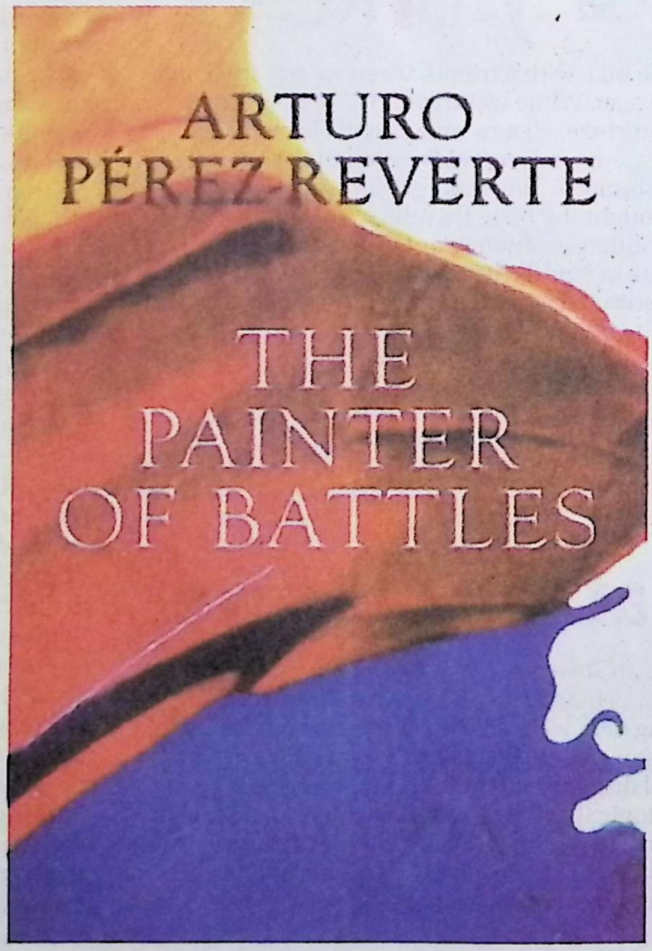
The Painter of Battles

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Just as we have our one-of-a-kind popular writers these days in John Grisham and Stephen King, Spain claims Arturo Pérez-Reverte, one of contemporary fiction's great entertainers. Most of his novels take us back into European history, but now and then he has touched on the contemporary world. In "The Painter of Battles," his latest novel to be translated here, he introduces us to a contemporary with a vengeance: Andres Faulques, a renowned war photographer, who, under the weight of grief and conscience, has withdrawn to an old tower overlooking a bay on Spain's southeast coast, where he has given up photography for painting, an art form he finds difficult and laborious.



"He had a good hand for drawing," we learn in the opening chapter, "but he was a mediocre painter." Faulques, or "the painter of battles" as he is often referred to in these pages, is pushing ahead with his new life-project, a mural on the subject of war that will cover all of the cracking inside walls of the tower. His monumental project incorporates images from major battle paintings by various Western artists as well as some from his two decades as a battlefield photographer in Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans and elsewhere (accompanied in recent years by his last lover, a daunting though not greatly talented Italian woman named Olvido Ferrara). "There was no ambition to achieve a masterwork," we hear. "[T]he mural did not even pretend to be original, although in reality it was the sum and combination of countless images taken from painting and photography that would be impossible without the existence and the eye of the man who was painting in the tower."

The second chapter immediately changes the pitch of the narrative. It opens with the appearance of a visitor to the tower, a stranger who over the course of the rest of the novel becomes quite familiar to the painter of battles. His name is Ivo Markovic, a former foot soldier, who announces to Faulques that he wants revenge for being featured in one of the man's photographs from a battlefield in the Balkans.

The photograph "destroyed my life," and brought down horror on him