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Review of “E. J. Hughes: Canadian War Artist” by Robert Amos

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Robert Amos. *E. J. Hughes: Canadian War Artist*. Victoria: TouchWood Editions, 2022. Pp. 216.

When a teenaged Edward John Hughes illustrated scenes and uniforms from the Napoleonic Wars and the Great War in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he could not have expected that a decade later his artistic talents would be enlisted in a new global conflict. A prewar militia cadet and trained illustrator, Hughes joined the Royal Canadian Artillery as a gunner in September 1939, but he still recognised the valuable contribution that art could make to documenting Canada’s war effort for the wider public. Through his own initiative, he applied to the Department of National Defense and by late 1940 he had been appointed one of the original three official war artists in the army’s historical section. By the end of the Second World War, Captain E. J. Hughes had travelled from training camps in Canada to army bases in England to the remote island of Kiska in the northern Pacific. He produced 541 paintings, sketches and drawings that depicted everything from training maneuvers and military hardware to the daily life of units stationed in England and the harsh winter conditions that troops endured in the Aleutians campaign. Seventy of his works held by the Canadian War Museum, along with many pictures from other collections plus several photographs, are reproduced in this magnificently illustrated volume, *E. J. Hughes: Canadian War Artist* by painter and writer Robert Amos.

This is the fourth volume that Amos has compiled of paintings from across Hughes’s career, with a further two published by TouchWood Editions in 2023 and 2024. With his expertise about Hughes’s life and an artist’s attention to technique and nuance, Amos guides readers on an incredible visual journey into Hughes’ wartime experiences. The saying not to judge a book by its cover can certainly be disregarded in this case. The scale, composition and colour of *Convoy Through Wales* (1943) makes this exceptional oil painting the perfect introduction to Hughes’s wartime pictures. Indeed, the stunning images inside make the volume a wonderful coffee table book for any military history enthusiast or admirer of Canadian art. At the same time, every painting and drawing appears to be chosen with great care both to complement the historical context that Amos describes and to illustrate how Hughes’s



art evolved to meet the circumstances and requirements demanded of him as an official war artist.

The detailed and vibrant paintings that Hughes produced between 1941 and 1946 are the greatest appeal of the book, but equally significant and even more personal are extracts of cartoons and self-caricatures that he inserted into letters to his wife, Fern, who he had married in February 1940. Clearly for Hughes, art was more than

a profession and drawing was more than just a skill. Viewing such a variety of artworks in his distinctive style reveals that the visual medium represented a rich form of communication whether to his closest loved one in private correspondence or to the Canadian public through the exhibition of his official war paintings. Showcasing so many unique and vibrant pictures deeply enhances our visual understanding and appreciation of Canada's army during the war.

Although Hughes did not witness direct combat nor did he depict frontline battle scenes, his experiences in the Second World War carried much emotional weight. Very likely some of the servicemen Hughes had met and sketched at home and overseas were later wounded or killed once Canadian troops deployed to Italy and France. Amos detects a shift toward a darker painting style immediately after demobilisation, which he speculates may have indicated signs of post-traumatic stress. The loss of three children, one at birth and two shortly after birth, made the war years that much more tragic for Hughes and Fern, who had spent so much time separated by distance during his overseas assignments. Elsewhere quoted in the book, a soldier who served in Kiska agreed with the statement that "Mr. Hughes never indicated horror or revulsion of any kind to the war ... From the manner in which he spent all his time under extremely trying conditions pursuing his Art, I would agree that you are correct in assuming his greatest horror in life would be his inability to follow his chosen field" (p. 146).

Into the 1950s and 60s, Hughes continued pursuing his art and gained an acclaimed reputation as a painter of landscapes and seascapes, particularly of his home province of British Columbia. Undoubtedly his service as one of Canada's most prolific official war

artists was formative to his later life and artistic career, but as Amos notes, "he never again used a military subject for a work of art" (p. 174). For a boy who drew historical military uniforms and a young man who sketched and painted the actual experience of war, it is poignant that an older Hughes looked for more peaceful and naturalistic subjects to make his art.

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