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Artist of War

Jack Shadbolt (1909-1998)

Laura Brandon

The impact of war on artists can be profound. Terrible sights and awful experiences become works of art that honour acts of courage and move the soul, or they record war's immense cruelty in chilling images of man's inhumanity to man. War artist Jack Shadbolt, who died on 22 November 1998, found both honour and horror in the more prosaic day-to-day existence of home front and behind-the-lines service. His legacy is an important body of work on the war and its impact on the human spirit.



32 works on paper he produced there form the main body of his art at the Canadian War Museum. Executed in watercolour and pencil, Shadbolt's subjects include portraits of the Veterans Guard of Canada, the German prisoners, work parties, and several detailed portrayals of the bleak camp itself. In these camp studies, the barbed wire fences, the watchtowers, and the ramshackle wooden huts document with chilling thoroughness, one aspect of Canada's war on the home front.

Jack Shadbolt was born in Shoeburyness, England in 1909. When he was three his family immigrated to Canada, finally settling in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1914. Exposure to the art of Emily Carr and the Group of Seven, combined with a burgeoning interest in outdoor sketching led to his decision to become an artist. He later studied in New York, London, and Paris, and in 1938 began teaching at the Vancouver School of Art.

In February 1945, Shadbolt travelled to London, England, where he was to assist with administration duties at Canadian Military Headquarters in connection with the war artists' programme. While there, he completed several watercolours of bomb-damaged London, four of which now complete the Shadbolt collection in the Canadian War Museum's holdings.

He enlisted in the army as a signaller on 28 October 1942. Preferring to paint, however, he devoted time during training to recording the setting and activities of Little Mountain Camp, B.C. In May 1944, the Canadian War Artists' Committee identified him as one of a number of suitable candidates for commission as an official war artist, but the vacancies in the army were filled so he could not be appointed. Instead, he became a "narrator," with the rank of major, on the staff of the Director of Historical Services, Ottawa, pending a vacancy in the war artist establishment.

This subject was a continuing inspiration in his subsequent work, not simply as a symbol of the destructiveness of war but, more importantly, because the ruins enabled him to understand the nature of abstraction. In an interview on 26 April 1980 with art historian and curator Ian Thorn, Shadbolt explained:

...I was aware of the nature, it suddenly dawned on me, about this business of abstraction. I always think abstractly but the problem was that it didn't come into the work. And it is this, that when the bomb blows the building apart it abstracts it, the pieces fall back together again and you get a memory image of what was there but vastly altered and psychologically made infinitely more intense than the original thing. So that was a process of abstracting. Well, I started thinking of bomb ruins in terms of "here was a building and here are the abstract elements of it." I worked from there.¹

Beginning on 23 October 1944, he spent three weeks painting and sketching at the German prisoner of war camp at Petawawa, Ontario. The



Left: A Veterans Guard on Tour of Inspection.

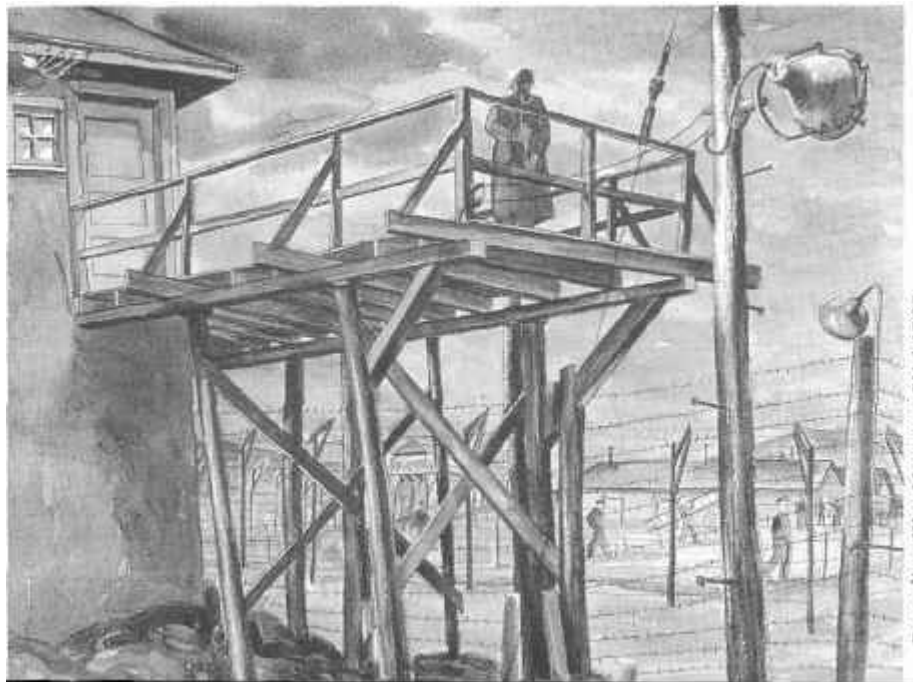
*Opposite:-
Near right: Veteran's Guard Officer Conferring with Forestry Supervisor.*

Far right: Poking in the Ruins.

*On Back Cover:-
Incoming and Outgoing Guards.*

Canadian War Museum CN 14288

Right: The Guard on Tower No.5.



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During his period in London, Shadbolt was responsible for sorting and cataloguing the photographs taken by the Army Signal Corps at the Nazi concentration camps at Belsen and Buchenwald. The effect of this horrific exposure emerged in a series of paintings beginning in 1946 after his return to Canada. Paintings such as *Dog Among the Ruins*,² where a howling dog, jaw agape, screams in front of ruined buildings, visually attest to his profound anger at the legacy of war. Several other works from 1947 depict groups of howling dogs, ruins, and - scattered on the ground - the bones of the dead. In the artist's landscapes of that year such as *Near Wreck Beach*,³ fallen dead branches are depicted as skeletal forms. In *Victim*,⁴ a dog no longer represents the human condition in wartime, or bones their ultimate fate; instead, a skeletal human figure screams and writhes helplessly. In this painting Shadbolt encapsulates his thoughts and feelings about the tragedy of war. In subsequent works such as *Killer Birds #1 - Study*⁵ from 1948, Shadbolt combines his powerful new war subject matter with familiar West Coast native imagery.

For the next 50 years Shadbolt consolidated his position as one of Canada's most innovative and important artists. He was an inspiration and a mentor to many. Although his career as a war artist was brief, with the support of those responsible for the war art programmes, he was given opportunities to paint and see events that were to have an impact on his development as an artist. The art that emerged after his war time service is a profoundly moving visual inheritance. His achievement as an artist is to have seen beyond the immediate theatre and action to the human tragedy that underlies all conflict.



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Notes

1. Ian Thorn, *Jack Shadbolt: Early Watercolours* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1980) Exhibition catalogue, p.8.
2. *Dog Among the Ruins*, 1947, watercolour and carbon pencil on paper, 78.2 x 56.9 cm, artist's collection.
3. *Near Wreck beach*, 1947, oil over conté on paper, 57.0 x 72.4 cm, Glenbow Museum, gift from Masters Gallery Ltd., Calgary, 1984.
4. *Victim*, 1947, watercolour and ink on paper, 48.5 x 38.7 cm, artist's collection.
5. *Killer Birds #1- Study*, 1948, watercolour and carbon pencil on paper, 46.7 x 37.2 cm, collection: Dr. and Mrs. Ben Kanee.

Laura Brandon is Curator of War Art at the Canadian War Museum.