

World War I remembered through British art

Truth and Memory at the Imperial War Museum, London, until March 2015

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A major retrospective at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) London features the work of British artists sent to capture the reality of the First World War.

Compelling works reveal how artists helped commemorate “the war to end all wars.” They also highlight the dilemma facing official war artists. While many of the artists started the war at least generally supportive of its aims, they confronted something rather different at the front. Their portrayal of the horrors they witnessed does not always sit uncomfortably with official requirements.

The works are divided between two galleries, *Truth*—artists who created on the front line; and *Memory*—artists who painted their works on returning to Britain.

Truth is the more sobering. Visitors are confronted first with two paintings illustrating official British sentiment at the start of the war. William Barnes Wollen’s large *Death of the Prussian Guard* (1914) presents the first battle of Ypres as a moral triumph over Prussian militarism. Walter Sickert’s *Integrity of Belgium*, painted late in 1914, endorses support for “gallant little Belgium” in its noble and glamorous depiction of physical warfare.

Both paintings support the justification of British involvement in the war in defence of Belgium and in opposition to German militarism. This propaganda promoted British imperialism at the cost of millions of lives.

The rest of the gallery portrays a very different conflict. Two rooms feature works by Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson and Paul Nash, both appointed official war artists in 1917 for the Department of Information.

Nevinson had been associated with the Italian Futurists before the war, collaborating with the movement’s founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti on a 1914 English Futurist Manifesto *Vital English Art*. Marinetti had promised to “glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, [and] the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers.”

Initially, therefore, Nevinson was interested in glorifying the war as a triumph of technical achievement. His style changed after the horrors of the front. The “essence of the new war,” he said, “was overwhelmingly extremely alien, and utterly un-

heroic.”

He is best known for *La Mitrailleuse* [The Machine Gun] (1915), “an example,” in the words of the *London Evening News*, “of what civilized man did to civilized man in the first quarter of the 20th century.” It does not really stand up to this praise: it shows less of the realities of war than it does a Futurist glorification.

Memory contains a room devoted to the Vorticists, whose manifesto bore some similarities to Futurism, with its call for a “strong, virile and anti-sentimental” art. In Percy Wyndham Lewis’s *A Battery Shelled* (1919) the soldiers are insect-like stick figures. Lewis likened the First World War to an absurd nightmare, removed from everyday reality. The IWM distanced itself from his work, loaning it out long term to the Tate Gallery.

Nevinson’s *French Troops Resting* and *The Doctor* (both 1916) show a sympathetic realism. Of the image of a dead child in *A Taube* (1915), completed in Dunkirk after an air raid, Nevinson said: “there the small body lay before me, a symbol of all that there was to come.”

Nevinson’s depictions of death, like the portrayals of destruction by Paul Nash that hang alongside them, are apocalyptic. *Paths of Glory* (1917) was banned from public display, as it depicts two putrefying British soldiers lying face down in “no man’s land.”

Another similar picture did not attract the censor. The Irish-born William Orpen’s *Dead Germans in a Trench* (1918) also shows soldiers putrefying in their trenches. The *Times* said Orpen “paints the corpse with serene skill, just like he might paint a bunch of flowers.” The censor allowed this painting because, unlike Nevinson’s, it showed *enemy* corpses.

Orpen was criticized in the press, but achieved popular acclaim for his sympathetic response to what the IWM call “the madness of war.” Works like *The Mad Woman of Douai* (1918) and *Blown Up—Mad* (1917) portray its harrowing effects. He depicts trench warfare in grim detail but seems, in the words of his contemporary John Rothenstein, to have “found it difficult ... to come to terms with the broader implications of the war.” This is a wider problem here.

Orpen had been associated with the Celtic Revival, seeking artistic expression for an Irish national identity alongside the literary Celtic Twilight movement. Orpen, who went to the front as an official war artist, remained a loyal figure within the British Empire despite his anguish at what he saw of the war. He was knighted by the British crown after the war.

What Orpen saw at the front affected him deeply. Most of his images, some of the most powerful here, come from the Somme. In August 1917 Orpen came across a vast cemetery where British troops had buried their own dead but left the Germans to rot. Like *Dead Germans in a Trench*, Orpen's *Thiepval* (1917) leaves us with a dismal image of mud-baked white and the remains of a British and German soldier, their bones entangled in death.

Such sympathy was often based on personal experience. In "*Over the Top*", *1st Artists' Rifles at Marcoing, 30th December 1917* (1918), John Nash (Paul's brother) recalls a disastrous action that resulted in the death and wounding of nearly his whole company.

Many of the artists emerge as deeply conflicted. Orpen, for example, despised the post-war vainglory of those military figures who commissioned him for portraits. Despite this, and his own depictions of imperialism's effects, he was knighted for his war work in June 1918.

Another Irish official war artist represented in the *Memory* gallery, John Lavery, was also knighted for his work. He painted a portrait of Michael Collins after the pro-Anglo-Irish Treaty Sinn Féin leader's assassination. Orpen and Lavery both gave the IWM substantial art collections after the war.

Lavery's *Lady Henry's Crèche, Woolwich* (1919) is one of several pieces showing women's auxiliary work for the war, including Anna Airy's *Shop for Machining 15-inch Shells* (1918). Airy, one of the first official women war artists, was employed by the IWM when it was first established. The Museum could refuse any work she produced, without payment.

Memory also marks the memorialisation of the dead. George Clausen's *Youth Mourning* (1916), inspired by the death of his daughter's fiancé the year before, stands as an elegy for a lost generation; a powerful image of grief and sacrifice. Clausen was appointed an official war artist in 1917, but could not travel to the front because of his age.

The most striking work here is the final painting in the *Truth* gallery, *Gassed: In Arduis Fidelis* (Faithful in Adversity) by Gilbert Rogers (1918). In stark contrast to Wollen's work opening the gallery, Rogers hauntingly depicts a dead medical officer lying alone in the mud surrounded by puddles of water. The officer's gas mask is turned towards the observer, a disturbing image that stays with you.

The exhibition is significant. The paintings do not just document the conflict. They raise questions about it.

The IWM was first proposed in 1917 as a "national war museum" to document the experiences of World War I. Its

remit was extended in 1939 to cover the next world war. During the Korean War coverage was extended to "all conflicts in which British or Commonwealth forces had been involved since 1914." Since then it has also expanded to run the Royal Air Force museum, the museum on World War Two warship HMS Belfast, and the War Rooms of Winston Churchill. While the IWM can be blunt about certain realities of conflict, it is also an official repository, pushed towards "approved" versions of history.

Like other cultural repositories in Britain, even the flagship museum of the government's Great War centenary has not been immune to budget cuts. The IWM's government grant has been reduced significantly, and it relies on private funding more than ever.

It also has to satisfy its 22 trustees, who are appointed variously by the monarch, the prime minister, the foreign secretary, the secretary of state for defence, and the high commissioners of the seven Commonwealth governments. The board currently includes leading military figures like former secret intelligence head Sir John Scarlett, as well as the billionaire Conservative donor Lord Ashcroft. This is a highly political body.

In October 2012 Prime Minister David Cameron opened the centenary campaign at the IWM announcing £50 million of funding, including an upgrade to the museum.

The portrayal in *Truth and Memory* stops short of analysing the wider implications of what the IWM calls the "epoch-defining events of the First World War." Its focus, rather, is a sense of ordinary people working together in a difficult but necessary situation without commenting on the reasons. Overall its memorial to British sacrifice fits perfectly with David Cameron's notions of "Britishness."

IWM publicity underscores this: "At the turn of the last century, art in Britain held a position and status in society quite different from today and was often regarded as having a social function. In particular, images of warfare imparted notions of identity, culture and morality, enshrining these as the 'truth'."

The exhibition's strengths lie in what it shows of the realities behind such notions. Artists in the current epoch confront the necessity to go further.

The exhibition, which is free of charge, runs until March 8, 2015



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