AN APPRECIATION OF
THE WAR PAINTINGS OF CLAGGETT WILSON
BY HENRY McBRIDE

Usually it is something unprecedentedly Spanish that Claggett Wilson telephones me I must see. He has the flair for things Spanish and as he is the most generous person in the world he cannot conceive of a pleasure unless it is shared with someone. As I recall it, it was our mutual enthusiasm for “The Land of Joy,” an ill-fated but riotously Spanish theatrical production of some years ago--there were gorgeous dancers in it with the real thing in the way of costumes--that brought us into acquaintance.

....The first exhibition of his that I was called upon to examine professionally for the public prints was unadulteratedly Spanish. He had been living some months--or was it some years?--in the Basque country, and all his pictures were of the fishermen, brigands, senoritas of the region--fisherman, brigands and senoritas who bear themselves as proudly as grandees, and in fact frequently make the grandees step aside for them on the esplanade beneath the tamarisks at San Sebastian in the month of August, which is the only time the grandees are there. This pride of bearing informed Mr. Wilson’s pigments and the Basque sailors of his paintings stared at you with as unabashed eyes as may be found anywhere in art, and usually stared you down. I believe the Basques are unconquerable. Some historians pretend that it is the out-of-the-way situation of the Basques that has saved them hitherto from defeat. They hint that it has never been worth any good general’s while to penetrate to the Spanish fastness where the Basques flourish and lick them good and proper. These skeptics have simply never seen Mr. Wilson’s Basques. Otherwise they would understand that Basques are literally unconquerable.

The next exhibition of Mr. Wilson’s art that I encountered was made up entirely of decorative pieces. I recall being slightly astonished by the fierceness of the thorns on the rose branches in certain panels. Perhaps it were truer to say “slightly shocked.” There was something Spanish, something Basque, even in those roses. They, too, were perfectly able in self-defense....I saw that there must be something in-born, something native to Mr. Wilson, that resulted in this
foreignness….Of course, as an American critic of art I have objected strenuously to foreignness in our native artists. I don’t suppose I have ever objected so much to any other of the traits that periodically break out in young Americans. Yet, just the same, I make exceptions. When it appears to be “plus fort que moi” I have nothing more to say. What is there to say? I have never thought it worth while to point the finger of scorn, for instance, at Mary Cassatt or Walter Gay, both of whom gave themselves up into such an wholesale admiration of the French that the French ended in claiming them to belong to French schools. They took their “bien,” like Moliere, where they found it, and with vengeance. Mr. Wilson’s case is similar. It is unquestionably “plus fort que moi” with him; and unless “something happens” the Spaniards may make the same gesture in his direction that the French have for the two celebrities already mentioned.

Something did happen lately that I thought would annihilate all the plus-forts-que-moi in the world. I refer to the Great War. Yet I give you my word, the first thought that entered my head when I saw Claggett Wilson’s portfolio of war-drawings--after the first surprise in discovering that Claggett Wilson had made war-drawings--was a thought of Goya’s Album of “Desastros de la Guerra.” There was the same strange blend of repulsion against savagery and fascinated absorption in the hideous details of it--which is Goya and Spain. Those barbed-wire entanglements in the war pictures were precisely like the thorny rose stems that Claggett Wilson used to paint. A downright, flat, take-it-or-leave-it realism combined with as downright a sense of beauty. It’s the wedding of aesthetics to a bull-fight, it’s the maiming of a child by its mother to make it the more appealing as a beggar, it’s the irresistible cadence of the guitar in the courtyard of a jail, it’s the flash of a dagger in the midst of such a gay thing as “Carmen,” it’s a kiss and a laugh and a sudden pain and a crucifix all in the same moment. In short, Claggett Wilson was being, perhaps not so innocently and unintentionally as before, but still perceptibly and incurably--Spanish.

At the same time, he fought with the American forces; and the soldiers in the drawings are our soldiers and this is “our” record of it. If there is anomaly here, make the most of it. For my part, I prefer to side-step, for twenty years or so at least, all these questions pertaining to the exact ratio of innate patriotisms. According to the slang of the
day, one is either one hundred percent or one is not one hundred percent. There are no gradations, so they say at present, yet “they” are often wrong and probably are in this matter. At all events, it is one of those things that the future decides, like the Germanism of the Heine who lived in Paris years ago, and which has now been arranged to the satisfaction of all concerned. Probably Claggett Wilson found himself in the war as Heine found himself in Paris—with mix feelings. It was just this equal balance between the “for” and the “against” that is responsible for his tinge of Spanish, an since it has so evidently been planted there by his Maker and is not a thing acquired by him through Error, I think it safe to put the appraisement of it up to a succeeding generation.

The succeeding generation will be interested enough, I am sure, to go into the matter thoroughly. Even the present generation already finds the war so remote that it will share my own astonishment in looking at these drawings. The feeling in them is so genuine it will not be questioned. There is the hilarity that most of the athletic young participants in the war juxtaposed with their tragedies. Most of those who came back laughed in the midst of their most gruesome recitals. Claggett Wilson does, too. That sniper dangling dead from his lofty perch is funny—if he is not also something else! I suppose it is a natural enough state of mind in the eye-witness of such a thing, though Freud and Jung, probably, could write you whole chapters on that item alone. The sickening story of the retreat of some Americans over a battlefield and the action of one youngster who reached down to shake the hand, in passing, of a dead German, saying “Hello Fritz,” has sufficiently recounted, and always with the wrong interpretation. The chances are a thousand to one that the soldier was as decent as you and I, dear reader, and was merely covering up, in his bravado, a tenderness he felt out of place....What counts as merit, also, in these drawings, is their use of contemporary idioms. They were made before the Movies fought the war all over again, but they speak in accents that are frequently similar. The soldier who put out his hand to ward off a terrific splash of shrapnel in the night is pure movie. So is the fellow with the pistol sneaking across the foreground of a print with legs so outstretched he covers the page in a single stride. I have even identified him for myself as the Mr. Karl Dane who made people laugh and cry in alternate moments in the early war pictures, but who in recent ones is content t merely make them laugh. This coincidence
of method between cinema and artist makes both, in my opinion, the more authentic; for as I said before, the War has already become remote and we require several testimonies before we believe in any of it.

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