

ART AND WAR

AUSTRALIA, BRITAIN AND CANADA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR



“Doing justice to history”: Canada’s Second World War official art program

The Canadian War Records (CWR), Canada’s Second World War art program, produced two kinds of art: field sketches and finished paintings. What is the relative value of each as an historical record? Is the truthfully observed detail of the battlefield in the form of a sketch as valuable a document as an oil on canvas that has eschewed extraneous detail, added missing information from other sources, and been compositionally focused on a significant historical event as a result of a creative process? The War Artists’ Committee (WAC), which ran the CWR from Ottawa and devised the official instructions issued to all the war artists in 1943, believed it knew the answer. When the WAC recommended in its instructions that the artists share in the experience of “active operations” in order to “know and understand the action, the circumstances, the environment, and the participants”, it viewed this only as an information gathering and research stage. This stage, as the instructions note, existed solely to meet the committee’s ultimate goal: “productions” that were “worthy of Canada’s highest cultural traditions, doing justice to History, and as works of art, worthy of exhibition anywhere at any time”.

The instructions charged the artists with portraying “significant events, scenes, phases and episodes in the experience of the Canadian Armed Forces”, and required each of the 32 artists hired to produce two 40 x 49 inch canvases, two 24 x 30 inch canvases, and ten 22 x 30 inch watercolours. The instructions make it clear that the WAC highly valued these finished paintings. “Cartoons and sketches” were useful only, the instructions note, “for the re-creation of atmosphere, topography, and details of arms, vehicles, equipment, clothing, participants and terrain, of aircraft and ships.”

In devising the instructions, the WAC was influenced by the fading recollections of a few notable Canadian First World War painters, such as A.Y. Jackson, who served on the committee and played a key role in the selection of painters. It was particularly affected by its members’ vivid memories of massive, rarely exhibited First World War canvases of courage and sacrifice by artists such as Anglo-Canadian Richard Jack, works then languishing in storage at the National Gallery of Canada. These, the WAC members agreed, were what war art should be. Indeed, one of them, Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, director of the Army Historical Section in Ottawa, had, since 1941, sent “service artists” (those artists hired before the official program was in place) to study the few exhibited First World War paintings in the Canadian Senate Chamber as part of their initial training.

Duguid also encouraged newly-hired artists to sketch. His unique method of training service artists, from whose numbers later emerged a significant number of official war artists, included a series of timed sketching exercises to assess the artist’s ability to record military subjects with “speed and accuracy in observing and recording essentials of mass,

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line, colour, atmosphere and attitude”. He also favoured hiring service artists from the ranks of combat personnel, believing that painters with military experience would more easily accommodate themselves to the circumstances of war. In this, as a member of the WAC, he would influence the hiring of artists for the official program.

Theoretically, a military background should have been an advantage. But the limited fighting conducted by most Canadian forces before 1943 meant that very few official artists had much exposure to any operational environment and therefore lacked knowledge of the subject matter they were expected to depict “vividly and veraciously”. They were largely tied to an approach that favoured landscape painting, typified by Canada’s celebrated Group of Seven, of which A.Y. Jackson had been a member. Furthermore, in winter, the country’s harsh climate kept artists indoors, with the result that the painting of still lifes, portraits, and figure studies dominated their subject matter. Depicting human activity, movement, and death was not at the forefront of Canadian artists’ regular experience.

Destruction, however, was more familiar. Canadians were not unaccustomed to seeing landscapes and buildings transformed by fire and storm. As war artists, it was a subject to which they were drawn and which they sketched effectively throughout the war. Similarly, the still lifes of war appealed to them as iconography in the form of the broken tanks, guns, vehicles, aircraft, and the ubiquitous bombed churches. Into this category came dead bodies too. Portraits, equally familiar, were sketched in the hundreds, but motion – the peopled ebb and flow of battle – was not captured with ease in watercolour or pencil by any of the official war artists.

Captain George Stanley, second-in-command to Major C.P. Stacey, the head of the Canadian Army’s historical section in London, believed that the first field sketches had disappointed Ottawa’s larger military community. This community had little or no experience of them as a record of war because the preliminary field sketches from the First World War, deemed unimportant at the time, had never been given to the Canadian War Memorials Fund that oversaw that war’s art program. “I think that some people had the idea of the war artist sitting on the top of a trench sketching peacefully while the battle was going on,” he recalled in an interview. Some of the disappointment was valid. Many sketches could be criticised for being less than useful because either the artist was too far away from the scene of action for much that was of documentary use to be depicted or, alternatively, was so closely focused on detail that the work missed the larger picture. A majority of the sketches and small watercolours swiftly executed by Canadian air force artists, for example, were done on the ground at various bases in England. Most of the naval war artists from Canada spent a great deal of their time in the relatively secure ports of Halifax or St John’s. On land, shortly after the June 1944 invasion of France, a few distant puffs of smoke in a rapidly painted watercolour are all that indicate an army artist’s record of this critically important battle. But there was also prejudice in

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favour of more traditional art among this military community, whose members simply did not view field sketches as “impressive” works of art compared to the generally far larger and more dramatic oils on canvas.

By the time the war artists settled down in their studios in London or Ottawa to paint, other factors had come to bear on what they would eventually produce. One was the influence of the official historians to whom they reported. It was not uncommon for an artist, on historical advice, to replace one vehicle for another in a composition in order to make it a more “accurate” reflection of what had happened, even though the artist’s field sketch gave evidence to the contrary. The official instructions also played a role in the final compositions. “Action Episodes”, defined as “Eye Witness Records” and “Reconstruction”, the instructions stated, were, in order of importance, the first subjects to be tackled. To achieve this goal, Stanley and Stacey, for example, encouraged compositions that drew on the artists’ own field sketches but incorporated other material including that contained in photographs and war diaries. This often resulted in scenes more dramatic than those they had actually witnessed. Inevitably, therefore, those paintings that depict action, such as Charles Comfort’s *The Hitler line*, are reconstructions and, to a large extent, fictional. Based on a series of field sketches and watercolours of a destroyed Panzerturm near Ortona, on Italy’s Adriatic coast, Comfort’s figures, exemplifying what he took to be Canadian heroic stoicism, are products of the artist’s imagination. Somewhat featureless and puppet-like, they have been imperfectly accommodated within the brutalized Italian landscape that the artist knew well. It is not surprising that Stanley once referred to such paintings as “faked”.

The paucity of combat actually witnessed by Canada’s Second World War official war artists made reconstructions inevitable. “War is boring,” naval artist Tom Wood commented in an interview in 1995. “It’s routine for a soldier who in the span of weeks of tedious duty might experience a few minutes of danger and excitement.” None the less, while the artists may have believed themselves encouraged to paint a form of fiction, they were also complicit. Faced with field sketches and photographs that took care of the details, they instinctively focused on creating good compositions. Alex Colville’s *Tragic landscape*, for example, is a composite. Separate studies exist of the dead paratrooper and the landscape in the background. The cow is not based on a specific sketch, although they were a ubiquitous sight in Holland at the time. Artists could also be prejudiced against scenes of action, with inevitable consequences for the works they produced. Former bomb-aimer Miller Brittain found the “sinister fairyland of a target” too disturbing (although he painted it in *Night target*, Germany) and preferred to depict off-duty images such as *Airmen in a British pub*.

During the Second Gulf War of 2003–04, Canadians became familiar with the controversial concept of embedded journalists whose perspective, although close to the action, is inevitably affected by the troops with whom they live. In many ways, Canada’s

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Second World War artists were essentially “embedded” with Canadian forces. Limited in much the same way as journalists have been during the recent war in Iraq, the artists’ field sketches record only what they saw, and what they saw was a very limited slice of a much greater subject. This raises the question of whether their studio canvases and watercolours, completed many months – even years – later, and with the benefit of more knowledge, greater reflection, and understanding, convey more fully the meaning and implication of what they sketched. The evidence suggests that the long view, tempered by a wider contextual standpoint, is the more valuable testimony of events. That the canvases contain elements of imagination, rearrangement, and synthesis, which sometimes led to charges of their being “faked”, should not detract from their overall value as expressions of the true experience of the Second World War. They may, in fact, represent an artistic truth and, in this sense, provide a more valuable record of the historical experience of the war than the field sketches.

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