



George Luks
American, 1866 - 1933

The Bersaglieri

1918

oil on canvas

overall: 101.9 x 151.5 cm (40 1/8 x 59 5/8 in.)

framed: 119.1 x 169.6 x 7 cm (46 7/8 x 66 3/4 x 2 3/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: George Luks

Gift of the Avalon Foundation 1950.5.1

ENTRY

Shortly after the United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, a series of Liberty Loan drives were organized in major American cities to encourage citizens to help the federal government defray its wartime expenses by purchasing bonds. In New York, elaborate parades were held on the city's main thoroughfare, Fifth Avenue, which was specially decorated with flags of the Allied forces. The city's artists contributed to such patriotic events by designing war posters and various forms of propaganda or by painting pictures of the parades. The most famous examples of the latter are the approximately 30 paintings of Fifth Avenue bedecked with flags by Childe Hassam (American, 1859 - 1935), represented by *Allies Day, May 1917* at the National Gallery of Art. [1]

George Luks's first Fifth Avenue parade subject, *Blue Devils on Fifth Avenue* [fig. 1], represents a regiment of French soldiers marching past Delmonico's restaurant at the intersection of 45th Street and Fifth Avenue during a Liberty Loan drive parade on the morning of April 30, 1918. [2] The festive painting, which was based on sketches that Luks made while observing the event, was greeted with critical acclaim and acquired by Duncan Phillips, who pronounced it a "masterpiece of

impressionistic painting, an important canvas which would have value for its technical qualities alone.” [3]

Luks’s lesser-known *Bersaglieri* represents a regiment of Italian sharpshooters who had been sent to the United States in 1918 to stimulate interest in the fourth Liberty Loan drive. Introduced into the Sardinian army in 1849, they had served heroically in numerous military engagements and were noted for their endurance and ability to march at a speed of four miles an hour. When Italy entered World War I in 1915, 12 regiments of Bersaglieri were in the regular army and 20 battalions in the mobile militia. On October 12, 1918, they marched at the head of a procession led by President Woodrow Wilson from East 72nd Street down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square. The event was described in the *New York Times*:

First in order came the Bersaglieri of Italy in their blue uniforms and brown “tin hats.” Every man was a veteran who had helped stem the Austro-German torrent that once upon a time threatened to overwhelm Italy. The Italians came by at a “turkey trot” and as it was Italy Day at the Altar of Liberty as well as the anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, the veterans got a double sized tribute. They were still “turkey trotting” when they disappeared down the avenue. [4]

Luks’s painting of the parade is remarkably similar to the photograph of the event that accompanied the *New York Times* article [fig. 2].

The Bersaglieri is an effective piece of wartime propaganda. A critic had noted how *Blue Devils on Fifth Avenue* conveys a sense of “the electric feeling that seems to float from the crowd and through the crowd on especially sympathetic occasions.” [5] Here the artist also captured the soldiers’ martial prowess, the din of the crowd, and the excitement of the occasion. Wearing their distinctive green-gray uniforms and steel helmets decorated with flowing feathers, the Bersaglieri march in unison down a flag-draped Fifth Avenue. The tuba players at the head of the column dramatically step out of the shadows cast by the tall buildings on the avenue into the light-drenched cross street as Italian and Red Cross flags billow in the wind. The viewer is immersed in the scene at street level, creating a sense of immediacy. Luks’s success in enlivening the scene was indebted to his experience as a newspaper illustrator covering the Cuban revolt against Spain in 1895.

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Shortly after World War I ended, Luks painted two other military processional subjects, *Armistice Night* [fig. 3] and *Czechoslovakian Army Entering Vladivostok, Siberia, in 1918* [fig. 4]. [6] He also painted two other war-related subjects that were on display during the Fourth Liberty Loan drive: *In the Service* (1918), depicting a Red Cross nurse in front of a billowing American flag, and *Fight to Buy or Uncle Sam* (1918), an unorthodox image of the legendary figure as a long-haired politician. [7] Finally, *Knitting for the Soldiers: High Bridge Park* (c. 1918, Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago) was exhibited alongside *Blue Devils on Fifth Avenue* at the Kraushaar Galleries in June 1918.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 George Luks, *Blue Devils on Fifth Avenue*, 1918, oil on canvas, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, acquired 1918

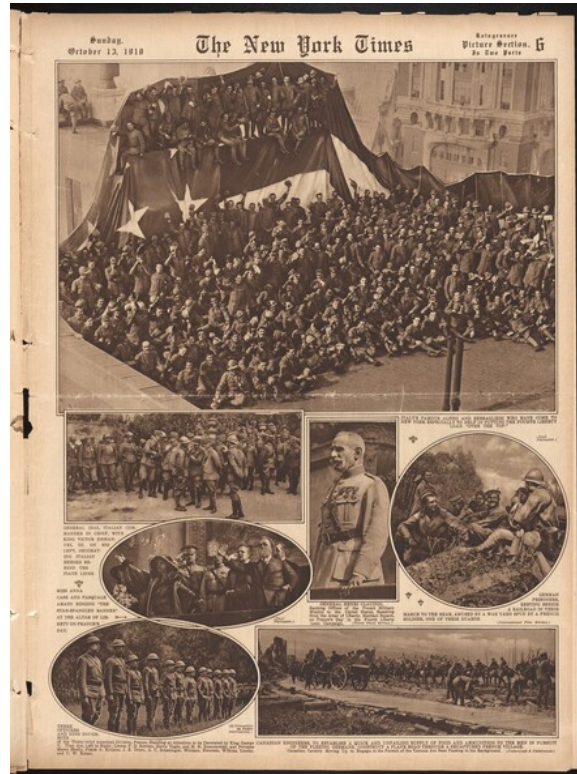


fig. 2 Paul Thompson, "Italy's Famous Alpini and Bersaglieri who have come to New York especially help in putting the Fourth Liberty Loan 'Over the Top,'" *New York Times*, October 13, 1918, p. 58. Image courtesy the Library of Congress



fig. 3 George Luks, *Armistice Night*, 1918, oil on canvas, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, gift of an anonymous donor, 54.58



fig. 4 George Luks, *Czechoslovakian Army Entering Vladivostok, Siberia, in 1918*, 1918, oil on canvas, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection

NOTES

- [1] For an extensive discussion of artists' contributions to the war effort in New York and Hassam's flag paintings, see Ilene Susan Fort, *The Flag Paintings of Childe Hassam* (Los Angeles, 1988), 198.
- [2] *Blue Devils on Fifth Avenue* was specifically painted for an exhibition of patriotic art that Phillips co-organized with A. E. Gallatin for the National Arts Club that was ultimately held at the Kraushaar Galleries in June 1918. A measure of the painting's success can be judged by its appearance as the frontispiece for Gallatin's *Art and the Great War* (New York, 1919) and as an illustration in his *Allied War Salon* (New York, 1918).
- [3] Erika D. Passantino, ed., *The Eye of Duncan Phillips: A Collection in the Making* (Washington, DC, 1999), 324–326.
- [4] "Acclaim Wilson as He Marches in Big Loan Parade," *New York Times*, October 13, 1918, 20.
- [5] Henry McBride, "Views and Reviews in the World of Art," *The Sun*, June 2, 1918, George Benjamin Luks papers, 1902–1961, reel 95, frame 154, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- [6] The latter subject, which may have been executed around October 1918 following the Czech Day celebrations of the Fourth Liberty Loan drive, was painted with the aid of an eye witness to the event. See Ilene Susan Fort

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and Michael Quick, *American Art: A Catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection* (Los Angeles, 1991), 278–279.

- [7] *In the Service and Fight to Buy* are discussed in Stanley L. Cuba, Nina Kasanof, and Judith O'Toole, *George Luks: An American Artist* (Wilkes-Barre, PA, 1987), 35–36.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The coarsely woven plain-weave fabric support has been relined with wax and remounted on a new stretcher. [1] All of the tacking margins have been removed. X-radiographs reveal the presence of two superimposed full-length portraits beneath the present composition. They are both perpendicular to the present orientation, but the figures are head-to-toe, suggesting two different portrait campaigns. The present image was thickly painted in the wet-on-wet method, with heavily textured, pastose paint in some areas. In other passages, the paint is thinned to a watery consistency and drawn over the support so that drips of liquid paint run down the canvas. Color blending is often done on the picture surface. Other than the deep cracks that have developed in the thick paint and a record of minor flaking, the painting is in good condition. The surface is coated with a fairly even, glossy layer of damar varnish. [2]

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] The conservation record indicates that two lining fabrics were removed in 1956, when the painting was relined using a wax adhesive onto a single piece of fabric.
- [2] The conservation record states that a damar varnish coating was applied in 1956.
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PROVENANCE

The Bersaglieri

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The artist; purchased by Arthur F. Egner, South Orange, New Jersey, by 1934;^[1] (his estate sale, Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 4 May 1945, no. 116). (Knoedler and Co., New York), by 1947;^[2] purchased 16 May 1950 by NGA.

[1] The painting was lent by Enger to the 1934 exhibition *The Work of George Benjamin Luks* at the Newark Museum.

[2] The painting was lent by Knoedler to the 1947 exhibition *Fiftieth Anniversary Exhibition: Paintings by American Artists 1896-1930* at the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1934 *The Works of Benjamin Luks*, Newark Museum, New Jersey, 1934-1935, no. 36.

1946 *American Painting*, Person Hall Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1946, no. 27.

1947 *Fiftieth Anniversary Exhibition: Paintings by American Artists 1896-1930*, Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, 1947, no. 23.

1949 *The Turn of the Century: American Artists 1890-1920*, Des Moines Art Center, 1949, unnumbered catalogue.

1954 Extended loan for use by Blair-Lee House, Washington, D.C., 1954-1956.

1973 *George Luks: An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings Dating from 1889 to 1931*, Museum of Art, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, April-May 1973, no. 47, repro.

1973 *The City in American Painting*, Allentown Art Museum, Pennsylvania, January-March 1973, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1988 Extended loan for use by Secretary Frank Carlucci, U.S. Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., 1988-1989.

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1991 Extended loan for use by Secretary Lynn Martin, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, D.C., 1991-1993.

1993 Extended loan for use by Secretary Robert Reich, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, D.C., 1993-1995.

2001 Extended loan for use by Ambassador William Stamps Farish III, U.S. Embassy residence, London, England, 2001-2002.

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- 1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 80, repro.
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- 1980 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1980: no. 52, color repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 207, color repro. 219.
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