

The Destruction of Art

Iconoclasm and Vandalism
since the French Revolution

Dario Gamboni

reaktion books



The Destruction of Art

*Iconoclasm and Vandalism since
the French Revolution*

Dario Gamboni

REAKTION BOOKS

2 A Historical Outline

Preservation, use, and symbol

A few general remarks are necessary at the outset of this historical summary. Horst Bredekamp stressed the value that the study of 'wars of images' possesses because they question the universal validity of the modern concept of 'art'. I would say that dealing with the destruction of works of art means seeing them in the broader context of artefacts, objects, even – to pay a tribute to George Kubler – 'things'.¹ Some prejudices may be better fought against in this way. First, the binary opposition between creation and destruction. Unfortunately, the very word 'destruction' that I have to employ, notwithstanding its simplifying character, contributes to this symmetry and tends to evoke the idea that the mistreatment it denotes is – after 'creation' or 'production' – the second, and the last, one that any object has been subjected to, unless the object still exists. From this point of view, in summary, an object is made, it exists, and it may, ultimately, be destroyed. Now, a closer examination of the history of any object shows that the bad treatments in question take place in a long series of interventions of which they may or may not be the final ones. 'Creation' itself may be constituted of several of these interventions, as every ancient building attests (of how many depends on the stage or state at which one chooses to situate the 'standard' existence of the object). Some of these interventions aimed at lengthening its existence, others (the iconoclastic ones) at terminating it, and many – maybe all – at modifying it. Intention in this respect, it must immediately be remarked, is not everything, and judgement may differ considerably from it. That every intervention, whatever its purpose, implies a modification, derives from the fact that on a technical and aesthetic as well as physical level, there is no conservation without transformation; what varies, and certainly matters, is the kind, extent and duration of this transformation. As far as 'bad treatments' are concerned, and taking into account the possible discrepancy between intention, effect and judgement, it may be better to call them 'misuse', as the term makes clear that it is but a kind of 'use', and that the distinction between 'misuse' and 'use' depends on what is defined as 'proper use' at any time, for any object, for any person and in any circumstance.

A second point that must be made about the life of artefacts is that it is their normal fate to disappear. A number of factors contribute to determining the duration of objects, including the materials employed in their making and the way these are combined, the physical context in which they are placed and its changes, as well as the uses to which they are submitted and the way they are considered. Regarding materials and their combination, it may be sufficient for the moment to remind the reader that the length of time they are expected to survive is generally one of the reasons for their selection, and that the hope they will last is traditionally associated with works of art as well as with monuments. The question of use is even more crucial, but more complex. Most of the time, using an object means wearing it out. For example, in 1836 Ludovic Vitet expressed his regret that French cathedrals, unlike English secularized churches, still fulfilled religious functions, since 'use is a kind of slow, imperceptible, unheeded vandalism, which ruins and defaces almost as much as a brutal devastation'.² One may, however, oppose symbolic to practical use in this respect, and stress that whereas the latter surely leads to physical damage, the former does not necessarily, or does less; or distinguish objects and uses that involve direct physical contact from those (such as images and the act of contemplation) that do not. The matter is obviously not a simple one, as Vitet's attitude towards ecclesiastical architecture makes clear. Many religious images were meant to be kissed and caressed in the West and elsewhere – indeed, curators in India are obliged to prohibit the performance of religious practices in their museums that involve the statues of gods in their care.³ Still, uses that rely less directly on the physical properties of an object and more on its relation to something it represents or refers to, are less liable to cause its degeneration. Moreover, insofar as what it stands for (person, institution, belief, value, norm) is endowed with a permanence and as its relation to it remains effective, the object may benefit from the permanence in question and thus escape the general effects of physical, technical and aesthetic obsolescence, i.e. replacement or destruction, or relegation to a 'basar', less specific use or to a less central place.⁴ In the case of works of art, and in particular modern art, 'what it stands for' may be thought to be purely inherent in the object, but the symbolic relation exists none the less.⁵

Of course, an object may – it generally does – fulfil several functions simultaneously or successively, and changes of function may contribute to its conservation (and modification) just as easily as they might to its destruction. Most artefacts that are now regarded as works of art, monuments or 'cultural property', and which are preserved for that

reason, owe their present status and continuing existence to such a transformation. It may have been more or less progressive or brutal, minor or radical, and is too often defined as a 'defunctionalization', but it really is a change of function and use or a redistribution in the system of functions and uses. However, this type of preservative functional change has long remained an exception, and many authors have stressed how normal it was until modern times to eliminate what we would call a monument or a work of art when it was outmoded or no longer suited the needs and expectations it formerly satisfied.⁶ Moreover, the symbolic relationship is not in itself preservative: it rather tends to make the object share the fluctuating fate of what it symbolizes, unless the relationship comes to be regarded as ineffectual or marginal. Thus, the portrait of a sovereign has a good chance of being preserved, so long as it is deemed worthy (as an effigy and work of art) of the sovereign, but it runs the risk of being discarded or destroyed if the sovereign falls from power or fame, unless it is considered to be too good a picture – rather than as too bad a portrait – to abandon. Suffice it here to mention, in order to point out that the same can be true of 'pure' art, that a painting may be removed from the exhibition rooms of a museum and thrust into its storerooms when the artist, movement or period that it exemplifies falls into disgrace, or when it ceases to exemplify them properly; or it may on the contrary keep its privileged status thanks to other properties that it possesses and can exemplify. But the solidarity and interaction between the object and what it symbolizes (as well as between sign and signified in general) can work in both directions, and this is precisely what accounts for iconoclasms among other kinds of treatments. One may act upon the shape and fate of an object in order to let what it symbolizes partake of this fluctuation, either metaphorically or – by one means or another – literally. Again, 'what it symbolizes' may be an artist, an artistic movement or a definition of art as well as a monarch, a dynasty or a kind of regime.

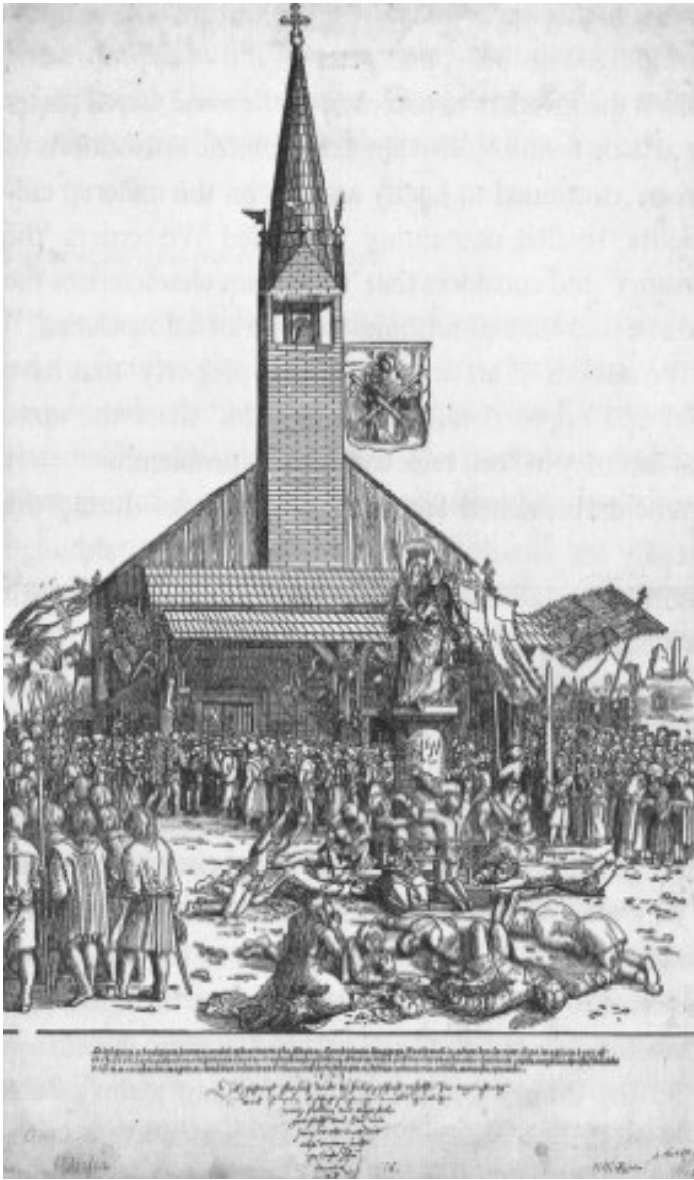
The portrait of a sovereign is a paradigm of the symbolizing power of images in general as well as of their political function in particular.⁷ In this domain, use and misuse can easily be shown to determine each other: it is because images are used to express, impose and legitimize a power that the same images are misused in order to challenge, reject and delegitimize it. It was thus argued that the French Revolution would not have been so extreme in its iconoclasm had the French monarchy not resorted to art as a political instrument to the degree that it did, while the link between Communist monumental propaganda and the wholesale pulling down of statues in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 is readily apparent.⁸ This means that iconoclasm implies some degree of competition in the political and social situation; characteristically, André Chastel proposed to explain the importance of acts of destruction in the history of French art by the fact that France was a land of civil war.⁹ As far as images of sovereigns (or other persons embodying power) are concerned, the political function can be closely connected with others, such as commemorative and funereal ones. *Damnatio memoriae* has been known – if one may say so – from time immemorial, and, in various guises, has remained common practice. The fact that images were for a long time conceived of as real substitutes for the persons represented (replacing those persons on a legal and ritual as well as cognitive plane), and the fact that this is no longer the case, changes matters as far as the more literal or metaphorical status of image use and misuse are concerned; but it does not follow that degrading or eliminating portraits and effigies in modern times should represent a relapse into 'animism' or other 'primitive' ways of thinking and acting.¹⁰

Byzantium and the Reformation

In the case of religious images, the immaterial character of what is symbolized and the fact that ritual or theology often encouraged a fusion of image and prototype made the issue of the adequacy and legitimacy of the symbolizing relationship particularly critical. The iconoclasts of eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium did not mean to attack Christ through his images, even though their enemies implied that they did (illus. 3), but they did object to the use of images as cult objects as well as to related circumstances, such as the wealth and power that their production and exploitation bestowed on the Church, and particularly on the monks. The relative importance of, and the relation between, the overt theological motives that provoked the 'Quarrel of the Images' of 726–843, and its political, economic, social and military implications, have been abundantly discussed, but since the arguments put forward by the iconoclasts have reached us only via their opponents (who were finally the victors in the struggle), the full circumstances of the Iconoclastic Crisis will probably have to remain conjectural.¹¹ The iconoclasts accepted, in fact promoted, abstract rather than figurative symbols and called for an even stricter submission of images to religious function. This point may indicate the – admittedly minor – presence of a crucial factor in the history of later iconoclasms, i.e. conflicting definitions of, and attitudes towards, an autonomy of art. But this aspect becomes really explicit with the destructions organized by Savonarola in fifteenth-century Florence, during which works of art furnished by their owners, and in some cases by their authors, were piled on top of various other objects and burnt as instruments of sensual pleasure and symbols of an immoral and unjust society.¹² The form of the *bruciamenti* prefigures one of the techniques employed for the elimination of 'emblems of the old order' in Revolutionary France, but, what is more important, so does the widening spectrum of symbolic contents involved and the corresponding spectrum of objects attacked.

The conquest of the New World also had an important iconoclastic dimension, one that has only begun to be officially recognized – the Pope very recently begged for pardon in a Mexican church built on the ruins of a Mayan temple – and can only be briefly touched on here.¹³ Following the initial conquest, the images made and used by the New World's inhabitants were interpreted as 'idols' and mostly destroyed, as were many buildings and towns, among which was Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital of 300,000 inhabitants that Cortés razed to the ground in 1521. In this war of images, the necessity of both neutralizing the instruments of indigenous belief and practice and of appropriating their symbolic potential led the invaders to make use of the same sacred places and to accept syncretic artistic forms.¹⁴ But the ethnocentric attributions of 'idolatry' and 'primitivism' continued to justify assaults on the material cultures of colonized societies, so that one author has called Westerners 'the greatest destroyers of history' and considers that 'vandalism characterizes the way in which developed societies have communicated with archaic societies'.¹⁵ It must be added that the notions of art and of 'cultural property' that have since been universalized and opposed to such 'ethnocides' share the same Western origin, and that fact may in itself raise comparable problems.

The theological arguments presented for and against images during the Reformation were generally the same as those made previously – although here one can at least study the reasoning of both sides at first hand – with the exception of a new insistence on the question of the Eucharist.¹⁶ Some of the prototypes (the saints) or their properties (miracle working) were criticized, but the attacks concentrated again on the adequacy and legitimacy of their relation to images and other objects such as relics, as well as on the uses (denounced as superstitious misuses) that found their source and justification in this relation. In order to prove their powerlessness, images were not immediately destroyed: first they were profaned and degraded – often in ways that mimicked judicial processes of the day or the martyrdom of the saints they represented – and summoned to react. The idea was to reduce them to a material status of non-symbolic objects (wood, stone), and a rigid distinction between the profane and the utterly immaterial, non-human realm of the sacred was redrawn.¹⁷ Nevertheless, compared to the Byzantine iconoclasm, the ethical, social, political and aesthetic elements of the Reformation were far more explicit, and certainly weightier. There was the critique of art as luxury and of artistic investment as economic waste detrimental to the interests of the poor, an argument that has remained central to the reception of public patronage down to the present. The role played by iconoclasm in the political dynamics of the Reformation is also of considerable interest for comparative purposes. In the case of France, for instance, Olivier Christin has shown that isolated and precocious iconoclastic acts could be used as a means of radicalizing activism, compelling fellow believers to proclaim their faith and take sides; at the other extreme, the Protestant authorities were chiefly anxious to prevent extremism and keep the revolutionary potential of iconoclasm in check.¹⁸ This 'official' iconoclasm also led to a process of selection based on distinctions between images that were considered to be dangerous and those that were not. As for aesthetic factors, the coincidence between the Reformation and the development of new techniques for the multiplication of images and of new forms and standards of realism has often been stressed. Cheap, popular prints made images ubiquitous, whereas the skill of great artists promoted both the fusion of image and prototype and a distinction between unique images of the same prototype (illus. 4). The inhibiting effects of Protestant aniconism on the imagination and artistic production of a significant part of Europe are well known. But the consequences of the Reformation for the general development of art are more far-reaching and less one-sided, as Werner Hofmann has convincingly demonstrated. According to Hofmann, Luther's assumption that images were not themselves responsible for the uses to which they were put amounted to a liberation, and the expulsion of images from religious services eventually led not only to the flowering of profane art but to Kant's definition of art as the object of 'disinterested enjoyment', to the condemnation of iconoclastic attitudes as archaic, and to the establishment of a 'religion of art'.¹⁹ Similarly, John Phillips has seen in the 'Reformation of images' in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England the origin of 'the move from art as a handmaiden of religion to its conception as an autonomous activity'.²⁰



4 Michael Ostendorfer, *The Pilgrimage to the Image of the Beautiful Virgin in Regensburg*, 1520, woodcut. Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg. The bottom of the print bears Albrecht Dürer's handwritten comment of 1523, condemning the idolatrous practice of pilgrimages to the statue of the Virgin by Erhard Heydenreich and the supposedly miraculous picture attributed to St Luke.

5 *The Overthrown Idol*, 1791, etching and aquatint. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. The print attacks the person of the monarch (the bust of Louis XVI) but defends the monarchy (the fleur-de-lis mantle, the crown), with the caption 'We shall support it to the last drop of our blood'.



The French Revolution

The French Revolution is generally recognized as a turning-point in the history of both the destruction and the preservation of art. In an attempt at summarizing the evolution of iconoclasm, with the Byzantine 'Quarrel of the Images', the Reformation and the Revolution as its main stages, Karl-Adolf Nappé saw in the Revolution the culmination of a threefold process involving a dilution of the 'spiritual content' of the attacks, a widening of their targets and a growth in the importance of aesthetic components.²¹ André Chastel noted that the very notion of *patrimoine* (heritage) was 'born out of the unheard-of disasters of the Revolution'.²² The contradictions and paradoxes of this Janus have been open to interpretation and controversy, for the destruction of art became a major argument in the evaluation of the Revolution as a whole. Unfortunately, and characteristically, the destructive side has remained much less studied than the conservative one.²³

The importance of symbolic objects and their manipulation during the Revolution can be related, as has already been mentioned, to their importance under the Ancien Régime. Desecrating images contributed to the delegitimization of the King before his eventual elimination (illus. 5).²⁴ In contrast to the Reformation, it was less to the images than to their symbolic content that the Revolutionaries objected. This fact could allow works to be preserved, provided that their symbolizing relationship was broken or reinterpreted. But since the whole order of society rather than just some of its members was questioned, the 'symbolic content' objected to was defined in an all-embracing sense that endangered a correspondingly wide spectrum of objects: not just arms, portraits and effigies of the monarch, the members of the nobility and the Church – although such objects were the ones most directly and systematically attacked – but any work that they had commissioned, possessed and displayed and was thus understood as participating in the rhetoric of power and hierarchy. Towers could be deemed enemies of equality, and the ashes of renewed *bruciamenti* mixed with the dust to produce the 'beautiful effect of a perfect equality'.²⁵ When the Terror and civil war further radicalized the struggle, a whole town could be denied the right to exist. Lyon was deprived of its name (in favour of 'Commune-affranchie') as well as of some of its citizens, monuments and major buildings, one of which was addressed in these terms: 'In the name of the Sovereignty of the people ... we strike with death this abode of crime whose royal magnificence was an insult to the poverty of the people and to the simplicity of republican morals' (illus. 6).²⁶ The 'emblems of feudalism' and 'of superstition', 'toys' and 'spoils of prejudice and arrogance' were everywhere, as was the ambition to renovate. The break in communication and tradition could not be better expressed than by the way these 'emblems' were denounced as 'insults', 'offences' to a free 'republican eye'. Many Revolutionary prints show the figure of Time himself smashing material symbols of the

Ancien Régime.²⁷

The pedagogical, political and even economic potentialities of destruction were exploited from the start. The Bastille for example, which had been perceived both as a military threat and as a symbol of royal arbitrariness, was given to a private entrepreneur who proclaimed himself 'citoyen Palloy', demolished it (illus. 7) and produced – allegedly out of bits of the walls – profane relics representing the fortress and commemorating its fall.²⁸ Major destructions tended to be elaborately presented or at least represented in such a way (illus. 8, 9). Iconoclasm played a role at every stage of the Revolutionary process – to foster it, to incite conviction or fear, and to make the change appear and become irreversible. But just as the individual actors, aims and circumstances varied, so did the actual ways in which objects were handled. Klaus Herding has recently proposed a typology of these treatments, distinguishing between the replacements of visual signs and inscriptions on monuments, their renaming or rededication; the transformation or replacement of whole works; the burial, beheading or banishment of statues, treated as if they were real persons; the removal of monuments from their public sites to special rooms – museums possessing their own aura; and annihilation. As can be noted, total elimination was but one solution. Richard Wrigley has rightly insisted on the importance of transformation and reuse, proposing to apply to this category Derrida's concept of 'rature'.²⁹ Erasures and modifications mostly concerned coats of arms and inscriptions, thus dissociating the works from their original places or functions and redefining them. Reuse of fragments, materials or sites aimed at further symbolizing and commemorating the epochal annihilation and replacement of the old order.³⁰



6 Lafosse, *The demolition of Two Proud Façades in the Place de Bellecour in Lyon*, 26 October 1793, engraving. Musée historique de Lyon. *The engraving shows the aftermath of the failed resistance of 1793. Beneath the 'A' on the left-hand column is the Representative of the People Georges Couthon, giving the first symbolic blow to the building with a silver hammer, saying 'I condemn you to be demolished in the name of the law'.*



7 Hubert Robert, *The Bastille during the First Days of its Demolition*, 1789, oil. Musée Carnavalet, Paris.



8 *The Greatest of Despots, Overthrown by Liberty*, 1792, coloured etching. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. *A symbolic representation of the pulling down of François Girardon's equestrian statue of Louis XIV in the Place Vendôme, 12 August 1792.*



9 Jacques Bertaux, *Destruction of the Equestrian Statue of Louis XIV*, 1792, pen and ink drawing. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Like the Protestant authorities, the Revolutionary ones were anxious to give iconoclasm a legal frame of justification, execution and control. It had an aesthetic component, with the critique of art as luxury – unnecessary, even pernicious for mankind – to which Jean-Jacques Rousseau had particularly contributed on a theoretical plane and which could be summarized with the iconoclastic formula ‘monument of vanity destroyed for utility’.³¹ But a positive view of the moral, political and economic as well as aesthetic potential of art was even more important for the approach to extant works and for the (mostly unrealized) artistic projects of the Revolution. Fundamental was the possibility of distinguishing between the sign and the signified. In several instances one can observe the shift of content to which an object, a motif or a type was submitted and which justified its preservation. Dussaulx declared on 4 August 1792 before the National Convention that the Porte St-Denis in Paris, being ‘dedicated to Louis XIV ... deserves the hate of free citizens, but this gate is a masterpiece’; a report on the royal tombs in St Denis proposed to except from melting the top of a sceptre of gilded silver, ‘not as part of a sceptre but as a piece of fourteenth-century goldsmith’s art’; and a member of the Convention, Gilbert Romme, pointed out that the fleur-de-lis had been both ‘a token of pride for the kings and a national stamp for the arts’, so that the work of French artists was wrongly attacked because of the first function.³² The values to which objects became attached and which, as historical testimonies and works of art, they were shown to share or exemplify, were opposed to the particular and to the class-bound: they were national and even – at least virtually – universal. This applied first to certain objects that were exempted from destruction because of their ‘interest for art’ or ‘for history’, and permitted a process of selection and purification that was part of the state-controlled politics of memory; but the arguments put forward for preservation implied a general validity. As far as (more or less) moveable works were concerned, public museums became the privileged places where refunctionalizing took place. Neither the idea of collective heritage nor the institution of the museum were invented by the Revolution, but the redefinition of nation and state, the dispossession of the Crown, the nobility and the Church, gave them an unheard-of importance.³³

The stigmatization of iconoclasm was the other instrument of this refunctionalizing. Destroyers were thus accused of misusing objects that they misunderstood and of acting in a way unworthy of the regenerated nation to which they belonged. One member of the Convention, Abbé Grégoire, who has already been mentioned in this respect, was by no means the first or only person to condemn ‘vandals’ and ‘vandalism’ publicly (illus. 10), but his three *Rapports* of 1794 were of particular notice. The other main hero of the fight for preservation was Alexandre Lenoir (illus. 11), a painter who obtained the former convent of the Petits-Augustins to locate his Musée des Monuments Français, an immensely influential collection of decontextualized mediaeval art that he was ready to enrich by any means possible.³⁴ Iconoclasts were also accused of destroying public wealth, of defaming the image of Revolutionary France and of working for its enemies, *émigrés* in particular. With the fall of Robespierre, ‘vandalism’ was associated with the Terror and became an instrument of its condemnation, even if the secularized and nationalized estates continued to fall prey to their new owners. As Klaus Herding synthetically formulated, the transformation by Lenoir of the notion of monument from an instrument of domination into one of instruction, together with Grégoire’s appropriation of monuments as works of art and his condemnation of their destruction as ‘vandalism’, made it possible – at least in theory – to go beyond destruction and to renounce it. It is not by chance that Schiller, who in 1788 had attributed Netherlandish iconoclasm to the mob, should have ended his drama *Wilhelm Tell* (1804)

with the question of what was to be done with Gessler's hat, the crudest example of a humiliating sign of power. Several voices called for its destruction, but Walter Fürst, representing a social and moral elite among the insurgents, replied: 'No! let it be preserved! It had to be the instrument of tyranny, let it be the eternal symbol of liberty!'³⁵

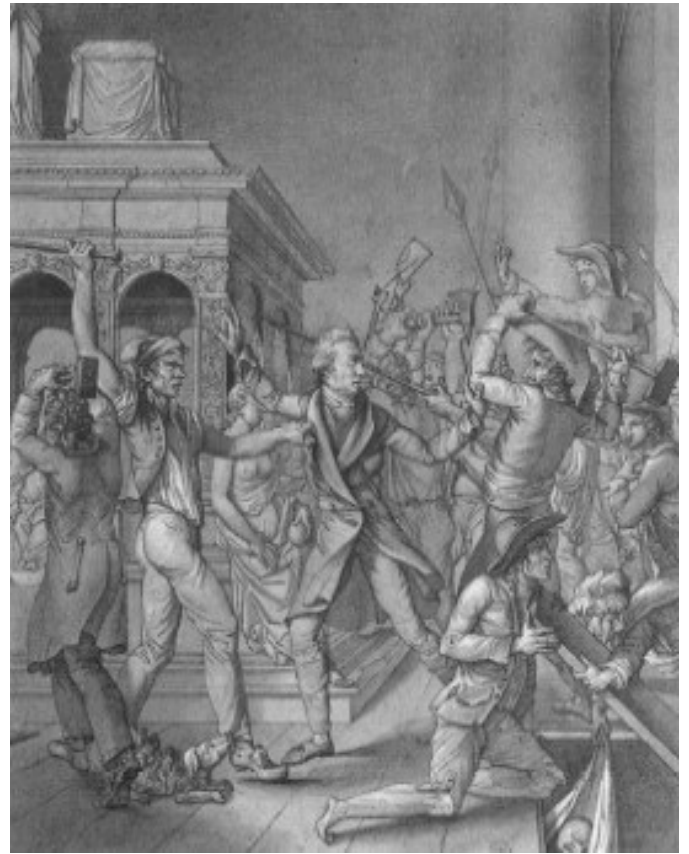
The defence and erosion of heritage

Later political re-establishments could not nullify those profound transformations, on which the situations that we shall examine in the following chapters are all predicated in one way or another. Museums, at first a refuge for so many objects wrenched from their original contexts, progressively became the 'natural' place for historical testimonies to be apprehended and, even more, for works of art to be enjoyed and studied 'for their own sake'. This meant also that the most prestigious *destination* (in terms of function as well as site) of new works would be the museum, denounced by conservative-minded critics like Quatremère de Quincy as the negation of art and a source of its decadence.³⁶ The definition and evaluation of the autonomy of art was to remain, down to the present, an issue whose importance cannot be overrated, and we shall encounter some of the numerous attempts at re-socializing or re-instrumentalizing art that would follow. The new public space, already apparent in the eighteenth century, and the state's control over cultural matters (particularly in France), led to the development of specific institutions and of an 'artistic field' in Pierre Bourdieu's sense.³⁷ Culture manifested the shortcomings of the universalism inherited from the Enlightenment and the Revolution: theoretically the spiritual and – through the museum – material property of everyone, art represented a set of socially determined and distinctive practices. It could thus contribute to a naturalization of inequalities – insofar as the unequal use of art was explained by innate differences of sensitivity – and to a 'symbolic violence' that would provoke at times, as we shall see, violent reactions. The growing autonomy of art meant also specialization and an ever narrower distribution of competence and specific (cultural) power. From the beginning of the nineteenth century on, the recourse to violence against art must therefore also be understood in relation to the possibility or impossibility of access to legitimate means of expression, as a dark spot in the economy of the relationship between art and the public.



10 E. Le Sueur, *Vandal, Destroyer of the Products of the Arts*, c. 1806, gouache. Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

11 P.-J. Lafontaine, *Alexandre Lenoir Opposing the Destruction of the Royal Tombs in the Church of St-Denis*, 1793, drawing. Musée Carnavalet, Paris.



For reasons of time and money, the main artistic realizations of the Revolution were not the huge monuments that had been projected but rather prints and feasts.³⁸ Nevertheless, the idea of art as propaganda remained very much alive, and neither Napoleon nor later rulers and governments renounced it. It was affected, however, by shifting ideas of art and power. With art defined as an end in itself, susceptible by its own virtues of enlightening humanity (or even, later on, by being essentially free of any such purpose), the functions it used to fulfil could be regarded as extrinsic, accessory, and eventually undesirable. This was true for religious (see chapter Twelve) as well as political art. *Auftragskunst* (commissioned art) would not disappear, but it tended to decrease in legitimacy, prestige, and therefore – this being said in full awareness of the bias inherited from modernist historiography – in quality. As far as republics, parliamentary monarchies and democracies are concerned, the relatively depersonalized and abstract character of power made political self-representation difficult, as the competition in France in 1848 for an official image of the Second Republic clearly demonstrated.³⁹ Certainly, important differences according to regime as well as country must be acknowledged here – a case in point being the Third Republic, which developed a pedagogical artistic programme, the aesthetic evaluation of which would become an index of opinion about political art.⁴⁰ However, this politological aspect combined itself with the artistic one to limit the recourse to art for direct political use, granted that the possession and promotion of great art could bring indirect political benefit and that, as Martin Warnke stressed, industrial images offered new possibilities for propaganda as compared to handmade ones.⁴¹

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, enormous losses were inflicted on the heritage defined in the wake of the Revolution, in particular on unmovable works of architecture and arts ‘applied to’ it. Apparently, these destructions were not caused by any objection to what these objects stood for.⁴² But it may be more correct to say that the symbolic content that provoked their elimination or prevented them from being preserved was of an even more general nature than the symbolization of the Ancien Régime that had widened the targets of Revolutionary iconoclasm. It was their belonging to – and thus exemplifying – an obsolete state of the world in technical and aesthetic terms (a counterpart to Riegl’s ‘antiquity value’, as we shall see later).⁴³ The ‘ideology’ that fostered and justified the destructions was also wide-ranging and tended to transcend traditional political cleavages: it was the primacy of economy and the ‘religion’ of progress. Consequently, this kind of ‘iconoclasm’ was more a matter of daily business than of violent outbreaks; it was rather performed ‘from above’ in a legal frame, and was mainly due to owners and authorities. Nor did it spare the New World, which generally escaped the large-scale destructions caused in Europe by wars and political events. Montalembert, one of the main opponents to this ‘barbarism’, could thus classify it according to its authors: government, mayors and municipal councils, priests and Church committees, owners. He rejoined Victor Hugo in the fight for the material support of collective memory, affirming that ‘long memories make great peoples’, and characteristically opposed art to power as such: ‘power has the faculty of degrading and depopularizing art’.⁴⁴ Ironically, transformations of works intended – at least allegedly – to preserve

them appeared to him and other influential defenders of heritage as amounting to destructions, so that he baptized a variety unknown to Grégoire, 'restorative vandalism'.⁴⁵ Conceptions and the practice of restoration would evolve towards a greater respect but also to a more problematic view of the 'original state' of objects, ultimately including their previous restorations.

The fall of the Vendôme column

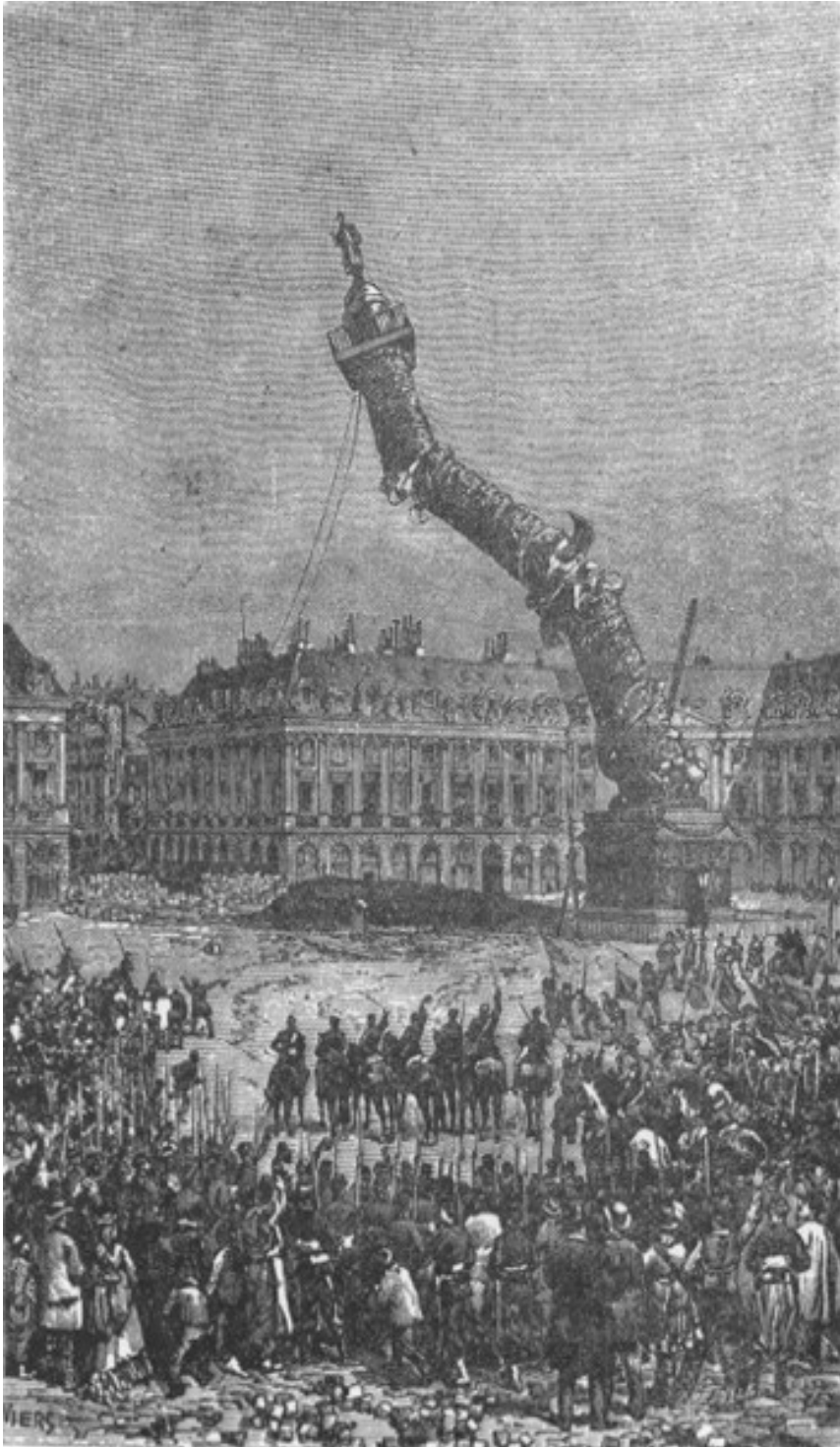
This does not mean that attacks, modifications and destructions motivated by the specific function and content of works disappeared. To the same extent that political art continued to be commissioned, it was further abused as a matter of bureaucratic procedure or at times of upheaval.⁴⁶ In France, where conflicting regimes rose and fell in rapid succession, one can find any number of such *ratures*, the best known and most remarkable palimpsest being the *lieu de mémoire* identified alternately as the 'église Sainte-Genève' and the secular 'Panthéon'. The exterior (pediment, inscription and crowning statue) and interior decoration kept being adapted to these conflicting purposes.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, and even if the artistic status of monuments slowly decreased, the idea of heritage and the general condemnation of 'vandalism' tended to strip iconoclastic actions, as well as their authors and motives, of legitimacy. This was more easily done if those actions came 'from below' and could be socially opposed to the world of civilization and culture.

A major case in point is the damage caused during the struggle between the Paris Commune and the Versailles government in 1871.⁴⁸ The destruction was chiefly of buildings set on fire as a means to stop the advance of the enemy – a new technique of street-fighting since identified as an unexpected consequence of Baron Haussmann's introduction of broad avenues that aimed, among other things, at preventing insurgents from building barricades. But symbolic elements were also at stake, for example the burning of the Hôtel de Ville; in *L'année terrible*, Victor Hugo defined the destruction as a kind of suicide and summarized his interpretation of its social background with this response by an incendiary, to whom he had explained what a library meant for the emancipation of mankind: 'I cannot read'.⁴⁹ The most symbolically loaded target of the Commune was the Colonne Vendôme, a derivation of Trajan's Column, erected by Napoleon I on the site previously occupied by a royal statue and refurnished with an effigy of the Emperor by his nephew Napoleon III. It was condemned by the Commune as a nationalistic 'symbol of tyranny and militarism' and solemnly pulled down on 16 May 1871 (illus. 12), possibly also as a substitute for military victories. The justification for, and comments on, the destruction supply ample evidence that the monument deemed invisible by Paul Veyne could elicit, under particular circumstances, very strong and specific responses.⁵⁰ One of the most interesting aspects of this episode is the price Courbet had to pay for the role he had played in it.⁵¹ Politically engaged in the Commune, the painter had publicly pleaded on 14 September 1870 for a *déboulonnage* (screwing off) of the column, a neologism with which, he later explained, he had only meant a dismantling of elements that could be displayed in a less central place for those interested. The final decision was taken without Courbet's participation, but caricaturists did not fail to interpret the destruction of the column as a fresh manifestation of his alleged megalomania (illus. 13), and the government of the Third Republic ordered him to pay the 323, 091 gold francs required for its reconstruction. Two facts are of particular note in our context: first, Courbet mentioned in his defence that the monument was of low aesthetic value; second, whereas the metaphorical 'iconoclasm' already attributed to him as a result of his out-spoken artistic anti-traditionalism eventually became a title of glory, this literal one resulted in excuses, explanations, but no defence.⁵²

The World Wars

Technical progress allowed unprecedented destructions (as well as constructions) in the twentieth century. One need only think of the 'adaptation' of cities and landscapes to motor-car traffic, of the elimination of archaeological material through underground construction and tunnelling, or of the effects of air pollution on stone monuments. In most cases, apart from the unspecific objections to the past that I have already mentioned, no intention to destroy may seem to have been – or to be – at stake. What about the wars, during which the national dimension of the idea of heritage was bound to come into conflict with its supranational one? The systematic inclusion of civil targets and the use of ever-more massive means of destruction that characterized the two World Wars obviously had disastrous consequences for art, and in particular for immovable objects; movable ones could be better protected, as well as plundered in the traditional way.⁵³ The same factors make it difficult to ascertain to what extent works of art were deliberately targeted, but what seems to me to be the important point here is that accusing the enemy of having done so became a major propaganda weapon. During the First World War, the ethno-historical connotations of the concept of 'vandalism' were exploited to the full, and German aggression was defined by the French as an attempt on the part of 'Teutonic barbarism' to annihilate 'Latin civilization'. The damage caused to major Belgian and French works of architecture, especially the Library in Louvain and the cathedral in Rheims (illus. 14), became an

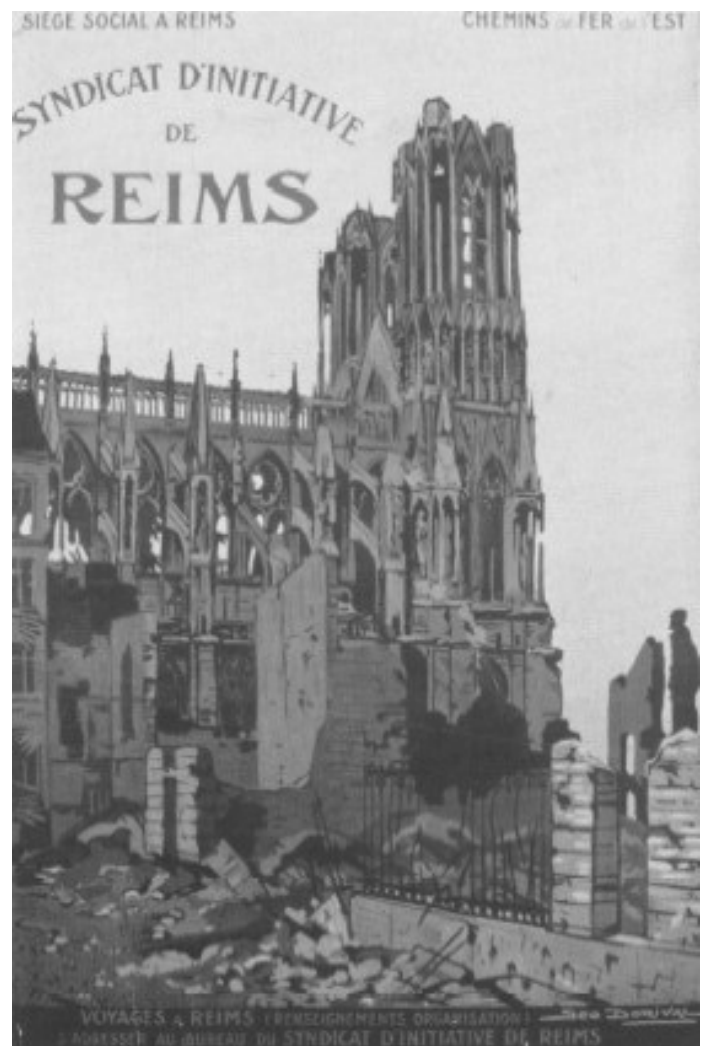
instrument of national and international mobilization, a symbol of the enemy's negative identity. The bombing of Rheims cathedral led to a worldwide protest, to which the Germans replied mainly with military justifications.⁵⁴ George Bernard Shaw pointed out that Rheims's towers inevitably made it a target, and that it was stupid to call the Germans barbarians since there was every evidence that they were not, and because they very well knew what the English had done to their own medieval heritage in peacetime; but his voice was almost a lone one.⁵⁵ A war of images raged: the Germans rejoined with accusations of vandalism, while damaged works were exhibited in Paris as 'Assassinated Art' in order to underline their sacrilegious and brutal martyrdom (illus. 15).⁵⁶



12 D. Vierge, *The Fall of the Vendome column*, 16 May 1871, engraving by F. Méaulle, published in Victor Hugo, *L'année terrible*, Paris, 1874.

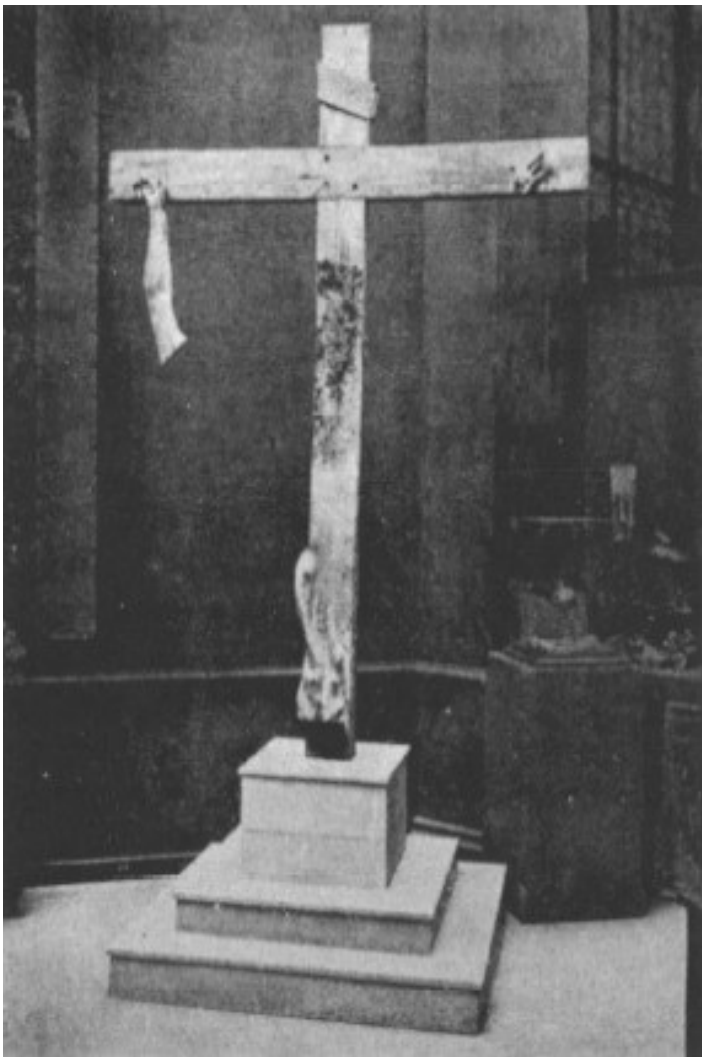


13 Bertall, *Citizen Courbet*, cartoon in *Le Grelot*, 30 April 1871. The caption reads 'Humble petition of the bronze men of Paris, who ask not to be melted'.



14 Géo Dorival's 1919 poster for the Chemins de Fer de l'Est advertising train trips to Rheims and showing the cathedral in ruins. Collection Maillon-Dorival, Lyon.

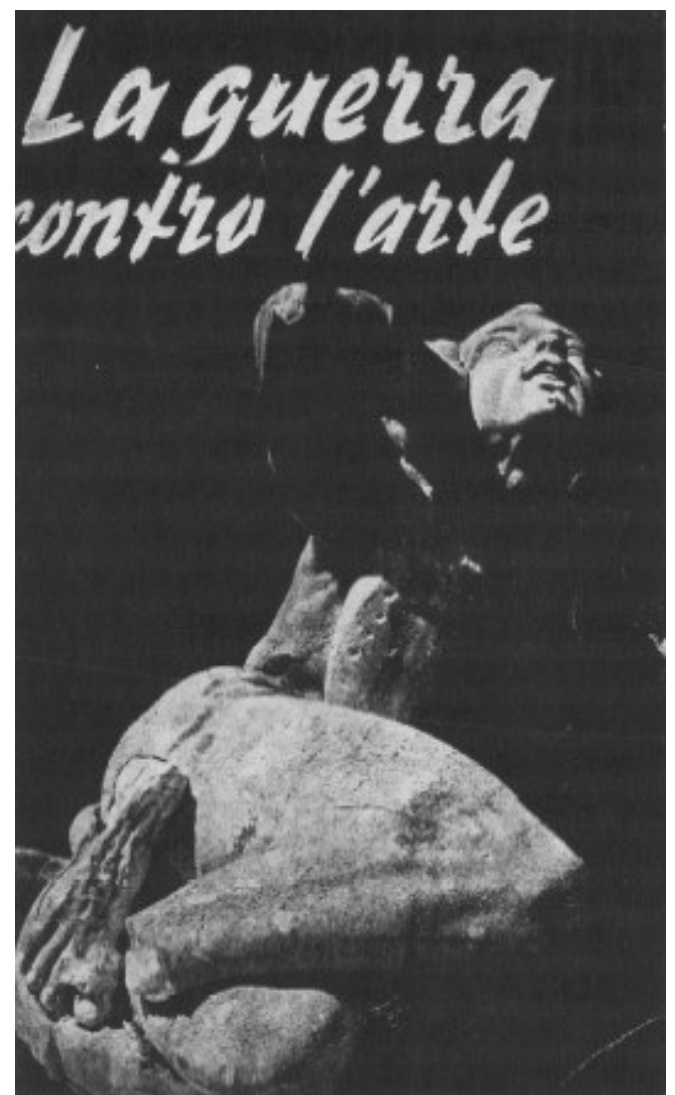
This propagandist use of the charge of ‘vandalism’ was further developed by all parties in the Second World War. The Germans, who resorted to aerial bombing in order to terrorize and demoralize entire populations (illus. 93), were called ‘modern Herostratuses’ as well as ‘twentieth-century cannibals’.⁵⁷ At a later stage, a further step was pointed out in an English cartoon that denounced a German use of famous works of art as hostages with the warning ‘Barbarians!’ (illus. 16). Italians forged fake evidence of damage to art made by the Allies on Cyrene, and stylized the Liberation campaign in their country as a ‘war against art’ (illus. 17).⁵⁸ The prevailing awareness of heritage, thus instrumentalized, led after the War to the signing, in 1954, of The Hague Convention (and maybe to the conception of thermo-nuclear bombs that would destroy lives yet spare things).⁵⁹ Despite instructions intended to limit damage, the Liberation had indeed been very destructive, importing into Germany the *Blitzkrieg* and experimenting with nuclear weapons in Japan. Fifty years later, the polemics in Germany provoked by the War’s commemoration, the erection in London of a statue to ‘Bomber’ Harris, and a historical exhibition in Washington on the destruction of Hiroshima show how controversial these issues have remained.⁶⁰ In the cities that had been only partially damaged, reconstruction often proved to be even more destructive than the War had been, not only because of insufficient financial means but because the circumstances favoured a radical modernization.⁶¹



15 Large wooden crucifix from the church of Revigny (Meuse) burnt in the fire of 8 September 1914, as shown in the *Assassinated Art* exhibition at the Petit Palais, Paris, 1917, and in the special issue of *L'art et les artistes*.



16 Leslie Illingworth, *Who's a Vandal?*, cartoon in the *Daily Mail*, London (March 1944).



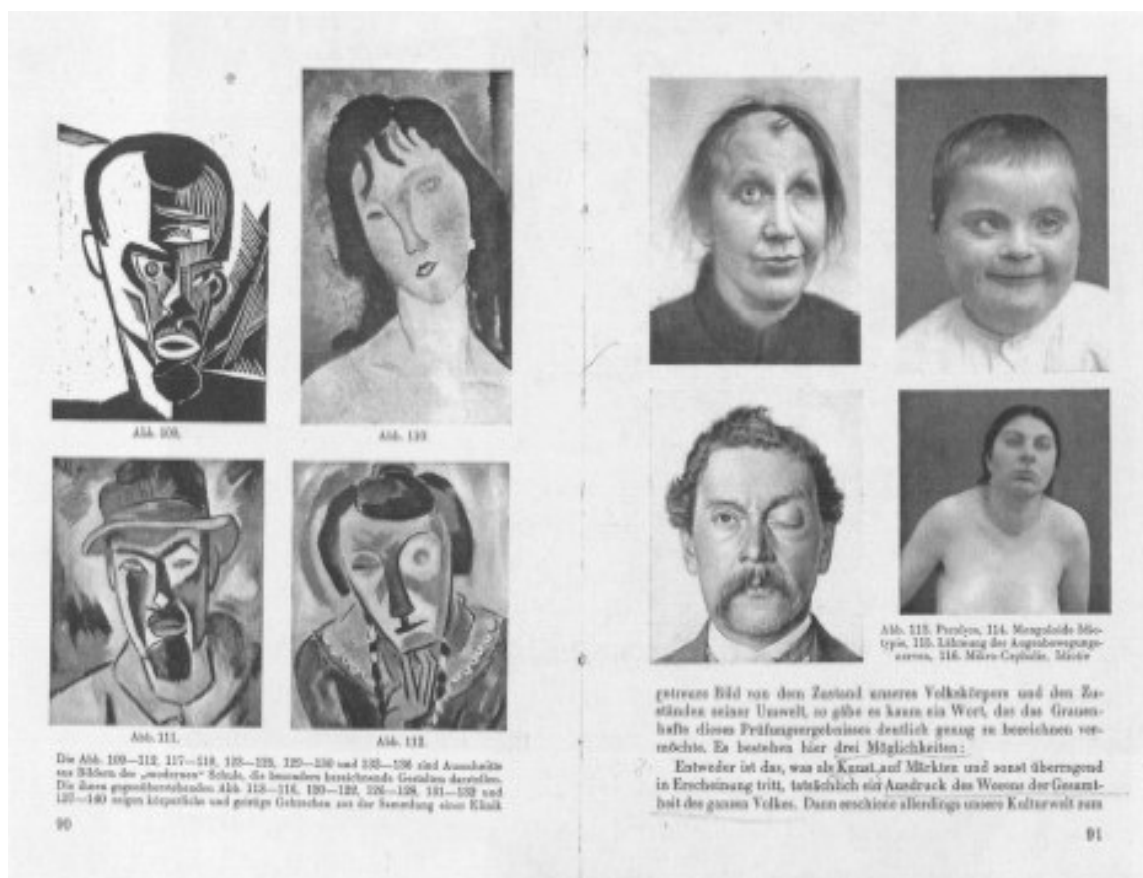
17 Cover of *La guerra contro l'arte* ('The War against Art'), an illustrated account of damage caused to works of art in Italy through bombardment during the Second World War (Milan, 1944).

Nazism and 'degenerate art'

As far as the destruction of modern art was concerned, the Nazi politics of images had effects comparable in importance to those of the French Revolution for 'vandalism' in general.⁶² The Nazis did indulge in traditional iconoclasm, both in Germany and in the occupied countries. An interesting case in point is France, where the Vichy government ordered the melting down of a great number of public statues under the pretext of reusing their materials to meet the needs of agriculture and industry; the monuments and parts of monuments made of stone were spared,

but later official declarations admitted that ‘recovery’ furnished a welcome occasion for a ‘purification of the national glories’ (illus. 97).⁶³ But their main target was the autonomy of art, and their influential originality consisted in their objecting primarily to form and style, which they denounced as expressions or symptoms of artistic, moral, ‘racial’ and genetic ‘degeneration’.

This was not really an invention, and their theory of ‘degenerate art’ profited from a traditional critique of modern art that can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Major milestones had been Max Nordau’s *Entartung* of 1893, a widely translated and discussed libel against European avant-garde innovations in all domains of culture, and Paul Schulze-Naumburg’s *Kunst und Rasse* (‘art and race’) of 1928, which was particularly effective in its naturalization of traditional conventions of representation of the human body and its equation of modernist expressive or formalist ‘deformations’ with photographs of people displaying physical or mental aberrations (illus. 18).⁶⁴ On the other hand, modern German art had been supported by prominent members of the upper classes and by official institutions of the Weimar Republic, whereas resistance to it was actually or potentially widespread in large sectors of the population, particularly the middle classes. The persecution of ‘degenerate art’ thus represented, like other aspects of Nazism, a conscious exploitation of the situation for political ends. But it also had less instrumental, more profound roots: Hitler himself was an unsuccessful painter; some highly placed members of the Party advocated other attitudes towards modern art; and the fear of ‘decadence’ was central to the Nazis’ view of the world.⁶⁵ In any event, artists were libelled, forbidden to work, forced to flee and sometimes killed; works were declassified from museums and sold outside Germany or burnt. The *gesundes Volksempfinden* (‘sound popular feeling’) was cynically employed against the values, institutions and independence of the artistic field.⁶⁶ This persecution was the destructive side of a re-instrumentalization of art for propaganda purposes that developed its own destructive aspects in the realm of architecture and town-planning. This symmetry was nowhere more apparent than in the two exhibitions simultaneously presented in Munich in 1937: the ‘Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung’ and the ‘Entartete Kunst’ exhibition.⁶⁷ The latter, which successfully toured other German cities, was the major example of a defamatory exhibition, in which the works on show were degraded to the role of proof and exemplification of the very reproaches addressed to them. Interestingly, the section of the exhibition devoted to Dadaists (illus. 19) turned against them the ‘iconoclastic’ weapons they had themselves forged, and reproduced the Dadaist slogan ‘Nehmen Sie Dada ernst!’ (illus. 20): as Peter-Klaus Schuster has remarked, Hitler did take Dada seriously.⁶⁸



18 Double-page spread comparing ‘details of pictures of the “modern” school’ (including works by Modigliani and Schmidt-Rottluf) with photographs of physical and mental abnormalities, from Paul Schulze-Naumburg’s *Kunst und Rasse* (Munich, 1928).

The Nazi attempt at re-instrumentalizing art contributed to the discrediting of state art, commissioned art, political art, and even, to some extent, of public art. So did its Soviet counterpart, theorized as ‘Socialist Realism’, particularly during the Cold War.⁶⁹ But the persecution of ‘degenerate art’ was even more important for entrenching the idea of the illegitimacy of attacking art, and especially modern art, in the West. After the Liberation, the Nazis’ iconoclasm would be frequently evoked not only to assess physical aggression, but to silence verbal critiques of progressively officialized avant-gardism. Illegitimacy did not mean that (modern) art ceased to be attacked, but it tended to give such aggression an anonymous and clandestine character. These aspects will be examined in the following chapters. But before embarking on this exploration, a last general question must be raised: does the history that has been sketched – with due reverence to lacunae, hypotheses and question marks – imply that iconoclasm, notably politically motivated iconoclasm, represents today an anachronism or at least an archaism? It is a view that is often expressed about every kind of attack against art, and to which Martin Warnke’s introduction of 1973 adhered.⁷⁰ This may be wishful thinking, however, based on sociocentric assumptions about humanity’s unidirectional and irreversible progress, as well as a way, like the ‘vandalism’ concept, to repress the thing by locating it elsewhere, in time (the past) as in space (barbarism). The end of the Soviet empire and of the Cold War ‘balance’ have made it difficult to hold to such a position. We see daily how the misuse (and use) and the destruction (and creation) of objects, among which are works of art, play a frequent and sometimes crucial role in the transformation of societies. We may stick to the conception that sees our world as the goal of mankind and the end of history, and consider these phenomena as a temporary relapse into earlier stages of development, or we may use them to revise our understanding of ourselves and of the importance of ‘symbolism’ in our societies.⁷¹ The primary role of identities – as opposed to territories – in recent conflicts is precisely a reason for the rampant destruction of ‘cultural objects’. In the former Yugoslavia, buildings (particularly churches) and images suffered in the course of ‘ethnic purification’, and the concentration on urban targets has justified use of the neologism ‘urbicide’.⁷² The primarily symbolic dimension of destruction was nowhere more apparent than in the case of the Old Bridge of Mostar (illus. 21) in the south of Bosnia on 9 November 1993, which was accompanied by moving testimonies made by the town’s inhabitants, who expressed regret that they, or persons dear to them, had not been destroyed instead.⁷³ This proximity of works to persons is further illustrated by the fact that authors can be persecuted in the place of, or together with, their works, as the persecution of Salman Rushdie or the destruction of the statue of the sixteenth-century poet Pir Sultan Abdal and the burning of forty writers and artists in Sivas (Anatolia) on 2 July 1993 demonstrate.⁷⁴ The menace represented by such violence makes it all the more important to remember that even if there are many worlds of interpretation, they come into conflict in one and the same world.



19 The Dada wall in the *Entartete Kunst* ('Degenerate Art') exhibition, Munich, 1937; the inscription *Nehmen Sie Dada ernst!* ('Take Dada seriously!'), was ascribed to George Grosz.



20 Opening of the Erste Internationale Dada-Messe (First International Dada Fair) at the Burchard Gallery, Berlin, July 1920. In the upper left corner *Nehmen Sie Dada ernst* appears again; Grosz is standing on the right, with his hat on.



21 The 1557 Old Bridge (Stari Most), Mostar, Bosnia, in October 1912; the bridge was destroyed by shellfire in November 1993.

Published by Reaktion Books Ltd
33 Great Sutton Street
London EC1V 0DX, UK

www.reaktionbooks.co.uk

First published 1997, first paperback edition 2007

Copyright © Dario Gamboni, 1997

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Page references in the Photo Acknowledgements and
Index match the printed edition of this book.

Designed by Humphrey Stone
Jacket designed by Ron Costley
Photoset by Wilmaset Ltd, Wirral
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddies Ltd, King's Lynn

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gamboni, Dario
The destruction of art: iconoclasm & vandalism since the
French Revolution – (Picturing history)
1. Art, Modern – 19th century 2. Art, Modern – 20th century
3. Art – Mutilation, defacement, etc. 4. Iconoclasm
I. Title
709'.034
eISBN: 9781780231549