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EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Cyclorama: The Big Picture' Review: Standing at the Center of History

The stunning restoration of an epic 1886 wraparound painting, 'The Battle of Atlanta,' goes on view.



Detail of 'The Battle of Atlanta' (1886) in 'Cyclorama: The Big Picture' at the Atlanta History Center PHOTO: ATLANTA HISTORY CENTER

By *Edward Rothstein*

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Atlanta

Today, it often seems, great historical battles aren't those in which military forces determine the course of history but battles over the interpretation of history itself. Who tells the story? Lines are drawn. There is much bloodletting.

Those kinds of clashes play an important role at the Atlanta History Center's imposing new presentation, "Cyclorama: The Big Picture." But when you stand on a viewing platform to gaze

at the main attraction—a stunning restoration of an epic 1886 wraparound you-are-there painting, “The Battle of Atlanta”—something very different comes to mind.

Cyclorama: The Big Picture

Atlanta History Center

What you see is a cyclorama—a painted pre-digital version of virtual reality that flourished in the late 19th century and promised to immerse viewers in a historical event. This one, painted by 16 German artists hired by William Wehner, the manager of the American Panorama Co. in Milwaukee, is 49 feet tall and nearly 400 feet around. In preparation, some of the artists mounted a 25-foot-high platform about 2 1/2 miles outside of Atlanta 22 years after the battle. They were aiming to sketch the landscape as it might have appeared during the sweltering day of July 22, 1864, in which Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman’s Union troops encountered forces that tried to halt his march toward Atlanta, the commercial hub of the Confederacy.

The cyclorama weighs 10,000 pounds and is mounted in a new 25,000-square-foot home after having been housed since 1893 in Atlanta’s Grant Park; \$35.78 million was raised, including a \$10 million endowment. It is one of two surviving historical cycloramas in the U.S. according to the exhibition—the other, “The Battle of Gettysburg,” was given a new home a decade ago at the Gettysburg Museum of the American Civil War. And though cycloramas were once popular, as an accompanying exhibition recounts, the painted form was supplanted by photography and motion pictures. Cycloramas’ promise of sensation was better fulfilled by 20th-century media.

But sensation is just what hits you here. Everywhere is a welter of soldiers racing, screaming, bayoneting. Puffs of smoke from ordnance and weaponry dot the countryside; splayed men and horses lie in the wake of waves of gray and blue. There are more than 6,000 figures—a number that approaches the total killed that afternoon—far more than you can readily take in. Below the painting, 128 plaster soldiers seem to emerge from the canvas, added during the 1930s as 3-D supplements to the spectacle.

It overwhelms, and it is meant to. Only after a while can you make sense of the landmarks and allusions: the silhouette of Atlanta’s tallest buildings of the time or the twisted rails of tracks Union soldiers were destroying; the Confederates breaking through a trench line or U.S. Maj. Gen. John A. Logan leading a charge back. Who is winning? It is difficult to make it out through the fog of war.

The argument made by the curator, Gordon L. Jones, the Center’s senior military historian, is that over time the painting became a canvas for the projection of shifting Southern passions. It was created to be viewed in the North (Union leaders can be identified but not Confederates), but when it made its way South with a new owner, Paul Atkinson, in 1891 there was some attempt to portray the Battle of Atlanta as a Confederate victory. He had the uniforms of a group of Confederate prisoners recolored so Union soldiers were those defeated.



Visitors view the restored 'Battle of Atlanta' (1886) PHOTO: ATLANTA HISTORY CENTER

Moreover, the battle's importance had to affect the painting's interpretation. It was, the exhibition notes, "retouched, rebranded, and reinterpreted." For the North the battle presaged the fall of Atlanta and thus resurrected Abraham Lincoln's hopes for re-election. For the South, it became a last stand for the

Lost Cause: One display shows a velvet box, on loan from the United Daughters of the Confederacy, cushioning a bullet said to have been the one that killed U.S. Gen. James B. McPherson that day. Each wave of the painting's restoration, we see, was affected by views of the Civil War in Southern culture. This is also the point of an introductory film projected onto the painting, in which the painting's history—rather than the battle's—is the focus of attention. Much of this is illuminating, giving new energy to the Atlanta History Center under the guidance of its president, Sheffield Hale.



Restoration of 'The Battle of Atlanta' (1886) PHOTO: ATLANTA HISTORY CENTER

But such passions swirl around the painting rather than within it. The cyclorama's actual effect is not of jingoistic fervor for either side but of detached amazement. Minor changes were not necessarily relevant to interpretations of the war. When he was a Republican candidate in 1888, President Benjamin Harrison arranged to have himself painted into the battle. And when the cast of "Gone With the Wind" (1939)

visited (only whites were permitted), Clark Gable jestingly asked where he could be found; in response, the features of Rhett Butler were added to a dying Confederate soldier.

What then are we left with? The ideological landscapes of the succeeding century are revealed, but even though touch screens draw your attention to parts of the painting, and maps cursorily

outline the battle, few visitors will emerge with a clear understanding of what precisely happened on that day. It would have helped to have another presentation leading viewers through the cyclorama, as at Gettysburg, particularly because here there is no preserved battlefield, nor is the confrontation as clear. Battles over history should not so strenuously eclipse historical battles.

—*Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large.*

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