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In Love with God, in Love with War: Joan of Arc in the 20th Century. Imperial War Museum, London.

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It is not clear why the Imperial War Museum of London chose this particular moment in time to stage a temporary exhibition on Joan of Arc. We learn from a page devoted to the exhibition that she was “declared venerable” in 1904.[1] Perhaps they felt it appropriate to celebrate this anniversary. On the other hand, there seems to also be a renewal in “Joan of Arc studies,”[2] largely initiated by feminist scholars, which is a group one does not expect to have sympathies. The image of Joan of Arc projected almost six hundred years of highly questionable hagiography, after all. <p> At least three broad lines of interpretation will make the success of this exhibit difficult. First, there is likely to be an enormous difference in perceptions of Joan of Arc by the older generation of French people—who were uncritically taught the feats of “national liberation” attributed to her in primary school (say, pre-1968)—, and the young of all countries, for whom she is probably seen only as another film heroine (if they know anything about her at all).[3] Another dividing line is between devout Catholics and other believers or non-believers. A person’s opinion of Joan’s life will be radically different based upon whether she is revered as “Saint Joan,” or simply seen as a woman inspired by Christian virtues. This association with devout Catholicism leads to another very complex factor of French politics. From the late 19th century onward, the inheritance of her “martyrdom” has been part of a tug-of-war between the militant Republican Left and the equally militant pro-Catholic anti-Republican Right, both of whom wanted to prove that they were the best Nationalists. The agitated political and military history of France in the 20th century only heightened these tensions— which indeed continue to this day, with Le Pen’s Front National celebrating “Saint Joan” Day on May 1,[4] while the Left is marching to celebrate “<cite>La fÃte du

travail</cite>” (“Labor Day”). <p> How then could Michael Moody and his team from the Museum’s Department of Art hope to recreate the extraordinarily complex sub-texts attached to her image through the ages, and especially in France during the last 100 years? The task was clearly impossible, and was probably not even attempted, though the exhibit press announcement offered an over-ambitious attempt: “This graphics display [...] includes examples of prints, posters and ephemera that illustrate Joan’s charisma and importance as a national figure from 1914 until the present.” This inability does not mean that the exhibition is worthless—indeed if it tells us little about the real Joan of Arc, it tells us a lot about the unashamed exploitation which was (is) made of her image. <p> First comes the commercial exploitation. The visitor is greeted by a glass showcase a tin of “Joan of Arc Black Beans/Frijoles Negros,” by B&G Foods Inc., USA, 2004,“ among other curiosities. What the curators call “memorabilia and ephemera” also includes “an American souvenir ‘dog-tag’ cast in sterling silver“ with Joan of Arc in relief: “its reverse bearing the text, ‘With God’s help I served in Harm’s Way Iraq 2003.’” Perhaps more subtle than the trade of material goods, was the trade in of intellectual property, which must have been extremely profitable for record companies and film producers. Thus, we have a 1966 L.P. album with a recording of Bernard Shaw’s “Saint Joan” (1924), played by great stage actors like Siobhan McKenna, Donald Pleasance, Robert Stephens, Jeremy Brett and Nigel Davenport.[5] The cinema is also well-represented, with posters of Carl Theodore Dreyer’s <cite>The Passion of Joan of Arc</cite> (1928), Otto Preminger’s <cite>Saint Joan</cite> (script adapted from G.B. Shaw by Graham Greene, 1957) and Luc Besson’s Jeanne <cite>d’Arc</cite> (<cite>Messenger: The Story of

Joan of Arc

, 1999), showing the evolution in graphics, and the continued interest in Joan of Arc. For [Saint Joan](#), there is also a photograph of Jean Seberg, with the caption: "Like Joan, Seberg (1938-1979) is now the object of a cult following."

Then, as a borderline case between commercialism and patriotism, there is the wartime exploitation of her positive image to persuade American and British women to buy Treasury bonds in 1918, in support of the Allied war effort. A magnificent American poster by William Haskell Coffin (1918) with the caption "Joan of Arc saved France: Women of America save your Country—Buy War Savings Stamps" surrounds an eye-catching 20th century Joan with lipstick and make-up, and in full armor, brandishing a sword. This image is paralleled by Bert Thomas' (1918) very similar slogan, "Joan of Arc saved France: Women of Britain save your Country—Buy War Savings Certificates."

In France the nationalistic exploitation of the image of Joan of Arc was naturally used to strengthen the image of alliances and enemies during the two World Wars. During the First World War the image of the unblemished Maid was utilized against the barbaric Boches who bombarded Rheims Cathedral—the very cathedral, as all French schoolchildren used to know (and as is usefully indicated by a caption), where Charles VII was crowned on 17 July 1429 thanks to her ("Cathédrale de Reims bombardée". Marcel Augis, 1915. Coloured etching'). Other allusions to the Maid as the soldier's guardian angel are notable in "Le baiser de Jeanne d'Arc" ("Joan of Arc's kiss") (lithograph, 1915), which refers to a legendary incident of 1429. Being associated both with the crypto-Fascist Catholic Right and with rabid Anglophobia, the Vichy regime naturally used the fact that Saint Joan of Arc (that archetypal [Résistante](#)) had been "burnt by the English" in Rouen, as all French people know. The [Pétainists](#) were (or rather, felt) thus able to equate the "real" resistance-fighting with their opposition to the pro-British Gaullists, and Joan of Arc was presented as being on the side of Vichy and against the British, and their "terrorist" associates in France.

This bitter ideological struggle for the appropriation of Joan of Arc in Occupied France, 1940-1944, has to be borne in mind when one looks at the extraordinarily polysemic poster of Rouen Cathedral, surrounded by flames and guarded by the ghost of Joan of Arc at the stake. The poster carries the caption: ["Les assassins reviennent toujours sur les lieux de leur crime"](#), which is a transparent allusion to a well-known French saying, ["L'assassin revient toujours sur les lieux de son crime"](#).^[6] The "assassins" in this case are the British, ^[7] whose first crime

was the burning of Joan of Arc in 1431, and who had returned in the spring of 1944 to bomb Occupied Rouen (a key railroad hub between Germany and Normandy) in preparation for the D-Day Landings. Beyond the phantasmatic presence of Joan of Arc, the visual link between the two "crimes" is seen in the flames themselves. The continued appropriation of Joan of Arc by the extreme Right is appropriately illustrated by another poster, from the Front National, with the motto: ["Avec toi, Jeanne, pour la France !"](#) ("With you, Joan, for France!") (2002).

All of the displays are presented in a strong and largely natural light (unlike most museum exhibitions today, which expect visitors to have exceptional nocturnal vision), and in very quiet and roomy surroundings (I was the only visitor when I first entered the hall. Two or three people arriving as I left). The background music is also suitably connected with the theme. One tune I believed to recognize was ["Jeanne au Bûcher"](#), ("Joan at the Stake") (1928) by Arthur Honegger, although I could not find any explanation in the program confirming my conjecture.

The exhibition is complemented by a series of Joan of Arc films in the Museum's cinema, with the Preminger and Besson films alluded to above among them, but also Robert Bresson's ["Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc"](#) ("The Trial of Joan of Arc") (1962) and Jacques Rivette's ["Jeanne la Pucelle"](#) ("Joan the Maid") in two parts (["Les Batailles"](#) ("The Battles") and ["Les Prisons"](#) ("The Prisons"), 1994).^[8]

In the opening days of the exhibit, the visitor had the opportunity to follow up their tour with the concurrent exhibit, "Women and War,"^[9] which had a magnificent Joan of Arc at prayer, by Rubens' (c. 1618-20), from a Raleigh (North Carolina) Museum. But this exhibition closed on 18 April, and apparently the picture was removed to Antwerp a few days early. I was only able to see a black-and-white copy of it when I returned on 15 April.

The he uninitiated and those who are not well-versed in Joan of Arc lore and 20th century French politics may miss a lot by not being able to scratch below the surface of this exhibit. The captions, however helpful, cannot provide a substitute to a full history course. It is therefore unadvisable for teachers to take school parties unless they are ready to do a lot of preparatory work. In fact it is doubtful whether this exhibition would be of interest the younger generations at all: what does Joan of Arc mean for them, after all? They have grown up with other heroes and heroines. But the older visitor, who received a traditional (old fashioned?) education—whether from Great Britain, France or elsewhere—will be at least even partly aware

of the complex layers of meaning associated with the different displays, it will undoubtedly enjoy the visit. All H-Museum subscribers with an interest in the subject who plan to visit London before the end of June are warmly encouraged to go and form their own opinion (allow 45 minutes-1 hour). <p> Notes <p> [1]. “The title of a deceased person who has attained a certain degree of sanctity but has not been fully beatified or canonized” (<cite>Concise Oxford Dictionary</cite>, 1995). <p> [2]. See for instance the wealth of recent books on Joan of Arc by female (feminist?) authors and editors, notably Dominique Goy-Blanquet (Ed.): <cite>Jeanne d’Arc en garde À vue. Essais rassemblés et présentés par Dominique Goy-Blanquet</cite>, Bruxelles 1999 [Joan of Arc. A Saint for all Reason: Studies in Myth and Politics, Aldershot 2003]; Ada Ruth Dogger: <cite>La Pucelle: The Real Joan of Arc</cite>, London 2001; Ann W. Astell/Bonnie Wheeler (Eds.): <cite>Joan of Arc and Spirituality</cite>, Basingstoke 2004. <p> [3]. See Robin Blaetz: <cite>Visions of the Maid. Joan of Arc in American Film and Culture</cite>, Charlottesville

2001. <p> [4]. She liberated Orleans on May 1, 1429, which was a turning-point in the Hundred Years’ War. <p> [5]. See Sara Gwenllian Jones: <cite>Myth and Tragedy: Representations of Joan of Arc in Film and the Twentieth Century Theatre’</cite>. Ph.D. thesis, University of Bristol, 1997. <p> [6]. Literally, “the murderer always comes back to the place of his crime.” The English equivalent proposed by most dictionaries (“As a dog returns to his vomit, so a fool repeats his folly” [from Proverbs 26:11]) does not adequately render the idea contained in the French phrase—and is of no help in the case of the 1944 poster. <p> [7]. The curators speak of “Allied bombing”—but this is extremely reductive, gravely diluting Vichy’s unambiguous Anglophobic intentions, as the poster is specifically directed at British air raids. <p> [8]. A full list, with dates of showing, will be found on: <http://www.iwm.org.uk/lambeth/wotfilm3.htm> <p> [9]. See comments in the H-Museum review of that exhibition: <http://www.h-net.org/mmreviews/showrev.cgi?path=656>

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