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‘Soldier, Spectre, Shaman,’ an Alternate History at MoMA

By JASON FARAGO
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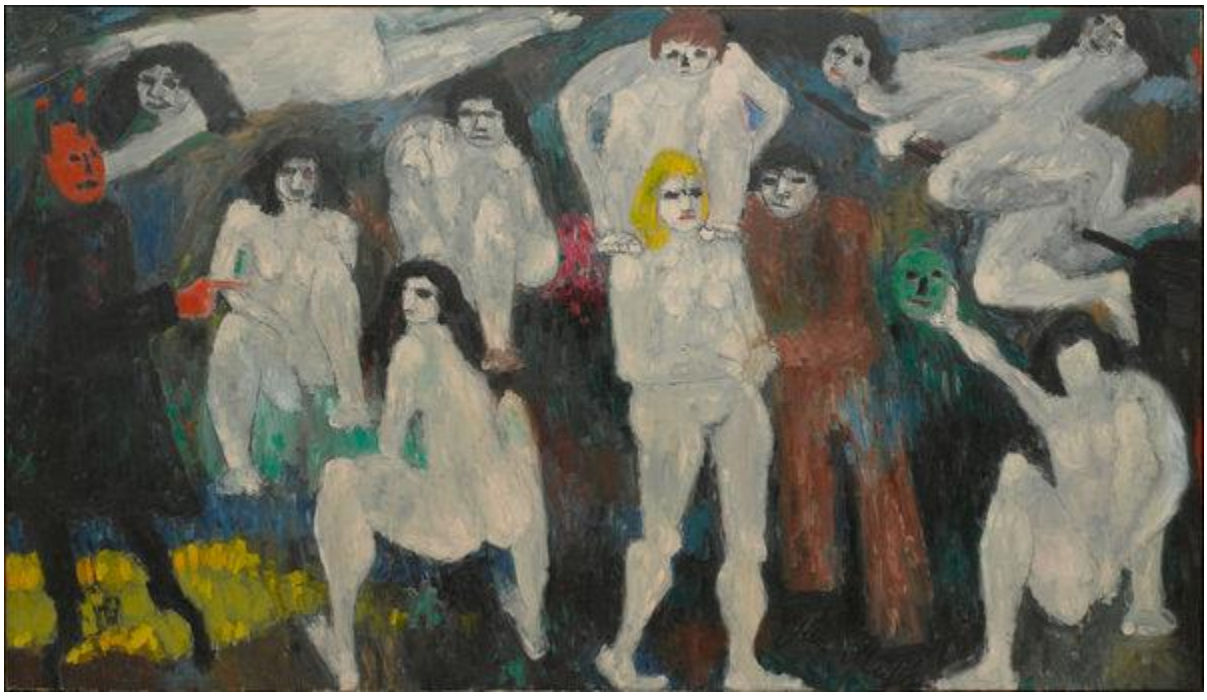
In 1936, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art mapped out the art of his time in a famous chart, the first taste of the museum’s persistent narrative of Modernism. The doctrine goes something like this: Western art of the early 20th century develops in a single direction, toward abstraction. Artists working toward that goal were the true radicals. Those who held onto representation were aesthetic conservatives (whatever their actual politics).Conveniently enough, the artists who broke most definitively with figuration, and who made abstract painting and sculpture into the One True Art, were living in New York — the city that, in the words of the art historian Serge Guilbaut, “stole the idea of Modern art” from Paris after World War II.

That is a fantasy, but the fantasy endures in MoMA’s presentation of its permanent collection, which still stages the art of Pollock, Newman, Rothko and the rest of the New York School as if they were the acme of Modernism. But “Soldier, Spectre, Shaman,” a noteworthy and all too rare exhibition on view on the museum’s third floor, offers a vital corrective to the gospel of abstract art. Most of the 30 or so artists here are European, and stand outside the museum’s tenacious master narrative. While their American counterparts were paring down painting, sculpture and other media to their essences, these artists insisted on the primacy of the figure, and conceived a new, more downhearted humanism for an inhuman age.



"Faust, I," a 1956 work by Jan Müller. Credit Estate Jan Müller, Museum of Modern Art

With the end of the war, and the full revelation of the Holocaust, the human body became a figure of pathos and existential dread, and only rarely one of possible rebirth and redemption. Francis Bacon, in a lurid 1946 painting featuring a black-suited gent standing before a crucified cow carcass, updated the Christian trope of the Man of Sorrows (with an allusion to Rembrandt's 1655 "Slaughtered Ox") for an era after the death of God. So did Alberto Giacometti, represented here by his "Standing Woman," of 1948, an emaciated, etiolated bronze of the type that Giacometti's friend, Jean-Paul Sartre, compared to "the fleshless martyrs of Buchenwald." His fellow sculptor, Germaine Richier, a Frenchwoman who fled to Switzerland as the war began, took a similar approach to bronze sculpture, casting pockmarked and injured figures whose bumpy surfaces recall the corpses of Pompeii.

Scarred, pained or totally blasted, the body in European art of the 1940s and '50s testified to both physical wounds and to deeper, internal traumas. That was especially the case in postwar France, where Jean Fautrier, an artist and member of the Resistance, far too little known in the United States, created his "Otages" ("Hostages"). Their flattened and anguished faces were informed by the sounds of the torture of civilians he heard at night outside a suburban Paris asylum. This show contains a pair of prints that, unfortunately, only suggest the sickly force of his plaster-thickened paintings. More compelling French works here include a spare watercolor of two ectoplasmic figures by Henri Michaux, who is better known as a poet; a bronze head by the Greek-born Takis, its eyes formed from whorls on its scored surface; and a small occult work by the Romanian émigré Victor Brauner, in which a skeleton is formed from tallow dripped on wood.

New York, too, had its fair share of artists who responded to wartime suffering in figurative means, often with a Surrealist bent. A 1941 print by David Smith depicts a parched battlefield overrun by hybrid Amazon-centaurs equipped with wheels instead of hind legs. A frail and gaunt totem by Louise Bourgeois, who moved from France to New York in 1938, stands between two thin rods that could be arms, or crutches.

Perhaps the most startling work here comes from Jan Müller, a German refugee in New York who studied under Hans Hofmann. Where most of Hofmann's students turned to gestural abstraction, Müller espoused an eerie, anxious figuration with ghoulish details. In his fantastic 1957 tableau of the Walpurgisnacht from Goethe's "Faust," Mephistopheles has the simplified head of a Halloween jack-o'-lantern, while a witch in one corner has torn her face right off. Müller died the next year, at the age of 35. One can only speculate where his painting may have led.

"Soldier, Spectre, Shaman" also glances at Japanese art from the 1950s, and focuses on how bodies were depicted in the years after the bomb. The most compelling works come from Chimei Hamada (now 97), whose postwar etchings feature amphibian soldiers left for dead on a barren battlefield, or hanging from wooden pylons. They are shocking, surreal nightmares drawn from his experiences in the Sino-Japanese War, as blunt and as memorable as anything by Goya.

"Soldier, Spectre, Shaman" has been organized by Lucy Gallun, an assistant curator in the museum's photography department, and Sarah Suzuki, an associate curator of drawings and prints. It is small, drawn entirely from the permanent collection, and it may be a greater achievement as a riposte to MoMA's own history than as a stand-alone exhibition. MoMA has no collection of Socialist Realism, for one, and so the show necessarily ignores

Soviet examples of postwar figuration, as well as significant leftist French artists such as the painter Boris Taslitzky, who survived Buchenwald. More surprising is the omission of Jean Dubuffet, whose fraught and scumbled figures testify to wartime privation and inner anguish. The curators have, on the other hand, thrown in two panoramas of warrior nymphets by the outsider artist Henry Darger — lovely works, but extraneous.

Still, we see these works too infrequently in New York, and this show offers a corrective to an art-historical fiction that MoMA should keep trying to transcend. It is a reboot, of sorts, of the museum's 1959 exhibition "New Images of Man," which was pilloried at the time for its defense of the figure (and, worse, of Europe), but which might offer some guidance to MoMA's curatorial team. Ahead of its controversial expansion, the museum is now planning a substantial rehanging of its permanent collection that, so they say, will abolish the current medium-specific galleries. It would do well to think not only past medium but past dogma, too, and to use its unrivaled collection to reveal the postwar era in all its plenitude breadth and tragedy.

"Soldier, Spectre, Shaman: The Figure and the Second World War" runs through March 20 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-708-9400, moma.org.

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