

# Images of violence

Though violence has been a major source of inspiration for art, artists of every nation and age have sought to convey the message that war is destructive and ugly



**CREATIONS**  
Nanditha Krishna

ONE of the most unforgettable images of recent times is that of the planes flying into the New York World Trade Centre's twin towers, and the towers collapsing vertically. Of people running on the streets of New York, covered in dust. I doubt whether those who saw those images on television will ever forget them.

Some images are permanent and indelible, such as the little Vietna-

mese girl running in terror from the napalm bombing by the Americans, and the blasting of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban. The First World War's lasting image is the Austrian Grand Duke Ferdinand seated in his car, before his assassination, while the Second World War is remembered by images of bombed European cities and crying and maimed children sitting on the ruins of Hiroshima. These were black-and-white photographs, which made them even more stark and terrible.

Ever since the America-Afghan war started, we have been bombarded by images. Some are tragic, some are bleak — war never produced pretty pictures. Others are a joke. I will never forget one that came out when the war began. The newsreaders (BBC and CNN) were describing Osama bin Laden's popularity in Pakistan, where he is a popular icon. And they showed posters of Osama hung up in the marketplace of Peshawar, flanked by posters of ... Madhuri Dixit and Juhi Chawla! I did not know whom to feel more sorry for — the two actresses who were in such unpleasant company or Osama who, along with the Taliban, obviously has a problem about women.



**Achilles killing Penthesilea ... pottery from Athens, 530 BC**

depicted in scenes of violence, neither the hunt nor war. A few Greek reliefs do show the Greeks fighting the Amazons, but as the latter are largely mythical, they do not count for much.

A lot of art is the result of war — images of war, celebrations of war and rallying calls to war. Americans carrying their flags after September 11 portrayed stability, permanency and reassurance, as much as a call to war, and I am sure we will see American artists reproduce them on canvas, like musicians create songs to commemorate the dead. A famous war preserved for posterity was William the Conqueror's conquest of England in 1066 AD, painstakingly embroidered by his wife Matilda and preserved as the Bayeux tapestry. It narrated the war in detail, with scenes of fighting and dead bodies, including the death of Harold, King of England. Indians built pillars and temples to commemorate victories. Ashoka's pillars of stone, the Gupta Iron Pillar, Rajaraja Chola's Brihadishvara Temple and the Jayastambha of Chittorgarh are examples of victorious art. Islam's ban on visuals may have been one of the reasons for the celebration of Muslim victories by the destruction of temples and churches and the construction of mosques on the same place. How else could the conquerors remind an illiterate population of their victory?

Till recently, only victors celebrated their victories in works of art. The vanquished were either enslaved or oppressed, and their cultures were destroyed and repressed. In 1937, Picasso created *Guernica*, a monumental monochrome depicting the destruction by German bombers of a Spanish village. It did more to mobilise European opinion against the Nazis than the speeches of politicians.

The year 1971 was a defining moment in the history of modern India, when the trauma of partition and the frequent Pakistani attacks on India were felled in one stroke by the break-up of Pakistan. So sweet was the victory that when a euphoric opposition leader A B Vajpayee likened Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to Goddess Durga, destroyer of the evil demon Mahisha, artist M F Husain was inspired to depict Mrs Gandhi as Durga. Husain produced some of

his best work in this period.

Indian art abhorred the depiction of violence as much as the Indian religions — Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism — rejected violence. While Greek art depicted violent emotions, such as the Alexander mosaic described earlier, Indian art was inward looking. For example, in a scene of violent warfare, such as Durga killing the demon Mahisha, the face of Durga is calm and untouched by the fighting. Similarly, even as Shiva kills demons in his various *samhara* (destructive) aspects, his face remains calm and untouched by the violence of the events. This is the doctrine of *nishkaama karma*, action without desire for reward. But whereas divine wars are motivated by selflessness, human wars are definitely motivated by selfish desires.

The Americans claim to be fighting a war against the monster of terror, but theirs is a war of anger. The Taliban and Osama bin Laden claim to be fighting a holy war or *fiyah*, but the killing of innocent civilians going about their work peacefully can never be holy. Only images will outlive this war — images of injured children, crying children, children fighting for their lives, children used as human shields, children with one leg, one eye and so on.

Once upon a time, we would wait for an obliging artist to come along and record the war for posterity. Today, images travel so fast that we see them even as they are being made. Television is a new art form that brings striking images into our homes. But the Alexander mosaic and Bayeux tapestry are still available for view over a thousand years later. Peasants in a Chinese village are reconstructing the Bamiyan Buddhas in their village. I wonder how the bombing of the twin towers and the war against terror will be preserved for posterity.

Most victorious and heraldic art was commissioned. But the artist slipped in his opinion of the horrors of war in the body language and facial expressions within his paintings. Unfortunately, we have yet to learn the message that artists of every nation and age recorded in their images: that war is destructive and ugly. The artist of Nineveh was a "peacenik" of the ancient world, as are so many other artists cutting across time and civilisation. But their voices are drowned by the louder clamour of war cries.

The author is Director, The C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, Chennai