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Canvas of War: Masterpieces from the Canadian War Museum, 1914–1918 and 1939–1945

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CWM CN 8682

Major O.M. Learmonth, the Victoria Cross

Painted in 1918 by James Quinn (1871-1951)

Major Learmonth, a 23-year-old company commander in the 2nd Battalion, was killed during a German counterattack on Hill 70, 18 August 1917. He led the defence of the position, at times catching grenades thrown by the Germans and throwing them back. When his wounds grew too severe, he remained in the frontlines giving advice and instructions to his men. He died later in hospital as a result of his wounds.

Canvas of War

Masterpieces from the Canadian War Museum, 1914-1918 and 1939-1945

An Exhibition at the Museum of Civilization, Ottawa, Canada
11 February 2000 - 7 January 2001

Duncan McDowall

The new millennium has found Canadians with an aroused sense of their military heritage. From their *fin de siècle* perch, Canadians sorted out their national achievement in the 20th Century. And, despite their reputation for being an “unmilitary” people, it was on the crucible of war that Canadians instinctively focused their nostalgia for the waning century. Vimy, Ortona and peacekeeping spontaneously surfaced as turning-points in the “making” of the nation. Historian Jonathan Vance demonstrated the power of such constructs of memory in his eloquent study of the memorializing of the Great War, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (1997). The experience of war, he suggested, prompted citizens to construct a “mythic version” of their military deeds “from a complex mixture of fact, useful thinking, half-truth, and outright invention.” Meanwhile in Ottawa, Canadian War Museum Director Jack Granatstein waged a dogged campaign to elevate Canadians' consciousness of the long-neglected Canadian War Museum. The war museum was the orphan of the federal museum system, both trapped in its dingy Gothic premises on Sussex Drive and in a 1960s mindset that implied that war was a politically incorrect focus for national devotion. War, Granatstein forcefully asserted in *Who Killed Canadian History?* (1998), was the forging – not the unmaking – of nationhood. A new war museum now seems likely.



In his advocacy of an enhanced military memory, Granatstein frequently drew attention to the Canadian War Museum's collection of 13,000 works of art. At the heart of the collection were the works of Canada's official war artists. During the First World War, Canadian press baron Lord Beaverbrook had commissioned 116 artists – some 40 percent of them Canadian – to capture the reality of war on canvas and paper. Beaverbrook's 1920 donation of almost 1,000 pieces of war art to Canada was the genesis of the national war art collection. During the Second World War, Ottawa sent a further 31 artists to the battlefield.

But from the outset, Canadians seemed to differentiate between art and “war art.” Art was aesthetic and uplifting; war art was prosaic and documentary. In the 1920s, Prime Minister Mackenzie King stymied Beaverbrook's hope of a national war art gallery as a focal point of remembrance. In 1971, the National Gallery appropriated what it deemed to be the “real” art – canvases by David Milne and British modernists – from the war collection for its own collection, leaving much of the rest of the war art in storage at the war museum. Only once, in the *Terrible Beauty* exhibition of 1978, did the collection receive a concerted showing. Canadians, it seemed, were oblivious to the power of art to illuminate the memory of war.

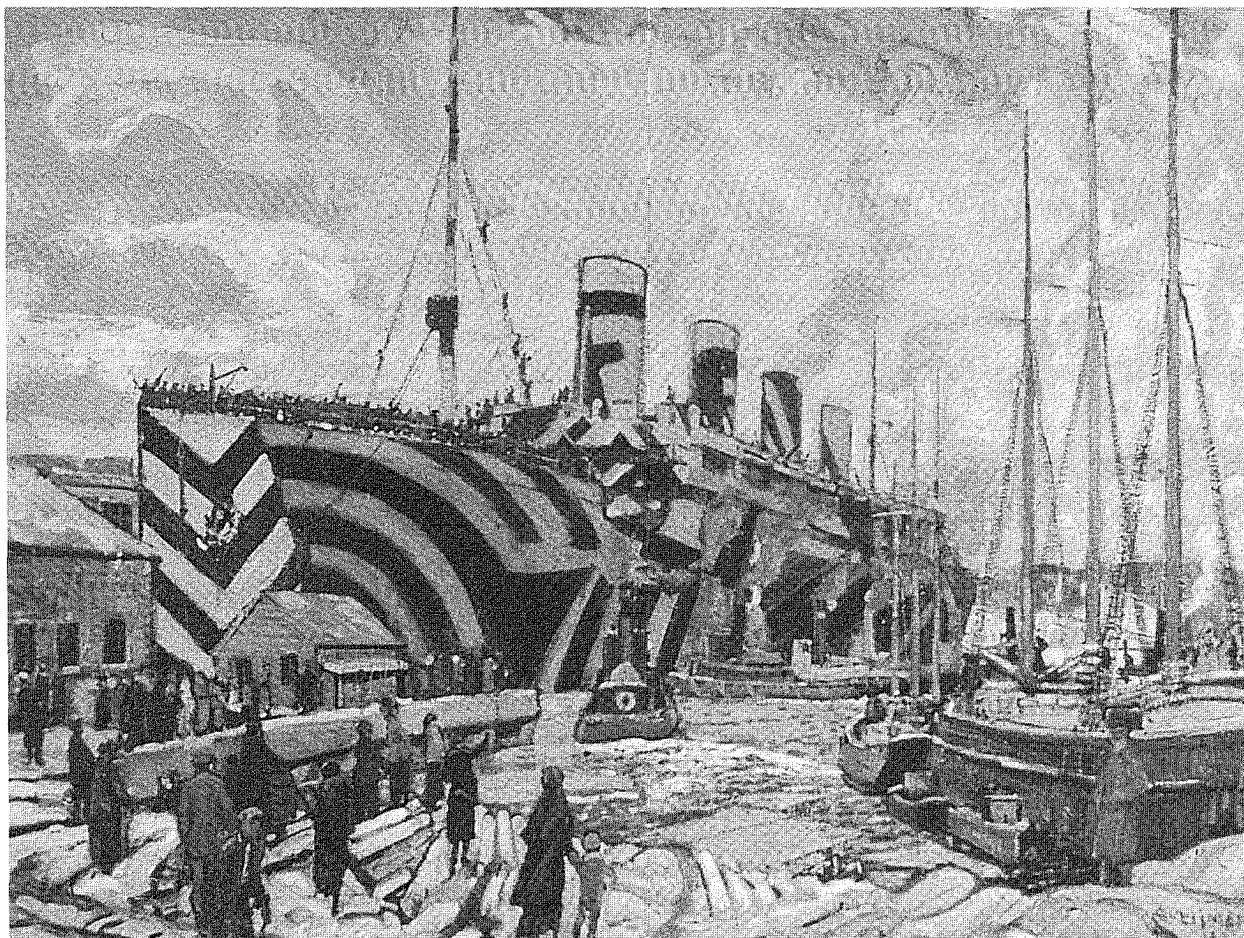


Photo by Harry Foster

The Canadian War Museum's newly-restored plaster model of "The Breaking of the Sword."

The new millennium has seen Canada's war art emerge from the shadows. The idea of *Canvas of War* was first seeded when the show's curator, Laura Brandon, assumed her duties as CWM's Curator of War Art in 1992. An art historian by training, Brandon was troubled by the fact that art had not been integrated into the telling of the nation's military past. Now, with the generous financial support of the Donner Foundation, Brandon has put together a benchmark exhibition that will set this magnificent national treasure on the stage it has so long been denied. Mounted in a specially-constructed series of galleries in the breathtaking Canadian Museum of Civilization, *Canvas of War* displays 72 works of art – 67 canvases, two works on paper and three plaster maquettes or sculptor's models. The exhibition is chronologically structured through a series of grand foyers and thematic rooms. The art of each war is given context by a brief historical snapshot of the conflict: a chronology, a montage of photographs and artifacts such as uniforms, weapons and paraphernalia from the Front.

Curator Laura Brandon hopes that *Canvas of War* will act on spectators as a "double helix" – by conveying the reality of war through art and by showing how art shaped Canadians' memory of war. This, then, is not just an art show. It is intended to illuminate, startle and provoke the viewer's understanding of war. This effect is immediately evident as one enters the exhibition's spacious central gallery. Standing guard outside are the plaster models used by sculptor Walter Allward in his creation of the symbolic figures – "The Defenders" – which stand guard over the Vimy Memorial. These larger-than-life models have not been displayed since they went into storage in 1937, but they still evoke the mixed sorrow and national pride that drew 100,000 to the Vimy unveiling in 1936. Once inside the central gallery, we realize that the scale of the Great War's art is often stunning. Richard Jack's "The Second Battle of Ypres" (on the cover of this issue) and "The Taking of Vimy Ridge, Easter Monday, 1917" jolt the viewer with their powerful message of bravery and sacrifice. This is art designed for its emotive impact – the Ypres



CWM CN 8363

Olympic with Returned Soldiers

Painted in 1919 by Arthur Lismer (1885–1969)

The Olympic, seen here docked in Halifax, was a sister ship of the Titanic. Its hull shows the dazzle-painting technique, a form of camouflage.

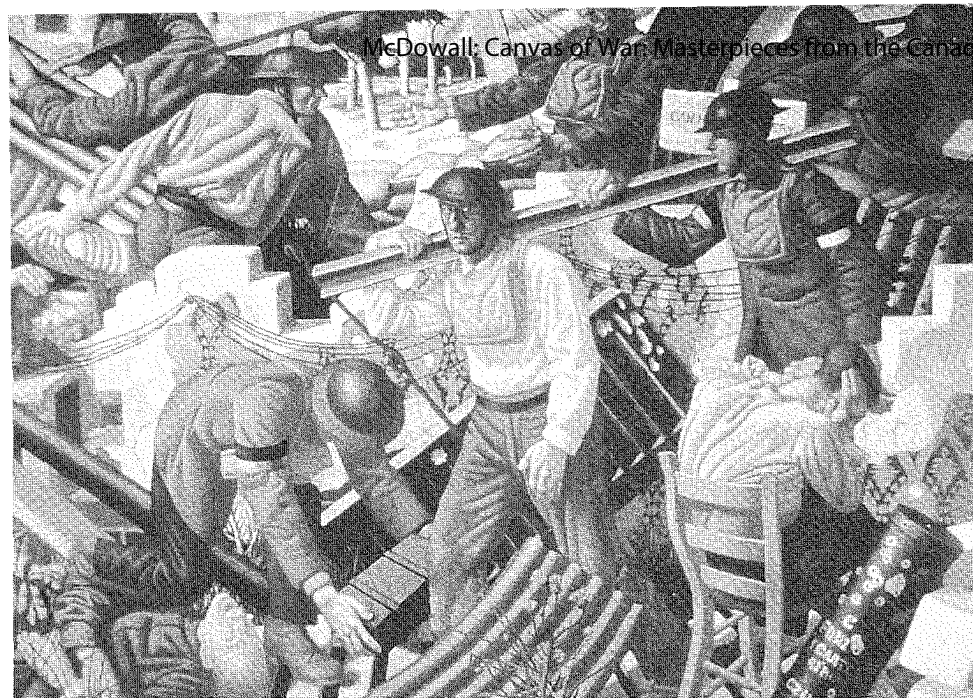
canvas is enormous, 6 metres across and almost 4 metres high. Commissioned by wartime information minister Beaverbrook, Jack's paintings were intended to overwhelm and patriotize the viewer.

Moving through the subsequent galleries of the show one is struck by the range of the art. This is not just a show about the sharp end of war. We glimpse the behind-the-lines life of soldiers in Alfred Bastien's 1918 "Dressing Station in the Field – Arras, 1915." We glimpse the women on the home front in Mabel May's 1919 "Women Making Shells" and Manly MacDonald's beautiful "Land Girls Hoeing" (1919). We encounter the aesthetics of war when we gaze upon the cubist patterns of ship camouflage in Arthur Lismer's "Olympic with Returning Soldiers," painted in Halifax harbour in 1919. Aerial warfare, we realize, provoked artists into new perspectives, detaching human figures for the first time from the stable platform

of the earth. The tumbling aircraft of C.R.W. Nicholson's "War in the Air" (1918) celebrates Billy Bishop but at the same time seems to liberate the artist from gravity.

The artists of the Great War indeed saw a terrible beauty. Brandon reminds us that in its aftermath the Group of Seven were never again able to look innocently on the Canadian landscape. In it they now saw nature's wrath. To make the point, Brandon juxtaposes Frank Johnson's 1920 "Fire-swept, Algoma" with the battlefield paintings of the war; the blackened forest might as well have been flattened by artillery. Deeper scars are hinted at by the art. Are some of the workers in Colin Gill's 1919 "Canadian Observation Post" suffering from shell-shock? Fred Varley's 1918 "For What?" prompts the viewer to the profoundest dilemma of all.

By contrast, the art of the Second World War is less emotive, more documentary. There is less



Canadian Observation Post

Painted in 1919
by Colin Gill (1892-1940)

The seated figure to the right displays visible signs of "shell shock," or combat stress, which, at the time, was seen as a sign of cowardice.

▲ CWM CN 8967

▼ CWM CN 8390



Land Girls Hoeing

Painted in 1919
by Manly MacDonald (1889-1971)

battle, more training and more of the far-reaching effects of total war. There are sailors being instructed in knots, WRENS cooking salmon, technicians repairing bent props and preparing Halifax bombers for a mission. Yet, the horror is still evident. Words fail when we gaze on Jack Nichols' 1946 "Drowning Sailor" or Alex Colville's 1946 "Bodies in a Grave, Belsen." War at sea and in the air naturally feature more prominently in the Second World War. Will the ship spot the castaways in Harold Beament's 1943 "Passing"?

Art and personal experience, we imagine, blended when Spitfire pilot Robert Hyndman painted "Dive Bombing V-1 Sites, France" in 1945. A mock-up of the battlefield "studio" of Charles Comfort convey a sense of the vocation of a war artist.

One's progress through *Canvas of War* is like experiencing an inexorable emotional compression. The outside world falls away. We are drawn into the memory of war. The quiet playing



For What?
Painted in 1918
by Fred Varley (1881–1969)

▲ CWM CN 8911

▼ CWM CN 11608

of Polish composer Henryk Gorecki's Symphony of Sorrowful Songs throughout the exhibition space reinforces the contemplative mood. In the end, we reemerge in the foyer where we began our journey and there we discover on the back wall, hidden from our entering gaze, Charles Sims' enormous, allegorical canvas "Sacrifice" (1918), so large that it has not been exhibited since 1924. And then, to remind us that the implications of war still confront us, we see one last canvas – William MacDonnell's 1994 rendition of Canadian peacekeepers at work in Croatia, "Sappers Clearing a Deadfall." And thus we return to the world, our memory of war rekindled. To aid in the process of emotional decompression, a comments book for visitors – like the ones at the military cemeteries in Europe – invites us to record our impressions. To adopt John Ruskin's metaphor, our "words" on their "deeds" and their "art" should make moving reading by the time *Canvas of War* closes in 2001.

Duncan McDowall teaches history at Carleton University in Ottawa. He has published widely in the area of Canadian and international business history. In 1998, he wrote Canada's "Nazi gold" report at the request of the Governor of the Bank of Canada. His latest book – *Another World: Bermuda and the Rise of Modern Tourism* – was published by Macmillan in London in 1999.



Dismantling Bent Props
Painted in 1945
by "Moe" Reinblatt (1917–1979)