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AT EASE WITH G.I. PEARLSTEIN: PHILIP PEARLSTEIN CAPTURES WORLD WAR II ON PAPER AT BETTY CUNINGHAM

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Philip Pearlstein, *German Prisoner of War Camp (Near Pisa, Italy)*, 1945, watercolor.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BETTY CUNINGHAM GALLERY, NEW YORK

This would be an intriguing show no matter who the artist: in 1943 a young American is drafted and spends three years serving in World War II; throughout the entire time, he records his experience in dozens of drawings and watercolors. The fact that the young man in question is now the major figure painter Philip Pearlstein (who is still going strong at 92) makes the show all the more compelling.

In 11th grade the young Pearlstein had won first prize in both the oil painting and watercolor sections of the National Scholastic High School Contest. His paintings were reproduced in full color in *Life* magazine. A couple of years later Pearlstein took his copy of *Life* with him when he reported for duty—evidence that he might be better employed as a sign painter than a frontline infantryman.

The little pictures that make up this exhibition document Pearlstein's time in training camps in the United States, aboard troop ships crossing the Atlantic, and as a G.I. in occupied Italy. Occasionally, they provide hints of the artistic personality that would blossom in his work from the 1960s onward. There are even a few of them—like the 1943 group of studies of *Soldiers Resting*, for example—that look forward to the foreshortened prone figures with their splayed and overlapping limbs that characterize his best known work, though of course no naked women appear among his wartime subjects.



Philip Pearlstein, *Soldiers Resting (study for bayonet practice)*, 1943, pen and ink on paper.
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More interesting, however, are the ways in which these early efforts differ from mature Pearlsteins, for they remind us of what Pearlstein gradually stripped away from his art to arrive at the clear-sighted monumental figure studies for which he is now celebrated. Nowadays, there is no hint of narrative, which was an inevitable part of what was after all a visual journal, and gone is the jokey anecdotal quality that the young Pearlstein resorted to repeatedly.

In technical terms the high finish of present-day Pearlsteins is a long way from the sketchy shorthand of these youthful experiments. In fact, as Pearlstein has admitted, it was probably his experience as a commercial illustrator that most influenced his mature style. The fact that some of these early works are also included in this show lends it a further fascination. Before he even sailed for Europe he worked in a visual-aids shop painting signs to demonstrate the proper use of weapons and flash cards to help recruits learn to read maps. The demand for absolute accuracy in these tasks is clearly something that left its mark on Pearlstein's subsequent artistic assumptions.

Pearlstein has spoken of his time in the service as a "three-year lost period" in his artistic career. Perhaps putting this show together has made him reconsider that assessment, because it provides a tantalizing glimpse into the early development of one of our greatest figurative painters.

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