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Visualizing and Remembering the Civil War: The Art of the Battle of Sharpsburg

The Battle of Sharpsburg of September 17, 1862 carries with it the embodiment of incredible destruction and carnage: it is known as America's bloodiest day. Photographs taken of the various fields, encampments, battlefields and surrounding buildings, as well as the battle's key landmarks, "Bloody Lane" and "Burnside's Bridge," attest to the extent of the encounter, the ubiquity of troops and fire, and the extent of the carnage. Reviewing the photographs more closely, however, reveals that the images made of the Sharpsburg field and region, dating to late September and October 3-4, 1862, group themselves into more telling representations. These representations are key to the art of photography in the mid-19th-century, and even more importantly, key to the dramatic changes that were being excavated within the terrain of American art and photography at the time and in the heat of the Civil War.

This talk will outline the structure of Battle of Sharpsburg (Antietam) photographic representations, utilizing key groupings of photographs reviewed in the Photographic Selections website of the Library of Congress. These photographs were taken primarily by Alexander Gardner; a smaller selection is attributed to James Gibson and to other northern photographers. The photos group themselves primarily into four "types": farmhouses and churches; bridges and engineered structures; portraits of generals, officers and other key individuals and groups; and views of the fields and Bloody Lane in the immediate aftermath of the battle. In this talk, I will concern myself with buildings, bridges, and fields.

Photographs of farmhouses and churches marking key emplacements, sites, and battlefield hospitals partake of the theme of the American pastoral. Explored in the early 19th century by painters of the Hudson River School and the New England landscape, this theme situates the home and its domestic environment as one of sanctuary, care, peace and rest. Photographs of the Antietam bridge and Burnside's Bridge, marking key strategic battle sites, partake of the theme of the American picturesque. Explored by Hudson River School artists as well as by British imperial photographers influential for the evolution of American photographic art, this theme situates the bridge and its environs in an imaginatively accessible locale, the exotic and imperial domain of ruins and relics. Photographs of the fields and Bloody Lane, mapped by the bodies of Confederate dead, partake of a theme which I will call the "photographically embodied." Explored primarily by war photographers as well as war artists, and rendered most poignant in three-

dimensional stereo photographic cards, this theme situates the land and its human relics in the domain of desolation and memory.

By means of a series of comparative images—Sharpsburg documents compared with paintings, graphics and other representations of the period ca. 1835-1905—this talk will seek to situate the representations of battle within an expanding visual culture whose parlance would be increasingly mediated through the searing virtuality of photographs.