

Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984. xii + 136 p., 51 illus., \$24.95 (cloth)

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MARIA TIPPETT *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984. xii + 136 p., 51 illus., \$24.95 (cloth).

Art and military activity go back a long way, from paintings found in ancient Egyptian tombs through Assyrian and Classical sculptures and ornamentation to more modern forms: field sketches by serving officers, the work of 'special artists' employed by newspapers, and painters attached, with varying degrees of official formality, to the armed services. Most industrialized states now have an array of paintings and sculptures which reflect the national military experience.

The term 'war art' applied to such collections can be misleading. Even works assembled in wartime frequently include depictions of non-combat activities: industries turning out military hardware, recruiting, training, and the mundane existence of those in uniform, demonstrating the adage that 'war is a period of great boredom, interrupted by brief moments of intense excitement.' Moreover, although most such collections have been created in wartime, it is not uncommon today for artists to be attached to forces operating ostensibly in peacetime conditions. Such assignments are not always tranquil, as can be attested by British artists sent to Northern Ireland, or Canadian painters attached to 'peacekeeping' forces in Cyprus and Vietnam.

As a *genre*, war art has received relatively little study. Library cards will lead one to exhibition catalogues (such as Joan Murray's *Canadian Artists of the Second World War*, for a 1981 display at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa), writings by or about certain painters involved in war activities (Charles Comfort's *Artist at War*, an incomplete 1956 autobiography; *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist*, compiled by Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, Nimbus, 1981), or books that rely heavily upon war art for illustrations (*The Nature of War* by John Keegan and Joseph Darracott, 1981; Heather Robertson's *A Terrible Beauty* – released in French as *Beauté tragique* – Canada's best-known 'war art' book and actually an anthology of war writings, illustrated with the paintings used in the exhibition of the same name).

In recent years 'war art' has received some added attention, notably in Aus-

tralia and Great Britain. Pat Hodgson's *The War Illustrators* (1977) was a comprehensive study of the 'special artists' employed by British and American mass-circulation newspapers until the First World War. The Imperial War Museum's art collection has been the subject of two excellent works: *Colours of War* by Alan Ross, and *The War Artists* by Meirion and Susie Harries, both published in 1983. Two monographs produced by the Australian War Memorial, *Masterpieces of the Australian War Memorial* by Gavin Fry and Anne Gray (1982), and *A. Henry Fullwood: War Paintings* by Anne Gray (1983), should command international respect for that country's military art collection and for the awm's skill in publicising it.

Canada's official war art collection – some 7,800 works, ninety-eight per cent of which are owned by the Canadian War Museum – has received sporadic attention from writers and art institutions. The significant rôle of Joan Murray, of Oshawa's Robert McLaughlin Gallery, in organizing the 1977-81 show *A Terrible Beauty* was one of the best-kept secrets of the Canadian art world. Curators in Atlantic Canada have shown considerable interest – albeit parochial in a preference for local artists (Colville) and subjects (paintings related specifically to naval or east coast themes).

The more general attitude of gallery curators and art critics towards 'war art' seems to have fluctuated between disdain and indifference. Following the critical acclaim given *A Terrible Beauty*, those responsible for the Canadian War Museum's war art collection expected a surge of interest from institutions that might previously have been unfamiliar with these works; it did not come. An exhibition of forty war works by Alex Colville toured Canada from January 1981 to December 1983; notwithstanding the simultaneous publication of *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist*, the show was almost totally ignored by the general press and those who write on art for periodical and daily publications. One must conclude that if an exhibition of war art is to attract even minimal notice, it must be accompanied by an intense publicity programme such as that generated in 1977-78 by James Lorimer and Company. In launching and promoting the book *A Terrible Beauty*, that firm set up a fanfare befitting the Second Coming, all of which helped the exhibition *A Terrible Beauty* to catch the specialist and public eyes.

Lest this piece seem to be an exercise in 'media bashing' or 'gallery sniping,' the writer hastens to add that lack of exposure and public notice for Canadian war art is not wholly the fault of non-governmental agencies. The National Gallery of Canada, custodian of the collection until 1971, did not even appoint a Curator of War Art until 1962 – four decades after acquiring title to the First World War paintings that started it. Of the four persons who have since administered the collection, none has been a trained art historian, although all have had experience in military history. Each Curator of War Art has had to struggle with the problems that governments inflict upon their own cultural agencies – unrelated extra duties, parsimonious budgets, minimal staff, inadequate quarters, and bureaucratic demands that constitute 'guerrilla warfare' waged by administrators and management consultants against curators, designers and writers. The professional Canadian art community may have given the nation's war art less than its due, but that same community has done something: in the field of publications, the private sector has been more searching and prolific than the public organization that owns the art itself.

This brings us to Maria Tippett's book on the origins of the Canadian War Memorials Collection, the first body of 'war art' secured for Canada. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this thesis is that it has not been written earlier by a National Gallery of Canada or Canadian War Museum official whose responsibilities should have encompassed such a task. Major Robert Wodehouse came closest with a Foreword to his 1968 *Check List of the War Collections*; this reviewer skipped over the subject in an essay that opened *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist*. Dr. Tippett has started from scratch, sought out source material, and got it right – thorough, scholarly, sometimes witty.

Art at the Service of War, a slim but fascinating volume, describes the origins of the Canadian War Memorials Collection, an array of some 850 paintings, drawings and sculpted items, assembled between 1916 and 1920, which formed the cornerstone of the war art collection that now constitutes a national treasure. The story is one of vision and improvisation, initiative and timidity, success and failure.

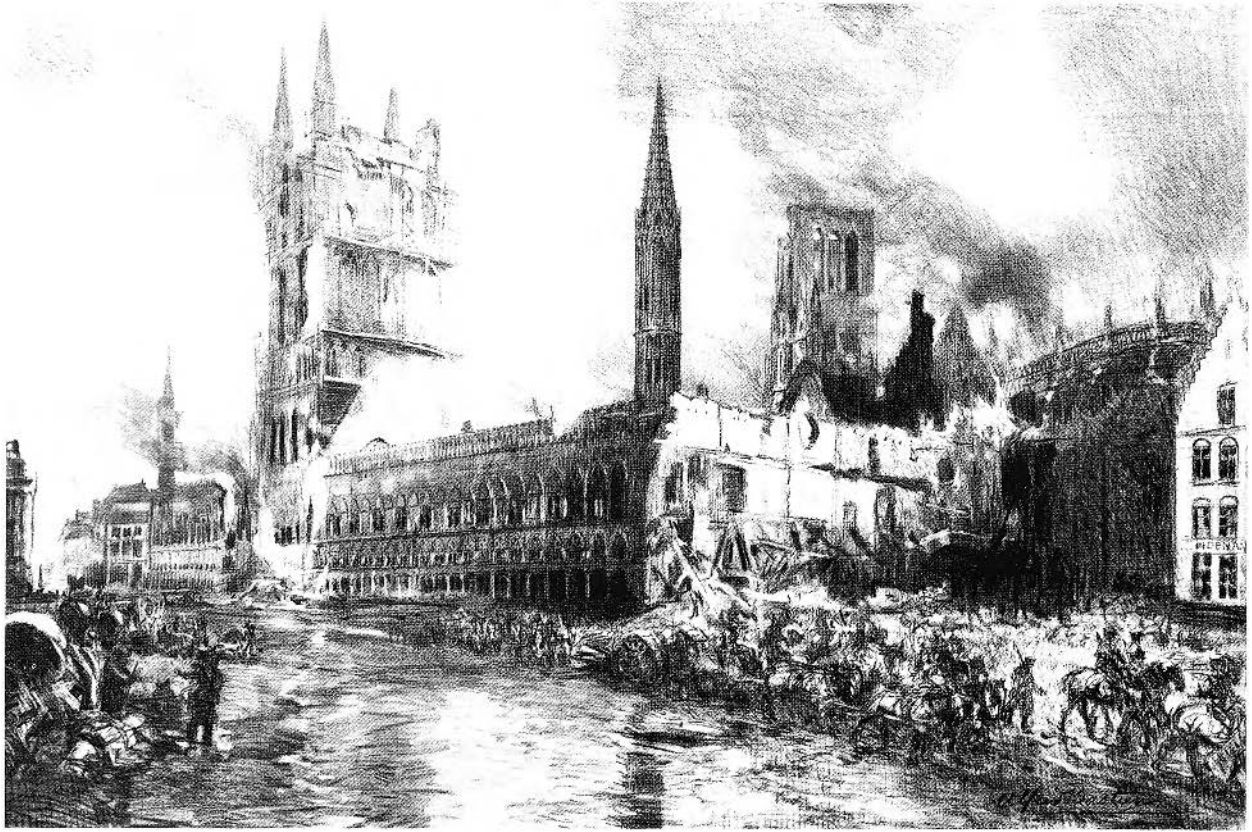


FIGURE 4. Alfred Théodore Bastien, *Cloth Hall, Ypres, 1914* (Photo: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa).

The book has a hero: Max Aitken (Lord Beaverbrook), who saw no contradiction in being simultaneously a Canadian nationalist and a British imperialist. In January 1915 he had secured an honorary commission and appointment as head of the Canadian War Records Office in London. As an archivist, Aitken impressed even the professionals in that field. However, he had also been determined to describe to the world how Canadians were contributing to the war; his various publicity projects (books, battlefield photography, cinéphotography, even a newspaper for the troops) had been so successful that complaints were registered: Aitken, it was claimed, was creating the impression that Canadians were almost single-handedly holding the Western Front.

Photographers were not always present to record important events: the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, when Canadians first encountered poison gas and, nevertheless, had held a crucial section of front, had been a case in point. Aitken first turned to

artists as a means of filling such gaps. The programme expanded, with more painters being assigned to Canadian forces (Figs. 4-5). He envisaged a body of art that would later be housed in a special building serving as a combined gallery and war memorial.

Knowing little about art, Aitken wisely selected advisors, notably Paul Konody, art critic for *The Daily Mail* and *The Observer*, and Ernest Fosberry, the latter influential in bringing Canadian painters into a scheme which initially had been staffed by British artists. Aitken accepted their guidance, backing the programme with bullish energy, enormous charm, and money – some of it from his own pocket. It was a tremendous achievement; but Lord Beaverbrook did not receive formal thanks until 1928, eight years after the collection he had created had been deposited with the National Gallery of Canada. The proposed gallery-memorial was never built.

If Lord Beaverbrook is the hero of the piece, Sir Edmund Walker stands out as a minor figure. The Chairman

of the National Gallery of Canada's board of trustees had, before the war, been more familiar with European oils and Japanese prints than with his own nation's artistic accomplishments. Ultimately he became involved in the Canadian War Memorials project, selecting artists for overseas assignments as well as ones to cover home-front activities (Halifax harbour, shipbuilding in Toronto and Collingwood, infantry training at Niagara-on-the-Lake, air training at Camp Borden, Toronto, and Beamsville). However, Walker was a reluctant recruit; Walker's timidity stemmed from his fear of choosing among different Canadian artists, a group he described as having 'irritable minds.'

Walker's timidity was matched by short-sightedness on the part of Canadian officials charged with administering the newly-acquired treasure trove. They were tight-fisted, holding back payments to artists and sculptors who were completing the last works scheduled for the collection. Plans to send two artists to Siberia, where Canadian



FIGURE 5. Eric Kennington, *Mustard Gas*, pastel (Photo: Canadian War Museum).

troops were engaged in a peripheral campaign against Bolshevism, were cancelled. Preliminary sketches for major works were not acquired, then or in the 1940s when many were offered once more. A gallery to house the collection got no further than a roughly sketched proposal; by contrast, Australia was reasonably prompt in finding a suitable home for its more modest assemblage of art and military trophies.

Maria Tippet's book is sprinkled with anecdotes relating to specific works. Byam Shaw used two of his sons as models for his large, symbolic canvas, *The Flag*; both were killed during the Second World War. Derwent Wood's bronze, *Canada's Golgotha*,

drew protests from German spokesmen who described it as vicious propaganda – which it was.

The book has few faults. There is little about the conditions under which artists worked in the field, or incidents to show how they were received by the soldiers themselves. The decision to use black-and-white illustrations was undoubtedly made to reduce publishing costs, but it was still unfortunate. The index is not complete. Nevertheless, these are petty given the final result – a comprehensive, pioneering study that recounts an important piece of history never told in depth.

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KLAUS HERDEG *The Decorated Diagram: Harvard Architecture and the Failure of the Bauhaus Legacy*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London, the MIT Press, 1983. viii + 125 pp., 120 illus., \$31.50 (cloth).

Consigned to eternal passage within a revolving glass door, the heroes we create are either on their way in or on their way out, but never at rest. No one needs ask in which direction Walter Gropius, once fondly regarded as the individual who rescued American architecture from its moribund reliance upon the Beaux-Arts mentality, is travelling these days. In fact he is moving out so fast it is conceivable his path will be linear rather than circular. Already convicted for most of the crimes of International Style architecture, he is also being held responsible, in no small measure, for the weaknesses of the architecture and architects seeking to displace modernism.

Klaus Herdeg's thesis will do little to decrease the velocity of Gropius' recent passage. The book associates many of the 'ugly new buildings around' with the teaching ethos engendered by the architect's 1937-1953 tenure at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. In doing so, it questions what has been until now a relatively safe facet of Gropius' career.

From at least 1973, with the publication of Charles Jencks' *Modern Movements in Architecture*, the works of such Harvard graduates as Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, I.M. Pei, Ulrich Franzen and Victor Lundy have been recognized by some as constituting a problematic, formalist approach to architecture. Through careful analyses of a number of 'Harvard' buildings, Herdeg seeks to articulate more clearly the nature of this American formalism. It exhibits certain positive values – functional zoning, expert attention to detail and craftsmanship – but, according to the author, these are merely isolated reminders of what might have been. They appear in passionless structures which fail to address, let alone display 'the struggle involved in attempting to reconcile opposing functional and formal conditions, or a struggle with a difficult site.' In the end, the buildings subsist largely through the plays of textures, patterns and materials that are almost casually superimposed upon diagrammatic responses to functional demands.