

ARTISTS RESPOND

American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965–1975

A divisive and controversial conflict, the Vietnam War had a profound impact on politics and society in the United States. It also radically affected the art of its time. As the 1960s began, the most critically celebrated U.S. art tended toward abstraction or seemed coolly detached from topical issues. But as media coverage of the war intensified and the horrific human toll continued to mount, the moral urgency of the Vietnam War compelled a shift from ideals of aesthetic purity toward those of shared conscience and civic action. Artists of all kinds chose to engage—with their present moment, with politics, and with the public sphere.

Focusing on the height of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, this exhibition emphasizes a “real time” experience of the war period as seen through the eyes of artists living and exhibiting in the United States. Some sought to raise political consciousness about the war and, they hoped, to help end it. Others produced art that was not explicitly activist yet steeped in the imagery and emotions of the conflict. New artistic forms emphasizing the intersection of art and lived experience, such as body art and institutional critique, emerged. So, too, did a greater diversity of voices, as artists of color and women demanded to be heard. The works assembled here make vivid an era in which artists struggled to address the turbulent times and openly questioned issues central to American civic life.

LIVING ROOM WAR

The Vietnam War was the first U.S. military conflict to be televised. Never before had civilians in the United States been able to watch, from the comfort of their homes, scenes of a faraway war unfold in moving pictures. The war was also heavily covered by photojournalists, who operated free of U.S. military censorship and circulated their work in newspapers and widely read magazines, such as *Life*, *Look*, and *Time*. Media images of the war appear again and again in the art of the period, sometimes quoted directly, sometimes considerably transformed. The flow of visual information from combat zones to the home front made the war newly vivid and real to many Americans.

A WAR OF INFORMATION

The Vietnam War coincided with the rise of conceptual art in the United States. Conceptualism asserts the importance of concept over object and thinking over form. That a work of art could consist of facts—and that an art gallery could be used to amplify knowledge and stimulate critical thought—had special resonance in the context of a war driven by information and misinformation. Conceptual artists brought real-world news reports into the supposedly neutral context of a gallery, transforming a setting once reserved for aesthetic contemplation into an arena of active questioning. Artists also pursued an impulse to document, using the presentation of hard facts and direct observation as a way to engage and inform viewers.

PRINTS FOR PEACE

Prints have long been used for social critique and raising awareness because they are affordable to produce and easy to distribute. The outpouring of graphic art during the Vietnam War ranged from protest posters with clear, strong messages to experimental works that reflected recent developments in Pop art and conceptualism. Artists created limited-edition prints to raise funds for the antiwar movement; they also produced prints anonymously and in large quantities to give away at demonstrations, sell at low cost, or post in the streets.

Some of the artists whose work is shown here had an ongoing commitment to both the medium of printmaking and political discourse. Others vigorously protested the war as private citizens but found it difficult or undesirable to do so in their art. Abstract artists, especially, considered their work ill-suited for tackling current events and kept it removed from political speech. Yet the pervasive impact of the Vietnam War prompted meaningful exceptions, often in the form of prints. In some instances, invitations to participate in protest exhibitions provided the pretext for artists to merge their art with activism.

SELECTIVE SERVICE

During the Vietnam War, the military draft—which affected men aged 18 to 26—forced younger Americans to think about potential combat service. Men in that age bracket were required to register with the Selective Service, and they could then be called up to serve in the U.S. military. Thorny questions of patriotism and sacrifice are embedded in the art of the period, often revealing opposing perspectives that divided the country.

For much of the war, the Selective Service allowed deferments for college and graduate students, a system that was later deemed unfair. Those who were drafted were more likely to see combat and bore a disproportionate share of the casualties. The draft thus became a galvanizing political issue among minorities, who were struggling for civil rights at home even as their young men fought for the country abroad. The Black Arts and Chicano art movements, rising at the time, insisted on art's political role and emphasized cultural self-determination; they provided a context in which artists of color tackled themes of national identity and service.

SHOOT, BURN, RESIST

The Body

With news about death and physical injury a heavy presence in the media during the Vietnam War, the vulnerability of the human form became a widespread preoccupation in art. This was most strikingly addressed in the field of performance art, which tapped into the immediacy and visceral power of live experience. In insisting on the continuity between life and art, and foregrounding the body as both subject matter and political means, performance is deeply characteristic of art formed in the crucible of the Vietnam War years.

SITES OF PROTEST

Following the accomplishments of the civil rights movement, “putting your body on the line” became by the late 1960s a common tool for demanding social change. Antiwar artists adopted techniques of public protest and direct action, creating works informed by their participation in mass demonstrations, such as marches and strikes. They also unleashed performances in strategically selected sites.

The museum became for artists what the university campus was for student activists: the site of authority at which they could direct their protest. In works of institutional critique, they raised questions about the very settings where they took place, calling attention to the connections among audience, museum, and larger political and economic power structures.

CRITICAL PICTURES

By the late 1960s, people in the United States were deeply divided about the legitimacy and purpose of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Amid the climate of passionate public debate, some artists embraced figurative representation and narrative, modes of expression considered out of fashion among U.S. modern painters since the 1930s. At a time when cool abstraction dominated, these artists ran hot. They created bluntly provocative and dissenting pictures, often drawing on sources such as comic books, bathroom graffiti, and caricature in their efforts to make painting equal to the emotional pressures of the time.

Women, people of color, and artists living far from the prominent art market of New York City were often the most outspoken and transgressive in their antiwar art. They already operated beyond the attention of the largely white, male critical establishment. The works by women seen nearby appeared only in a few protest exhibitions during the period and were rarely discussed for many years after.

HOTSPOT

Chicago 1968

Chicago hosted the Democratic National Convention (DNC) during the last week of August 1968. The violence that erupted when police attacked antiwar protesters outside the convention hall outraged and galvanized the city's already politically active artists. Chicago's Democratic mayor Richard J. Daley handled the chaos with authoritarian intolerance. The national and international press covering the spectacle in print and on television described the incident as a microcosm of a divided country. Protesters in Chicago chanted "the whole world is watching" in the streets, aware of the power the media had to spread images of police brutality. In the wake of the events, the city's artists and galleries organized exhibitions responding to the violence at home and to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

This gallery includes artwork made for or included in protest exhibitions in both 1967 and following the DNC incident in 1968. Much of the imagery skewered authoritarian figures, such as Mayor Daley, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson (LBJ), and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Like artists on the coasts and throughout the United States, the Midwest had an engaged community who responded to key moments of political upheaval during the war.

HOMECOMING

As the Vietnam War persisted into the 1970s, artists who had served in the conflict returned and created work informed by their wartime experiences. Like many other veterans, they expressed both pride and pain about their service. Jesse Treviño, who lost an arm due to injuries sustained in combat, reinvented his painting practice as he recovered, newly asserting his perspective as a veteran and a Chicano. Performance artist Kim Jones developed the persona “Mudman,” who traveled by foot through Los Angeles wearing combat boots, his face covered by a stocking, and his body coated in mud. Bearing a spiky wooden structure on his back, Mudman is both imposing and vulnerable, embodying the outsider status assigned to many Vietnam veterans upon their return to the civilian world. Even artists who did not serve in the war effort lost friends or family members to it ; they, too, produced work that questions the motives of war and the meaning of loss.

**This exhibition is organized by the
Smithsonian American Art Museum
with generous support from:**

Anonymous

Diane and Norman Bernstein Foundation

Sheri and Joe Boulos

Gene Davis Memorial Fund

Glenstone Foundation

Norbert Hornstein and Amy Weinberg

Henry Luce Foundation

Nion McEvoy and Leslie Berriman

Cindy Miscikowski

Daniel C. and Teresa Moran Schwartz

Smithsonian Scholarly Studies Awards

Terra Foundation for American Art

The United States and Vietnam have a complicated history.

The conflict known as the “Vietnam War” in the United States—and the “American War” in Vietnam—was long in the making. Global and domestic conditions in the years leading up to the war made for a shifting relationship, as forces in each country pursued their own political and ideological goals.

The region that is today Vietnam became a French colony in the late 1800s. During World War II (1939–45), Japanese forces also occupied Vietnam. Communist leader HỒ Chí Minh and his nationalist Việt Minh fighters resisted all foreign authority, and the U.S. government supported them in their struggle against the Japanese. When Japan surrendered in 1945, HỒ Chí Minh declared Vietnam an independent state. After that, the United States, hoping to contain the spread of communism, backed France’s attempt to reestablish colonial rule. After an eight-year conflict, HỒ Chí Minh’s forces defeated France in 1954. At peace talks in Geneva, the major world powers decided to temporarily divide the country instead of upholding independence. Two nations eventually emerged: the noncommunist Republic of Vietnam in the south, supported by the United States, and the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north, allied with the Soviet Union and China.

Political tensions escalated and war broke out between the North and South. Without making an official declaration of war, the United States provided steadily increasing aid to South Vietnam. The commitment of U.S. ground troops in 1965 finally brought America’s long involvement in Vietnam into the open.