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## Review of "I Can Only Paint: The Story of Battlefield Artist Mary Riter Hamilton" by Irene Gammel

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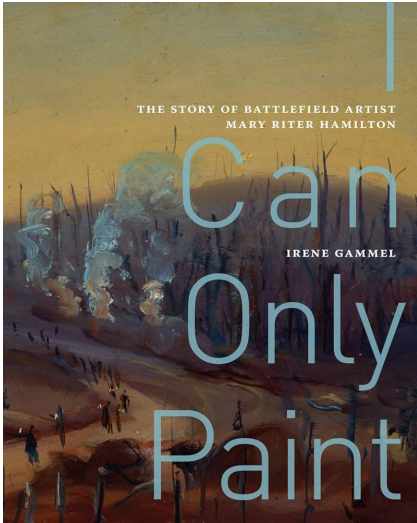
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Irene Gammel. *I Can Only Paint: The Story of Battlefield Artist Mary Riter Hamilton*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. Pp. 400.

Mary Riter Hamilton led the life of a struggling female artist in a largely male-controlled art world. Widowed soon after marriage and wanting to avoid the country Prairie life she was raised in, she turned to the arts and became a self-taught painter in Western Canada. Her early painting career focused on ordinary lifestyle portraits with a trip to France in 1903. Just prior to the First World War and into the early war period, she painted natural scenes in British Columbia, with a style like the future Group of Seven. After Riter Hamilton enjoyed some success as an artist, she had run-ins with the narrow and myopic circles of the Canadian art scene, centered on the National Gallery, due to the prewar exclusion of Western Canada subjects and female artists. Riter Hamilton linked this earlier rejection to her later rejection a decade later as a war artist. In fact, no female war artist was sent overseas. As the title suggests, the artist thought she "can only paint" the Western Front, so she embarked on a mission to get there and paint the devastation. Riter Hamilton, unlike the well funded official war artists organised by Lord Beaverbrook, had ongoing struggles with finances to support her overseas painting mission. She lost her major sponsor soon after arriving in France and began to rely on donations from friends and relatives. The combination of a mission-like zeal, poor finances and the demoralising subject of war-torn France and Belgium contributed to her developing a mental illness. A byproduct was the alienation of her supporters as her communication became more strident and less frequent or thankful for their aid. Through Irene Gammel's *I Can Only Paint*, readers develop real empathy for Riter Hamilton, hoping fervently that things will take a turn for the better. The author does a commendable job describing the painter's self-anointed mission to paint the Canadian Corps' battlefields, damaged French and Belgian landscapes and Canadian war cemeteries.

From the author's description of Riter Hamilton, it is clear to this reviewer that the people who document, photograph or paint war should do so with some sort of support structure, whether financial, moral or a substantive organisation to ensure that the subject does not consume the observer. In a sense, Riter Hamilton became a casualty of the war in a similar way that many surviving



veterans also suffered post war. The constraints she placed on herself increased her mental stress not unlike the stress of combat. Whereas the official war artists worked more slowly, methodically and apparently with less chance to let the subject overwhelm them, Riter Hamilton seemed as if she was on a “mission from God” to do what the government would not.

Because of Riter Hamilton’s drive to paint, we do have to thank her for some poignant Belgian and French cemetery scenes. This reviewer found her paintings useful to accompany official war photographs of cemeteries.

In some cases, her paintings were the only visual documentation of what the cemeteries looked like prior to the Imperial War Graves Commission postwar consolidation of graves and cemeteries, the replacement of grave markers with the common white gravestones and the cemetery landscaping and beautification effort. Her unique paintings of this subject include *Cabaret Rouge Cemetery* (p. 111), the *Cemetery of the 7th Battalion, British Columbia* (p. 132) and *Courcelette au Bois Cemetery* (p. 206). A prime motivation of Riter Hamilton was to document through painting what France and Belgium looked like before it was “normalised” through post-war reconstruction.

There are only a few minor weaknesses in the book. The first is a lack of illustrations of some paintings discussed in the book to accompany a paragraph or two of description. For example, Gammel describes the painting *Ruined Cathedral of Saint Nazaire* (p. 107) and the painting *Ruined Cathedral of Ablaine St Nazaire* (p. 109), but we are left wanting for images to judge for ourselves. The second weakness is also related to a lack of imagery when the author compares the artist’s work to earlier painters like Gauguin and El Greco. These other works are described but without the opportunity for us to see the art to judge for ourselves (pp. 34 and 196). The absence of even more paintings may be understandable due to space constraints in a book already 400 pages long. The third weakness is the author’s statements regarding Riter Hamilton’s individual painting’s purpose

or intent without providing documentary evidence. For example, the author interprets Riter Hamilton's portrayal of the *Ruins of Mt St Eloi* with the church in the upper right as an act of remembrance and the bottom half empty fields representing those who died there with no reference to Riter Hamilton's writings (p. 88). Gammel also did this with the painting *Battlefields from Vimy Ridge* (p. 134) when she focuses on a small leaning cross interpreting its position as the beginning of forgetting of the dead. She should have been clearer if this was conjecture. Finally, the author tends to use artistic adjectives and comparison to religious motifs for themes in the paintings that are not readily obvious. For example, she describes the crossroads in the painting *The Cross Roads, Vimy Ridge* as portraying Greek cross symbolism (pp. 138-39), when in fact the painting looks exactly like contemporary photographs of the Artillery memorial at Les Tilleuls crossroads. The official war photographs would have been available to Riter Hamilton, so perhaps she was merely mimicking the original photographer's symbolism.

These minor caveats aside, Gammel has done a commendable job documenting Canada's unofficial First World War female war artist. It is lavishly illustrated in colour on glossy paper stock with an image on almost every other page and many two-page examples of Riter Hamilton's work. Since artwork tends to be dispersed into many collections, this book is a valuable reference work. Any scholar of Canadian art history or First World War history should have a copy of this to accompany their other reference material on war art, literature and remembrance.

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