The Importance of Artwork in the Commemoration of WWI

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Visual culture has been a medium through which people have not only documented, but also shaped and commemorated history. Pieces inspired by World War One have held great value since the crisis ended on November 11, 1918. At a glance, the countless artworks appear to have little value in the modern day. However, extensive analysis of historical sources corroborates that visual culture has been, is and will continue to be imperative in commemorating World War One. A comprehensive evaluation of the historical and informative and emotional value of artwork is demonstrative of this. As the Annenberg Foundation (2017) states, “Art can commemorate existence, achievements, and failures, and it can be used to record and create communal as well as personal memories”. In essence, it is to commemorate, to recall and to show respect for.

The historical and informative value of artwork, essentially how it recalls or describes the events of World War One in a meaningful fashion, is undeniable. The outbreak of hostilities in 1914 triggered an intense public curiosity in the war itself. That curiosity inflected every sphere and register of cultural life: it caused newspaper circulations to increase exponentially and war-themed books to be published and purchased in their thousands; it inspired countless civilians to start writing and reading war poetry; and it led to a surge of plays, concerts and other theatrical performances that all hoped to satisfy the public's craving for topical entertainment. “This was commonly referred to as ‘war fever’” (Lees, 2018). War fever's most voracious demands, however, were arguably made of visual culture. The fact that art was hand-made meant that they lacked the dependable objectivity that came with the mechanically produced photographs. For these reasons, the latter were believed to be of greater value than the former - the photograph “worth much more than a sketch by a draughtsman who is trying to produce a pretty picture” (Fox, 2015). The war, it seemed, was creating the conditions for a mass criticism of art. However, as the art world had combated its other recriminations, so painters, illustrators, their patrons and publishers attempted to neutralize this criticism. They set out to prove that they could also be legitimate and reliable chroniclers of war. In the process, they proved that traditional forms of art had a crucial role to play in the way the conflict was experienced and understood on the home front. “The public may well have been obsessed with discussing the war, reading about the war and hearing about the war, but above all they wanted to see the war. In 1916, four artists were commissioned to travel to the battlefields. The work that resulted from those visits was published in 1918 in a four-part edition called *British Artists at the Front”* (Fox, 2015). Their pictures offered the public vivid and colourful insights into the conflict: Nevinson painted bursting shells, secret glimpses into Brigade Headquarters and furtive views from the trenches; Lavery painted factories, scenes aboard British battleships and the searchlights of coastal defence units; Nash drew the empty battlefields of Flanders in the aftermath of hostilities; and Kennington focused on everyday life at the front line, such as soldiers enjoying tea between shifts and patients convalescing in hospital wards (Kennington, 1915; Nevinson, 1916; Nash, 1918; Lavery, 1917). All artists however, sought to satisfy the civilians' voracious desire to see aspects of the conflict that were inaccessible, and in many cases unimaginable to them. At the start of the conflict, the accepted style of war painting was a legacy from Victorian times. Its heroic battle scenes and reassuring patriotic messages could no longer be believed by a population exposed to total war. What followed was a revolution in art, as artists struggled to depict the reality of life at the front. And whether revered or ridiculed

at the time, all of these paintings can help us remember World War One today. Furthermore, this art didn't just explore the battlefields of the wounded and dead, it considered issues beyond the battlefield, for instance, issues of civilian casualties, the home front and the plight of refugees (Rushbury, 1918; Skinner, 1917; Orpen, 1918).

The beginning of artwork in relation to World War One lies in *Kensingtons at Laventie*, created by Eric Kennington in 1915. Kennington was a young soldier who had fought in France, been wounded and sent home to recover, and his work depicts him – in the black balaclava to the left – and his company arriving exhausted at their billets, straight from the front line (Kennington, 1915). In other words, it shows the reality of war. He chose to depict a facet of World War One that was often disregarded or forgotten and with it provided immense informative and historical value to those living at the time and for posterity.

Nevinson utilizes art in a different respect. His work from 1916, named *French Troops Resting,* depicts soldiers, who despite their exhaustion, through their uniforms and geometric simplification, form a single mass bound into a war machine. Together with the sharp diagonal of the cobbled highway – up which a soldier glances, legs outstretched and hands pocketed – it serves as a pitiless reminder of the compelling force of war (Nevinson, 1916). "This more experimental style became thought of as very effective in rendering the unprecedented experiences of the conflict" (Das, 2014). According to the contemporary art critic Charles Marriott, it provided a more intense reality than 'realism'. Nash's artwork, with a new modernist vision, is the "powerful, apocalyptic vision of nature devastated by war" (Lees, 2018). The title mocks the ambition of war, *We Are Making a New World*, a phrase generally having positive connotations is satirically juxtaposed with the image. All of the commissioned artists' work had to be passed by the official censor. While depictions of dead British soldiers were unacceptable, this devastated landscape managed to pass unchallenged due to its symbolic, rather than literal, content (Nash, 1918). This art provides value through its portrayal of the aftermath. An interesting perspective, unseen by civilians at the time and historically accurate for a battlefield in World War One thus providing increasing value for the future. "The view over a desolate landscape with shattered trees, the earth a mass of shell holes with the sun hanging high in the sky and beams of light shining down through heavy, earth-coloured clouds" (Robinson, 2018). The historical and informative value of artwork at the time and in the modern world is extensive.

The emotional value of artwork and literature, essentially it's value in providing escapism, consolation and catharsis, is evident. For the myriad of grieving families who had suffered personal loss in the war, commemorative artwork provided some comfort – whichever side you were on (Das, 2014). The First World War created a set of unusual social demands that could be satisfied only by visual culture, namely, the public's desire to see the war, the press's determination to profit from the war and the government's need to manage the war. These demands had many cultural consequences, of which the proliferation and official endorsement of war art was one. This was only part of the story, for the simple reason that war art was not the only kind of art to be produced between 1914 and 1918. The conflict gave rise to another very different set of social needs, which in turn produced another set of artworks (Fox, 2015). These needs emerged later than those that provoked the nation's much-discussed war pictures, but they grew with every year of the conflict and by its end they were considerably more influential. The images that resulted from them could not have been more different from their bellicose counterparts, for their function was not help those affected by the war merely confront

the hardships of war but rather to escape and overcome them. “Scholars have traditionally neglected the consolatory strands of wartime culture because they do not fit the narratives of despair, disillusionment and dissent that have long governed interpretations of the field” (Todman, 2014). In recent years, however, these cultural trends have finally started to receive the attention they deserve. From about 1915 many of those involved in the war increasingly craved diversions from the battlefields. It might seem as though that amid the company of cinema and music, fine art was singularly unsuited to fulfilling these objectives. Yet this was not the case. In fact, pictures were extremely effective vehicles for escape. They could capture the human stories associated with the novel; “they could gratify the scenes like music; and unlike almost every other medium, they could function equally well both in public and in private” (Lees, 2018). Thousands of people could enjoy diverting prints on streets or periodicals, while a single person could lose himself in a painting in the most intimate corner of his home. “The most ubiquitous form of escapist picture was the pastoral landscape” (Richards, 2014). This is not, perhaps, a surprise. The pastoral mode is old and complex, but it has long been understood as a 'discourse of retreat'. Its celebration of rural life has in particular been invoked as an escape from all things urban. By examining the development of the English literature from the sixteenth century onwards, Raymond Williams in his 1973 book, *The Country and the City*, contended that the pastoral was not merely a retreat from the country to the city; it was a retreat from the 'disturbance and disorder of the present' to 'an ordered and happier past'. A representative example of this temporal escapism is a landscape by Benjamin Williams Leader, painted in 1915, which depicts a family picnic in a cornfield on a midsummer day (Leader, 1915). It uncannily resembled the bucolic pictures he had been producing for years, this painting, however, was entitled *Peace* It was therefore instantly recognizable as an explicit visual counterpart to the conflict. And in case viewers still doubted his picture's meaning, Leader added an inscription to the frame that, quoting William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, read: 'Yellow the cornfields lay although as yet and; Unto the stucks no sickle had been set'. The metaphor was clear: the picture did not just represent any peaceful scene; it recreated a precise historical moment that preceded the August harvest, as well as its tragic equivalent - the human harvest of the August war. In other words, Leader's textual intervention ensured that when an audience of 1915 and the future looked at his painting they would be looking back into the past, from war into peace and commemorating the war and the peace (Leader, 1915). William Orpen’s work, *To the Unknown British Soldier in France,* also has substantial emotional value. It was one of three paintings commissioned from Orpen to commemorate the Peace Conference at Versailles in 1919, symbolising the conclusion of the First World War. The artwork is a symbol of peace, unity and the removal of hostilities and in that way has a positive emotional influence on us and those at the time (Orpen, 1928). The emotional value of artwork from World War One is thus revealed with clarity.

Having examined evidence from a variety of primary historical sources and secondary sources, the importance of artwork in the commemoration of the First World War is apparent. The importance has been discovered to be founded on two things: its emotional and historical and informative value. The war definitively ended many social and cultural traditions that survived the nineteenth century and made clear the modern, mechanized world we were entering, a world where the older expressive forms and techniques no longer seemed adequate, appropriate, or compelling. However, visual culture persisted and thus remains one of the oldest and yet progressive aspects of commemoration.

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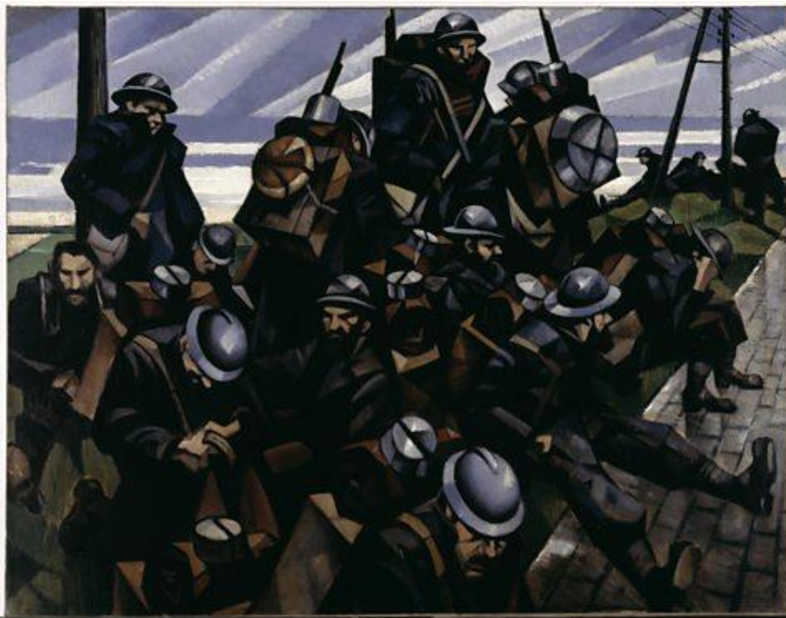
Appendix 1: Artwork in regards to historical value

Image 1.1

The Kensingtons at Laventie (1915) by Eric Kennington

Image 1.2



French Troops Resting (1916) by CRW Nevinson

Image 1.3

We Are Making a New World (1918) by Paul Nash

Image 1.4

Gassed (1919) by John Singer Sargent

Image 1.5

The War Refugees' Camp, Earl's Court (1918) by Henry Rushbury

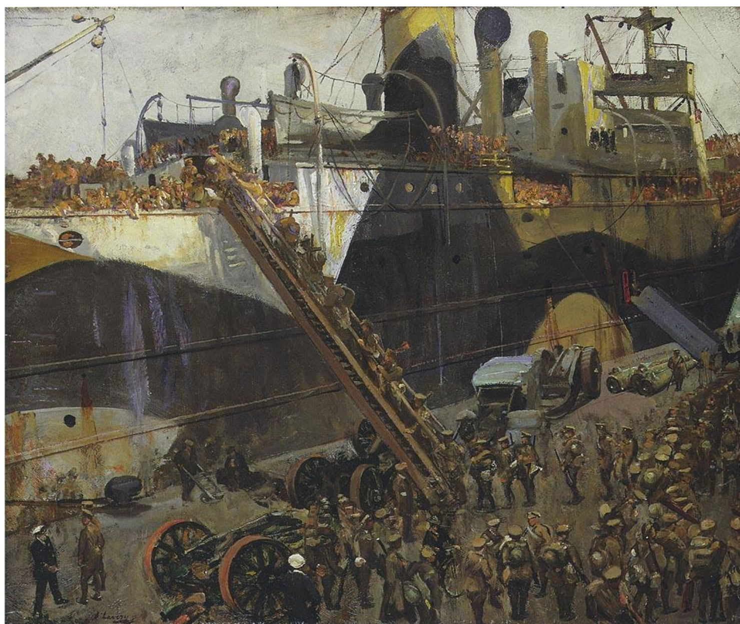
Image 1.6

For King and Country (1917) by Edward Frederick Skinner

Image 1.7

Bombing: Night (1918) by William Orpen

Image 1.8



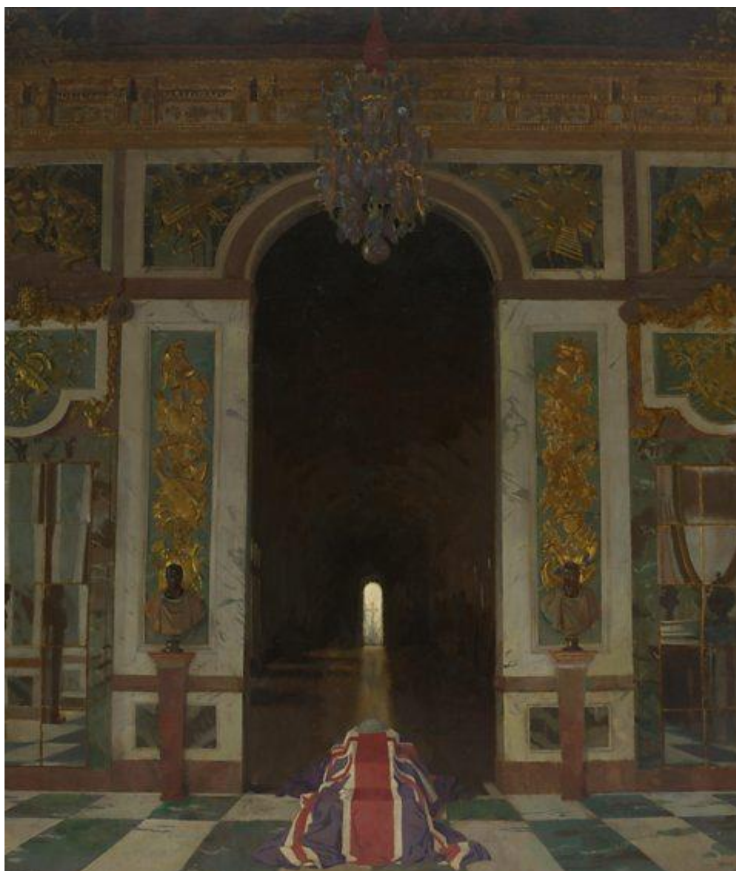
Embarking on the Western Front (1917) by John Lavery

Appendix 2: Artwork in regard to emotional value

Image 2.1

Peace (1915) by Benjamin Leader

Image 2.2



To the Unknown British Soldier in France (1928) by William Orpen