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George Campbell Tinning: War Artist 1910–1996

Laura Brandon

Canadian War Museum, laura@laurabrandon.ca

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George Campbell Tinning

War Artist 1910-1996

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His fellow official war artist T.R. MacDonald sketched him twice, once in September 1944 and then the following month (13206-7). In both portrait studies Tinning seems deep in thought, his expression if anything severe and rather cold. The man this writer got to know over the last three years was not like these depictions at all, rather warm, friendly and engaging. In early telephone conversations he bubbled over with enthusiasm when talking about his war experiences and his war art. Sadly he was too ill to come to Ottawa to see his paintings before he died, but we took photographs of them to Montreal so that he could tell us about his commission. Almost my last conversation with him was to let him know that his composition *The Last Parade: 5th Canadian Armoured Division, Groningen, Holland, May 1945* was to grace the cover of this journal (Vol.4, No. 1, Spring 1995). He was very pleased.

George Campbell Tinning was born in Saskatoon and trained at the Eliot O'Hara Watercolour School, Goose Rocks, Maine and the Art Students' League in New York. He moved to Montreal in 1939 where he established himself as an artist and worked as an illustrator. He never stopped painting and exhibiting, and at the end of his life was creating large abstract compositions in brilliant colours, pictures that were far removed in style and feel from his wartime and Immediate postwar subjects.

Tinning began his military career in the 2nd Battalion, Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) in June 1942. He was appointed an Official War



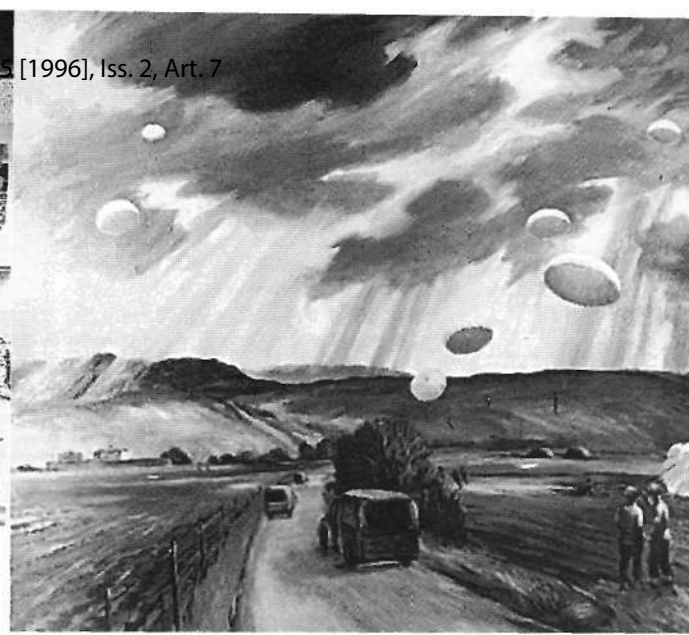
Artist in April 1943 and spent the balance of the year in Ottawa. From December 1943 to July 1944 he was in London, attached to the Historical Section at Canadian Military Headquarters, before being transferred to the 1st Canadian Division's Historical Section in August 1944, serving in Italy and Northwest Europe. He completed his service in Ottawa in 1946 and was released in October of that year with the rank of Captain.

Like all of the war artists attached to the army, Tinning was issued with Operational Instructions. These quite clearly laid out how he should work, and provide an interesting perspective on how the military thought artists might work. Section 6, for example, suggests a number of approaches.

You should first prepare a plan to cover the activity you are going to record, with a time-table covering a week in advance. The possible steps in formulating this plan might be

- (i) Perusal of training syllabus or operation orders, and explanation by an officer familiar with the activity.
- (ii) Study of the terrain: on tire ground if possible, or from the map.
- (iii) Selection of places and phases likely to lend themselves to pictorial work.
- (iv) Preparation of time-table, allowing sufficient time to deal with subjects tentatively selected.¹

Section 8 suggests that "After field sketches and notes have been completed, lose no time in securing additional details of topography, uniform, equipment, weapons and vehicles



Top left: George Campbell Tinning surrounded by his works in his studio in London, England at the end of the war. The painting on the easel appears to be an early version of his well-known landscape "The Gothic Line near Tomba di Pesaro Italy" (the figures in the foreground would later be eliminated).

Top right: Drifting Down

(101.6x81.5 cm; oil; CWM CN 13875)

Bottom left: Portrait of Captain G.R. Tinning by T.R. MacDonald.

(46.1 cm x 31.1 cm; chalk; Canadian War Museum (CWM) CN 13206)

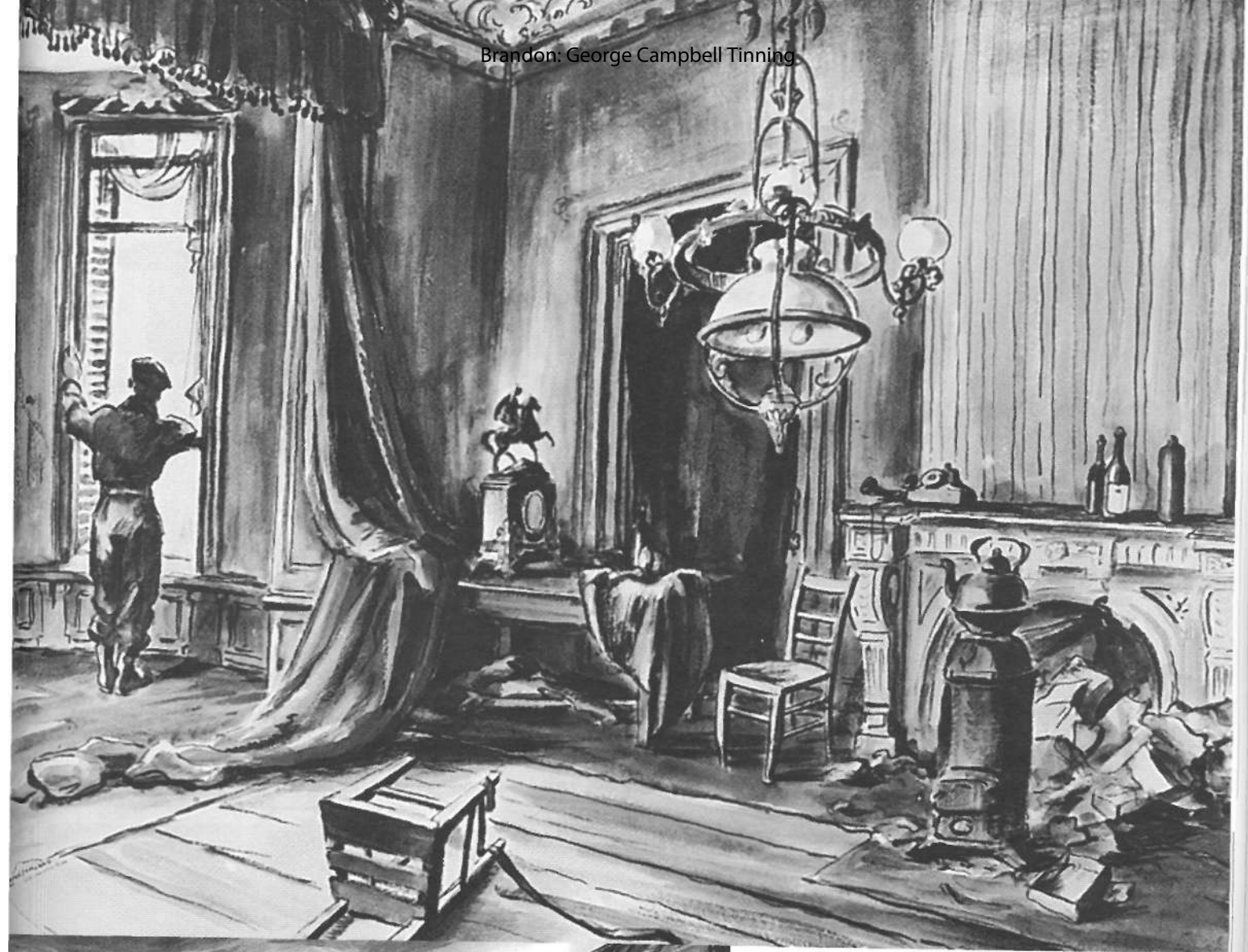
portrayed; and arrange for participants to pose as models."

Tinning seems to have taken these instructions to heart, for his commissioned work includes a number of detailed studies of vehicles and artillery pieces. However, he was also able to follow both the specific operational instructions and create some profoundly moving pictures. One outstanding example is *The End of It All* (13879). In this watercolour, the interior of a country house in Holland is shown in some disorder. In the foreground, a knocked over chair and a telephone with the receiver off the hook indicate that the German occupants have left precipitately. In the background a Canadian soldier stares out through the window, his back turned towards the detritus of occupation. The immediate meaning derived from the painting speaks of hope in the midst of trouble, for the soldier seems, by the act of looking out the window, to be looking perhaps

at a more promising future. It turns out that the painting was posed and that the model was Turning's driver.

Tinning was to create the same effect in his ironic composition *Spring in Arnhem, Holland* (14002). In this mixed-media piece, a Canadian soldier stands in seeming disbelief as he surveys the domestic destruction around him. The watercolour (14003) that preceded this work did not include the male figure, and it is this addition to the final composition that gives it special meaning.

Tinning's paintings, particularly his watercolours, demonstrate that regardless of army instructions, or new and sometimes difficult subject matter, what mattered was what he could make of it as an artist. His early 1944 works featuring the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion practising drops in the Wylde Valley in England capture the quiet, gentle movement of falling parachutes. *Drifting Down* (13875) contrasts their curving shapes with a thundery sky behind, while the light breaks through the clouds in bright rays which reflect off the parachutes. The painting is true to the activity it depicts, and to the



Top: The End of it All, Holland, May 1945
(76.5 x 56.2 cm; watercolour;
CWM CN 13879)



Left: Spring in Arnhem, Holland, 1945
(101.7 x 76.4 cm; mixed media;
CWM CN 14002)

Bottom: Spring in Arnhem
(Watercolour; CWM CN 14003)



landscape in which it is taking place, and the two play off each other harmoniously.

His later work in Italy is particularly fine, for he had an eye for the telling and the unusual. *In the Vault of the Cemetery* (13915) depicts off-duty soldiers sheltering in a family tomb during a period of shelling. They play games, they read, some rest in the still-to-be-filled spaces as they wait for the battle to die down. In *Italian Family Under Mortar Fire* (13918) family members rush for cover as their windows break up after a mortar blast. As sheets of music fall to the floor from the piano to the left, *one* woman tries to shelter under a mattress. The composition is immediate, dramatic and very real.

In 1973 Tinning saw several examples of his work in a Canadian War Museum exhibit entitled *Sicily/Italy 1943-1945*. He consequently wrote to Lee Murray, then Chief Curator of the Museum, of his pleasure in seeing these works.

The two paintings that moved me most both for memories and as pictures were *Dante's Tomb, Ravenna* [13871] and *Canadian Graves at the Gothic Line* [13843]. [The first]...is a very fine water-colour and says for me, what it was like to be in Italy at that time. The colour is poetic and the subject starts one thinking of the crossing of the 13th and 20th century cultures. *Canadian Graves at the Gothic Line* was done

two days after the breaking of that line at Tomba di Pesaro. In black and white I have always considered it lacking in design - rather amateur. Not at all, the olive tree (the symbol of peace) and the grey sky were there and possibly were fortuitous, but their message comes across. I have always hoped that perhaps one or two of the families of the men whose names are on the crosses may have seen this picture.

Tinning's war artist career ended for all intents and purposes in London. He was there on VJ Day and captured in paint the celebrations in Piccadilly Circus (14029). It is a lively composition which epitomises the frenetic nature of the moment. This painting hangs in the Canadian War Museum where it now represents and celebrates not only a victory won for the Allies, but the career of a remarkably talented war artist.

Notes

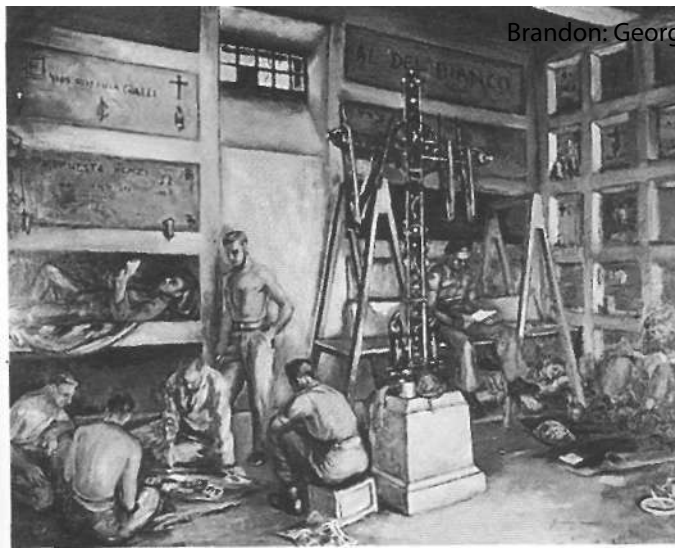
1. All quoted material is from the artist's file at the Canadian War Museum. Numbers in brackets after the titles of works of art refer to the Canadian War Museum's cataloguing system.

Laura Brandon is the Chief Curator at the Canadian War Museum.

Canadian Graves at the Gothic Line

(56.8 x 39.1 cm; watercolour; CWM CN 13843)





Above left:
In the Vault of the Cemetery
 (109.0 x 89.0 cm; mixed media; CWM CN 13915)



Above right:
Italian Family Under German Mortar Fire
 (78.2 x 56.5 cm; watercolour; CWM CN 13918)

Right:
V.J. Celebrations, Piccadilly Circus, London
 (78.7 x 58.2 cm; watercolour; CWM CN 14029)



Below:
Dante's Tomb, Italy
 (76.5 x 56.4 cm; watercolour; CWM CN 13871)

