

Art and conflict

The ravages of war

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MANY of the exhibitions that commemorate the start of the first world war focus on the fields of Flanders and northern France where the heaviest battles took place. "Ravaged", an exhibition in the Belgian town of Leuven, marks the centenary in a different way. It explores another universal consequence of conflict: its impact on art and culture. Its starting point is the story of how German troops entered Leuven in 1914 and, in retaliation for a supposed sniper attack, exacted terrible reprisals on the town, destroying large swathes, including the university library, and executing many inhabitants.

It's a good idea, therefore, to prefix a visit to the exhibition with a climb up the rebuilt library's 80-metre bell tower, where the town's story is told floor by floor. At the museum proper, the exhibition is introduced with a work from 2011 by Adel Abdessemed, an Algerian conceptual artist. With a flailing horse lying on top of a copy of the "Green Book", a collection of the political thoughts of Muammar Qaddafi, it tries to illustrate the close relationship between propaganda and slaughter. Nearby, a canvas by Michael Sweerts dating from 1650 shows Mars, the Roman god of war, destroying "the arts".

Alexander and Bonin

By juxtaposing recent conflict-oriented works and installations with older items, the exhibition shows how art has been a victim of war and wilful destruction through the ages. The subtext of "Ravaged" is that whereas death in war is indeed a tragedy, cultural obliteration is, in its own way, just as destructive. When art is obliterated, suggests the exhibition, so is a core part of man's humanity.

In some cases this idea is driven home with extraordinary power and economy. Take, for example, "Bunker" by Mona Hatoum, a Palestinian artist. This series of structures represents both abstract and real buildings, such as a school in Beirut that was devastated by war. It's a desolate and desolating landscape whose steel boxes have been made to look as though punctured by bullets and shrapnel. The terrible irony of the work's title is that nobody could hope to find any sort of shelter in this wasteland.

Of the two works specifically commissioned for the show, only one, by Fernando Bryce, a Peruvian artist, has an emotional immediacy. His copies of postcards, pamphlets and newspaper coverage of the destruction of Leuven's university library and Reims cathedral in France are a reminder not only that heritage is a frequent casualty of war but that the presentation of its destruction can offer a very personalised telling of history: what seemed at first authoritative suddenly looks subjective.

It is more difficult to engage with the older works. This is not because they are uninteresting, but because compared with the power of the large-scale installations and conceptual pieces they seem smaller, more precious, less urgent. It is harder to be moved by J.M.W. Turner's painting of a city in flames when the first feeling is of how beautiful it is. The conventional beauty of the medium creates a certain detachment. A few of the older works do break through that barrier, most notably Samuel Colman's "The Edge of Doom", from 1836, which depicts an apocalyptic scene at a time when it was not particularly fashionable to do so. A statue of William Shakespeare stands amid a scene of cultural freefall, with frescoes and paintings flying through the air and plunging into an abyss.

Some of the older paintings are moving too for the way they avoid romanticising ruins and destruction. Witness Aurèle Augustin Coppens's monochrome paintings of Brussels after its destruction by the French in the 17th century. The power of these paintings is enhanced by the fact that they are presented—as are others here—in a black circular structure that represents a burned-out building, the deleting of history.

The last room of the exhibition brings the viewer back to libraries. Emily Jacir, a Palestinian artist, took photographs of some of the 30,000 books taken by Israelis in 1948 from Palestinian homes, libraries and institutions, which are now kept in Jerusalem's National Library under the heading of "Abandoned Property". Laid out on shelves as if to create a new library, they commemorate what was, and raise questions about preservation and restitution. From the walls of this room you can see the vast new building that was erected on the spot where Leuven University's original library once stood. But the absence of its predecessor still echoes around the city.

"Ravaged—Art and Culture in Times of Conflict" is at M Museum in Leuven, Belgium, until September 1st 2014