

Advice to visual artists concerning the fate of their works in the coming wars

By Bertolt Brecht

Today I thought  
How you friends too, who paint and draw  
And you who wield the chisel will have  
In the times of the great wars that are surely coming  
Nothing to laugh about.

For you ground your hopes  
Which are necessary for the construction of works of art  
Above all on generations yet to come!  
It follows, you will need for your paintings, drawings and stones  
Created under such privation  
Good hiding places.

Consider, for example, that the artistic treasures of the British Museum  
Plundered from all corners of the globe  
At some sacrifice of lives and money, the labors  
Of long-lost peoples, now repositied at a street corner  
Can be, with a few explosive bombs, reduced to dust  
One fine morning between nine and ten past.

So where to put your works of art? The holds of ships  
Are not safe, the sanatoria in the woods  
The steel vaults of the banks are not safe enough.

You ought perhaps to try and get permission  
To execute your paintings in the tunnels of the underground railway  
Or, better still, in aircraft hangars  
Buried in concrete seven floors under.  
Paintings painted straight onto the walls  
Take up no room.  
And a few still lifes and landscapes  
Will not trouble the bomber crews.

That said, you would then have to erect signs  
In prominent places with easily legible directions  
That at such and such a depth beneath such and such a building (or pile of rubble)  
There lies a small canvas of yours, a representation of  
The face of your wife.

So that future generations, your unborn comforters  
May discover that in our times there was art  
And pursue enquires, shovelling away the debris.  
All the while the watchman in his bearskin  
High on the skyscraper roof, rifle in his lap  
(Or bow and arrow), keeps watch for the enemy, or the kite  
He craves to fill his hungry stomach

*The Svendborg Poems. 1939.*

Translated by Tom Kuhn and David Constantine