CROWDS AS A SUPPORT FOR ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIETY

Fabien Tschirhart

Art des Images et Art Contemporain (AIAC), Université de Paris VIII

ABSTRACT

We will see, through this short paper, how, most of the time, crowds have not been used in art as a simple decorative element or subject. Indeed, whatever is the period, the place or the culture, representations of crowds were mainly done in a specific objective, sometimes for artistic purposes but not always. If today we do have a specific perspective on past artistic creations; it was a time were what we are considering as artworks were actually objects of the everyday life. In such a context, the message moving along the piece of work was certainly different. In fact, crowds appear to be, in many cases, a support for artistic creations: a mean to convey emotions and feelings and not only the subject or even a simple decorative aspect in a whole work. We will try to focus on some of the most representatives pieces of art that highlight this phenomenon into representations of society and daily life of people. That way, we will show how and why crowds may be a tool that transmit a whole set of information about an event, maybe an epoch.

THROUGH TIME AND SPACE: PAINTING

Carved in the stone blocks of the Lakshmana temples by the Chandelas sculptors; soaked with ink with the fine point of the Zhang Zeduan brush, onto xuan silk papers; trapped by an anonymous journalist in the archives of the press that may be lost in some time; described by Victor Hugo or Maupassant; painted in their French daily life by Renoir or Manet ; analyzed by Le Bon or Freud; sang by a military chorus; animated into the latest blockbuster epic battles scenes ; almost living into our most modern video games… Whatever is the context or its support, crowd keeps this specific form where are both maintained the group harmony and the chaotic aspect. Different size, different behavior, different epoch or its very kind, its representation is and will always be an entities aggregation, homogenous and confusing at once. Homogenous because when the anonymity reach everyone, identity as no more value, only the group keeps one. Which means that inside the crowd, there is no way to orientate; that last fact also explains the confusing feeling. We do consider a crowd representation in art is a representation of an important amount of anonymous people where the amount generates the anonymity. A crowd activity is generally the same: they may be passive or active, but most of the time, all people in the same crowd has the same activity, or follow a common goal.

Finally, art can only transmit a representation of the crowds: their appearance and their behavior. If we fully admit that the main goal of art work is not to create a perfect copy of the reality but a vision through the eyes and the feelings of the artist, what may be his objectives and direct motivations? We can identify different usages of crowd representation, the very first of them was probably done in order to immortalize human society major activities, and this is the step we are following in this paper: piece of arts depicting the human society and daily activities. In further studies, we will revisit other usage of crowds: propaganda, religion or immersion.

The Rock art of the Iberian Mediterranean basin, also known as Levantine art, includes some of the very first known examples of "crowd" representations (see figure 1). If, as a large group of anonymous men, presently, it would not be considerate as a true crowd, it is anyway one of the first representation of people in such amount, we know. More than twenty hunters have been drawn on the rocky walls, surrounding a small herd of deers.
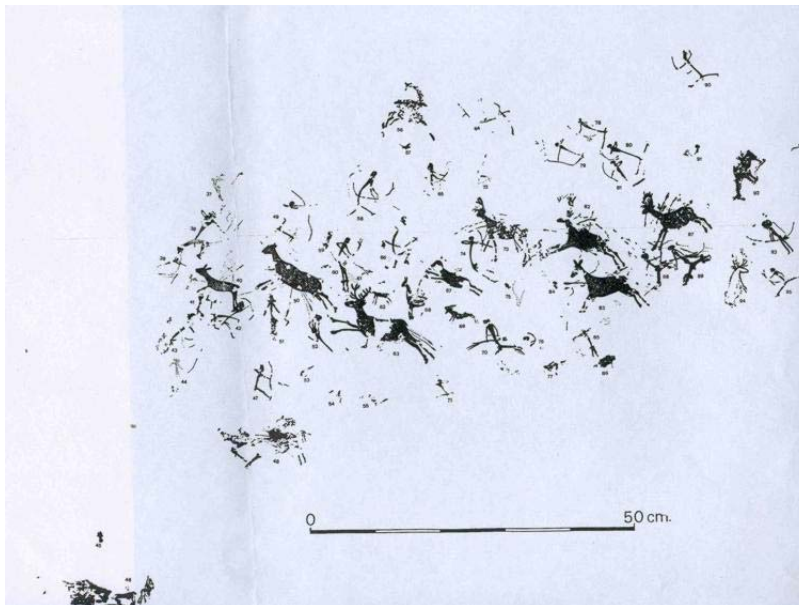

Figure 1 Hunting scene from the Hideout I. VIIIM^e B-C.

Chinese art also contains very interesting piece of work depicting the everyday life of people through crowding. The *Nights Revels of Han Xizai* by Gu Hongzhong is one of them. The painting reveals the daily life of Han Xizai, an official of the Chinese Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period states Wu and Southern Tang. Regularly missing the morning meetings and declining the opportunity to become the prime minister, the emperor sent a painter, known as Gu Hongzhong, to report him the life of his official. From the forty different people drawn on the pictures, each is painted with the facial

expression and the dressing they had at that moment. The overall painting, not only depict the very activities of the official, but the overall life of the court at nighttime.

On a sunnier instant, the famous painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (see figures 2, 3 and 4) is probably one of the most interesting piece of art representing crowds in their daily life. The work captures both the life of people and the landscape of the city of Kaifeng[1]. As the painting allows the spectator to see the different parts of the city it reveals the nature of the activities depending to the social of the people from the rich to the poor, from the merchant inside the market place to the peasants in the rural area surrounding the city. The spectator is even able to have a glimpse on the clothing, the architecture, the agricultural tools or the boat of the epoch. The eight hundred people represented on the painting are not sharing the same amount of space: the density vary from the rural landscape to the city or the temple area. With his painting, Zhang offers the spectators a wide range of emotions and feeling: first comes the curiosity, on the edge of voyeurism where we surprise ourselves spying on the daily life of the people we are seeing in theses shops, theses streets. This man looks like he is cooking something for this group of people sat a few step farther. Finally, the different parts of the painting provides different feelings: calm and tranquility when crowds are away, then stir and noise once they appear to monopolize our attention. As soon as we see crowds, arises all the excitement that it usually brings up: the diffuse noise of the conversations, the clashes of hooves horses pulling plows, exclamations occasionally breaking up above the mob…
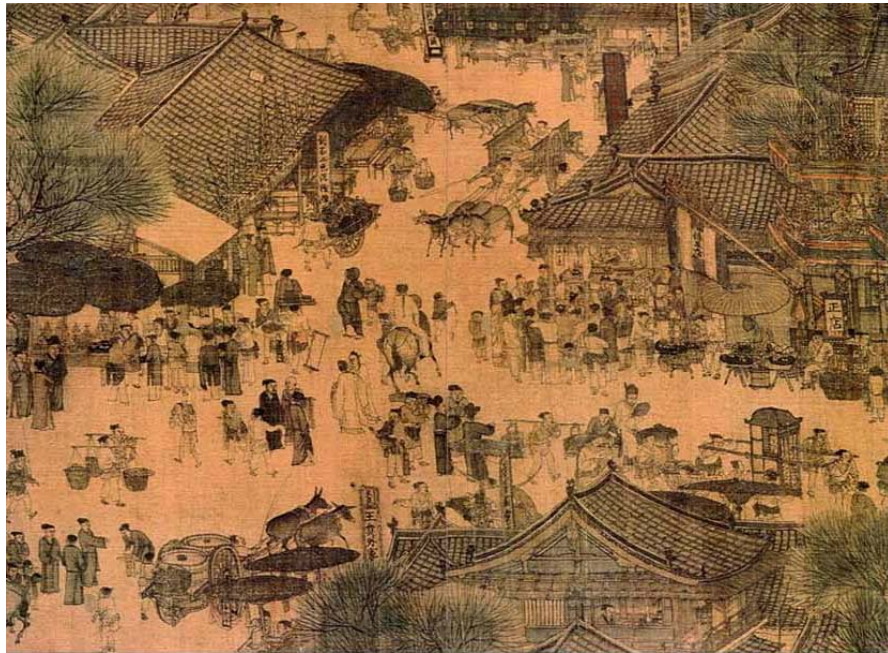
---

[1] At that time, Kaifeng was known as Bianjing.

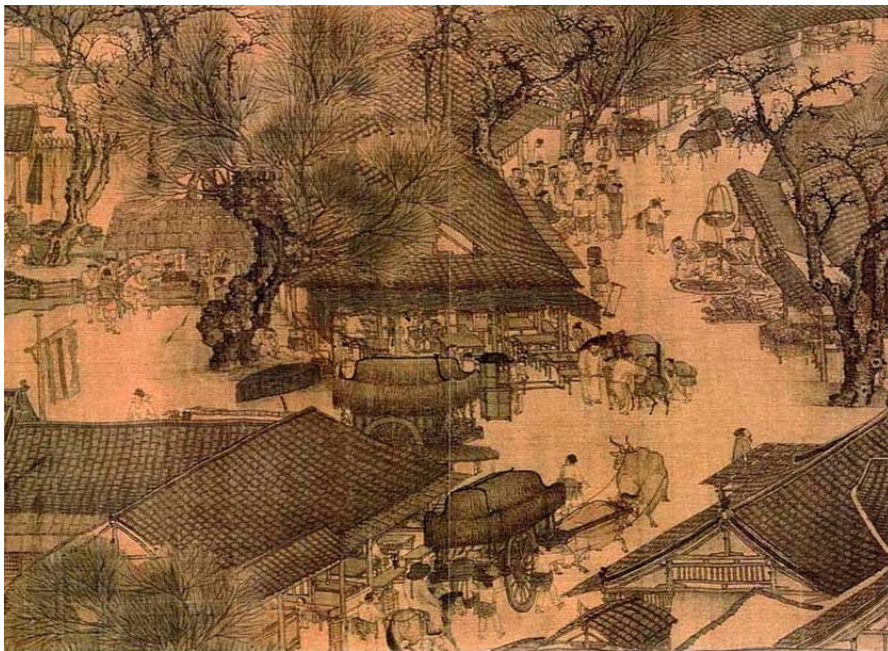**Figure 2 extract from _Along the River During the Qingming Festival_. – The market place. Zhang Zeduang, XII[e].**

Figure 3 extract from _Along the River During the Qingming Festival_. – Outside the city. Zhang Zeduang, XII[e].
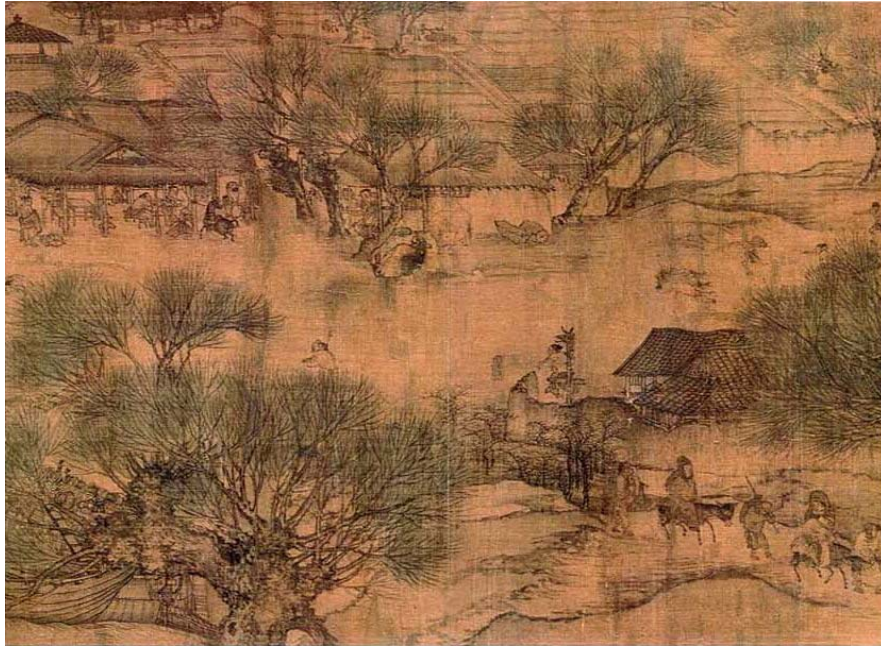
Figure 4 extract from *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. – Country side. Zhang Zeduang, XIIe.

If the simple representations of those crowds is enough to disrupt our feelings, it also contributes, as soon as it disappears, to the tranquility and appeasement. That way, crowds allows Zhang to intensify emotions yet opposites, playing on their presence, their density and their activity.

Pieter Brueghel, a Brabançon painter, is well known for his numerous representations of crowds in different circumstances: battles, everyday life, celebrations, religious events… As such, he uses crowds the same way Zeduang did a few centuries earlier, depicting expressive crowds in their daily activities. *Children's Games* and *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (see figure 5) may be two of the most interesting examples of such a usage.

Figure 5 *Children's Games*. **Pieter Brueghel. 1560.**

In the middle of the XIXe century, appeared the first collapsible paint tubes, invented by John Goffe Rand. These tubes allowed to store oil paint without drying out allowing painters to start working outdoors: *en plain air*. That way, they could capture the daily activities of people: painter were now free to roam over the cities areas or through the country side, looking for a specific landscape or life instant, to be captured. Among the hundred available piece of work, some are showing crowds and society activities: *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette*, by Renoir; *Music in the Tuileries* and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* by Manet; *Rue Montorgueuil*, by Monet, *Boulevard des Italiens* by Caillebotte. Closer to the postimpressionism era, Van Gogh made two interesting painting known as *Les Arènes* and *The Dance Hall in Arles*.

With Impressionism, art really started to use crowds as a single element of the work composition: neither a detail of the painting or the main element, crowd is a main component of each piece of art. Simply imagine *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette* (see figure 6) without any of the people Renoir drawn. This painting is famous for the way Renoir played with the colors: the clothes, the sunray through the leaves and over the people, the contrast between the colorful dress of the women and the blacks worn by the men. All of this effects he rendered could not exist without the crowd. As such, the crowd appears to be both an essential and a secondary component of the painting. Moreover, the crowd brings the agitation and the noise we would not be feeling if the scene was empty.

Figure 6 *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette*. **Auguste Renoir. 1876.**

Following the impressionism and postimpressionism movements, the expressionism also provides us some interesting usage of ambulant and common crowds. *Workers on their Way Home* by Munch, *Metropolis* by Grosz or *Leipziger Straße* by Birkle, are among them. Once again, they depict crowds as if they were a secondary component of the painting.

Playing with all the feeling associated to crowds, the contemporary painter Francesca Miller offers a very interesting work with her painting named: *All Alone in a Crowd* (see figure 7). As the central element of the painting is a little young girl which seems lost among pedestrians, the importance of the crowd remain essential as the feelings would be totally different if it were absent. Lost in a crowd looking for her parents, lost for a few seconds' felts like hours. The crowd appears like an enemy where it's finally neutral and also may be friendly. Actually it is simply unaware of the little girl's anxiety.

Figure 7 *All Alone in a crowd*. Francesca Miller. 2010.

MEDIATIC ARTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY CAPTURING CROWDS

With photography we have become able to captures life's instants in a few seconds, without specific skills as it was required with painting. For about one hundred years, people took pictures of events that seemed important to them. Some of them, as journalist, started to contribute to what is now known as mediatic arts. In our very specific study, mediatic arts are particularly interesting because most of the time, when they are involving crowds, mediatics art may be immortalizing an important event of our history. This is how the photographic reporter Tina Modotti captured the peasant walks, known as *campesinos*, in the streets of Mexico in 1923. On another well-known picture, the journalist took a picture of the crowd looking at firefighters responding to a blaze in London, in 1930 (see figure 8). It allows us to see the clothes people were wearing, the tram, or some epoch's public props: here, a lamppost. Once again, crowds appears as a support for the picture, which would have no value if it was empty of people.

Figure 8 *Crowd looking at firemen fighting a blaze*. **London. 1930.**

The celebration of the liberation of Paris is one of the most important and cheerful event of the XXe century. It is evident that, as such, it has been captured in many ways: from the streets but also, from the top of some buildings (See figure 9). Here, the details of the crowds may not be perceptible, nonetheless, the presence of the crowd become interesting more as an event importance marker than at an artistic degree.

Figure 9 *Celebration of the liberation of Paris*. **Paris. 1944.**

During the march on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King delivered a speech, *I Have a Dream*, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial (see figure 10). This speech is now known as a defining moment of the American Civil Rights Movement. The crowd, surrounding and standing down from King, is depicting the mobilization of the American people against the segregation the inequalities generated by the Jim Crow laws. Pictures of the rioting events of May 1968, in the French capital, also shows the opinion of the people and the evolution of the mentality and habits request of the French youth.

Used in such a way, it may be questionable to consider pictures as pieces of art. Each time, the crowd gives the spectator an evaluation of the magnitude and the importance of the evoked event or phenomenon. Whether it is owing to jubilation or anger, the

crowd is identified as the people opinion. Through mediatic arts, crowd goes beyond esthetic and information to reach a new dimension: politics, history and social implications.

Figure 10 *"I Have a Dream"*. **Martin Luther King Jr., Lincoln Memorial. 1963.**

Figure 11 *Cheering crowd*, **Unknown author, 2010.**

Pictures of parties and cheering people (see figure 11) may help us while we are trying to move further away from medias in order to match, once again, crowd representations with art and people daily life and activities. While may see a radical difference both in

style and effects quality between the old picture King during his speech and the unknown below picture, the first and oldest one will probably famous for a very long time while it is probable the first and last time you see the second one. It definitely confirms how the context and the history behind a picture is part of the picture itself. And crowds are an important part of this context.

DIFFERENT REPRESENTATIONS FOR DIFFERENT USAGES

As we stated in the first lines of the article, we maintained our interest toward representations of crowds depicting everyday life of people, whatever may be the place or the epoch. With cinema, and this is all the more remarkable with video games, the main objective of the author is rarely to depict the society reality but to create an immersive environment where he should easily be able to brought life to his plot. Usage of crowd in such a manner is not the subject of our paper. However, we may find a particularly interesting exception: the movie often referred as the first motion picture ever displayed in public, *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory in Lyon* (See figure 12), offer a walking crowd of people. If the scene is played, (the workers were asked to come to the factory on a Sunday, especially so Louis Lumière could record the clip) the movie captures the clothes (Sunday clothes) and the natural steps of the people at that time.

Figure 12 *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory in Lyon*, **Louis Lumière, 1895.**

Our journey through the representation and the usage of crowd for the art was extremely shorter than it could have been. Our focus on crowd representations for everyday life and

society evolution is the main reason of this shortening. For example, if religion may be considered as part as the society and the daily life of people, we also think that it the massive usage of crowds in religious pieces of art justify a dedicated article. It could also be merged with the usage empires, kingdoms and governments made of crowds representations, essentially through hundreds of battle paintings.

Modern cinema and video games are doing a very specific usage of crowds, using them as a tool to create more immersive scenes. Some video games are even using them as part of the gameplay and the design. Studying this utilization is part of the work we are planning to achieve.

SUMMARY

When he adds crowd to a work the author provides life to his work of art. With the crowds, Zhang brings life to his painting, through the sense of unease and confusion that characterize them, with the richness of these seemingly random behaviors which are in fact very coherent and normative. Crowd bear within itself many of the different feelings the author may have experienced while working, then become an excellent mean to transmit them to the spectators.