

## Constructing National Identity through the Lens of the Painted Panorama: The Bourbaki Panorama in Lucerne, Switzerland

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### Abstract

Using the Bourbaki Panorama, which depicts the French General Charles-Denis Bourbaki's army crossing Switzerland's border near Les Verrières in 1871, this paper examines the notion of identity narrative in nation-building and addresses the following questions: How does the Bourbaki Panorama reinforce Switzerland's national identity? How can identity narratives strengthen or challenge a nation's collective memory? How can these findings inform current and future practices in the development and interpretation of new and existing panorama projects?

### Keywords

Bourbaki Panorama, national identity, collective memory, identity narrative, Franco-Prussian War

### Introduction

In an increasingly global environment, with shifting geopolitical borders, ever-increasing migration, and the international standardization of information technologies and manufactured goods, there is a sense of uncertainty as to how national identity may be maintained or restored. Many nations have reacted to the perceived threat of globalization by cultivating an interest in nationalism in an effort to renew a sense of community and confidence.

Many of the few remaining panoramas from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be used as a lens to understand national identity. Much like other history paintings, the panorama is a blending of myths, memories, and values. Altering facts to create a cogent narrative was common in paintings that depict significant historical events, such as *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), one of the most iconic images in American history for reinforcing collective memory and national identity painted by Emanuel Leutze (German American, 1816-1968).

One goal of many panorama artists has been to represent an accurate account of places and events through rigorous research. Many of these panoramas depicted recent battle scenes relevant to the cities and regions for which they

were made as well as "exotic" locations, enabling people to compare their lives and traditions to others.

Lucerne's Bourbaki Panorama was painted under the direction of Édouard Castres (Swiss, 1838-1902) and completed in 1881. An identity narrative constructed to address Swiss nationalist themes, it depicts the 1871 event of General Bourbaki's French army crossing Switzerland's border near Les Verrières and disarming. [1] This paper will address the Bourbaki Panorama as a model of using national identity as a narrative for nation-building, the ability for identity narratives to strengthen and challenge a nation's collective memory, and practical recommendations for developing and interpreting painted and digital panorama projects.

### Collective Memory, National Identity, and History Painting

When considering national identity and a nation's heritage, it is important to understand the notion of collective memory, which in its simplest form may be defined as a way that two or more members of a social group recall, commemorate, or represent their shared societal or cultural history. Collective memory is the result of socialization through education, traditions, and customs, including public ceremonies and monuments. [2] It is also important to consider how a group collectively forgets by excluding or silencing alternative perspectives or versions of events from a social group's memory. [3]

The concept of national identity has evolved into an effective social and political tool over the past two or three centuries because its collective memory and forgetting offers powerful narratives that help groups of people to identify with others in a social group, bringing shared experiences to a socially and economically diverse group of people.

In *Nationalism: Political Cultures in Europe and America, 1775-1865*, Lloyd Kramer writes, "Most analysts

of nationalism locate its emergence in late eighteenth-century Europe. This argument for historical specificity challenges a typical nationalist's view of national identities as very old or even primordial realities, and it places nationalism at the center of political and cultural modernization. Where nationalisms usually claim to represent the deep spirit and traditions of common people, historians usually find the creation of nationalist ideas in the writings of elite intellectuals and political activists." [4] National identity is a construction as opposed to being fixed or absolute.

Through a nation's endeavor to preserve its past, it creates an identity, from which emerges unity and a sense of self drawn from events and cultural symbols, both tangible and intangible. [5] A nation's identity and cultural heritage work hand in hand. State-sanctioned heritage reinforces a nationalistic agenda of unity and shared history. [6] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, history painting provided a vehicle for commemorating contemporary events in a heroic and monumental style. A famous example is Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, which captures a pivotal event that changed the course of the American Revolutionary War (fig. 1). The crossing took place on the eve of December 25 and into the early morning on December 26, 1776, enabling Washington's troops to catch the German Hessian forces by surprise. Washington stands confidently in his boat, with his sword and the American flag beside him, leading his troops as they paddle through treacherous waters and what appear to be miniature icebergs. Leutze simplifies and dramatizes the historical event: the Durham iron-ore boats actually used in the crossing were much larger; Washington would have been seated rather than standing; and the flag depicted would not be used for another six months. [7]



Fig 1. *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851 Emanuel Leutze, painting, The Metropolitan Museums of Art. Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Paintings such as Leutze's reconfigure historical events to create dramatic narratives that augment meaning and evoke emotion beyond the actual occurrences themselves. In *Nation and Nationalism*, Ernest Gellner reinforces this

idea: "nationalism uses the pre-existing, historically inherited proliferation of cultures or cultural wealth, though it uses them very selectively, and it most often transforms them radically." [8]

*Washington Crossing the Delaware* and the Bourbaki Panorama are both identity narratives, which I define for this discussion as deliberate constructions that contribute to an evolving story of a nation and instill patriotism and national unity.

## The Bourbaki Panorama and National Identity

The panorama is a popular subgenre of history painting that sought to document places and events from both ancient and more contemporary times. These panoramas are barometers of the mores and interests of artists and their audiences for whom they were made, providing insight into the culture. Battle scenes were of particular interest to viewers and this tradition of painting continues in panorama production today as teaching tools in such countries as China, Turkey, North Korea, and Cambodia to instill a sense of collective history and national pride.

While Castres's Bourbaki Panorama is a depiction of war, it is atypical of other panoramic battle scenes, as it presents a humanitarian effort during a time of war. Completed in 1881, it depicts a historic event during the Franco-Prussian War in the winter of 1871, which would be a defining narrative of Switzerland as a nation. With no ability to retreat, the French General Charles-Denis Bourbaki (1816-1897) and his troops had two choices: surrender to the Germans or seek refuge in neutral Switzerland. Many of Bourbaki's soldiers were sick or wounded. Humiliated by impending defeat, Bourbaki attempted suicide, then was removed from command and replaced by General Justin Clinchant (1820-1881), who was ordered to lead Bourbaki's eastern army. Recognizing no alternative other than surrendering to Germany, Clinchant sought asylum for his troops in Switzerland. Over three days, 87,000 starving, exhausted, and disheartened Frenchmen plodded through the snow to cross the Swiss border, where they sought safe haven. At the army's points of entry, Swiss citizens helped to ease the French army's suffering as much as they could by providing food and aid with their limited resources. Soon afterward, Swiss authorities, local residents, and the recently founded Red Cross stepped in with further assistance (fig. 2). The Swiss government and its citizens worked collectively to ready households, churches, schools, and hospitals to aid the wounded and sick soldiers, providing treatment and nourishment. In addition, the Swiss provided the soldiers with clothing, books, and playing cards, as well as free concerts and political and

cultural lectures. Switzerland's treatment of Bourbaki's army is considered one of the greatest examples of wartime kindness and generosity to a foreign body. [9]



Fig. 2. *Bourbaki Panorama* (Detail), 1881, Édouard Castres, panorama. Credit: Author.

Commissioned by a Geneva-based entrepreneur and a Belgian company, the Bourbaki Panorama depicts this historical event in a single defining moment. Castres began preliminary studies for the project in 1876 before he began working on the final panorama in 1881. With the help of about ten assistants, it took four months to complete the 112-meter-long cylindrical painting. He was well suited for the project, as a number of his postwar paintings focused on military subject matter and he was a voluntary member of the Red Cross embedded in the French army when the event occurred, so he could provide first-person recollections. [10] Between the audience's viewing area and the painting is faux terrain, enhancing the immersive experience of the event.



Fig. 3. *Bourbaki Panorama* (Detail), 1881, Édouard Castres, panorama. Credit: Author.

On one side of the panorama, the exhausted and broken French troops, in tattered uniforms, trudge through the snow, surrendering their weapons in the expectation of aid from the neutral Swiss (fig. 3). On the other side, Swiss soldiers march into the Val-de-Travers valley with their

immaculate uniforms and equipment, ready to provide assistance and order for the internment. In another section of the panorama, the Swiss General Hans Herzog (1819-1894) and the French General Clinchant shake hands while on their horses as they come to an agreement regarding the internment. The Swiss humanitarian efforts, both civilian and military, are the focal point of the panorama. For example, in a field among countless others providing help to the deflated French military, a civilian woman assists a sick and wounded soldier (fig. 4). The International Red Cross logo is prominent at points throughout the panorama. Castres, who assisted the Bourbaki army in the battlefield as a volunteer for the Red Cross, was present for this border crossing and depicts himself accurately beside a Red Cross wagon.



Fig. 4. *Bourbaki Panorama* (Detail), 1881, Édouard Castres, panorama. Credit: Author.

Much as Leutze had, Castres embellished the event. For instance, there is no evidence that Generals Herzog and Clinchant met on horseback. Likewise the national Swiss uniform had been adopted by the army in 1869 as depicted in the painting, but in truth, many still wore the regional uniforms of the cantons, as before 1874 there was not yet a centralized Swiss military system, only cantonal contingents (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. *Bourbaki Panorama* (Detail), 1881, Édouard Castres, panorama. Credit: Author.

While the factual inaccuracies listed above exist within the panorama, perhaps they were intentional, providing a more cohesive narrative of national identity. Creating a contrast between the broken and fatigued French army and an ordered and disciplined Swiss army presents a position of strength and unity to the Swiss people. The depiction of Swiss civilians and military, together with the International Red Cross providing aid to the surrendered French army, reinforces the Swiss goal of remaining neutral and providing humanitarian assistance in times of both war and peace. Choosing to illustrate the generals' handshake further reinforces the Swiss position of neutrality and providing respite for the fallen (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. *Bourbaki Panorama* (Detail), 1881, Édouard Castres, panorama. Credit: Author.

## Deconstructing National Identity

The purpose of national identity is to bring a nation together into a cohesive whole by unifying its citizens through an identification of a national culture and a way of life. This is accomplished through an arrangement of symbolic practices, the construction of narratives from historical events, and cultural heritage manifestations. A consequence of national identity as seen in history is that it has not only homogenized a group of people from potentially diverse backgrounds, it creates an “other,” which can easily lead to prejudice and stereotyping. [11]

While the United States' national identity includes democracy, individual freedom, and tolerance, intolerance may be found in some of its citizens' day-to-day actions. The ramifications of ethnically homogenizing a nation's identity may be seen through paintings that respond to *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. One such painting is Robert Colescott's socially charged *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1975, St. Louis, private collection,) in which the artist satirizes Leutze's painting of blackface figures in a brightly colored, caricature-like style, replacing the soldiers with racist African American stereotypes (fig. 7). In Colescott's painting, George Washington Carver, the

innovative agricultural scientist who was born into slavery, stands in for George Washington and leads a crew of black minstrels, cooks, maids, and fishermen. Using pointed social critique, Colescott (American, 1925-2009) brings out the complexity of the African American in slavery, inequality, and discrimination in the history and culture of the United States. [12]



Fig. 7. *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook*, 1975, Robert Colescott, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 108 in., Private collection, Saint Louis, © 2017 Estate of Robert Colescott / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo: Jean Paul Torno.

Another treatment is Roger Shimomura's painting, *Shimomura Crossing the Delaware* (2010, Washington D.C., Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery), which focuses its attention on Asian American struggles against xenophobia. In this painting, Shimomura (American, b. 1939) imitates *Washington Crossing the Delaware* in the graphic style of the nineteenth-century woodcuts of the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai. He places himself at the boat's helm among samurai warriors crossing the San Francisco Harbor with Angel Island, a processing center for many Asian immigrants, in the background (fig. 8). In 2010 Shimomura wrote, “I was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, a city where ethnic diversity is standard fare, however, for over the last 40 years, I have lived my life in the Midwest where the Asian American presence is still somewhat of a rarity. Since living in Kansas, I have found it to be routine to be asked what part of Japan I am from, or how long I have lived in this country. Just as common, subtle references continue to connect me to stereotypical ‘oriental’ traits, both physical and behavioral. Far too many American-born citizens of Asian descent continue to be thought of as only ‘American knockoffs.’” [13]



Fig. 8. *Shimomura Crossing the Delaware*, 2010, Roger Shimomura, acrylic on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; acquired through the generosity of Raymond L. Ocampo Jr., Sandra Oleksy Ocampo, and Robert P. Ocampo © 2010, Roger Shimomura.

These identity narrative commentary paintings are important for understanding the complexities and consequences of creating a homogenized national identity that advertently or inadvertently marginalizes minority populations within a country, creating adversaries through the construction of the other by alienating those who have different traditions and belief systems. In the essay “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship,” John Gillis acknowledges these ramifications when he writes, “Ironically, fierce battles over identity and memory are erupting at the very moment when psychologists, anthropologists, and historians are becoming increasingly aware of the subjective nature of both. These struggles make it all the more apparent that identities and memories are highly selective, inscriptive rather than descriptive, serving particular interests and ideological positions. Just as memory and identity support one another, they also sustain certain subjective positions, social boundaries, and of course, power.” [14]

When European nations were being formed in the nineteenth century, many writers of the time believed that nations should be founded on a shared language and ethnicity. For the most part, France and Germany subscribed to this notion as they sought to unify themselves in the construction of a national identity by using language, ethnicity, and shared history. [15] Nevertheless, not all European countries shared this sentiment. Switzerland’s rationale for becoming a nation-state consisted of different qualities that did not include shared language and ethnicity.

During the mid-nineteenth century multilingual Switzerland had a noncentralized military and an immigration policy that was determined by regional cantons rather than a national policy. [16] While the country lacked the ethnolinguistic homogeneity that such nineteenth-century political theorists as Giuseppe Mazzini believed was required to become a nation, they argued three major points to solidify their national identity: a

shared political history, a unified neutral and humanitarian vision, and a common natural heritage—the Swiss Alps. [17] The nineteenth-century Swiss philosopher Carl Hilty wrote in support of Switzerland as a polyethnic nation: “What holds Switzerland together vis-à-vis its neighbors is an ideal, namely the consciousness of being part of a state that in many ways represents a more civilized community; of constituting a nationality which stands head and shoulder above mere affiliations of blood or language.” [18]

In the subject matter presented in the Bourbaki Panorama it is evident that Castres sought to design a painting that did not merely depict an important historical event, but created a narrative that solidified the national identity of Switzerland, much as Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* had for the United States. Patrick Deicher writes that the event depicted in the Bourbaki Panorama played “an important part in helping shape Swiss national identity. At the time, national identity included a very strong emphasis on solidarity and humanitarian activity. The founding of the Red Cross in Switzerland in 1863 is a part of this. The internment became fixed in the Swiss mind as a major achievement that helped to build the national identity.” [19]

While the painting depicts a unified and powerful national military under General Herzog, which many political theorists of the time argued was an important component of a nation-state, perhaps many local leaders were marginalized and remain unrecognized for their contribution to this important humanitarian event in Swiss history. Perhaps today what may be more interesting to consider is how Switzerland’s disparate ethnic communities came together in an effort to support the shared political values and institutions that have helped to shape Switzerland.

## Concluding Remarks

While memories help us make sense of the world we live in, constructions of national identity make these memories tangible with the creation of heritage objects such as monuments, holidays, cemeteries, and museums to reinforce a nation’s perceived narrative. In her essay “Collective Memory and Forgetting: A Theoretical Discussion,” Cindy Minarova-Banjac writes, “Collective or social memory refers to shared perceptions of the past, where societies ensure cultural continuity by linking the past, present, and future in group narratives. How the past is remembered and interpreted plays an important role in the creation of individual and group identities, represented by oral histories, traditions, myths, and languages.” [20] Perhaps as nations move forward in the struggle to define themselves in an increasingly globalized world by re-

establishing a unified national identity, they should resist defining themselves using such qualities as ethnicity, religion and language, but rather through another set of common attributes—both tangible and intangible—much like the Swiss had in the 19th century.

Identity narratives are social and political, as they involve the coordination of individual and group memories whose outcomes may appear consensual when they are in fact bound together as much by forgetting as by remembering. Future research efforts by this author will be undertaken to further understand how more recent panorama painting initiatives in such places as Cairo (1988) and Istanbul (2009) compare to nineteenth and early twentieth century panorama projects, potentially providing additional insight into identity narrative constructions within the context of nation building.

Many of the remaining nineteenth and early twentieth century panoramas are important heritage documents that not only re-present significant events or places, but now serve as heritage artifacts that provide insight into the time and place in which they were constructed. As panorama organizations work to interpret these valuable artifacts, and as contemporary panorama artists design new panoramas that depict one's heritage, we must be aware of not only previously marginalized voices and communities who have contributed to the fabric of a nation, but also how others from outside a country may perceive events within a country's history differently.

### Notes

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