



Souvenir d'Algérie

Memories of the French Foreign Legion

Artists tend to seek inspiration from peculiar sources. Take Willem. He's trying to piss off an imaginary dictator.

'What you see in the main media today is all the same. If there was a dictatorship, either on the left-wing or right-wing, most of the newspapers wouldn't even have to change what they run,' he says. 'I try to do things that would be forbidden under a dictator. I try to use the freedom we have.'

There is little doubt that if France were ruled by a dictator, Willem would spend a considerable amount of time bleeding onto the damp stone floor of a dungeon. His latest series of linocuts are a merciless critique of one of the world's most revered military traditions: the French Foreign Legion.

'I am not a very romantic man. They're known as heroes but people who enroll in the Foreign Legion

are people who want their past forgotten. They are former criminals and murderers who do the dirty work for France and other countries.'

His images of legionnaires cavorting with headless African women and smoking opium with emaciated Asians are another step in Willem's quest for the extreme in politics and art. Born in a small village in central Holland, Willem, whose full name is Bernhard Willem Holtrop, has always used drawing to express his opinions and earn the rent. He began drawing for Dutch papers but moved to Paris in 1968 when the city was ablaze with student revolution. As his work evolved, his voice became more political and he began working for *Liberation*, the left-wing tabloid in Paris, in the 1980s. He is now one of the paper's regular editorial cartoonists.

Willem travels extensively to support his work, based on the philosophy that 'you can't draw about a country until you know how it smells, know what makes the people laugh.' The French Foreign Legion



Souvenir de Cochinchine



Souvenir de Djibouti

series was the result of travels through central Africa where he saw legionnaires in the field.

'They are not well-liked by the people,' Willem says. 'It became an interesting topic for me: exoticism, politics, sex, strange cruelties—everything is in it.'

There is certainly no shortage of mystique surrounding the Legion. Glamourized in films like *Beau Geste* with Gary Cooper and *Legionnaire* with the somewhat less-dashing Jean-Claude Van Damme, and the subject of countless bad romance and adventure novels, the elite fighting force has a firmly-fixed spot in the collective imagination. Founded in 1831 by King Louis-Phillipe to control French colonies in Africa, the Legion has been involved in almost every military conflict since then, usually taking the most dangerous and violent campaigns. Legionnaires have fought in the Crimean War, both World Wars, the Falklands War, the Gulf War and countless other bloody and remote conflicts.

Volunteers still arrive in France from around the

world to sign unbreakable five-year contracts and the French Foreign Legion still offers men an escape from dubious pasts and a promise of violent military action.

Underneath the romance are the raw truths of war and soldiering that Willem tries to evoke with his work. A brutal and effective fighting force is capable of especially brutal and effective atrocities in places where people's screams are not heard. Like all military forces, the legion has had its scandals, but because of its secrecy, its code of honour and its ability to operate covertly, there is far more rumour than fact when it comes to their alleged human rights violations.

'I try to show things as they really are,' Willem says. 'We live here on an island of democracy and prosperity and most of the world is not like that.'

The series is Willem's first attempt at using linoleum engravings to produce prints. The work was overseen by The Arts Factory and Un An ou Deux in Paris.



Souvenir des Champs Elysées