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January 30, 2018

Celeste-Marie Bernier

Suffering and Sunset: World War I in the Art and Life of Horace Pippin

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015. 552 pp.;
32 color ills.; 35 b/w ills. Cloth \$39.95 (9781439912737)

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CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2018.18



In *Suffering and Sunset: World War I in the Art and Life of Horace Pippin*, Celeste-Marie Bernier has written an intellectual and cultural biography of the artist. Her study is a deeply researched, archival-focused examination of the ways in which war, military service, race, identity, and art making were inextricably bound together for Horace Pippin (1888–1946). *Suffering and Sunset* is also polemical, challenging white-dominated archival and historical structures and official histories that have ignored and negated both the black male artist and the African American combat soldier. Understanding World War I as the defining experience for Pippin, Bernier reconsiders his paintings, burntwood panels, sketches, drawings, and manuscripts in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the artist's motivations. Scholars have wrestled with how to categorize Pippin, labeling him as "untrained," a "folk" artist, a "visionary" artist, a "naïve" artist, and/or a "modernist primitive." Bernier refutes a simplistic understanding of who Pippin was and how he approached war in his art. Instead, she offers "a life story of art that is indivisible from a life story of war" (2), proposing that in order to fully understand the depth of Pippin's art, it is necessary to understand his perceptions of World War I as a soldier who served on the frontlines in the so-called "No Man's Land" and his development as an artist within this political context.

Organized with a long introduction and three parts, Bernier offers an in-depth analysis of Pippin's life, his art, his military service, and more generally, the black military presence during World War I. In her introduction, she outlines the book's parameters: "Recognizing the limitations and distortions enacted by official histories, Pippin's autobiographical manuscripts work in conjunction with his drawings, paintings, and burntwood panels to memorialize the histories and lives of Black combat service that have been subjected to deliberate as well as accidental erasures within the white-originated and white-controlled national archives" (6). Her introduction also sets the tone for the rest of the book through her close looking and analysis of two self-portraits: *Portrait of a Soldier* (ca. 1940) and *Self-Portrait* (1941). Both of these images provide competing yet sympathetic depictions of the black male self: one an image that shows Pippin as a ready and prepared combat soldier, and the other a painting of the artist engaged in the aesthetic process of creation. Bernier also incorporates Pippin's disability (his right arm was severely injured during his military service), his family history in slavery, the marketing of Pippin as a self-taught artist, and the ways in which Pippin's white Philadelphia art dealer, Robert Carlen, mythologized Pippin's biography for the sake of selling works. In the 1940s, Carlen proposed that Pippin's talent was inseparable from his disability, his slave past, and his lack of artistic training. Bernier refutes such simplistic understandings of Pippin overcoming insurmountable barriers, and instead presents a story of a complex, self-made man deeply aware of society around him and of mainstream artistic traditions.

"Part I: A Life Story of War Is a Life Story of Art" considers African Americans and their role in World War I, closely examining complex issues of race, inequality, and military service. Within this context, Bernier explores Pippin's autobiographical statement *My Life's Story* (ca. 1941) to access the ways in which he narrated his "life story of art" in relation to the psychologically complex lives of black

soldiers engaged in destructive modern warfare on the frontlines at a time when their personhood and civil rights were denied in the United States. Through an examination of archival documents—census records, marriage applications, newspaper obituaries, city directories, burial records, and death certificates—Bernier conveys new information about Pippin’s biography that helps refute his mythologized life story and the infantilizing rhetoric that has shaped dominant understandings of him. In part 1, Bernier reveals the ways in which Pippin resists easy definition by presenting the deep self-reflexivity and experimentation evidenced in both the artist’s use of language *and* his engagement with pencils, paint, and burning tools that allowed him to become a soldier-artist.

Bernier turns her attention to Pippin’s handwritten autobiographies in “Part II: War and Writing in the Life of Horace Pippin.” She argues that Pippin was a self-made writer as well as a self-made artist. In his autobiographies, she sees Pippin wrestling with the traumatic experience of war through his imagistic use of language: “Alternating between first-person and third-person narration, Pippin dramatizes both personal and collective experiences as he seeks to characterize Black combatants as complex individuals rather than reductive archetypes” (177). In a thoughtful engagement with Pippin’s autobiographies and his art, Bernier recognizes that Pippin’s writing is integral to understanding his paintings, burntwood panels, and sketches. By comparing his “visual and textual archive,” she reveals the contrasting way in which Pippin memorialized war in his writing and his artwork (179). Also important to part 2 is Bernier’s narration of the frontline war experience from a black soldier’s perspective: the reader gains a sense of Pippin’s memory of war (the horror and trauma of aerial combat for those on the ground, for example) and the struggles he faced to articulate the devastation of war both linguistically and visually.

In “Part III: War and Painting in the Life of Horace Pippin,” Bernier explores the impact of the war on Pippin through a detailed examination of his techniques and of his materials as well as the interpretive potential of his World War I art. She understands Pippin to have been engaged in anti-racist work: “His paintings and sketches reveal his resistance to white racist strategies intent on misrepresenting and misremembering Black combat histories. Profoundly aware that white racist imaginings of Black men—reproduced in cartoons, posters, prints, and official works of fine art—held their grip over a white national memory of war, Pippin worked to create a body of antisensationalist and antistereotyped images” (301). Most importantly, she notes that Pippin strove to depict black soldiers as individualized subjects and black manhood as what she calls “the normative default” (302). In addition, Bernier frames (but does not valorize) Pippin’s war injury as a disability that transformed his art: without the full use of his right arm, Pippin developed innovative and experimental artistic strategies including a reliance on discarded objects, his adaptation of his brushes and easel, and the use of everyday objects such as pokers to create his burntwood panels.

At the heart of *Suffering and Sunset* are Pippin’s numerous letters and papers, his four hand-written manuscripts housed in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, and a close reading of his World War I paintings, drawings, and burntwood panels. Bernier avers that Pippin’s voice in the archives and his “writing himself into existence” must guide an understanding of him. She writes, “Pippin’s manuscripts testify to his cultivation of an array of formal and thematic strategies as he assumed the role of memorialist-witness to the unrepresented realities of Black military lives” (3). Bernier extensively researched art archives, military service records, and genealogical records in a variety of collections. Although anchored in the archive, Bernier is fully aware of the problems involved in using it, including interpretive dilemmas and issues of absence. In her epilogue, she also points out the inherent concern of authenticating Pippin’s work when forged and faked Pippin paintings continue to dominate the market, and make it difficult for scholars to define an authentic canon of the artist’s work.

As a scholar who teaches Pippin in twentieth-century art-survey courses, for me this book is an invaluable resource. It is a dense and rich rethinking of Pippin, his art, and his combat service and the military service of African American men during World War I. I can imagine assigning this text in a graduate seminar, using it as a way to wrestle with the role of the archive in art-historical research (and the understudied Pippin archive in particular), and to consider the symbiotic relationship of writing and art making for the artist. That said, *Suffering and Sunset* might be a difficult read for an undergraduate audience and those who are unfamiliar with Pippin, due to its density, polemical nature, and difficulties in the language. However, overall this is a much-needed reconsideration of Pippin, providing a nuanced and critical evaluation of his writing and his art.

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