

Exhibiting War Art:

The Imperial War Museum in 1919 and 2014

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Abstract

The First World War undoubtedly shaped and triggered memories of people across the world. How did society during this historical event choose what has been remembered and what forgotten? How were these events recorded and by whom? One hundred years after the events of the conflict, what has entered the collective memory of the *First World War* and what has been left behind? Analysing two exhibitions of official war art 95 years apart reflects not only on the past but also on modern society's attitudes towards conflict and its commemoration. This paper's focus is on the Imperial War Museum [IWM] and its unparalleled collection of material from this conflict. It will comparatively assess exhibits from 1919 entitled 'The Nation's War Paintings and Other Records' and 2014's 'Truth and Memory: British Art of the First World War'. The paper will look at the commission and content of three paintings representing the front lines, women's work, and medical care, which were three of the big themes considered by IWM in their collecting and display. Following this, an analysis of how all three of these paintings had been displayed and curated in both exhibits, as well as consideration about how each audience reacted to the works will be conducted. By comparing these displays and audience reactions, this paper will argue that memory of world changing events such as this conflict is affected not only by life experiences but also by representative art and culture, under certain political, and societal conditions that will have affected the audiences' perception. And further, that as the public becomes distanced from those events by time, that culture becomes more important in shaping and informing our collective ideas about the past.

Keywords: War, art, curation, display, commemoration, memory

In the 105 years since the end of the First World War, the Imperial War Museum [IWM] has displayed the breadth of its unparalleled collection of war art in two major exhibitions. In December 1919 to February 1920, the Royal Academy hosted IWM's first display of over nine hundred war works in the exhibit 'The Nation's War Paintings and Other Records'. Ninety-five years later, many of those same pictures were used in the 2014 exhibition 'Truth and Memory: British Art of the First World War'. This was the largest display of art from this conflict to be displayed since 1919, curated as part of the centenary commemoration period. This paper will consider how IWM, as a newly formed institution in 1917, recorded the official artistic interpretations of the First World War. Furthermore, it will explore how that same institution, central to national remembrance during the commemoration period, used those same works of art to shape a collective memory for a public with no personal connections to the conflict. This paper will consider the commission, display, and emphasis on specific artworks across both exhibitions. This paper will also question if and how, being placed under the lens of commemoration reclassified the meaning of some works. Finally, this paper will look at differences in display and curation of both exhibitions and at the language used in reviews to understand how historical and modern audiences responded to war art.

To do this, it will directly compare the exhibitions curated by this organisation almost one hundred years apart. The following will look at three themes in its selection of works: the front-line, using John Singer Sargent's *Gassed*; women's work, using Anna Airy's *Shop for Machining 15-inch Shells: Singer Manufacturing Company, Clydebank, Glasgow*; and healthcare, using Stanley Spencer's *Travoy's Arriving with the Wounded at a Dressing Station at Smol, Macedonia*. These pictures, whilst showcasing a diverse range of artistic styles and content, were also among the most discussed and emphasised in official exhibition documents such as press releases and in reviews. Thus, they provide a good understanding of what IWM wanted to showcase, and what the public thought of the wider show. Through their use in this paper, the paintings act as material traces and as case studies which represent how objects have been used and deployed differently as IWM's mission has changed over time. This paper will first look at these paintings individually, before analysing their display in 1919 and in 2014.



Figure 1: John Singer Sargent, 1919, *Gassed*, Oil on Canvas, IWM Art.IWM ART 1460

John Singer Sargent

John Singer Sargent was commissioned by the British War Memorials Committee in 1918 to paint scenes from the front. Sargent had witnessed the aftermath of a mustard gas attack, seeing a line of blinded men lead each other towards a dressing station (Girard 2008). Figure 1 depicts that scene as a side view of a line of soldiers, blinded by gas, being led by a medical orderly. The men's eyes are bandaged and posed to look uncertain. One soldier's foot is placed high as though expecting a step, and another is faced in the wrong direction. Each man's hand is placed on the shoulder of the person in front as they lead each other through a path between groups of injured soldiers in the foreground and the background, all in various stages of the effects of gas exposure. These soldiers all have bandaged eyes. One holds his head as though in pain, another attempts to sit up, and another can be seen drinking from his bottle. The crowd of injured soldiers continues on the right and left sides of the canvas, allowing the viewer to imagine hundreds of bodies across the field. In the background, dressing station tents can be seen, and another group of soldiers in front of the setting sun which lights the entire piece. All three of the works discussed here are large in scale, however *Gassed* is the largest of them all, measuring over 106 inches tall and 255 wide in frame (Imperial War Museum). This was because the painting was commissioned with the intention it become the centrepiece of the Hall of Remembrance: a memorial gallery which would permanently display art from this conflict but was never constructed.

This painting is now considered one of the most famous artistic representations of chemical war (Girard 2008). It has been displayed across the world in IWM exhibitions,

including at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Most recently, the painting was displayed at IWM North for the ‘Making a New World’ season of exhibitions and events about the First World War. The picture, though not permanently on display until November 2023, is extremely familiar to many viewers in part because of its consistent reproduction in historical scholarship, museum material, and popular media. The painting is the cover art for several books including Marion Girard’s *A Strange and Formidable Weapon*, David M. Lubin’s *Grand Illusions: American Art and the First World War*, and Roger Tolson’s *Art from the First World War*. It is also the current cover image for IWM’s collections search webpage. This familiarity even provoked art historian M.R.D. Foot to omit the painting from a book about war art, calling it ‘hackneyed’ (Girard 2008, p. 179). Despite its use and reuse as a symbol for First World War suffering, the painting has a complicated history when it comes to review and reception. In 1919, *The Athenaeum* printed an essay about the piece (quoted in Haines 2018):

...Both mental and physical aspects at this scene can scarcely have been more poignant, and of this Mr Sargent has made a picture, a reproduction of which many a young lady will hang up in her boudoir, and in sentimental moments will regard with that taint glitter of a summoned fear and murmur "Poor fellows."

The *Athenaeum* declared *Gassed* as the kind of painting created to be reproduced and displayed by those affected by the atrocities it depicts, and to elicit sympathy in those who had not. In this way, its creation could be considered a tool for shaping collective memories. Its reuse proves its success in this: the painting continues to evoke profound feelings in its audience. In blogposts about its display in 2014, viewers comment on the huge painting more than any other. For example, in the blog entitled ‘cultural capital’, Maryam Philpott (2014) wrote: ‘nowhere is this [themes of redemption, heroism, and sacrifice] more strikingly portrayed than in the enormous John Singer Sargent painting’.



Figure 2: Anna Airy, Shop for Machining 15-inch Shells: Singer Manufacturing Company, Clydebank, Glasgow, 1918, oil on canvas, IWM Art.IWM ART 2271

Anna Airy

In 1918, Airy was commissioned by the IWM committee to paint four pictures ‘representing typical scenes’ in munition factories (Imperial War Museum 1918). The national projectile factory at Hackney, Armstrong Whitworth’s in Openshaw, aircraft manufacturing co. at Hendon, and the national filling factory at Chilwell, which was later changed to the Singer factory in Glasgow were chosen. Airy’s munitions paintings hold an important place in IWM’s First World War collection. She was one of the most discussed female artists in the commemoration period, her name is often the only female artist to be specified in IWM press releases and web pages. Her work was redistributed in various forms to represent not only the

munitions worker as one of the most widely discussed role for women workers, prominent in historiography since the 1960s, but also to represent the woman as a war artist. Her munitions paintings were the subject of an online article on IWM's website and were often shown when commemorative media discussed the role, for example in BBC One's *World War One at Home*. This painting was featured in reviews and articles about IWM, for example in Burlington Magazine's 2014 article 'At the Imperial War Museum' (Shone, 2014).

Figure 2 depicts the inside of Glasgow's Singer Factory, which produced sewing machines. This factory was considered by *The Sewing Machine Gazette* (1884) as 'colossal' and at its peak in 1913 employed over fourteen thousand people. During the First World War, the factory moved from sewing machines to armaments. The painting, whilst depicting the impressive nature of the shells and consequently the development of the war economy, also depicts a disorganised scene. The floor is littered with objects and the shells are lined up haphazardly. The equipment and scenery depicted are rudimentary, notably the wooden trolleys and beams which hold the factory up, and the winches hanging from the ceiling. The contrast between this scene and the smooth metal shells represents the unfitting nature of a factory designed to manufacture singer sewing machines moving to create large naval gun shells. The centre point of the painting is these large shells which take up space in the foreground and lead the eye backwards towards the horizon point. It is only then the viewer notices the figures, somewhat overshadowed by the machinery. This is a common theme among Airy's wartime works: the figures appear to fade into the background, often in a group or huddle, whilst the product of the work itself was the focus of the art. The figures were also painted without detail to appear representative of a typical women worker and not of any individual.



Figure 3: Stanley Spencer, 1919, *Travoyes Arriving with Wounded at a Dressing Station at Smol, Macedonia*, September 1919, Oil on Canvas, IWM. Art IWM ART 2268.

Stanley Spencer

In 1918, Stanley Spencer was commissioned by the British War Memorials Committee to complete a painting with religious themes. Alfred Yockney had suggested a religious service at the front, but Spencer wanted to ‘show God in the bare real things’, and so suggested *Travoyes Arriving with Wounded at a Dressing Station at Smol, Macedonia*, which was approved by IWM (Gough 2010, p. 267). In the painting, an old Greek church was being used as a dressing station and operating theatre. During the war, Spencer joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and was posted to Macedonia where he served with the 68th field ambulance before volunteering as an infantryman and joining the 7th Royal Berkshires (Whitley 2013, p.100). Spencer lost his brother, who was killed in action in September 1918, and suffered

from malaria in 1919 (Whitley 2013, p.100). It was at this time, in 1919, that Spencer began painting this canvas. Spencer's wartime painting experience was tumultuous; after unsuccessfully attempting to resign from his commission, Spencer finished the painting, but refused to finish any further works, stating he had lost his 'Balkan feelings' (Spalding 2022).

Figure 3 depicts wounded soldiers being transported back from the front to this field hospital by travoys being seen from above. Four travoys carrying wounded soldiers wrapped in coloured blankets are pulled up to a dressing station by horses. Medical orderlies attend to the soldiers, the red cross armbands are painted in a bright white and red to draw the viewers eye to them. The orderlies are posed with their arms spread, and they guide the viewers eye up and down the painting. In the background, the dressing station can be seen in a white glow, and an operation is taking place. In the right foreground, a bandaged soldier can be seen walking away and looking back on the scene. The composition depicts an ordered and calm atmosphere. Unlike Airy's paintings, Spencer was not concerned with accurately depicting the nature of wartime work. In fact, his painting of wounded soldiers in a dressing station is lacking in the blood and mud which would have flooded the horrific scene. Due to this, Spencer himself described the piece as 'not a true war picture' (Benton 2017). The calm nature of the scene can be attributed perhaps to its religious themes and to Spencer's own experience of war, which led to his painting this scene as an act of catharsis (Willsdon 2000, p. 123). In 1938, Spencer wrote of the picture: 'I meant it not a scene of horror but a scene of redemption'.

These three paintings, used as case studies show that IWM had a lot of control over the content and nature of its commissioning works. The museum had a clear objective when commissioning the works and knew what they wanted to do with them: to create memorials for a nation. At the opening ceremony in 1920, King George V stated that the museum would act as 'a memorial which speaks to the heart and to the imagination' (Imperial War Museum 1920). This is reinforced by looking at the way the paintings were constructed: the figures do not show distinguishing or individualised features: they were designed to be representative of many soldiers and workers in order that they facilitate memories for the huge numbers of visitors to the museum. This was the goal that Martin Conway described in a memorandum to Alfred Mond in 1917 (quoted in Kavanagh 1988, 84):

...when they visit the museum in years to come, they should be able by its aid to revive the memory of their work for the war, and, pointing to some exhibit, to say 'This thing I did'...

1919

IWM was founded in 1917, after a proposal by liberal MP Sir Alfred Mond was approved by the war cabinet. At the time of the 1919 exhibit, the museum had not yet opened in its first permanent home in Crystal Palace. The official priority for establishing IWM was to record material of historical significance, and to amass a national collection of war related material before it was lost or broken up into separate collections. Lieutenant Charles Ffoulkes wrote in his autobiography that the intentions of the first committee was 'to make history, or rather to record history' (Cundy 2015, p.254). In 1919, IWM's objects were scattered in various storage locations, and its curators were focused on temporary exhibits. From December 1919 until February 1920, the Royal Academy hosted IWM's exhibition 'The Nation's War Paintings and Other Records'. This was the first exhibit to showcase the breadth of the new art collection, and so the art was being used to depict how widely the museum had collected. To paraphrase Ffoulkes, this exhibit made history by showcasing how it recorded history.

This show was well received by the public and critics: its run was extended one week due to its popularity, and reviews hailed the show 'a miracle' (The Daily Telegraph 1920), 'the arrival of a new artistic movement' (Westminster Gazette, 1919), and 'the promise of something much, richer, more interesting than has been in English painting since the Middle Ages' (The Times 1919). Reviews commented on the display of traditional and modern artists in the same exhibit as one of its major successes. Various newspaper articles referred to changes at the Academy and to the emergence of a progressive element (The Guardian 1920; The Observer 1920, p.10; The Times 1920). Critics were often struck by the younger, modern artists in this exhibit as the most adventurous and interesting. The Guardian (1920) stated:

the public were given an idea of the ideals and methods of the new generation and the welcome evidence that many artists were working for a real public art, for the between public service of art to the state.

Royal Academy shows would often display more than a thousand works, and so had characteristically busy walls with paintings covering any available space and without apparent order to exhibit as many works as possible (Sandby 1862, p. 269-270). The position of paintings usually depended on distinction and influence of the painter, with the best spots being most sought after by artists and less well-regarded artists being hung higher up and in less popular gallery rooms (Sandby 1862, p. 270). Despite this being an exhibition with a theme (albeit a colossal theme of global conflict which had dominated the previous 4 years) the works on this exhibit were also displayed without theme or order. Considering their differing content, tone, and style, it is interesting that the three paintings chosen for this paper were all exhibited in Gallery III (Imperial War Museum 1919). Anna Airy's other paintings, created by the same artist with similar tone, content, and style, were displayed rooms away from each other, perhaps indicating the massive size of many commissioned war works were problematic for displaying at the academy thematically. Gallery III was a large space, which was picked out by some reviewers as a highlight. The Observer (1919) wrote that this gallery showed promise for the hall of remembrance, which was never to be:

The large no. 3 gallery, though lacking in the architectural articulation needed for a decorative scheme of this kind, gives a fair idea of the noble and impressive effect that may thus be achieved.

Some critics picked up on this lack of display narrative. Western Morning News (1919) commented on there being 'some evidence of chronological sequence, so that it is in itself almost an illustrated document of the progress of the war', but The Observer (1919) commented that because many artists documented typical rather than specific incidents, chronology 'supplies no clue'. The theme of this exhibit as the entirety of the war, was perceived by some critics as so vast that the lack of thematic explanation was overwhelming (The Observer 1919). For this audience, whilst a carefully curated narrative would have been beneficial, it was perhaps not as strictly necessary as it would be one hundred years on and was affected by the physical space of the gallery in 1919. Showcasing the vast collection of art, accumulated so quickly, which had never been seen seemed to be IWM's primary objective.

In 1919, these works were praised for their truth-telling nature of the conflict. *The Burlington Magazine* (1920) commented on the lack of ‘bombast and sentiment’ and praised the ‘honest observation’ in the works, *The Observer* (1919) described the tone of the exhibit as ‘serious and thrilling’, and *Western Morning News* (1919) noted that: ‘The very pictures that conjure up the idea of sympathy convey a hideous nightmare. Yet it was no more than the truth’. *Gassed* won Picture of the Year at this exhibit. Reviews such as *Western Daily Press* (1919) hailed the painting as a ‘masterpiece’. Airy was most often the only woman to be mentioned in reviews of this exhibit (only nine women artists exhibited works, of over one hundred and thirty artists). The *Architectural Review* (1920) described her works as ‘great, virile pictures of busy workshops’. Of Spencer’s paintings, *Travoys arriving with wounded at a dressing-station in Macedonia* was most discussed in exhibition reviews. *The Times* (1920) singled it out amongst a few others, and discussed the painting’s incongruousness with the pain and death depicted in other war art. However, the review continues that its careful and calm composition ‘express the eternal charity of mankind better than any chaotic realism could express it’. Even though these reviewers and members of the public did not experience every aspect of the war which this collection of art depicted when displayed together, the paintings were often described as realistic and true. This conclusion could only be reached by drawing upon a knowledge of this conflict built up through a combination of personal experience, interpersonal connections, news, and culture. And so, culture, in this case the nation’s collection of art, had a part to play in affecting what and how an audience remembered and viewed world events.

In 1919 these paintings were being used to showcase the efforts of IWM’s collecting to the nation. In doing this, the museum displayed a great many works – and had to display paintings wherever could accommodate their size. And so, the exhibit does not showcase a thematic or educational curatorial thought process. However, its audience required neither of these, as the effects of the conflict were still being felt and remembered personally. The audience reacted in a positive way to the new war art, and this was considered an excellent beginning for IWM’s future exhibitions.

2014

IWM was the central organisation for First World War remembrance and education during the centenary commemoration period beginning in 2014. The institution, now found at Lambeth

Road, saw a huge increase in visitor engagement, with over one million visitors in its first six months since reopening (UK Parliament & Imperial War Museum 2015). IWM conducted surveys on the public whilst it was reinventing its First World War Galleries. These found that thirty per-cent of those surveyed had ‘little knowledge’ and ten per-cent had ‘very little’ knowledge of the conflict (Cornish 2016, p. 515). Its collection was therefore put to a new use: to educate and shape public knowledge about the conflict. Paintings were being used to educate visitors on real and digital platforms. For example, Airy’s painting *Women Working in a Gas Retort House: South Metropolitan Gas Company, London* was used as the backdrop for a poetry reading created for the Women’s Work 100 project in which people were invited to share contributions on social media. During the commemoration, *Gassed* toured the US in a range of exhibits which celebrated America’s involvement in the conflict (Crux 2016).

The exhibition ‘Truth and Memory: British Art of the First World War’ was IWM’s first retrospective on art created in response to the First World War. This exhibit ran in IWM from July 2014 to March 2015, and in York Art Gallery from March to September 2016. The exhibit was curated to two themes: truth and memory. Truth focused on art from soldiers who experienced the front line themselves, it sought to showcase British artists from a range of backgrounds and to showcase how this conflict was ‘era-defining’ and ‘shaped the nation’s perception of ...warfare itself’ (Imperial War Museum). Memory, in which these three paintings were featured, focused on how British art commemorated the First World War whilst it was happening, and in the immediate aftermath using independent and commissioned works. In choosing and emphasising certain art and artists, IWM was also shaping twenty-first century commemoration of the conflict, and the public’s understanding of the conflict with this very exhibit.

In 2014, IWM’s curators had no personal involvement in the creation of the works exhibited. Similarly, the audience was separated from the events depicted by space and time, with no living memory of the events depicted. IWM, like all museums, had evolved throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The museum placed a greater emphasis on the education of its visitors. And so, the 2014 exhibition took on a more educational tone. The works were displayed here because they fit the themes of truth or memory, or because they represented a specific scene or idea IWM wanted to bring to the forefront of public thought. This exhibit showed curatorial thought and increased awareness and concern over public knowledge and engagement by having dedicated rooms and spaces for artists, separating pictures by theme, and creating annotations and labels for context. A

typical audience member was most struck by the scale of the paintings. Most blogposts added size adjectives to the description or title of the painting, for example ‘the enormous John Singer Sargent painting’ (Philpott 2014). Additionally, some blogposts commented on the number of objects in one gallery space which meant that the viewer could not achieve an unimpeded view of some larger pictures including *Gassed*, in their entirety (Kelly 2014). Airy’s four munitions’ paintings were displayed alongside each other, creating a narrative of her painting journey, and showcasing the munitions worker in various places and roles. Spencer’s *Travoy's Arriving with the Wounded at a Dressing Station at Smol, Macedonia* was displayed inside a room dedicated to Spencer’s works. In York Art Gallery, this painting was displayed nearby a sculpture of Doctor Elsie Inglis, showing curatorial thought to display objects thematically (Nott 2017).

Memories of the First World War are now influenced and informed by culture rather than living memory of personal experience. Due to this, some reviews in 2014 saw the same works, which had been heralded in 1919 for their candour, as ‘subdued and solemn’ or ‘poetically bleak’ (London Magazine 2014; Studio International 2014). The paintings were being looked at vastly differently by one audience, who themselves recently experienced the war, and another a century later looking back on a version of events influenced by museums, media outlets, and the sometimes-romanticised popular culture. Some reviews took on a distanced and sometimes romantic tone when reviewing some of the works, particularly regarding those of the front painted by soldiers. This is clear in reviews which discussed *Gassed*. For example, The Evening Standard (2014) wrote: ‘At once it conveys epic, unprecedented suffering and redemption: humanity still standing, even after all the horror’. *Gassed* is the cover photo for a great many articles about this exhibit, including from the Royal Academy and Evening Standard. Again, Airy is often the only woman to be mentioned in press releases and then reviews for the 2014 exhibit. She is often used as the only example of women as war workers and war artists. Her works speak to one of the most well-known roles for women in war, and their use in this exhibit mean the role continues to be at the centre of public thought. The Lancet (2014) wrote of the realism in the Singer factory painting: ‘its grimy and chaotic surroundings – a true representation of how men and women contributed to the war effort’. Interestingly, Marina Vaizey, reviewing for The Arts Desk (2014), after writing about Sargent’s ‘frieze of suffering’ and Spencer’s ‘great painting’, wrote, misspelling her name: ‘There are women artists too, of sensitive gifts: Airey’s superbly done small paintings of women at work’ despite the paintings being an impressive seventy-

two inches in height, and eight-four inches in width. Whilst this was not the author's intention, it illustrates the wider dismissal of women artists inside the remembering of a traditionally male topic such as war. The theme of women's work was popular among blogposts and online reviews written by members of the public. However, it was often singled out as an outsider subject rather than ingrained into the fundamentals of the topic of war, and the vocabulary used reveals an interesting correlation with memory. Gerry (2014) discussed the theme of women's work under the subheading 'forgotten fronts' and used the paintings to educate the audience of the history of women in war work. Meanwhile, other blogs, such as Philpott (2014), discussed Sargent and Spencer's works as pictures which 'reinforces the overall themes of redemption, heroism and sacrifice which unite the "Memory" section'. In the eyes of the public, pictures of the male dominated front lines reinforced fundamental ideas of war in their collective memory, whilst women's roles were forgotten and re-remembered through this display.

In 2014, IWM took on a new role: official institution for the centenary commemoration for the First World War. In its major exhibition 'Truth and Memory' the same pictures which were once used to showcase IWM as an institution. However, the pictures also had a new assignment: to educate. The pictures were displayed in such a way as to maximise knowledge gained on a specific theme. An audience which had been shown huge amounts of First World War content under a lens of commemoration and memory, but without personal connections to the conflict saw those same pictures very differently.

Conclusion

In closing, IWM as the central organisation for recording, collecting, and displaying First World War material has shaped what has been remembered of the conflict through its choice of commissioned art and artists, and then through curation and display of those objects. These have been affected by the museum's overall mission – firstly to record and memorialise and then additionally to educate. The three paintings studied were looked at vastly differently by two audiences: the first in 1919, who recently experienced some of the events depicted in the huge exhibit, and the second looking back on a version of events influenced by the mass of content produced during the commemoration period. In the case of these paintings, which have acted as case studies to represent this change, their content was representative and created to act as memorial. This shows that IWM had clear commemorative intentions for the

works. However, their differing display shows that whilst in 1919 the intention was to showcase, and perhaps justify, IWM as a new museum and collection, in 2014 the intention was to shape the knowledge of a public distanced from the conflict. It did this by emphasising certain art and artists and creating a thematic display. This shows that, whilst art itself does not change, its meaning and use can be reassessed, and can have an important role in shaping memories for people across time.

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