

ART AND WAR

AUSTRALIA, BRITAIN AND CANADA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



A common cause: Britain's War Artists Scheme

The Imperial War Museum's collection of Second World War paintings, acquired through the British government's War Artists Scheme (WAS), and subsequently augmented by judicious collecting, surveys the breadth of experience of civilian and military life, capturing the national mood and responses to the war, as well as shaping our memory of it. It shows the reality of modern war, the displays of force, but also the fear and the tedium, and how the familiar could be juxtaposed with the utterly strange and new. We see individuals at their most vulnerable and courageous, and how lives were shaped by extreme needs and everyday routines. We see the impact of a total war economy that ordered its entire population and exposed them to all its consequences. Understanding how British artists were able to work during the war and the particular concerns they addressed helps give necessary insights into their paintings and the forces that shaped them.

The WAS, administered by the War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC) of the Ministry of Information, was devised, established and chaired by Kenneth Clark, Director of the National Gallery and the then dominant figure of the British art world. As an act of patronage it was not unprecedented: recent examples had included schemes from the First World War, notably the Canadian War Memorials Fund, whose paintings Clark saw at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1917, and the Federal Art Plan in the United States, which was still operating at the beginning of the war, although Clark had grave reservations about the quality of its output. There was widespread understanding of the need and scope of such a project: "the camera cannot interpret, and a war so epic in its scope by land, sea and air, and so detailed and complex in its mechanism, requires interpreting [by artists] as well as recording". Clark's genius was to marshal his political skills and influence to bring into being a scheme that had the potential to address this scale of need and opportunity at the very outbreak of hostilities, and to manage potential criticism by selecting committee members who represented a variety of interested parties, including the London art schools, the Royal Academy, the armed forces, government ministries, and the Imperial War Museum.

His public vision was to support and enable the production and purchase of high quality art to express the liberal cultural values of the British, as opposed to the controlled and centralised aesthetic of the Nazis. Privately, he also hoped to save a generation of artists from being killed at the front. The message was aimed primarily at an educated art audience in Britain who, following the First World War, were inured to any overt propaganda. Such was Clark's sensitivity to these issues, that anything overtly didactic or obviously morale-raising was carefully avoided. In addition, throughout the war, exhibitions were prepared and toured overseas, notably to North and South America, to influence the people of that hemisphere and build support for Britain's struggle. Clark's

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long-term agenda was to develop, and indeed exploit, a growing interest in the visual arts through a wartime exhibition program that was to have a lasting impact on British visual culture. The committee's program achieved its desired effect of both appealing to its audience, when other forms of popular entertainments largely steered clear of the subject of the war, and broadening it by developing a new public for gallery-visiting in both urban and rural communities around the United Kingdom. At the end of the war, six thousand paintings by over four hundred artists were acquired by the committee and allocated to galleries around the United Kingdom and overseas, including Canada and Australia.

Many of the most important British artists of the day were either employed or commissioned, although others, notably Ben Nicholson, were excluded because their style of abstract painting did not fit into the program. As such, it provided a fascinating snapshot of contemporary artistic practice from Stanley Spencer's fantastical teeming shipyards to the empty desolation of Graham Sutherland's neo-romantic city and landscapes, and from Paul Nash's carefully constructed imagery that sought to embody the power and resolve of British resistance to Edward Ardizzone's intimate scenes of daily life. In addition, by focusing their attention on war subjects, the program cemented the move towards figurative painting in many artists.

Artists were employed on contract, or commissioned to produce specific works, according to their particular ways of working, both in terms of style, quantity and subject matter. In short, they were given a great deal of freedom to say how much work they would produce and to choose their subject matter within these defined limits. Work was also purchased from other artists, many in active service, and permits given to enable them to work in restricted areas. Official correspondence, now held at the Imperial War Museum, reveals their gratitude, along with a deep-felt sense of duty and responsibility to produce suitable work. Indeed, without the scheme, many would have lacked the opportunity to make any significant contribution to the Allied effort.

The resulting paintings might seem to be a less monumental or impressive body of work than their First World War equivalents, and, consequently, they have not always received the critical attention they deserve. There is an underlying support for the war and so the paintings are less confrontational, critical or violent. There are no identifiable motifs, such as muddy trenches or burnt tree stumps to stand for death or destruction, nor Futurist- or Vorticist-inspired aesthetics to express force and speed. However, artists were not blind to the importance of the events they witnessed: Paul Nash's *Battle of Britain* majestically reveals the possibilities of art engaged with history. Its ambition and the scale of the setting immediately impresses; we look down on a huge swathe of the English Channel and France beyond. Produced at the time of the battle, the painting encapsulates its scale and importance. However, this is not just an image of modern warfare, with its violence and destruction, or even an iconic victory; it is also a

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restatement of the value of art and the defeat of Nazism. Nash, a fierce critic of the way that fighting on the Western Front of the First World War had been conducted, was immediate and steadfast in his revulsion towards Nazi Germany and its culture. Here the regimented patterns of the Luftwaffe are broken and defeated by Allied fighter planes, forming great flower-like shapes in the sky. It was a measure of his belief in the propaganda value of these images that he wanted them produced as postcards and dropped over Germany to demonstrate the fate of any who attempted to attack these shores.

If Nash addressed an event of huge military and symbolic significance, other artists were engaged in recording aspects of economic and domestic life that underpinned these efforts, revealing complex new arrangements and values, or travelling into distant and dangerous terrains. While Nash's vision was clear and unequivocal, they explored places and ideas that were less certain, or entirely unfamiliar. If late nineteenth and early twentieth century painting had explored modern life through the public spaces of its transformed cities or its new technologies of speed and power, these paintings resolutely look behind the scenes at every aspect of a modern industrial nation attempting to fully exploit its resources.

In Britain, depictions of industrial sites and workers had taken on a particular significance and urgency: there was a public need to know that the capacity to produce armaments existed and was being fully utilised. These images of working environments, of the relationships between buildings and their functions, and between individuals connected with or targeted by technology, give us clues about the roots and patterns of our present-day lives and are a measure of how much these have and are still changing. They show that women were taking on new roles, from menial tasks with the Auxiliary Territorial Service to complex factory work, while their children explored the new nurseries – support structures that were deliberately set up as temporary so as not to undermine established social roles after the war.

When Ruskin Spear paints the interior of a factory, he highlights its medical facilities and its modern design. The clear signs on doors and walls, the electric lights, the loudspeakers sited high on the walls, and the functional furnishings are all elements of an architecture of production and communication. However, the two seated figures undermine this conceit as they occupy a social vacuum and wait for treatment on a very slow production line: their presence a question mark over the system that employs them. Edwin La Dell's painting exposes the secretive world of the camouflage workshop even as the designers play with their canvases to disguise the exterior of factories, giving an intriguing twist to the tensions of a liberal society constrained by the war effort.

Images of shelterers from the Blitz, even at their most exposed and uncomfortable, such as in the painting by Edward Ardizzone, were part of a deliberate program of

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commissions to show how the country was coping. Determining an appropriate response to suffering was disturbingly difficult; Graham Sutherland, for example, found it uncomfortable even to draw personal possessions damaged by the bombs that fell in the East End.

However, there was a widespread belief that the destruction of the Blitz was allowing artists to see something new, something worth painting, but so unfamiliar that they struggled to know where to begin. Duncan Grant was approached to paint St Paul's "because it has never looked more beautiful". This emphasis on the aesthetic gives the commission a strange slant. Yes, the cathedral does look impressive so strangely exposed, but its symbolic values and its description of a city on the edge of destruction impress just as heavily, if not more. If Grant's image draws on the durability of traditions and history, Sutherland's image of the twisted lift shaft, painted just the other side of St Paul's, suggests a new form of life emerging from the destruction.

Anthony Gross, Edward Ardizzone, Leslie Cole, Henry Carr, Eric Ravilious, Carel Weight and Leonard Rosoman all marked the beginning of the war at home before being sent to such places as North Africa, Italy, Greece, northern Europe, Norway and the Far East. Little wonder that Gross described the scheme as "a governmental magic carpet", a device that whisked them off to foreign lands where unfamiliar subject matter and dangerous situations demanded new levels of resourcefulness and opened up new opportunities. Gross's diary of his time in Burma tells how he familiarised himself with a new country and with the lives of soldiers. As he begins to recognise and record the details that animate the everyday life of the soldiers, he demonstrates how the complex relationship with fear is managed. The apparent jollity of the parasols in Battle of Arakan can only be understood in the context of the close and threatening Japanese presence. Captured as part of a game of nerves, the parasols represent the soldiers' skill and daring in jungle warfare. They are the visual antithesis of the stealth, disguise and hunting skills essential to survival, and their display is a statement of the soldiers' bravado.

There is an undoubted tension as we approach these pictures. We admire the technical skill and perhaps the courage of the artists, and their efforts to digest and interpret earth-shattering events. But we cannot stop there: the challenge is to try to re-enter these images, to relive what the artists saw, and to understand the context in which they sought to combine national priorities with their own artistic vision; to balance the duty to record and interpret all they saw with the restrictions of military security and the dignity of the individual; to weigh technological developments against the widespread destruction and chaos with which they were inextricably linked; to judge new industrial practice by its impact on society.

The WAAC was a marriage between the aspirations and traditions of visual culture and a complex, diverse and technologically driven conflict; between state patronage and an

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artistic community that might otherwise have struggled to define and justify itself during the war. It was government patronage that, in retrospect, seems to grow in its ambition and scale, rather than diminish. Kenneth Clark's carefully created project has left a legacy that, sixty years on, reveals a history that continues to be distinctive, disturbing and rewarding.

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