Gallery, and discusses the early careers of artists who would go on to earn the high-value commissions for history paintings related to the Crimean War instead of Vernet, namely Pils and Yvon. Pils emerges in *The Final Spectacle* as a central figure.

Though the Crimean War is introduced in the second chapter, it is the third, entitled "Painting the Crimean War," that delves into the conflict and its associated pictures in greater detail. This is a monster of a chapter consisting of one hundred pages that are devoted to official paintings of the war. The Crimean War was the first multi-national armed conflict to

be fought in Europe since the Napoleonic Wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century. France, England, and the Ottomans fought against the Russians for control over territory in Ukraine. The first section of the chapter features a detailed summary of the conflict's major events, including the long, drawn-out siege of Sebastopol and the spectacular, coordinated attack that ended it in favor of the Franco-English-Turkish allies, known as the Capture of the Malakoff Tower. This event would be the subject of the most important painting related to the war, Yvon's *Capture of the Malakoff Tower*, exhibited at the Salon of 1857. As Thoma explains, the conflict lasted longer than Napoleon III had foreseen and support for its economic and human cost had to be secured from a skeptical public. This helps to explain the preponderance of large-scale history paintings that were commissioned by the government. Thoma argues that the Crimean War "was a turning point for the genre of military painting" in terms of painting responding to the desires of critics (132).

In terms of organization, the chapter's length is a function of Thoma's dedication to exhaustive coverage of a great number of paintings, their authors, and the reactions of Salon critics. If the detailed documentation offered in this chapter is useful and thorough, the chapter's scope also stands in the way of a synthetic argument. Over the course of the chapter, Thoma identifies *vérité historique* as the benchmark for critics and evaluates the extent to which they found this quality to be present or lacking in the paintings up for discussion. Works are evaluated by Thoma in terms of their ability to muster what the critics wanted to see from a battle painting. She writes that it was not until well-after the war, in 1861, that Pils was able to depict a battle "in a way that satisfied critics" with his *Battle of Alma* (132). For this reader, it was an open question as to whether or not this was really a new criterion or a revision of the (subjective) quality of "objectivity" that had been expected in earlier topographical landscape and battle painting traditions. Based on Salon criticism, Thoma pronounces certain paintings, such as those by Eugène Lami, Hippolyte Bellangé, and Vernet of the *Battle of Alma* failures, since the critics "denied all three paintings . . . the quality of *vérité*" (135). The critics' misgivings included the paintings' supposed lack of unity, "truth," and artistic intervention, as well as their formulaic quality. This is a moment in the book where one would have wanted a more discursive and epistemological analysis of the problem of "truth," instead of an analysis that largely takes "truth" at face value, as an abstract quality that can be seen in a painting. Thoma describes Crimean War battle paintings in great detail, including two paintings that were regarded as critical successes, Gustave Doré's *Battle of Alma* (1855) and Pils' *Landing in Crimea* (1857). Thoma writes: "How to imbue a battle with historical truthfulness continued to be an urgent question when critics analyzed military paintings of the Crimean War" (147).

In the same chapter, Thoma offers a fascinating reconstruction of the Crimean War Gallery, a room that no longer exists in the Château de Versailles, but that nevertheless ushered in "a new era in the genre of military painting" (147). The gallery, which used the space of the unfinished Moroccan Gallery, was conceived on the model of the two adjacent rooms at Versailles, the Constantine Gallery and the Smalah Gallery, both designed and executed by Horace Vernet under the patronage of Louis-Philippe during the July Monarchy. The Crimean War Gallery was Napoleon III's opportunity to honor his own government's military exploits and he did so, as Thoma describes, by engaging the services of eighteen artists. The large canvases that once lined the walls of the gallery depicted the various phases of the war, starting with the troop landings on the Crimean Peninsula. Yvon's three monumental canvases, *The Capture of the Malakoff Tower* (1857), *The Malakoff Gorge* (1859), and

*The Malakoff Courtine* (1859) were the stars of the room. In small plates that are inserted at the center of the book, Thoma reproduces the majority of the large-scale paintings that once lined the room's walls, including Félix Barrias' *Landing of the French Army at Old Port* (1859), which is still in the collection of Versailles; Jules Rigo's *French Surgeons Passing Wounded Russians at the Battle of Inkermann* (1856); Eugène Appert's *The Sisters of Charity in Crimea* (1854); and Jean-Baptiste Henri Durand-Brager's *Panorama of the Siege of Sebastopol* (1857). Thoma argues that the room successfully depicted the temporal and geographic expansiveness of the Crimean War. This "propaganda display" was connected to the Second Empire's effort to "entertain and dazzle" the public and "captured the new complexity of modern warfare" (162). Thoma asserts that the Crimean War Gallery was more successful than Louis-Philippe's historical museum, which it inspired. As a space akin to a "panorama of the whole war," the room "sought to foster a more engaged spectatorship than did the July Monarchy rooms" (211). Thoma cites the presence of busts and of smaller-scale paintings alongside the larger canvases as the main reasons behind the comparatively "more engaged" (210) strategies of visual solicitation. She affirms that the room was able to "impress and overwhelm" visitors and therefore "foreclose expressions of doubt about the conduct of the war" (211). This conclusion leaves the reader wondering if more oppositional readings were possible or even abetted by this massive display of the government's official version of the war. Such displays likely also courted counter-readings that did not proceed according to the government's wishes.

In the same chapter, Thoma then turns her attention to the series of three monumental battle paintings produced by Yvon related to the Malakoff Tower that were on display in the Crimean War Gallery. Thoma advances a series of bold claims about the political effectiveness of the first of Yvon's paintings, *Capture of the Malakoff Tower*, exhibited at the Salon of 1857. She emphasizes the presence of *vérité* in the pictures: "Under political pressure, Yvon had renovated conventional pictorial strategies, rendering war more real than ever" (163). Yvon's three paintings were propagandistic efforts for Napoleon III to crown the Malakoff as a specifically French victory and to convince the public that the tremendous loss of life was well worth the effort. She provides a detailed account of the circumstances around the commissioning of the paintings, with the fascinating detail that Yvon had proposed the triptych himself to make up for a slight committed against the artist's relative, Louis-Jules Trochu, who had criticized le Prince Napoleon for leaving the war too early. Thoma argues that Yvon's Malakoff paintings made use of innovative strategies that represented a definitive shift beyond those developed by Vernet and that Yvon rendered war "more immediate" than the senior artist (178). To distinguish between the two artists in the service of arguing for Yvon's difference and innovation, she distinguishes between critics calling Yvon's scattered centers of action "episodes," while referring to Vernet's as "anecdotes" (172). The difference, however, does not appear as important as Thoma implies, as episode was also a term that critics had long applied to Vernet's paintings. In this section, Thoma also compares Yvon's monumental paintings to Vernet's *Smalah*, as well as to Jean-Charles Langlois' efforts to depict the capture of the Malakoff Tower in his panorama. Thoma points out that Yvon's paintings were not universally praised. This could have allowed the author to question the power dynamic behind the paintings' attempts to advance Napoleon III's political agenda. An extended political analysis might have allowed her to look beyond matters of Yvon's arrangement of figures in space to consider how such paintings may have courted oppositional readings, since these paintings nakedly displayed loss of life and, if one looked hard enough, a less than heroic fight. Thoma returns to formal analysis to conclude

that any negative, or “menacing,” readings of Yvon’s *Malakoff* were ultimately “neutralized by the overall composition” (179). There are gestures toward ambivalent readings of these paintings, such as when the author writes that “the criticism of the artistic shortcomings of Yvon’s *Capture of the Malakoff Tower* shows that the desired propaganda effect did not succeed in impressing the critics” (185). One paragraph later, however, any negative opinions of the painting are again “rendered harmless by the static overall composition” (186). The back and forth between arguing for the success and failure of the painting has a disorienting effect on the reader, who awaits a larger takeaway from the lengthy examination of the Salon criticism. Thoma notes that the painting received the prestigious *médaille d’honneur* and was “seminal for the pictorial rendering of the Second Empire’s writing of history” (187). The overriding argument pertains to the painting’s importance during the time it was made and Yvon’s merit as an artist who devised “pictorial solutions” for the picturing of war (147, 202, and others). This is one example in the book where Thoma’s penchant for studying these works on their own merits leaves one wondering what else might be said about the political pitfalls of using large-scale battle paintings to court public opinion.

The next chapter of the book deals with paintings of France’s 1859 Italian campaign, which resulted in a loss for the Austrians and the annexation of Nice and Savoie for the French. As a more coherent and focused chapter dealing with a smaller number of works, it is much more approachable for readers than the Crimean War chapter. It adopts a similar format, consisting of historical and political context about the campaign at the beginning of the chapter and a detailed analysis of the relevant official paintings thereafter. Thoma points out that public opinion was against the war from the outset. The war also resulted in a tremendous loss of life on all sides. As was the case with the Crimean War, this meant that the official paintings related to the 1859 Italian campaign were designed to persuade a skeptical public of the war’s importance. As Thoma points out, reproductive media also played an important role in mediating perceptions of the war. She reproduces a fascinating and gruesome stereoscopic photograph taken Jules Couppier of the *Cemetery of Melegnano, the Day after the Battle* (1859) about which much more could have been said.

Once again, the French government turned to Yvon to execute the most important and largest painting of the war. Thoma argues that Yvon’s *Battle of Solferino*, which was exhibited at the Salon of 1861, failed to satisfy both the critics and the Emperor. The failure was due to circumstances largely outside of Yvon’s control: unlike the most important battles from the Crimean War, Napoleon III was present for the Battle of Solferino, the largest to occur in Europe since the Battle of Leipzig in 1813, which resulted in a massive 17,000 allied deaths. The Emperor’s presence meant that Yvon was obligated to include him in the painting. Thoma recounts a plausible anecdote about a disagreement between the painter and the Empress Eugénie over the kind of hat that the Emperor would wear in the painting. The disagreement apparently carried heavy consequences for Yvon, who was denied a medal at the Salon of 1861 and received no more commissions for large-scale battle paintings after the incident. Unlike his previous paintings of the Crimean War, his *Battle of Solferino* depicted the Emperor in the middle of the painting, presiding over the battle. “Instead of looking up to a common soldier, the spectator was now looking up to the emperor” (242). Thoma argues that Yvon drew on the examples of First Empire battle painting, including François Gérard’s *Battle of Austerlitz* (1810) and Antoine-Jean Gros’ *Battle of Eylau* (1807–8), in the hopes of renewing *la grande peinture* (245). This aspiration was largely dashed because, as Thoma argues, Yvon failed to reconcile the demands of art with the demands of the official organs of

power who commissioned the painting. “The focus on the Emperor was indeed the main problem,” Thoma concludes (248). She compares Yvon’s painting to more topographical modes of battle painting that were on view at the Salon of 1861 that did not “center-stage” the Emperor. These were more favorably received by critics. The standout painting in this section, unfortunately reproduced with a low-quality black and white scan, is Édouard Armand-Dumaresq’s *Episode of the Battle of Solferino* (1861), in which the point of view is close to the ground and hovers around a group of soldiers who are firing on the enemy (251). Thoma dwells on the reception of battle painting at the Salon of 1861 and then considers Yvon’s unsuccessful attempt in 1863 to restore his reputation with the *Battle of Magenta*. Yvon shifted his focus back to the plight of the common soldier in the heat of battle, and the painting met with praise from critics. Despite the reception of the work, Thoma nevertheless concludes that the painting was not successful, since “the genre in general experienced a negative critical reception at the Salon of 1863” (266). She describes the reactions of several critics to battle paintings in general as a symptom of the “growing unpopularity of grand military *machines*” (269). As an explanation of this, Thoma notes that the rise of illustrated newspapers “coincided” with the “decreasing popularity” of military painting (271). The final section in the chapter deals with a small painting by Ernest Meissonier, *Napoleon III at the Battle of Solferino* (1863), which took its formal inspiration from an illustrated newspaper image that appeared in an 1862 edition of *Le monde illustré*. The painting’s small scale was appropriate for its destination, the contemporary art museum of Paris, the Luxembourg. Thoma points out that the look and size of the painting had everything to do with the fact that it was not intended for the historical museum at Versailles. Critics praised it and it achieved, in the words of Gautier, “a topical ‘*vérité absolue*’” (279).

The book’s last chapter delves into a genre of military painting that Thoma identifies as emerging in the 1860s: sentimental genre paintings of military life “focusing on the private feelings of individual soldiers” (281). Alexandre Protais’ series *Morning, Before the Attack* and *Evening, After the Combat* were exhibited to great acclaim at the Salon of 1863. The works appeared to critics as a welcome departure from the “epic rendering” of large-scale battle painting (281). Thoma points out that Emperor Napoleon III preferred to collect genre paintings such as those by Protais that showed the struggles of individual soldiers. Such works were “politically ambiguous” (282). In the chapter, Thoma returns to Meissonier’s *Solferino* and compares its narrative conventions to Stendhal’s 1839 *Charterhouse of Parma*. This comparison leads to a brief discussion of the history of genre painting, with gestures toward Jean-Antoine Watteau and Jean-Baptiste Greuze, and then back to Protais. Bellangé’s depiction of dying soldiers in *The Two Friends* (1855) is also cited as a key military genre painting from the period. Other sections deal with “male companionship and allusions to homoeroticism in military genre paintings,” Protais’ relationship to Salon critics, the idea of national sacrifice in Protais’ genre paintings, and Protais’ various Salon entries at the Salon of 1864 and the Salons of 1865 and 1866, including *The Victors* (1865), and *The Wounded Soldier* (1866). Several short sections, each dealing with one or a couple of paintings, comprise the chapter. The effect is a bit daunting for the reader: this is one of the sections where Thomas’ drive toward exhaustiveness detracts from a more synthetic overview of a big-picture problem related to military painting.

If one of the chief merits of this book is the copious number of sources that Thoma’s research has made available to readers, this is also one of its drawbacks. Readers should be



warned that this book reads densely, since it is a “lightly revised” doctoral dissertation. In the chapters on the Crimean War and military genre paintings, it is often difficult to see the forest for the trees. At times, there is also an overreliance on the work of others, an abundance of citations of other doctoral dissertations, and an impression that the author is performing scholarly due diligence, rather than driving forward her own arguments. All of this is consistent with what we might expect from a dissertation. It is not what we necessarily want out of a book.

Throughout each of the book’s chapters, Thoma describes the political considerations behind official commissions for battle paintings. Thoma insists on the political machinations behind their production, but less attention is paid to their reception as works of propaganda and to doubts about using large-scale battle painting as a form of political outreach. Whatever may have been the government’s ambitions for these kinds of pictures, one wonders about their effectiveness.

“Politics” in this book is instead handled in terms of the aims of official propaganda, whether or not official intentions were “read” by the critics, and the presence of “*vérité*” in the paintings. Within her analysis, “truth” is addressed as a self-evident kind of authority, rather than an epistemological problem. Because Thoma tends toward dense analysis of Second Empire battle paintings, readers are left wondering what the larger stakes of “truth” might be beyond the pictures themselves or how the desire for “truth” might be linked to larger political or aesthetic problems. The analysis of Salon criticism and the reading of “*vérité*” as a value to be adduced by Salon critics often stops with the pictures themselves. It does not carry over into sustained political analysis of the complex configuration between art, politics, and war that one might want from expect from a book about military painting.

Despite these shortcomings, Thoma’s book is full of rich historical and art historical research; it attends to the visual qualities of paintings that seldom, if ever, have been included in art historical studies of the period. Thoma is exacting in her coverage of military painting produced during the Crimean War and the Italian Campaign and for anyone curious about these works, *The Final Spectacle* is a crucial study.

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## Notes

[1] “Son immense popularité ne durera d’ailleurs pas plus longtemps que la guerre, et qui diminuera à mesure que les peuples se feront d’autres joies.” Charles Baudelaire, “Salon de 1846,” *Curiosités esthétiques*, vol. 2 (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1868), 159.