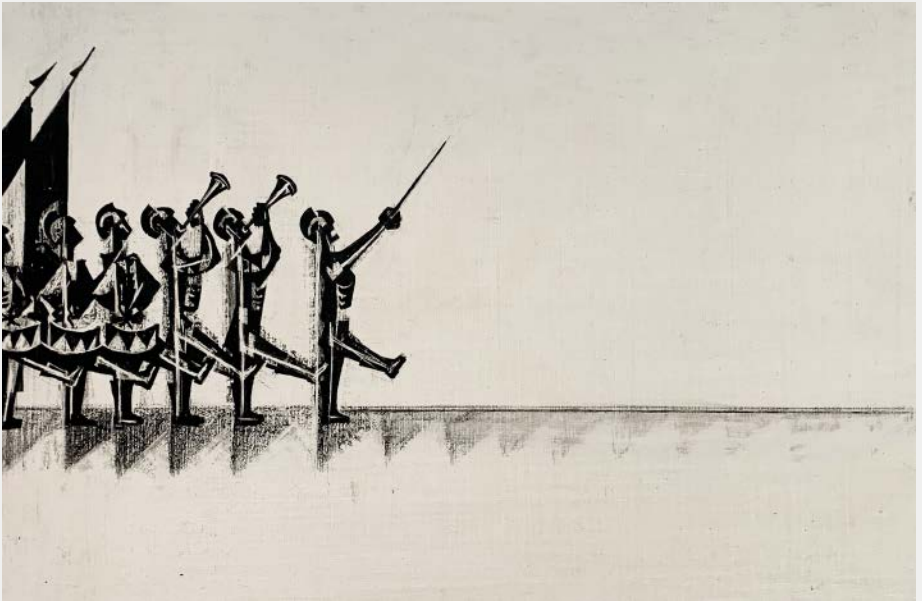


SI LEWEN

# THE PARADE



*Si Lewen: The Parade* showcases 63 drawings made by Polish-born artist Si Lewen (1918–2016) for a wordless book that was first published in 1957. This body of work draws inspiration from his long-standing interest in cinema, his early life in Europe, and his experience as a soldier enlisted in the United States Army during World War II. With stark lines and graphic clarity, Lewen explores the power of the visual form to articulate a nuanced understanding of cycles of violence across time and place.

Early in his life, Lewen admired the work of Belgian graphic artist Frans Masereel (1889–1972), who created wordless pictorial narratives. As Lewen said, “what I found so fascinating...about Masereel’s work is that it is very much related to movie making.” In light of these interests, the artist explored a similar format in his own artistic practice: the drawings presented here are ordered and oriented as though each one is a moment in time. Together they produce a complex visual narrative in much the same way the cells of a film strip form a movie, frame-by-frame. However, unlike a film, the drawings remain motionless, relying on the viewer to imagine the sounds and the sequence that stitches them together.

Only years after the so-called Great War ended in 1918, Lewen witnessed the escalation of nationalistic rhetoric that propelled Europe into another brutal conflict. The story of *The Parade* is anchored in Lewen’s own experiences. The drawings that begin the book highlight the groundswell of pride and patriotism as children and adults gather to cheer for a military parade. As the narrative progresses, men again march in line, but now bullets and bayonets pierce bodies, vultures peer at bloated animal carcasses, and prisoners are surrounded by barbed wire. Eventually the war ends, victory banners wave and crowds are once again cheering as soldiers parade. The story ends where it begins—an eternal cycle of war.

Lewen prepared each board by coating it with a layer of gesso, allowing him to scratch into the surface and create depth in the drawings. It is notable that he rendered *The Parade* in graphic black and white, which mirrors his observation that in war, “color disappears.... The sky, which a minute ago was blue, is suddenly just white. Blood is not red, [it is] black.” As the scenes move forward, the coverage and application of crayon, ink, and paint becomes much darker. White is used sparingly. Combined, these techniques present not only a dynamism in form, but also an expressionistic style. Lewen used simplified shapes and gestural mark-making to emphasize feelings and ideas over replicating reality exactly.

Artists have long addressed the subject of war. Such atrocity can pose the question of what is representable within the visual realm. How can one depict abhorrent societal conflict with any coherence? Lewen presents one possibility. With deft draftsmanship, he created a story highlighting militaristic fervor that descends into brutality and suffering that—being disassociated from one specific time and place—becomes a warning about the cyclical nature of war, a message as potent today as it was in the 1950s when the book was published.

Si Lewen was born in Lublin, Poland, relocated twice with his family in response to pogroms and anti-Semitic attacks, and eventually immigrated to the United States in 1935. During World War II, he enlisted in the United States Army as a part of a German-speaking Special Operations team known as the “Ritchie Boys.” He was deeply affected by his work at the Buchenwald concentration camp shortly after its liberation. In the aftermath of this experience, his art addressed the tragedy of war, the perils of violence, and the long, generational afterlife of both. In addition to *The Parade*, Lewen also completed the wordless book *The Journey*, and contributed illustrations to a number of poetry publications and novellas.

*Kelly Montana*

*Assistant Curator, Menil Drawing Institute*

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Copies of a facsimile edition of *The Parade, An Artist's Odyssey* (2016) are for sale in the Menil Bookstore.

*Public Programs*

In Conversation:

Art Spiegelman on Si Lewen and Graphic Novels

Followed by a public reception

Thursday, May 4, 6–8 p.m.

Lecture: Joshua Furman

*Antisemitism in the Archive: Documenting Prejudice in Houston Jewish History*

Co-presented with the Boniuk Institute and

followed by a public reception

Thursday, June 8, 6–8 p.m.

Curator Talk: Kelly Montana on Si Lewen

Sunday, June 25, 3–3:30 p.m.

*The Ritchie Boys* Film Screening

Thursday, July 20, 7–8:30 p.m.

*Si Lewen: The Parade*

April 21–September 3, 2023

Menil Drawing Institute    FRONT    Untitled drawing from Si Lewen, *The Parade*,  
The Menil Collection    ca. 1950. Crayon, ink, paint, and graphite on gessoed board,  
12 × 18 inches (30.5 × 45.7 cm). Collection of the International  
Institute for Restorative Practices. © International Institute  
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